

# Cresset

by Jason Brown

Written with love,  
for Ashley Vizcarra  
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# 1

“If you walk for long enough in that forest, you may come to find that the sun burns mighty sweet. The canopy takes every sense in turn: first the shade chills your bones to numbness, then your eyes are shut by darkness, your ears cast out into a sea of deep silence, and your tongue ripped from your head by the unshakable aloneness. You might as well throw yourself into the river and have done.”

He shrugged. “Yet I must go. Something is waiting for me out there, maybe the only thing that matters. Would you have me ignore my destiny?”

Pine needles pricked the widow’s feet. “Boy, the only thing waiting for you out there is death—and a painful one at that. I’m sure you can find a Destiny at the cathouse if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“Perhaps, my wrinkly friend, but death is waiting for me at the end of every road—whether I’m eaten by a grue in those murky woods, or I burn myself to the wick on a farm for the better part of a century.” He glanced at the rocky patches of weeds that amounted to the old woman’s entire world. “All roads lead to Rome and such. This is just the one worth walking.” He smirked. Death was a jape to him; endings were for the bards to worry about, but the beginning was his task alone.

The cloth-garbed traveler carried little for the journey he had ahead of him—an oiled leather water skin slung high on his shoulders, a simple dusty rucksack at his waist, and a worn ash walking stick crowned with rags. He was young but didn’t look it beneath the hood of his cloak. Mostly he looked tired, worn from the years of loneliness that had driven him

here to the rim of the Old World.

The scowling farmer shifted uncomfortably and spit a bit of gristle into the dirt of her garden. She hated the look of the ancient forest that stood at the edge of her land; it was a cursed place that few ventured into, and fewer emerged from. Sometimes *things* wandered out from the woods and savaged her cattle. The boy seemed strong enough, but what lay ahead of him cared not for strength.

“Better men than you met Fate in those woods. She wern’t kind to them, and she won’t be kind to you neither.”

The Traveler turned to face the distant wall of trees. “Fate is exactly who I intend to meet, and I don’t expect kindness. The stories worth telling are just as often penned by Death.”

For that is what he desired: neither gold nor maids, but the gilded doom of a quest worth dying for. Many men are like this in their youth, lusting after their own place in the elder stories, alongside the warrior Goliath or the knight Arth. Some of them venture across the sea, some to fair Olympia, and fewer into Amphor. Many don’t return from these journeys, and those that do often find that even the slightest hero’s tale comes at a dreadful cost.

“Thank you for the advice miss, but I’ll be on my way just the same. It’s better that I waste away out there rather than collapse on your fine stoop. Less cleanup you see.”

She scowled. “I’m no miss, and you won’t be a mister for long if you follow this gods-damned path,” said the old woman, “You’ll be so much litter and mulch. A morsel for the trees, or a bite for the beasts.” Her words were harsh, but her face was more sad than angry. She glanced again at the veritable sea of timber that was Amphor, and kissed her

thumb as the superstitious do to ward off evil. "Stay."

The farmer tottered off into her hut, wringing her hands and grumbling. She came back out a minute later with her arms full of produce. "I can't stop you from dying in the forest, but I can keep you from starving 'til your stupidity does the job. Here, I can never finish the cheese before it spoils anyway."

Four cakes of soft cheese covered in crispy parchment sheets, one partially eaten. A crock of butter, lumpy, but fresh. Three stale hunks of bread, rye. Two strips of dry salted beef. A handful of small red potatoes with only a few mealy black pits. One onion.

The Traveler tucked the food into his rucksack, and bowed to the woman. "Thank you, dear mother. You will find your place in my story as the fair maid who saved the hero from a wasting death." The boy was thankful, but still his voice tilted toward mockery.

"Damn your story—and your bull-head." The woman spat once more, and returned to the business of her garden. She flung a final word of warning over her shoulder, "Mind yourself boy, the forest's true fang is darkness. You'd best not let your fire go out at night if you wish to wake up again in the morning."

The widow farmer of Shandry is remembered in this tale alone. She fed a poor traveler, then sent him on his way. The remainder of her days were spent on that same piece of land at the border of Amphor, watering the cows and tilling the soil until she became a part of the latter. When she closed the door to her hut, so ended her part in the story that would one day come to be.

The traveler who was doomed to have a name kept on.

## 2

The ancient kingdom of Amphor was vast and wild, filled with naught but antediluvian forests and hulking iron mountains. It was a place that echoed the past, before man came with fire and sword to tame that which the gods had forged. Here was a land blanketed with a silence that drowned the cries of any who might wander through it; a land so primeval not even the beasts held dominion in its sprawling wilderness. The power that ruled in Amphor was a vicious and elemental darkness that some say was a remnant of the black that blanketed everything before the world came to be.

Yet man, ever the provoker of fate, sought to find his place in this shadowed land. At its heart a stern and steadfast people had built the bright city of Stonewatch, called the jewel of Amphor, which was the seat of their throne. The City of Stone drove awe like a stake into the hearts of all who emerged from the wilderness to see its gleaming marble walls challenging the surrounding peaks and holding the intruding forest at bay. During the day, the city stood as a bright testament to the willpower of mankind, and during the night its torches pressed back against the land's heavy darkness.

Over the marble walls, past the sturdy homes, through the bustling market, inside the fortress-like Stonewatch Keep sat the Arbor Throne, a massive seat worked from the base of a single towering redwood that had once stood there. The twisting roots of the throne burrowed deeply, and if legend is to be believed, stretched throughout all of Amphor. Years of bearing royalty had weathered the throne, smoothing its sharp edges and rubbing out all the splinters, yet still it stood as proof of the dominion of the Amphori royalty.

Before this throne stood the only person permitted to chastise the King.

“Father, quit playing the overprotective fool, you can’t expect me to stay within the walls all the time! Please, let me go for a ride with Mina. I’ll be home before lunch—no danger at all.”

The King’s Steward blanched at hearing the Lord Protector of Amphor called a fool, his knobby white knees buckling and almost sending him to the floor, rocked by the impertinence. The King just sighed wearily.

“Anne, I can’t let you go wandering around with the stone. What if something were to happen to you?” The King of Amphor knew the argument was lost from the start. His daughter was stubborn as a stump, and twice the rider he was. Twenty years old, and she already had the forceful personality of a young monarch—certainly a holdover from her mother’s side of the family.

The Princess glared at the perceived injustice. “Here, take the Cresset if you are so worried about it!” She unclasped her necklace quickly, and tossed it across the gap between her and the throne. It sailed through the air and caught the sunlight streaming in from the high windows of the throne room—the oval stone set into the pendant was a brilliant white, run through with webs of gold.

The Steward’s mouth fell agape as the stone dropped into the King’s lap. The Cresset was an immensely important heirloom, passed down from the first Amphori royals who

settled in this dark land. Legend had it that the stone held a measure of ancient power, the same power Arth himself had used to found Stonewatch and drive back the night. That power hadn't been evident for generations, but still it was treated as the most sacred relic in the kingdom. It was a symbol of the Amphori royal family's promise to protect their people from the biting shadows that threatened to topple them.

The King's countenance grew dark, eyes cutting a line through the room toward his daughter. "Anne, no. You can't just leave the Cresset where you will. I entrusted it to you as my father did to me. It's your birthright, and more than that it is your *responsibility*."

"It's a bauble father, a burden! I won't let it keep me imprisoned here just because it's an *expensive* pair of shackles." She was angry, but her anger started to cool as she saw how serious her father was.

"This *kingdom* is your burden—and a heavy one! A Queen doesn't get to abandon her people just because she wants to take a horse ride. We don't live in a kind land, Anne; tomorrow is not assured—not for anyone. The night doesn't care that you are a princess, or I am a king, or anything else!" He was nearly shouting now, knuckles white from gripping the seat. "You are going to have to face much worse than a day spent in the keep when you are sitting on this throne. You will protect this stone, and you *will* place the needs of your people before yourself." Regret for his anger set in almost immediately, but he knew Anne needed to hear this.

The King remembered a simpler time when his daughter didn't have to be worried about the fate of a kingdom. She had been a happy child, obsessed with butterflies and the

sunlit fields outside the walls of Stonewatch. Yet the time for childish things was over. With her mother dead, Anne was a Queen in all but title, and had to start acting like it. Life in Amphor was a risk, even within the walls of the city, and she would be in charge of this all should anything happen to him. It would be her responsibility to keep the torches lit, and the night at bay.

He held out the necklace. "Go on your ride, but wear it. If you aren't back in two hours I'm sending Vickers to track you down," he said in a flat voice. Anne took the necklace and mumbled a thanks before turning and walking quickly out of the throne room, eyes downcast.

The Steward stood stiff in the biting silence of the settled room, hoping he wouldn't have to chase the Princess down on horseback. The King rubbed his temples. He could feel a headache approaching, and now he had to meet with his captain of the watch. Apparently there had been an incident in one of the city's homes in the night.

He knew the day wasn't even close to being over.

### 3

The Traveler awoke to hands on his face, biting, choking, scratching. It felt like he was drowning in cold wet shadows.

*Wake up. Wake up!*

But he was awake. The claws weren't those of a nightmare, and the darkness wasn't unconsciousness. He felt a runnel of hot liquid drip down his chin, and knew it was blood. He scrambled away from his bedroll and batted at the things attacking his face. A second of reprieve, then gnashing teeth tore into his shoulder, and another set yanked his legs out from under him.

*My eyes. I'm blind!*

The bleeding boy swung his arms wildly, but couldn't seem to hit whatever monster was mauling him in the darkness. His fists found no purchase, yet it seemed like his assailant came from every direction, beating, breaking, buffeting. It refused to relent; every second was worse than the last. No weapon, no vision, and nowhere to run—he was helpless.

The pain arcing through his body was strangely cold, as if inflicted by the bite of chilled steel. Blood sprung from his wounds ever faster. One second he was awash with adrenaline, the next he felt his strength waning, slipping back toward sleep—this time permanently. He made one more dash to the other side of his camp, trying to escape whatever beast was making him prey. As he crawled, his hand dove into the remains of the fire pit, now extinguished, sending a different kind of pain, a hot pain, through his arm as he buried it in the dying embers. He tore his hand away from the

pain, then realized he could see his fingers, sticky and red, in the dim light of the uncovered glow.

*Not blind, just lost my light. Damn, this is exactly what that crone warned me about.*

Something sharp raked across his back, splitting his skin open again, and he dove to where he hoped his walking staff lay. Burned hand met smooth wood. He flipped onto his back and swung fiercely in the direction of his attacker, not hitting anything solid, but sensing a resistance to his movement—like pushing a paddle through water. The head of his staff lodged itself in the glowing remains of the fire.

He felt a pressure close around his neck, halting his breath.

*Come on, catch damn you!*

The Traveler's lungs heaved, searching for air but finding none. There were no stars to be seen through the thick forest canopy high above him, but still he felt his vision fading from black toward blacker. His pain dwindled, and he began to feel far, far away from the blood and dirt and monsters. He was drifting on a tranquil sea, his blood rushing in his ears louder than the fiercest waterfall. A step away from his last step.

His life didn't flash before his eyes; he supposed that there was nothing worth remembering.

The rags he kept tied to the head of his staff burst into a weak flame from contact with the embers, casting just enough light to illuminate the makeshift campsite at the base of a great tree. The Traveler gasped a sweet breath of the cold night air and rushed back from the edge of asphyxiation. Though just seconds ago some monster was upon him,

slashing and choking, the little clearing he sat in was now completely empty save himself and the bright red spattering of his own blood.

He quickly lit a new fire before the light of the burning rags gave out, and patched up his wounds as best he could. Bitter tears stung his eyes and every breath felt like it was drawn through a sieve. The scratches on his face weren't deep, but his back and shoulder were torn up something awful. He was tired and dizzy from blood loss, but he dared not sleep again until the sun was out, lest the monstrous darkness return ere he wake.

The Traveler's first night in the forest of Amphor would have killed most, and goaded the rest to flee back toward the safety of Shandry, but it would take more than a brush with death to drive him away. Certainly he was foolish, but he was also daring to a fault. Here, beneath an almost impenetrable canopy, was a foe worth fighting and a name worth earning. Every night after that he was more prepared, with wood, and peat, and stone to build torches and fires. He found that he could even rest for a few hours around noon when the sun was at its highest point and briefly filtered through the branches above.

For weeks the Traveler plodded through the Amphori wilderness, eating little, sleeping less, and venturing ever deeper into the heart of the unwelcoming land. His pace was slow but constant, heading ever in the direction of the setting sun, with no destination known save the grave. Survival called for constant vigilance; the living darkness at times

would begin to press in closer, despite the flame the Traveler constantly fostered. Strange gusts of wind would stir, trying to extinguish his light, and the forest's foliage seemed to have a life of its own, battering him whenever his attention lapsed. Still he pressed on.

Then one day, without warning, the Traveler stumbled out of the darkling forest, and into the open farmland that bordered one side of Stonewatch. He was exhausted, sick, and quite possibly a little crazy from his time in the shadows. He grinned as the sun blinded him for the first time in so long, and let out an ecstatic holler at his glimpse of the white walls of the City of Stone.

Then he toppled to the ground like a felled tree and passed out.

## 4

The Princess marched to the stables, hoping to drown out the bitterness of the argument with the sound of hoof beats. Her anger had settled for the most part. She knew her father was right on some level, and she resented it.

*I never asked for this. Not a kingdom, not this necklace.*

She loved Amphor and its people. It was her home, the only place she had ever known, and in her mind it was the most beautiful place in the world. But what she loved were the fields and the horses, the flowers and the trees. There was so much life here, even in a land plagued by deadly darkness. She didn't want to be responsible for these lands, she wanted to *experience* them. Her father couldn't understand that spending every waking hour in the keep.

When she got to the stables, Mina was waiting in her stall. Mina was one of the finest horses in the Stonewatch livery, a tall chestnut with a gleaming coat, and was the closest thing the Princess had to a best friend. They had spent the long days of youth together, roaming the countryside around the city and even sneaking into the outer edges of the forest when they could escape from their constant escorts. Anne knew freedom from feeling the wind on her face while perched on Mina's back, and she cherished the times she could get with her friend, despite how rarely they came these days.

Anne rubbed Mina's nose in greeting. "Come on girl, let's go for a ride." The horse tossed her head and clopped a hoof in affirmation. Anne quickly threw a cloth and saddle onto Mina's back, and cinched the leather belts snug around her chest. The Princess unmoored her friend from the stable wall with a few deft tugs at the hitching knot, then vaulted onto

her back and quickly walked out of the stables and toward the city's Forest Gate before the stable hand could offer to help her. She knew most of the livery staff, but today she didn't want to be bothered with small talk and niceties. She wanted desperately to be outside the walls.

The guards at the gate hollered at the Princess as she cantered past them wordlessly. A weight seemed to lift off her shoulders as she passed through the city walls, and she immediately squeezed Mina's sides with her knees.

*Come on Mina, let's go!*

Anne's eyes stung as the cool air whipped by, Mina galloping beneath her. The world out here in the hills and fields was different; not better, but more whole. The Princess could pretend for a moment that the immense responsibilities of leadership did not rest on her shoulders. Today wasn't a day for thinking of the future, it was time to lose herself in the wind and the grass and the shining sun. The landscape of Amphor was more beautiful than the finest tapestry in the keep, with more colors than her father's most expensive painting. For what seemed like an eternity all that existed was the song of the birds and the constant drum of beating hooves.

The Princess was so caught up in the music of the countryside that she almost didn't notice the cloth garbed traveler collapsed at the edge of the tree line.

"Whoa, Mina wait!" A tug on the reigns and the ride came to a halt just beside the injured Traveler. It took a moment for the Princess to realize that the boy wasn't a pile of dirty rags heaped in the grass.

The Traveler came to, head swimming and vision unfocused. Above him was the towering figure of something

out of a nursery rhyme—head of a woman, body of a horse, tall as a giant, and crowned with sunbeams. He managed to lift his staff a few inches off the ground and mutter, “Have at foul beast! I’ll... Oh...” He dropped his arm and groaned. “I’m rather unwell.” Another wave of dizziness hit him and he nearly fainted, all thoughts of heroism gone.

“Are you alright?” Anne hopped down from her horse, but kept her distance from the ragged brown lump; he might be injured, but he might also be sick or crazy. It was hard to tell.

From the ground the Traveler’s vision began to clear. He saw that the giant horse woman was much less giant and horse than he had first thought. She had mussed brown hair from her ride and scattered freckles from the sun. Her eyes were a deep and thoughtful hazel, and her mouth turned slightly down in a frown. An intricate gold necklace hung at her throat with a large white stone in the center, which seemed to shine brightly in the sun.

He cleared his throat. “Hello miss. I seem to have lost track of my legs. Would you at all mind helping me find them?”

“Your legs are right there beside you on the ground, sir. Are you alright? Have you had too much to drink?”

“A few too many sips of the forest if you catch my meaning. It’s not a very friendly place for strangers.” The Traveler rolled on his side and attempted to prop himself up on an arm, but failed miserably and ended up lying face down in the dirt.

The Princess saw the back of the boy’s cloak, torn and stained brown with blood. She bent down and gently turned

him over. "Gods look at you! Were you out in the forest overnight?" As she turned him, her hand brushed against his arm and she felt his cold flesh. "What were you doing out there? You are very hurt!"

"Kind of you to notice," he said wheezing. The conversation was beginning to tire him, and he could hear the blood rushing in his head again. Why wouldn't she just let him go to sleep?

"I've got to get you back to the Keep. What kind of fool gets caught in the woods overnight?" Anne tried to bring the boy to his feet, but he was clearly too weak to stand. "You aren't going to make this easy, are you?" It took her a few minutes of struggling against his wordless protests to hoist him onto Mina's saddle, slung across it on his stomach. In the process Anne saw more wounds and dried blood, and began to realize how badly he was injured. Even the youngest children in Amphor knew what harm the darkness could bring; it would take a suicidal fool to leave the walls at night, let alone head *into* the forest.

She picked up his charred walking staff, then jogged alongside Mina heading back toward the city with the slumped body of the first traveler to come to Stonewatch in years hanging limp in her seat. Behind her a void of timber spread to the horizon, consuming all manner of sound and light and goodness, the only unique feature a trail of crimson droplets of the boy's blood, which stretched for miles.

The darkness hungered for more.

## 5

The blazing basin of the Grand Tombs was a constant in Stonewatch; both tradition and writ mandated that it be lit day and night, come storm, gale, or shade. It was a great copper and stone bowl intricately inscribed with images of Amphor's past, set in a small crafted forest of marble columns that served as grave markers for the Amphori royals of days gone by. At the center of this brightly lit macabre copse was a great stone wrought tree, which sat atop the grave of the first king, Arth, legendary knight of the outer realms and the founder and patriarch of Amphor.

King Aestrus' attention was dedicated to a much less conspicuous memorial, a stout and striated white pillar on the edge of the marble grove. It was here that he had laid his own father to rest 28 years ago, and his mother beside a short time later.

"Why have we stayed here for so long, Father? Why have I let my people founder in a land that holds only death?" A dull pain radiated through his whole body, centered just beneath his forehead. He knew the answer—rather he knew *all* the answers. He brushed his fingers against the rough column. It was as cold as ice.

Amphor wasn't a place you *could* leave. Stonewatch was a tiny circle of light in a sea of gnashing shadows. He couldn't even begin to conceive what it would take to move his people out of the wild lands. Thousands would die on the march, and if any survived the hostile darkness where would they go? They would starve in the sunlight of the nearest kingdom; he knew there was no room for refugees from a tainted land.

So here they sat, lead one by one to the slaughterhouse. It

was true that the torches of Stonewatch protected its people, but no amount of light could drive out all the darkness from this black land. Every day people were found torn apart as if by wild animals. A farmer fetching wood for the night wandered into his too-dark barn and was split from head to toe. A maid caught walking through an alleyway at dusk had her throat torn out. A sleepwalking guard wandered from the barracks and never returned.

Aestrus closed his eyes. The bright light of the Great Basin only served to amplify the pain in his head. Just last night a brazier had been snuffed out by a draft in the bedroom of the city's clothier. With the light went the clothier, her husband, and their two young twins. The darkness was insatiable.

*We can't even protect our children. What hope do we have?*

He was the king of the grandest prison the gods had ever built.

*The worst part is I am just going to hand this pain off to Anne. No matter what I do, Amphor will be just as dark, just as plagued as it was when my father left it to me. And then her children will bear this pain. And then theirs. All fruitless. How can I force my hopelessness on those that I love?*

He remembered his father's death far too well.

It had been winter in Amphor. This was the most perilous time of year because the days were shorter, the nights longer, and the darkness more greedy. This particular winter was mild and dry, and very little snow had coated the ground.

Aestrus' father, then king, had decided it was an ideal time for a boar hunt. He mustered some of the more adventurous nobles, a cadre of guards, and his son—only newly a man—and rode off into the forest with dogs and horses. Boars were one of the few animals that were relatively plentiful in the darkling forest, because they were able to bury themselves in the brush at night to escape the darkness.

The forest of Amphor took on a frightening aspect in the winter. For a few months of the year the broad spiked leaves of the great trees fell to the ground, and left hulking twisted skeletons of silver wood standing bare in their absence. From the city it looked as if the sea of trees went from dark green, to brown, to the color of bone. Once one wandered into the forest though, the canopy was almost as dark as usual—the interlocking branches blocked out the light nearly as well as the leaves did.

The hunting party had flushed out a massive black boar, all bristle and tusk, and his father managed to wound it mortally with a spear. Despite the trauma to its body, the beast screamed and rushed farther into the woods, tearing a bloody path through the branches and litter. The king followed it into a dense patch of trees and brush, with his son close behind. Deeper and darker they followed the squealing thing, leaving their guards to pursue.

The thrill of the hunt had overwhelmed all senses. It was as if the world around Aestrus had closed all paths except those toward the injured animal. The air smelled of copper and the bitter decay of the leaves dying beneath his feet. He didn't think of where to step, he didn't feel the the branches whipping at his skin, he just flew.

Then all sounds had stopped. It was as if the boar had

been abruptly silenced. The boy skidded to a halt, but his father took one step too many.

They had gone too far into the woods in their frenzied haste, into a particularly shaded grove. Here there stood a wall of shadow which roiled and rippled with a living viscosity, eager to consume any that might draw near. The darkness of the forest was violent even during the day if you ventured deep enough, and here no sunlight reached the mottled floor. The king stumbled and fell backward, recoiling from the murk as if stung. For one tense second, the boy's father clawed away from the darkness on his belly—then something reached out from the shadow and latched onto his leg. The ghoulish appendage was half claw, half tentacle, with too many joints and spines in all the wrong places. The boy saw his father's eyes go wide as he was yanked violently into the dark.

His father's screams had sounded just like those of the dying boar—shrill and far louder a noise than a human should make. That is what he remembered most of all, the rending shriek that roared for what seemed like forever, with no pause for breath.

Then that too was rendered silent.

It took the guards only a few fateful seconds to catch up to the king and his son bearing torches and swords. When they came into the dark clearing, the shadows which had seemed living just a second before were dispelled by fire. In a circle of trees sat the crying boy, a butchered boar, and the flayed corpse of the king—eyes still wide in shock, mouth still twisted in pain.

There were no screams in the graveyard, but this bright marble forest still reminded King Aestrus of a much darker one; for what was Stonewatch itself but a sunlit forest of man's design?

Safe—until the shadows blotted out the light.

## 6

“Wake up already! Haven’t you slept enough you slugabed?”

“Ow! There’s a reason they put bandages there witch! How long was I out? Where am I?”

“It’s hardly kind to call the princess of this kingdom a witch, don’t you think? What is your name?”

“...”

“I dragged you here bleeding out of the dirt—you ruined a perfectly good day of riding! You would have slept right through your own funeral had I left you out there! You owe me your name.”

“Douglas. And I’m no boy; I’m to be a hero.”

“I’m Anne, and you are certainly the densest hero I have ever met. You’re in Stonewatch Keep, and you were unconscious for two days.”

“Well that explains how hungry I am. You wouldn’t happen to have bread in this blasted land, would you?”

“Why wouldn’t we? I’ll have the doctor fetch some for you.”

“...”

“Your voice... Where are you from?”

“Well, Your Highness, I’m from a lovely place just through those damned trees a little ways. Had I known how inhospitable your country was, I may have vacationed somewhere else!”

“Through the forest? You mean you are from outside? No

one gets past the darkness! How did you get here?"

"Lots of fire and a little luck. I can see why you don't do so much traveling. Those woods are bloody horrible they are."

"Why?"

"..."

"..."

"Dunno. Guess I thought I would find some kind of quest out here. Didn't find a good one in that forest though. You're a princess right? You wouldn't happen to have any spare quests lying around?"

"Quests are for children's stories Douglas. Are you saying you did this all for fame?"

"For fortune too, but I'll settle for fame."

"Well I'm sure the folks at the tavern will laud you for marching through the forest, but I still think you are a loon!"

"Tavern you say? I could use a drink."

"You can't walk! Look at you!"

"What, this? Just a couple scratches. I'm perfectly—ow—fine."

"..."

"Well I'm off, thanks for the help!"

"Ugh. I'm certainly not letting you go alone you fool. Probably kill yourself walking down the street."

"A princess as a bodyguard? What luck. Perhaps this will be worth a story after all."

## 7

“I come from a land much different than this one. It’s called Shandry, and it is a place of little consequence and less note. I suppose we have the same types of people that you have here in Amphor—farmers, tailors, butchers, and kings—but each of them blends into the next, fodder for thought rather than true fare. It’s appalling seeing everyone go about their day with no care for the next. Folks in Shandry are seldom remembered for more than a few hours after their death. The bards of my town are abhorrent; they only know made up songs and nursery rhymes—neither worth a whit. The people here are stronger,” he said, taking another swig of ale. “And so is the beer.”

Men and women crowded around the tavern table, listening to what the Traveler had to say of far off lands. There was a silent respect for this stranger; for surely only true heroes could survive a journey through the forest and befriend a princess. Some took to murmuring in dark corners after much drink that even the Princess was enchanted by the young adventurer—why else would she accompany him to this dim tavern? “Look at her, she can’t get enough of his story.”

The boy continued, “I was the son of a scribe, who was the son of a scribe, who was the heir to a score of scribes before him—and not one of their blasted pens scratched a thing worth reading; I know for I read it all. Years of farming yields for the town, tallies of this cattle or that grain. The worst were the genealogies: a thousand people boiled down to a birth, a wedding, and a funeral. Not one tale. Even the damn lovers letters were rewritten pig shit on paper—a pet name here, a fond memory there, and voila: you have the same letter that

has won twelve dozen hearts before! The only stories worth hearing were the ones told by old women and vagrants around the light of a nighttime hearth. Those were legends in the proper sense, rich with blood and bravery; but not even one verse has been written of the lonely people of sleepy Shandry.

“So I left.”

A voice rang out from one of the listeners, “How did you make it through the forest?” The question was met with babbling agreement.

“My first night was the worst—had no idea the darkness was so nippy. It took a few chunks out of me before I thought to light a torch, and drove it away with its tail between its legs. The next day was tough too, because the trees insisted on smacking me in the head every chance they got. It felt like someone or something was following me—which it was. That same living darkness returned the next night, and every night thereafter. I felt it getting more forward, pressing in closer to my nighttime campfires. The fourth night I reached my hand into a dark hollow in a tree, and almost lost a finger. So I made my fires bigger, and kept a few torches handy for emergencies. Nearly made it through without incident, but the night before your dear Princess rescued me, I lost my light. Nodded right off and didn’t wake till the fire was ash and something was in the camp with me. It was smart enough this time to scatter my torches so I couldn’t drive it away with fire. Luckily, I had taken to keeping flint and moss in my boot, and was able to set a small flame before I was completely carved from this skeletal spit. It gave me a little light, less monster, and I took a woozy walk to meet your future monarch.” He smiled like a dolt right at the Princess.

“I haven’t figured out a way to kill it yet, but I will!”

Guffaws burst from the lips of some of the more intoxicated onlookers. A bell behind the bar rung, and the rest began to disperse.

The Princess set down her flagon with a thunk. “Kill the darkness? Are you serious? That’s like saying you are going to slay the sun, or trap the wind. You can’t do that!”

“Well before I came to your land I didn’t think the night had teeth and claws. Where I come from the worst the dark can do to you is stub your toe. I plan on figuring out why things are different here. If it can tear into my flesh, there has to be a way for me to fight back—I just have to find what that is.”

The tavern was slowly emptying as sunset approached; in Stonewatch even rowdy drinking concluded when night fell. The Princess and the Traveler exited the building into the street. For a while they walked in silence toward the keep—the boy wouldn’t say it, but beneath his bluster he was intimidated by the young royal. Her derision seemed kindhearted, but there was a steel about her. He thought Anne was fiercely beautiful framed by the blue and orange gradient of the sky, a reflection of the sunset glinting at her neck.

Anne thought he was a suicidal idiot, but she also knew that he was different than the rest of the people here in Stonewatch. Her people survived, bore their burdens for as long as they had to; they persisted. Even her own father was

stone: steadfast and unwavering against the dangers of Amphor—but not daring like this young traveler. Douglas carried himself with a reckless abandon that made her heart quake.

The boy, usually a fount of words and stories, sought for sound to break the silence. “Your necklace, it’s beautiful.”

“Yes.”

“...”

“My father gave it to me. It’s an heirloom.” Her voice was flat.

“You sound unhappy about it.”

“Not unhappy, just conflicted. The Cresset is a mark of responsibility which I sometimes find... distasteful.”

The boy saw her hands reflexively clench tightly into fists. “Then why don’t you take it off?”

“I... I can’t. It’s a very *important* heirloom. Not the sort of thing you just stop wearing. The stories say it was the Cresset that let my ancestors settle this land.”

Douglas’ eyes glanced again at the jewel. “So it’s a magic necklace?”

“No, the stories are just that. It’s ceremonial, but ceremony is often important, don’t you think?”

They arrived at the keep just as the sky began to darken in earnest. The Traveler turned to the Princess before heading to his room.

“Ceremony may be important for a monarch, but stories are rarely just stories.”

The Traveler and the Princess spent many days in each other's company; he was introduced to the King, and welcomed as a visitor to Amphor. They wandered the markets, and the gardens, and occasionally even ventured out into the fields near the walls. Anne felt refreshed by his company—Douglas gave her a reason for adventure and new experience as she showed him about the city.

Anne's protectiveness for the naive traveler, and his own growing appreciation for her wild spirit, blossomed into a close friendship in the weeks that followed. Their relationship was one of laughter and learning, for both found in the other a uniqueness unmatched by anyone else in their lives.

Douglas' desire for a quest was not abated though, and he would often spend entire days wandering the forest alone, though he did not yet seek to return at night. He also spent time in the city, relishing the bit of fame his foreignness imposed. More and more he sought out tales of the Cresset, that infamous relic of Amphor's past. He was regaled with stories of the knight Arth, and his founding of the kingdom—many claimed that it was the Cresset which gave Arth the strength of arm and force of spirit to forge a city in the midst of the hostile forests and mountains. One old man told him that the stone was a bit of the sun itself, made firm by an ancient and powerful wizard. All agreed that it was an integral part of the city's protection from the dark, and that Princess Anne was worthy indeed of wearing it.

More often every day the Traveler's eyes were drawn to the stone when he spent time with the Princess. It glinted and

gleamed in the sunlight, but showed no sign of powers, fair or ill. Yet Douglas, a firm believer in the partial truth of legends, began to desire it—he believed that the Cresset was the key to his quest, the tool he must use to catalyze his tale.

So one night he left his quarters with a torch in hand while only a sliver of the moon was high in the sky. No guards walked the halls of the keep while they were shrouded in darkness—for what fool would leave the safety of a lit bedroom while the shadows ruled? He quietly crept to the Princess' room, and gently lifted the latch.

Anne was peacefully asleep in her bed, braziers and torches lighting the room. Douglas quickly unhooked the white-gold stone from around her neck. His face was blank, but beneath the surface guilt tore at his heart. He spent a hesitant moment gazing at the face of the girl who he was betraying, and then stole out into the night.

The Traveler turned Thief walked into the darkness of the forest bearing the Cresset alongside the burden of a traitor.

## 8

The small circle of light surrounding the Traveler was growing smaller by the minute as his torch dwindled.

*I'm a fool, and this is how fools die; alone in the dark with nothing but regret. I really should have brought another light.*

His only hope had been that the Cresset would reveal something out here in the dark, that he would be able to use its power to fight whatever was hunting the people of Amphor. He had tried everything: heating the stone over his torch, putting it around his neck, shouting at it—nothing made a difference. The dark stood solid around him, and not even the faintest spark leapt from the milky surface of the jewel.

Now, for the first time, the boy was afraid; not only because he might die here in the woods, but because he might die without consequence. Sure, the people of Amphor would be incensed at his theft, but thieves and charlatans rarely made their way into epics.

The cloth and pitch of the torch were nearly consumed by the flame—glowing red chaff spiraled down from the Traveler's light source, only to wink out on contact with the damp soil beneath his feet. The silence of the forest was oppressive, and reminded Douglas of being submerged in deep water. The darkness swam in the corners of his vision as if there were waving tendrils outside the radius of the torchlight; he had the immense and overwhelming feeling that he was being watched, that any second he might turn and come face to face with whatever lived out here.

The chain around his neck bit into his skin, rubbing at his

throat uncomfortably. It felt heavy and out of place.

*I need to find something to light and then head back to Stonewatch. Perhaps I can return the necklace before anyone notices it's gone.*

The Traveler went to his knees, searching the ground for brush and twigs with which to prolong his light. There were plenty of scattered branches and weeds, but everything was wet from the previous day's rain. He quickly swept up a pile of tinder, and pressed the smoldering flame of his torch to it.

*Gods please...*

Gray-white smoke rose from the leaves, but no flame was kindled. The moisture sizzled and the torch flickered. The boy's entire world had shrunk to the foot of light cast on the forest floor. For just a second the red glow of the wood flashed onto the pile of leaves.

Then the fire went out.

Fear seized Douglas' heart, threatening to tear it out; all his muscles tensed, and his breathing became rapid. His instinct told him to flee, to run for the edge of the forest, but he knew he would never make it out. Instead he sat frozen, straining his ears in the darkness and hearing only the shallow heaving of his lungs. The traveler waited for the unseen teeth and claws to return and finish him once and for all.

He closed his eyes and prayed for Death to be swift.

The boy stayed crouched for minutes, waiting for the rending of flesh and tearing wounds. His eyes were clenched so tight that he began to see dancing colors along the inside of his eyelids, which quickly faded into a staticky wash of blue.

The pain, fear, and remorse seared like coals in his chest and made him want to scream.

When he finally opened his eyes, the darkness of the forest was cut for the first time by a true light. A weird and distorted silver-blue radiance emanated from the stone around his neck and made every aspect of the darkling forest visible. This light was different than that of the torch; while fire banished the dark and canceled it out, the rays of the Cresset were softer, almost less real. It was the source of an illumination which coexisted with the darkness—the light didn't drive the darkness out, but gave it edges and contrast, allowing it to be seen. The glow let Douglas see that the waving tendrils he had imagined earlier were a reality—an undulating image projected by the thousands of shadowy moths fluttering around him.

For the first time, the Traveler was able to see the duality of the forest; both the physical, and the phantasmal.

A small unconscious smile perched on the Traveler's face as he took in his newly exposed surroundings. This smile was immediately wiped away when the monster stepped into the clearing.

The shadow beast emerged from behind one of the great trees and turned its hideous visage toward Douglas. It was something out of a nightmare—a twisted husk of unctuous horror. It was the size of a full-grown bull and walked on four fleshy appendages like a man on his hands and knees. Its central mass was a turgid hunk of leathery growths dominated by an uneven hump of matted hair like that of a camel. Hung low on this bestial torso was its face: an uncannily human thing split by a wide grinning chasm of teeth.

The beast's eyes, black and bulging, rolled over the Traveler. Its mouth parted and its body shook in a perverted mockery of a laugh, but no sound came from it—the silence of the forest remained unbroken.

*I'm hallucinating, I must be. Please. That thing isn't from this world!*

Douglas rose to his feet and held his walking staff in two hands, interposing it between himself and the dark monstrosity. His arms wobbled a bit, but his eyes were set on this lumbering horror. The young adventurer let out a snarl, and challenged the beast.

“Come and get me you bastard, you can't hide in the darkness anymore! Ill tear your heart out, and bring your head back to the city. Your reign in this forest is over!”

The thing's mouth curled, twisting its face into an even more grotesque smile. The shadow beast made no sound, but everything about it reeked of a sick joy.

Douglas couldn't explain exactly how the monster moved toward him. It seemed to charge and stumble at the same time; sometimes darting weightlessly around stumps, other times whipping in impossible directions like a cloud of smoke. It soundlessly scuttled on its spindly arms and legs, and the Traveler could have sworn that sometimes it had more than the four he could see. It approached him from the left, then rolled right at the last second, unhinging its jaw and lunging for the flesh of his leg. The erratic movements almost shook Douglas' aim, but at the last second he was able to adjust his swing and crack the aberration right in the skull. It collapsed and Douglas dashed away from the flailing limbs. The beast grasped its scalp and soundlessly screamed.

Douglas could see a line of black liquid dripping down the forehead of the freakish monster. "Hurts don't it? Now that I can see you I'm going to bash your head in, you ugly wretch!" The boy's blood was on fire and every moment stood out in stark relief. For the first time in his life, he felt alive. He wished Anne could be here to witness this.

The beast's second rush was more brutal. It leapt right at the Traveler, and just before impact it reared up on its legs. For one second all Douglas could see was its black scabby belly, then it came crashing down on him. He managed to block the swiping claws, but he was knocked on his back by the sheer crushing force of the blow.

He tried to crawl away, but he was no match for the strength and speed of this horrible beast. One arm pinned his ankle, the other snapped the boy's ash staff like a twig. The horrendous many-toothed face of the beast was thrust in front of his eyes, roaring like a lion. Though the monster produced no sound, Douglas could feel the vibrations in his chest. He tried to squirm away, but the shadow beast's grip was like iron.

The monster let out its broad gray tongue, and slid it across Douglas' face. It felt like a hundred knives dragging across his skin, and a cloying wave of grave stench assaulted his nose. The thing's four-fingered hand slid around the boy's throat and squeezed, choking him and cutting off all breath. It was the same pressure that had almost ended him that first night in the forest.

Panicked options ran through the boy's head. His right arm was pinned by the creature's other hand. The thing was crushing his chest with its weight, and he could not roll away. His feet were free, but he couldn't get enough purchase on the

ground to push out from under the monster nor the angle to kick it. His left arm was the only part of him with any freedom of movement.

As his head began to cloud, Douglas grabbed the nearest stone and swung it at the shadow beast. He felt it connect, but then the stone seemed to push through the beast, ineffectively falling to the ground a second later. This thing was not entirely solid, and there was nothing he could do to harm it. The monster swung its hideous head around, and clamped its jaw down hard on his forearm. Dozens of teeth sunk into the soft flesh.

So Douglas surrendered to the end. He knew his battle was lost.

*I'm still a failure. This is how my story ends.*

Crushing weight, choking hands, and grinding teeth all had their way with the boy there in the dirt. He felt himself slipping away from consciousness, and his lips began to blue.

So again he closed his eyes, and sank into the welcoming darkness.

## 9

Mina hated the dark, but Anne forced her galloping onward into the night nonetheless, following a path only her heart knew. She was furious—she knew it was Douglas who had taken the Cresset the moment she had woken up in her room to find it gone. She was also incredibly scared, because she was certain the boy was going to die out here pursuing his ridiculous quest.

*That bloody fool. I'm going to kill him for being so reckless.*

Anne looked the part of a fury flying through the air, hair whipping wildly, a hunting bow slung across her chest. She held a bright torch above her head, providing Mina with light to run by.

*He's going to be in the forest, that's where he would fight the darkness. But where?*

The Amphori forest was massive; Douglas was a wooden needle in a blazing haystack. She had no idea how she was going to find him, nor if he would be alive if she did—yet she couldn't even imagine leaving him alone. It would have been wise for her to raise the guards, but she knew they would have never let her go out in search of the thieving stranger.

*This is hopeless...*

In the distance a blue light illuminated the forest and the trees cast spindly shadows that looked eerily alive. The light quickly faded, but Anne knew that was where she would find Douglas. She had no idea what the light might be, but she rushed headlong into the trees in search of her friend nonetheless. Minutes passed, the Princess' heart drumming in step with Mina's hooves. She raced past stone and stream,

through the forest which she had never before seen in the night. The inky blackness began to fade as she grew closer to the source of the blue glow.

When she came into the illuminated clearing, she saw her worst fears had come to pass. The small crumpled form of the boy lay on the ground with the shining Cresset around his neck. Atop the lifeless lump sat a monster of shadow made flesh, all grotesque joints and sickly distended skin. It locked its beady black eyes on the Princess, and she could see that Douglas' limp arm was in it's quivering, grinning mouth.

"No!" The arrow flew from her hands almost before she had registered drawing the bow. She was no expert marksman, but fate led this arrow true, burying it in the creature's side. A mute howl tore across the shadow beast's face, and it scuttled at the girl and her horse. Mina, though well trained, could not stand against this monstrosity. She reared, tossing Anne from the saddle, and rushed away. In seconds the monster was on her, and she felt her skin crawling every place it touched. A claw slashed at her, and tore a ragged gash in the arm she flung in front of her face for protection. She winced and waited for the next blow, which never came.

"Anne!" The boy's voice was hoarse and cracked, a dark ring of bruise encircling his throat. He looked unsteady, but in his hand he held one of the long sharp splinters of his shattered staff. He stabbed at the beast, putting all his strength into protecting the girl he had come to care for. The stake pierced the blackened hide of the monster, pushing it off the Princess, and pinning it to the ground.

The ghoulish aberration squirmed beneath Douglas trying to escape, but he held it still, receiving numerous cuts and

gashes in the process. He turned and shouted, "Anne run! Go!"

The Princess rose, all fear replaced by a grim determination, and a hatred of this thing which had killed so many of her people. The Traveler thought she looked furious and divine in the unearthly blue light, more angel than woman.

"No," she said, and scooped up her torch from where it had fallen. With all her might she drove the flame into the deformed creature, pressing it into the black mass of fur and skin and teeth. The flames licked at her hands, but she ignored the pain and drove it deeper still, cutting through the beast composed of darkness like a hot knife through butter. The thing tried to escape, parts of it turned into something resembling black mist, but Douglas held it still. It writhed and bellowed, shaking the moths, and the trees, and their bones—and then it seized up and fell permanently still. A crater of charred flesh exposed its chest cavity, displaying its flame consumed heart.

Princess and Traveler fell to the ground, covered in blood, and mud, and ichor. For a long while they lay there in that clearing and said nothing.

The boy spoke first. "Anne?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"..."

"Here." He held out the white stone, hanging on the golden chain.

She silently grabbed the necklace, and clasped it around

her neck where it belonged.

The Traveler's eyes were set on the ground. He felt his shame even more deeply than before. He had almost gotten the Princess killed, and he knew what he had done was immensely selfish. "I'm sorr--"

Warm hands grasped his face, pulling him in. Anne pressed her lips against Douglas'.

"You are an ass, sir knight." Mockery and relief filled her chest in equal measure.

## 10

The stars twinkled in the wide black sky as the two heroes walked back toward Stonewatch. The cold night air was clean, and the sliver of moon stood sentinel overhead. The silence of the countryside was different than that of the forest, less empty, more full of the quiet sounds of wind on grass and the soft chirruping of grasshoppers.

The boy walked beside the Princess, occasionally letting his hand brush against hers in passing swings. He was a storm of emotions, wracked still by the weight of his actions and the terrors of the night, but overwhelmingly elated from the brief kiss. No matter how hard he tried he could not still the song of his heart, nor banish the smile from his face.

Anne turned and looked at the grinning boy, rolling her eyes at the plainly written feelings. On the inside though she felt the same joy. He was certainly reckless, and what he had done was foolish, but they had slain the darkness and that must count for something.

*The line between stupidity and bravery is thin, and our success seems to suggest the latter.*

No citizen of Stonewatch had ever hoped to do what they had done that night, not even the powerful kings and queens of Amphor had struck such a blow against their mortal enemy. For a long moment the night seemed bright and the world free of all pain—they were two young souls drunk on new love and wild adventure, and that is one of the most beautiful things of all.

Mina snorted and tossed her head, disturbing the moment. Douglas dropped his eyes from the Princess, and

Anne realized that they had been out of the forest for quite a while. They should have been within sight of the bright torches of the city by now.

Anne gazed into the empty blackness in front of her, and realized that they were indeed upon the city, and that all of the lights, great and small, were snuffed out.

“Douglas, something is wrong! There should be torches...” she said, her heart dropping instantly from boiling to frozen.

The Cresset again was alight with a blue flame, and upon the white marble walls of Stonewatch were dozens of shadow beasts of all shapes and sizes, storming the city and quenching all light and life within. Some were great black serpents, others like dreadful spiders, and more appeared to be indescribable denizens of another world. All were as horrible as the thing they had killed in the forest. The first scream from inside the city pierced the cold night air, and was quickly joined by dozens of others.

The Siege of Stonewatch had begun.

# 11

Within the city, one light still burned—a single brazier in the throne room of the keep. King Aestrus was disheveled and hastily dressed, quickly being briefed by the captain of the night watch.

“Sire, something is putting out the lights of the city. We have reports of the torches on the wall being darkened, and even the Great Basin in the tombs has been quenched. We’ve been trying to relight the fires, but the shadows are tearing the men apart! The darkness is here, and the people are dying.”

The King’s face was stone even though his head was full of fire and smoke. What he had always feared had finally come to pass. Deep down he felt hopeless to resist this unnatural power, but he owed it to his people to stand strong and do what he must.

“Rally the citizens, we will gather what survivors we can at the tombs. There is enough fuel there to ward off the shadows until morning, if only we can light it. Send guards immediately to escort Anne there.”

“Sir... Anne isn’t in her room. We have no proof that she is hurt, but we couldn’t find her.”

A massive crash shook the throne room as the King overturned a wooden table, scattering silverware and shattering plates. His face twisted into a snarl, with lines of anger and fear entwined in the dim firelight of the room.

“Go! Spread the word! I’ll light the fires myself damn it!”

The King marched out of the room. In his right hand he held the bright steel sword of his fathers, in his left a large club of a torch wreathed in flame, and in his heart the

righteous fury of man willing to die for those he loved.

The Princess and the Traveler had no trouble getting into the city, but once inside they hardly recognized it. Bodies lined the streets, and slick pools of blood coated the cobblestones. The few remaining guards and townsfolk seemed to be fleeing deeper into the deadly maze of buildings.

A young woman garbed in nightclothes, not much older than Anne, ran up to them, thinking their light the only safe haven in this sudden nightmare. The stranger fell to her knees and grasped the Princess' hand. "Oh, Princess Anne! Thank the gods, the shadows are in the city!"

Anne knelt to comfort the shaking woman. "What happened? Why are the lights out?"

"I don't know!" Tears began streaming down her face, and a torrent of panicked words poured out. "There was a sound like a roar, and then the lights in my room blew out, and I went running to Pa, and I hit my head, and something scratched me in the dark, and I kept running, and then I found Pa but he was... he was... I..."

Douglas noticed wet red stains on the stomach of the woman's gown, and motioned to the Princess. "Those cuts look deep."

The girl was clearly in shock. The Princess pulled her to her feet and held her hand, leading her toward the center of the city. "Come on, we need to get to the Keep. They can help you th--"

The bleeding woman's hand was ripped out of Anne's as she was crushed under the foot of a hulking black monster with a sickening wet crunch.

"Go!" Douglas practically carried Anne away from the carnage. The mammoth monster had the thick legs of an elephant, and was covered in twitching black tendrils with no obvious head. It was preoccupied with the body of the young woman, and they were able to escape it around a corner.

Now acrid tears streaked through the dirt on the Princess' face.

As they ran through the streets of the city they saw many and more scenes of terror and death. They passed the savaged corpses of men and women, but saw no more survivors. The shining light of the Cresset illuminated the forms of a multitude of horrifying shadow beasts, but none of them seemed inclined to pursue the fleeing couple. They continued to rush through the city, hoping beyond hope to find safety somewhere in the center.

A dull roar filled the Princess' head as she was more and more immersed in the horrors of what she had witnessed.

*I can't keep going. All these people... They're dead! This wasn't supposed to happen. I'm supposed to protect them!*

The Traveler saw her pain, but could only keep her moving. There was no time to deal with the darkness inside right now — there was enough turmoil without.

When they were nearing the Keep, they found where all of the remaining citizens of Stonewatch had gone — the marble forest of the Grand Tombs was filled with quaking bodies and screaming people. As Anne stepped into view of the ancient

burial ground, the glow of the Cresset illuminated the entire regal courtyard, exposing two things:

Her father, the King, with lacerations all over his body, gripping a sword and a torch.

And the Prince of Monsters, the largest and most horrible shadow beast, a long insectoid apparition with dozens of legs and the face of a laughing ogre.

## 12

No matter how hard he tried, King Aestrus could not light the beacon of the tombs. It felt like some invisible enemy was buffeting him with barbs and blades. Every time he tried to reach the Great Basin, he was repelled by some unseen force. His torch cast far less light than it should have, and he understood that whatever was killing his people was also suppressing his attempts to save them.

*Anne... I'm so sorry. I've failed you.*

Once more Aestrus charged toward the oil-filled stone cauldron that usually lit the entirety of the Grand Tombs. He spun his sword in a whistling arc, but only managed to scrape sparks off the stone floor before a concussive blow rocked his head, sending him to the ground. He rolled away, and felt at the side of his skull to find he had lost most of his right ear. Pain and frustration mingled into a bitter stew of emotion. The King let out a guttural roar.

"Father look out!" Anne screamed from across the divide.

The shadows seemed to coalesce into a solid form as blue light streamed through the stone pillars of the graveyard. Aestrus was barely able to register the monstrous centipede looming above him before it lashed out, piercing his thigh and chest with two long sharp segmented legs. The beast twisted about and snaked its hideous horned face toward the skewered king, opening wide to draw him into the needle-tooth lined void.

The Princess began to sprint toward the Great Basin, darting between the spires marking the remains of her ancestors. The Traveler grabbed her arm and stopped her

charge a stone's throw away from the coiled monster.

"Anne no! We can't fight that thing. It'll kill you!"

She struggled against the boy's grasp, then fell limp into a fit of sobs.

The King's leg hung ineffectively beneath him, and frothy blood bubbled out of his chest wound. A fiery ache spread through the left side of his torso with every breath, but the voice of his daughter roused a desperate strength. Aestrus roared again and let fly a mighty swing of his sword at the approaching ogre. The blade drove itself hilt-deep into the open eye of the monstrosity, spewing pitch black ichor in all directions.

The resounding scream shook the entire city, and though it made no audible sound, the reverberations shattered many of the marble monoliths of the Grand Tombs. Chips of white stone rained down on the heads of the onlooking citizens. The centipede creature turned in on itself, writhing wildly in pain.

The King fell to the ground, dropped by the shrieking beast. He saw that this might be his last chance to restore protective light to the city, and he seized the glowing torch before half-crawling, half-hopping to the stone and copper basin at the heart of the marble forest. He turned and gave a thin-lipped smile to his daughter. His body was mangled in many places, and his expression reeked of regret, but in his last moment he looked every bit the heir of the line of Arth. He mouthed a few words to his daughter across what seemed to her like an infinite chasm, and though she could not hear them, she read the phrase on his lips. It was one that he had often spoken to her as a child, a quip from one of the ancient tales she had grown up on.

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater. I love you.”

The King hoisted himself into the fuel filled pool, holding the flaming torch above his head. He turned toward the shadow beast, now quieted, and hurled a challenge.

“This land is not yours! These are my people and we will not bow to the night! Come and face the light leviathan!”

The cyclopean head of the monster lunged at the King, hoping to dispel the fire before the Great Basin could be lit. The hilt of Aestrus’ blade still protruded from its blinded eye, and its maw yawned wide to consume Stonewatch’s last chance of survival.

The King leaned into the blow, shoving his free hand deep into the throat of the charging beast. Gnashing teeth tore at the flesh of his arm and shoulder, but he just reached in farther, closing his hand tightly around some abhorrent protrusion in the infernal gullet. Understanding dawned on the Prince of Monsters, and it tried to pull back from the well of oil.

The King’s grip was iron and his will was stone—to the very end.

Aestrus dropped the torch into the fuel he stood in, and a column of flame erupted from the mouth of the basin, lighting the tombs with a radiance like that of the daytime sun. A wave of heat rolled across the people of Stonewatch as the centipede monster writhed in agony once again. Oily black smoke erupted from the beast, its head consumed by the bright conflagration. Then it fell limp, and stillness reigned in

the City of Stone. With the Great Basin restored, and the Prince of Monsters defeated, the Siege of Stonewatch was broken.

Thus King Aestrus of Amphor, may his name never be forgotten, served as the wick to the candle that cleansed his city of the onslaught of shadows. He died that many would be saved, and was laid to rest in a place of honor beneath the Tree of Arth, where his people had taken shelter on the darkest night that ever came to Stonewatch.

## 13

The morning brought light to Stonewatch like it had every day since the first. It was a cool gray dawn—the sun was diffused by a thin fog, and dew coated the plants of the city.

The survivors of the attack slowly filtered out from the tombs and began to wander the streets, examining the damage to their homes and finding the bodies of their loved ones. The tavern near the keep was converted into a refuge for the wounded, where clerics and healers worked to mend the bodies of those injured in the night. Many had been killed in the initial chaos, but most had been gathered by the guards at the scene of the final conflict. A muted numbness settled over the citizens as they wandered aimlessly about the fractured city.

The shadow beasts had wrecked much of Stonewatch, breaking everything they could. Many of the less sturdy buildings lay in shambles, and most rooms looked like they had been turned inside out. Nevertheless, the people of Amphor were thankful that they had survived, and the flames along the wall and inside the city were quickly restored in preparation for the returning night.

Anne remained at the tombs for most of that day, and Douglas sat beside her. Hers was a quiet sorrow—tears dried after a time, but the mourning persisted. Hours were spent in still silence, and the people left the two to their daylight vigil, though a pair of guards did remain near to their princess. When the sun began to sit low in the sky, Anne turned and leaned into Douglas, who wrapped his arms around her. A little while later, at sunset, Anne stood, turned to one of the guards, and told him to fetch her food and run a hot bath at

the keep. Her heart was wounded, but she had the strength of kings, and she would not let her father's sacrifice be rendered worthless. The next day she met with the Steward, Vickers, and her father's advisers, and they began making plans to rebuild.

Time heals many wounds, though the scars never truly fade.

The weeks following the battle were hard, but filled with much hope. For one, a change had come over Amphor: the night no longer held the same menace it once had. The death of the great shadow beast seemed to have dispelled much of the darkness of Stonewatch, and though there was still a threat in the shadows, the threat seemed far less actively sinister. The stars twinkled brighter, the moon shone more clearly, and the lights within the city suffered far less from the mysterious darkening than they once had.

Within months the city was rebuilt as strong as it had been before. The Siege of Stonewatch was recorded on the surface of the Great Basin, and the city's bards produced a multitude of poems and songs celebrating the exploits of Aestrus, Anne, and Douglas.

Anne was crowned Queen of Amphor, and served the people of Stonewatch with a kindness and grace that honored what her father had taught her, though she never gave up her love of the wild places. Even as Queen, Anne spent many

days in the fields and among the flowers, growing to appreciate the fact that not even great darkness and pain can hope to shroud the things that are truly beautiful.

Most importantly, the power of the Cresset remained. At first Anne was reticent to use it, but the more she saw the works of the shadow beasts, the more fervently she felt it was her responsibility—her fate—to eradicate the pestilence which had plagued her people for too long. She knighted Douglas as a vassal of Amphor, and together they fought against the blight of shadows. Stories of the Warrior Princess and the Hero Poet of Amphor are still told far and wide—this is merely the beginning of those tales.

Over time, their love for each other grew and was strengthened; and though the untamed lands did challenge their bond, they persisted. They continued to laugh, and live, and fight alongside each other, drawing closer together and farther from the pain of their pasts. They were married two years after the disaster, on a hillside overlooking both the forest and the city.

So the Queen and her husband ruled in the City of Stone, and the stories of the Cresset are still told, even though time and tide have swept away all evidence of Amphor—save their names. Anne and Douglas loved each other, and in their love fought all manner of darkness. So the stories say, and so they shall;

always.