

The Nightmare

Story Told By

Deft Miura

"Ah, the wastelands. The old frozen north, before we were forced south. The days when the shores of Sarnath had not yet been ours. In these days we lived close to the frozen north. There, at night, a thief of dreams appeared in the hills and crevices. There is one plant that survives the journey. The Nila. Mukul planted in the soft earth here, before it was swamp. Some of the older Mukul went to the heart of the Mehadi swamp. There, a brave Mukul would eat the freshly picked Nila blossom. He would dream of the old frozen north. A nightmare from our history. He would dream of the Marauder. A furred thief of the frozen north who attacked the Mukul and lived off our crops, magic and more. The wastelander wore the skull of our great work animal. The wastelander gloated. We were helpless. The foolish Mukul wanted the wastelander to infuse power into him. He did not understand what that meant. That the marauder becomes a part of him. Beware. Dreams come true. And nightmares too."

- Varuna

Prologue

Thenit did not begin as an archer.

That was the first mistake people made when they heard the old stories. They saw the bow across his back, the easy set of his shoulders, the patient eyes of a man who had learned to kill from farther away than grief could reach, and they thought the bow had always been there. They imagined him born with string-calluses on his fingers and a hawk's calm tucked behind his ribs.

Thenit let them think it, most days.

A man who survives long enough earns the right to choose which parts of himself become common knowledge. The rest he keeps folded away, like a spare blade hidden where polite hands will not search.

Before the bow, there had been the dagger. Before the dagger, there had been hunger. Before hunger had made itself useful, there had been a boy in Mileth who learned early that locked doors were only suggestions made by people with too much confidence in hinges.

He was not born cruel. That mattered to him later, though it did not matter much to anyone he robbed. He was born quick. Quick hands, quick mouth, quick feet, quick lies. He could make an apology sound like a favor and a favor sound like a debt. By twelve, he knew which merchants counted their coins twice and which priests looked away when a child stole bread because mercy, like crime, had its preferred hours.

The first thing he ever stole was not bread. It was a silver clasp from a woman too tired to notice him. He remembered her hands afterward, red from washing, and the small way her shoulders folded when she discovered it gone. He spent the coin before guilt could catch him. That became a habit too.

By fifteen, he had learned that charm opened some doors, patience opened others, and a thin pick could make a fool of any man who trusted iron more than people.

The rogues noticed him because rogues notice what everyone else loses.

His first teacher was not gentle. Thenit liked him for that. Gentle teachers lie without meaning to. They make the world seem softer than it is, and the world collects payment on that debt with interest. His teacher gave him bruises, bad meals, and one useful truth.

"A shadow is not safety," the old rogue told him, after knocking him flat in a training room that smelled of oil and old leather. "It is only a place where fools stop looking."

Thenit lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. "That sounds like safety with fewer admirers."

The old rogue put a boot on his chest, not hard enough to break anything, but hard enough to make breathing feel negotiable.

"You talk because you are afraid."

Thenit smiled around the pressure. "I talk because I'm talented."

"You talk because silence leaves you alone with yourself."

That shut him up for almost three breaths.

He learned quickly after that, partly from pride and partly because failure hurt. He learned the small arts first. How to move without making floorboards confess. How to cut a purse without tugging cloth. How to read a guard's boredom and a noble's vanity. How to carry five lies in the mouth and choose the one that fit the room. He learned that a blade did not need to be long if the hand was close enough. He learned that poison was patience made liquid. He learned that traps were arguments prepared in advance.

That last lesson pleased him most.

A warrior wanted strength in the moment. A rogue could be strong ten breaths before the fight began. A snare laid well was a thought that kept thinking after the hand had left it. Blindness, sleep, poison, steel in the dark. These things suited Thenit because they rewarded preparation and punished arrogance, and he was not yet wise enough to see how often those two qualities shared a bed.

He worshiped Fiosachd in the way gamblers worship luck, with laughter, bargaining, and a private fear that the god might one day answer plainly. Thenit never mistook Fiosachd for kind. Kind gods made poor patrons for rogues. Fiosachd was sharper than that. He gave chances, not comfort. A loose stone at the right moment. A guard looking left instead of right. A lock that yielded just before footsteps turned the corner. Thenit called these blessings when they favored him and insults when they did not.

Still, he prayed.

Not loudly. Not properly. Thenit distrusted proper things. He prayed with a coin rolled across his knuckles, with a grin offered to empty air, with a whispered promise made before doing something no sensible Aisling would attempt alone.

Alone became his habit.

At first it was practical. Other people breathed too loudly. They panicked at bad times, stepped on the wrong stones, argued over spoils, and expected gratitude for surviving mistakes they had created. Later, when he could have chosen companions more carefully, he found he preferred the clean terror of solitude. When one traveled alone, every success belonged to him. Every failure had no witness except the dark.

That suited him until it did not.

By the time he reached mastery, Thenit had become a dangerous man in the particular way young dangerous men are most likely to die. He had skill enough to be praised and not enough to doubt praise properly. He had survived ambushes, crypts, bad bargains, worse weather, and the kind of tavern conversations that begin with laughter and end with knives under tables. He had learned Hide and trusted it too much. He had learned Assassin Strike and loved the cruel purity of it. He had earned the Hy-brasyl Azoth, and when Aoife's words named him Master Rogue, something bright and foolish rose in him and mistook a title for armor.

The dagger was beautiful. That was part of the problem.

It rested at his hip like proof. It caught candlelight like a secret being told. When he first wore the Rogue Master Mantle, Thenit stood before a polished bit of metal in a rented room and turned one shoulder, then the other, judging the look of himself with the grave attention of a man choosing how history would remember him.

"You are going to be unbearable," he told his reflection.

His reflection, being young, agreed.

There were roads he might have taken after that. Safer roads. Wealthier roads. Roads with company, warm meals, and fewer things that whispered from beneath stone. Thenit could have built a comfortable life around smaller dangers. He could have sold his talents to merchants who feared thieves like him. He could have become a collector of favors, a finder of lost things, a man known in taverns for stories that improved each winter.

But comfort had never known how to speak to him in a language he respected.

He wanted proof. Not from Aoife. Not from the Temple. Not from the rogues who nodded when he passed and measured the new mantle with old eyes. He wanted the kind of proof no one could hand him. The kind that had to be cut from the world and carried back bleeding.

That was why the Marauder Legend found him at the proper time.

Or perhaps it is better to say Thenit found it when he was most vulnerable to its shape. A dream thief from the old frozen north. A nightmare with a skull for a crown. A task that could not be bought by a poor man and would not be opened by a clever one. A prize, a legend, to be revered.

Older Thenit would have heard the tale and tasted the hook beneath it.

Deoch 74 Thenit only smiled.

He was newly mastered. He was quick. He was lucky. He had a dagger bright and new and a god who sometimes let the dice land favorably.

Most dangerous of all, he had not yet failed at anything large enough to teach him the size of himself.

So when the road to Mehadi opened before him, wet and green and waiting, he took it alone.

Chapter 1

...Thenit remembered Deoch 74 by the taste of swamp water and copper.

There were other memories from that time, brighter ones, louder ones, the sort men preferred to tell over cups in Mileth when the fire was behaving and the listener had bought the second round. He had been named Master Rogue not long before, and there was still a gleam on that title in those days. It sat on him like a newly stolen cloak, handsome from a distance, awkward at the shoulders, and likely to get him killed if anyone looked too closely. The Temple of Choosing had given him its words, Aoife had given him its witness, and the world had given him a dagger bright enough to shame moonlight.

The Hy-brasyl Azoth rested at his hip like a secret with an edge. It did not make him brave. That was the first thing Thenit learned.

It did, however, make him foolish in a higher class of places.

He came to Mehadi with his boots half-sucked by mud and his patience already murdered. The swamp had a way of taking simple steps and turning them into arguments. Each root caught his ankles as though it had been paid. Each insect whined near his ear with the persistence of a beggar who had smelled coin. Somewhere in the reeds, unseen things clicked their mouths together, and Thenit, being young enough to believe irritation was the same as courage, told the swamp, "You had better have something worth my socks."

The swamp answered by swallowing his left foot to the shin.

He stood there a moment, looking down. "That," he said, "is not worth my sock."

By the time he reached the Rishi Mukul Gathering, the humor had thinned. He found Varuna where he had been told to find him, set among the damp green patience of his people, speaking as one who had inherited old griefs and kept them polished.

The Mukul did not gather like villagers around a story. They gathered like mourners around a grave no one else could see. Their children went quiet when Varuna began to speak. Their elders touched old charms at their wrists. Thenit noticed this and, because noticing was easier than reverence, pretended not to.

Thenit asked after the Marauder Legend because that was what one did when chasing a mark larger than the shape of one's own name. Varuna spoke of the old frozen

north, of the Mukul before the swamp, of a thief of dreams that came in the night wearing the skull of a great work animal.

It was a story of helplessness told without the comfort of distance. The words had roots. They crawled under Thenit's skin and settled there.

There was one way left to touch that memory, Varuna told him. The Nila still grew where the swamp held its old heart, a stubborn blossom planted by Mukul hands before the land had softened into rot and reeds. A brave Mukul would eat it fresh and dream of the frozen north, not as a tale told safely beside water, but as a nightmare entered with breath and bone.

"The blossom does not show what one wishes to see," Varuna said. "It opens the old wound and lets him step inside."

Thenit had heard many warnings by then. Most were dressed in poor clothes. "Beware the cave." "Beware the old road." "Beware the woman smiling near the altar." A warning was often just fear trying to sound educated. Varuna's warning was different. He did not say the dream might harm him. He said dreams came true, and nightmares too.

Thenit smiled anyway, because a man can be afraid and still have manners.

At Mehadi Heart West, the Nila Blossom waited in the wet hush of the place, dark against the swamp like a thing that had forgotten how to die. Thenit plucked it with two fingers, sniffed it, and regretted the decision. It smelled of frost, wet fur, old milk, and soil that had never been touched by the sun.

Thenit ate the blossom.

Chapter 2

The dream took him without drama.

One moment he stood knee-deep in Mehadi damp, and the next there was cold under his fingernails. The swamp was gone. The air had thinned into a knife. Hills lay before him, white and broken, with black crevices cutting them open like old wounds. Something moved in those cuts. He smelled animal breath, frostbitten grain, and blood left too long in a wooden bowl.

The Marauder came walking out of the white. It wore the skull as Varuna had said, but no telling had prepared Thenit for the sight of it.

The skull was broad and heavy, old bone strapped over a hunched head, its horns scraped with lines that might have been victories or prayers. Fur hung from its shoulders in clotted ropes. Its hands were too clever for the rest of it. That was what troubled Thenit most. The thing looked brutish until one saw the fingers, quick and delicate, thief's fingers, fingers that knew knots and throats and the soft place beneath the jaw.

Thenit understood, with sudden disgust, that this nightmare did not merely wear the giant shape of a rogue. It understood thieving. It understood wanting. It understood the small private hunger of hands.

It spoke without opening its mouth. The words arrived in Thenit's head carrying the smell of winter.

"Bring me one of three things, thief of the warm lands."

"Bring me five million coins, bright and heavy enough to shame your hunger."

Thenit's smile tightened. The Marauder's skull tilted, as if it had felt the old boy from Mileth stir under the mantle.

"Bring me treasure drawn from a chest where the dead still keep their fingers curled around the lock."

"Or bring me Hy-Brasyl made finished, torn first from the Unseelie Satyr and polished until dream remembers stone."

Thenit, who had never found silence useful when terror was available, said, "I was hoping you would ask for a song. I know half of one."

The Marauder leaned close. Its skull brushed Thenit's brow. Beneath it, in the shadow where a face should have been, he saw a wet black grin.

"You have stolen from hunger," it said. "You have stolen from the dead. You have stolen from danger and called the theft courage. Choose the shape of yourself."

Thenit's mouth had gone dry.

The Marauder whispered, "Wake, poor thief. Bring me a dream made hard."

Chapter 3

He woke on his knees beside the flowerbed, retching into the mud. There was no wound on him, no mark on his hand, no proof of the task assigned except the cold lodged between his ribs. He stayed there until the shaking passed. Then he rose, wiped his mouth, and began making a list of supplies in his head with the bleak precision of a man arranging his own funeral.

Five million coins was a lovely idea in the way castles were lovely ideas to beggars. Then it did not have it, and even if he had, handing over that much gold for pride would have made Fiosachd laugh until the heavens split.

So he went first to the locks.

The Marauder had not named Mileth Crypt, but it had not needed to. In Temuair, when someone spoke of treasure chests and the dead in the same breath, every rogue with a working pulse thought first of the old crypt. Its lower passages were full of sealed chests, stubborn locks, and the long resentment of things that had died without learning to share.

That meant descending into the darkness, not as a hero seeking battle, but as a rogue trying to prove that some nightmares could still be handled with patient fingers and a narrow piece of metal.

Then it slipped down through the early depths under Hide, holding himself in that invisible shape with the tight concentration of a man carrying water in his bare hands. Every step asked something from him. Every breath threatened to loosen the spell. The crypt smelled of old damp, spoiled food, cracked stone, and the sour little kingdoms of vermin.

Mice nibbled at rotten vegetables in the first passages. Spiders hung fat and patient in the dark, their silk trembling when he passed too close. Centipedes threaded through cracks in the floor, their many legs making a soft, hateful whisper against the stone.

By the time he reached the deeper ways, even though he'd journeyed the crypt countless times before, his nerves had been worn thin. He did not have time to waste on fighting needlessly. Hide, however, made him unseen, but it did not make him silent, weightless, or beloved by fortune.

Bats clung overhead in tight black knots, and farther below, scorpions dragged their tails across the floor with a dry scrape that followed him long after they were gone. Great Bats stirred on the lower stairs, their wings opening and closing like torn cloaks. He did not come to fight them. He had come with lockpicks, stubbornness, and the hope that a rogue might solve a nightmare in the proper rogue fashion.

By the eleventh depth, the chests began to appear. The crypt around them was no grand treasure hall. It was a cramped, miserable place where White Bats nested in the high cracks and old stone sweated onto the floor. The chests sat there in the gloom with the smug patience of things that knew exactly how many rogues had knelt before them and cursed. Thenit crouched before the first one, let Hide thin but not fall, and set his tools to the first chest's lock.

The pick caught.

For one bright breath, he thought the Marauder's task might be easier than pride had promised.

Then the lock seized, the pick snapped, and the sound cracked through the chamber like a tiny bone breaking. A White Bat stirred above him. Somewhere nearby, a Great Bat answered with a leathery rustle.

Thenit froze, one hand still on the chest.

"You are very fortunate," he whispered to the lock, "that I am pursuing personal growth."

He tried again. The pick broke.

On the third attempt, the lock gave half a turn and stopped. Not failed. Stopped. As if something on the other side had placed a dead finger against the mechanism and held it there.

Thenit swallowed.

He could have blamed the tools. He did for several minutes. Then he could have blamed the damp, the rust, the shape of the tumblers, the curse of the place, the poor breeding of bats, and any god currently listening.

By dusk, his pouch was lighter, his fingers ached, and the treasure remained exactly where it was, hidden behind a task that had no interest in being completed. Thenit stood, dusted off his knees, and accepted the truth with the bad grace it deserved.

The dream had offered him the thief's answer first. The thief's answer had refused him.

So it would be Hy-Brasyl...

Chapter 4

The priest found him near the entrance of Mileth, where a narrow track split toward the caves and mines and woodlands. He was an older Aisling in plain vestments but dawned a Symbol of Deoch around his neck. He was the sort of Deoch priest whose eyes made jokes impossible unless one was willing to work for them. Thenit asked him directly. There was no point dressing it up. The Cthonic Remains. A Hy-Brasyl Fragment. The deep floors. Unseelie Satyrs. He needed help.

The priest listened, then looked past him toward the road.

“No,” he said.

Thenit blinked. “That was very efficient. Usually people at least take a breath before abandoning me.”

“This is not abandonment. It is a refusal.”

“A distinction beloved by cowards and tax collectors.”

The priest’s expression did not change. “I have mended scars from Sgrios within Aislings who came out of that place with their spark chewed thin. Some returned speaking in voices they did not own. Some did not return, and their friends brought only their names. You are newly mastered. You are alone. You do not need a priest. You need better judgment.”

“I asked Fiosachd for that once,” Thenit said. “He offered me odds instead.”

“Then pray carefully.”

Thenit’s smile sharpened. “So you will not come.”

“No.”

“But you will stand here and look disappointed.”

“I am deciding whether disappointment is still useful.”

Thenit laughed once. It came out thinner than intended.

The priest studied him. “You did not come to me because you wanted help.”

“That is an unusual interpretation of asking for help.”

“You came because if I said yes, you could call your choice reasonable. If I said no, you could call yourself brave.”

Thenit’s fingers tightened near the Azoth.

The priest’s voice softened. That made it worse. “There are men who go alone because no one will follow them. There are men who go alone because they cannot bear to be seen needing anyone. The second kind die harder, but they die just as dead.”

For once, Thenit had no answer ready.

The priest touched two fingers to Thenit’s brow before leaving, not a blessing exactly, and not forgiveness. Something between pity and farewell.

Thenit watched him go with his jaw tight and his pride stinging worse than any wound.

Chapter 5

To reach the Cthonic Remains, Thenit first had to pass through House Macabre.

The place had once been a home, or had dressed itself in the idea of one. Yard stones leaned under weeds. Broken tools lay in the mud as if their owners had set them down only moments before remembering they were dead.

Zombi Beggars wandered near the outer path with hands still lifted for alms, while Zombi Carpenters and Miners dragged hammers and picks through the grass, scraping old habits into the earth. Farther in, a Zombi Peasant turned its ruined head toward Thenit and opened its mouth as though to ask after the harvest.

Thenit moved under Hide and gave it no answer.

Inside, the Study breathed dust and old paper. A Black Cat watched him from a shelf with eyes too bright for any honest animal. Unseelie Wisps guttered in the corners like dark candles, their flames bending toward the warmth of his blood. Below, in the Cellars, Green Widows clung to the stone with their silk trembling in the damp, and Nagetiers scratched behind the walls with quick, hungry patience.

Once, in the deeper dark, Thenit saw the long shape of a Nikuru pass between two pillars, spear held low. He, for a short moment, felt something older watching from behind a dead window and knew better than to look long enough to name it Lich.

He did not linger. House Macabre was not the task. It was the warning before the task, the world clearing its throat before speaking in a deeper voice.

The first floors of the Cthonic Remains had the foul patience of a buried thing waiting to be remembered. Stone corridors opened and narrowed without kindness. Damp ran down the walls in slow threads. Bone fragments pressed from the floor as if the dead below had begun growing upward.

Thenit moved under Hide, letting the spell fold over him like a held breath. It was not invincibility. He knew that even then, though knowing did not keep the heart from wanting lies. Hide made him unseen, not untouchable. Not like his Stone Skin does now. A careless foot on loose bone could still betray him. A random swing could still open him. A monster with the right hunger could still smell the heat of his blood.

Dhole Larvae moved in the lower dark like pale ropes filled with teeth. Nagetier Dieters scratched at the stone, their daggers and talons clicking as they worried old

scraps of armor. Scarlet Beetles shone dully in the gloom, red shells wet with condensation, antennae twitching at disturbances too small for Thenit to hear. He passed many. He killed only when the passage left no other bargain.

That was the difference between a warrior and a rogue. A warrior entered a room and demanded the world answer him. A rogue asked the room what it feared, then waited near the door.

The first kill was a beetle too large to ignore. It blocked a narrow stair, mandibles grinding a strip of mummy bandage into pulp. Thenit crouched beyond its sight and set a Blind Snare with slow hands, pressing the trigger teeth into a seam between stones. Behind that he laid a Poison Snare, green-dark paste glistening along the hidden barb. He retreated, took a chip of bone, and tossed it down the corridor.

The beetle turned. Its legs tapped stone in a quickening rhythm. It struck the blind first, and the snare burst in a bitter flash that filmed its eyes white. The creature reared, legs scraping walls, and stumbled forward into poison. Thenit watched from the edge of his own breath as the toxin began its work. The beetle's joints trembled. Its shell clicked against the wall. It tried to charge at nothing, struck stone hard enough to split one mandible, and leaked yellow fluid that smelled of rotten apples.

"Easy," Thenit whispered, circling. "No need to embarrass yourself. I can do that for both of us."

He did not use Assassin Strike. Not there. Not for a beetle. The art was not merely strength. It was condition, timing, promise. It demanded a first true touch, one perfect declaration delivered before the enemy had felt his hand directly. Traps could whisper beforehand. Poison could soften. Blindness could make a map of panic. But his blade had to arrive like fate, not like a second opinion.

He finished the beetle with Stab and Twist, driving the Azoth between plates and wrenching until the shell gave with a wet crack. The beetle folded, legs curling in, its body pulsing around the wound.

Thenit pulled free, cleaned the blade on a rag that had once been white, and descended.

He told himself the fight had been necessary. For a few floors, he even believed it.

Chapter 6

The Remains did not become worse all at once. They educated him.

Qualgeists came like bad thoughts wearing half a body. Bone Collectors moved with a dry harvest sound, gathering ancient bones not as trophies, but as if rebuilding some larger absence piece by piece. Mummies stumbled from side chambers wrapped in their own long decay, arms outstretched with the patient entitlement of the dead.

The first time one caught Thenit by the wrist, its fingers sank through his glove and into the meat beneath. The grip was cold and wet. He cut three fingers off and the hand kept holding him.

“Rude,” he hissed.

The mummy collapsed forward, spilling dust and a slurry of blackened matter onto his boots. He kicked himself free and found his wrist bruised purple beneath the torn glove, three crescents of flesh missing where the thing had dug in. He wrapped it with a strip from his cloak and kept moving.

A sensible man would have gone back.

Thenit had no interest in being sensible. Sensible men were remembered by their families and forgotten by everyone else.

By the sixteenth floor, the air grew warmer. That was somehow worse. Cold preserved old horrors. Warmth fed them.

Flesh Golems began appearing in the deep passages, and they were not made as living things were made. They were assembled from refusal. Arms grafted where shoulders should not be. Faces pressed into backs, some blind, some mouthing soundlessly. A golem turned toward Thenit once while he stood hidden, and every face in its mass inhaled at the same time.

It smelled him.

He ran.

There was no dignity in it. He threw a smoke bomb behind him and heard the thing bellow into the sudden blind. Its feet struck the floor hard enough to shake dust from the ceiling. Thenit slid around a corner, dropped a Sleep Snare with fingers slick from sweat, and kept moving. The golem hit the snare, stiffened mid-stride, and

crashed forward. The floor shook. One of its arms tore loose under its own weight and dragged behind it, fingers clenching and unclenching like a crab.

Thenit waited until the sleep began to loosen. He should have left it. The passage beyond was clear enough.

That was the first clean warning the Remains gave him. A path open. A monster sleeping. A chance to continue.

But a small part of him, the bright stupid part newly fed by mastery, wanted proof. He laid a Maiden Trap near the thing's chest, then another beside the twitching arm.

When the golem stirred, it rolled into the first. The trap opened with a sound like a butcher's drawer being flung wide. Blades sprang upward and inward, not cleanly, never cleanly. They bit into the golem's belly and tore through seams of stitched flesh. Its mouths screamed in different pitches. It lurched sideways into the second trap, and that one took its arm at the elbow, sending meat and dark blood across the wall in a fan.

Thenit stepped in for the Assassin Strike.

The world narrowed to one line.

He came from behind the golem, Azoth low, and drove the blade upward beneath the knot of skull and spine that served it for a head and then downward all the way to the lumbar. The strikes landed with the terrible rightness that made the skill feel less like murder and more like opening a lock. The golem convulsed. For one heartbeat every face in its flesh looked at him. Then the thing came apart, slumping into a heap of twitching meat and broken stitchwork.

Thenit staggered back, breathing hard.

"Thirty percent trained," he told the corpse. "Hundred percent handsome. Balance is important."

His laughter sounded wrong in that place.

Worse, it cost him. One smoke bomb gone. One sleep snare gone. Two Maiden Traps gone. A little blood. A little breath. A little luck.

He looked down the cleared passage.

The Remains waited, patient as debt.

Chapter 7

The Dark Cleric found him two floors later.

Thenit did not see it at first. He saw the stone cross massive in his hands. The cleric stood in a chamber where the ceiling sagged and roots had pierced the stone from some impossible soil above. It had once worn robes. Now the fabric clung to it in strips stiff with old blood and grave salt. Its face was a gray ruin drawn tight over bone and covered by a hat, but the eyes were alive with a hateful, learned light. It did not move like the other dead.

It waited.

Thenit, hidden, waited too.

A minute passed. Then ten.

That was when fear began doing its quiet work. It did not make him run. Running would have been kinder. It made him still in all the wrong ways. His breath shortened. His fingers tightened around the Hy-brasyl Azoth. The careful inward pressure that held Hide over him began to loosen, thread by thread, and he did not notice because every part of him was fixed on the stone cross, the dead robes, and those knowing eyes.

The cleric did nothing. That was its first attack.

The spell thinned across his shoulders first, then around his hands, then across his face like mist burning away under pale morning.

The cleric smiled.

It raised one hand and pointed directly at him.

“Mor Cradh”

Pain crossed the chamber without walking. It struck Thenit in the chest and opened him from the inside. He looked down, surprised that no blood spilt but felt pain beyond belief between the plates of his mantle. The remainder of his Hide broke like glass in rain. He tried to move, tried to lay a trap, tried to make a joke because surely death could be delayed by insolence if one spoke quickly enough.

The cleric spoke words that should only be known to aislings.

“Ard Srad Gar”

Thenit’s knees hit the stone. His lungs filled with hot metal. He saw the cleric coming closer, its bare feet leaving black prints. The stone cross swung downward. Its hand touched his face with almost tender curiosity, and the skin beneath its fingers split. Thenit felt something being pulled from him, not blood, not breath, but the thin bright thread that made his body worth occupying.

He managed one sentence.

“If you wanted a dance,” he whispered, “you should have asked before stepping on my heart.”

The cleric opened its mouth, and darkness climbed inside Thenit like water.

“Ard Sal”

Thenit tried to think of one more clever thing.

Nothing came.

Chapter 8

Sgrios did not receive him in a hall.

There was no throne, no judge's stone, no grand theater of bones. That would have been kinder. Thenit stood in a place without edges, beneath a sky that was neither black nor empty. It was crowded with the suggestion of wings. The ground under him felt like packed ash. In the distance, something vast breathed through a mouth full of graves.

Sgrios came as certainty.

Thenit could not look at him directly. Every attempt slid away into impressions. Antlers made of old weapons. Hands too long. A face hidden behind the last expression of every dead man Thenit had ever stepped over. The god of death did not rage. Rage would have warmed him. Sgrios was colder than that. He was patient because everything came to him eventually, and patience is easy for one who owns the end of every road.

"You are early," Sgrios said.

Thenit tried to answer. His mouth tasted of grave soil. "I have always valued punctuality."

"No," said Sgrios. "You have valued escape."

The words did not accuse. They weighed. Thenit felt every hidden passage he had taken, every fight avoided, every purse lifted, every boast laid over fear like paint on rot. He wanted to argue. He was good at arguing. He could talk a captain out of a toll, a merchant out of a grudge, a gambler out of noticing the second knife. But before Sgrios, cleverness looked like a child's toy left in the rain.

"I am not finished," Thenit said.

"No one is."

The god extended a hand. In his palm lay a scar, or the idea of one. It curled like a black hook.

"Price," Sgrios said.

Thenit understood. Not mercy. Not rescue. A transaction. A door opened for coin paid in the self. He thought of the priest who had warned him. He thought of Varuna's old sorrow. He thought of the Marauder wearing its skull, demanding a dream made hard. He thought of the Dark Cleric's hand on his face.

He thought, with sudden clean fury, that the cleric had killed him while he still had work to do.

"What does it take?" Thenit asked.

Sgrios's answer entered him without sound.

"Not years. Not flesh. Not memory entire. Something narrower and crueler. The scar would leave him with a door inside himself that never fully closed. Cold would know him. Graves would know him. In quiet rooms, when laughter thinned and fire sank low, some part of him would remember the road back here and understand that it was shorter than men pretended."

That was the price: not death, but the permanent knowledge of its nearness.

Thenit reached out and took the scar.

It entered through his palm and burned up his arm, across his chest, into the place behind his eyes. He screamed then. There was no wit in it. No style. No slick remark. Only a man being written on by death.

Chapter 9

When he woke, he was in the Mileth Inn.

For a while, that was the worst part of it. Not the pain, though there was plenty of that. Not the blood crusted beneath his nails, nor the black curve of Sgrios burning cold beneath his skin. It was the clean bed. The low wooden ceiling. The faint smell of bread, floor soap, and other people's ordinary mornings. He lay there staring upward while his body insisted, in many private languages, that he had no right to be alive.

Someone had found him. Someone had paid enough coin, or pity, or both, to have him dragged back where the living slept.

The sheets were white. That offended him most. Nothing that white should have touched him after the dark. He kept expecting them to stain beneath him, to show the truth of where he had been, but the innkeeper had tucked him into cleanliness as if cleanliness were a thing a man could still deserve.

He tried to sit up and failed.

He tried to laugh and failed at that too.

That frightened him more than the pain.

By sunset, Thenit had made it as far as the tavern down the road.

He was drinking with the grim dedication of a man trying to drown something that had followed him out of death. The first cup steadied his hands. The second made the room stop leaning. The third did nothing useful at all, so he ordered a fourth to punish it. He sat alone at a corner table with his torn glove beside him, the Hy-brasyl Azoth hidden beneath his cloak, and the taste of the Dark Cleric's killing word still caught somewhere behind his teeth.

That was where the priest found him.

Thenit never learned whether the man had come looking for him out of pity or habit, or whether Deoch had a cruel fondness for arranging meetings in rooms that smelled of ale. He only knew the priest stopped beside the table, looked down at him, and inhaled sharply.

That frightened Thenit more than the pain. Priests saw ruin often. When one looked surprised, the ruin was special.

"You went deep," the priest said.

"I like to be thorough."

"You died."

"I noticed."

The priest sat across from him. He did not ask permission. That was either kindness or strategy.

Thenit looked at the cup between his hands. "You warned me."

"I did."

"That must be satisfying."

"No."

Thenit's smile twitched and died before becoming anything useful.

For several breaths, neither of them spoke. Thenit hated him for that. Speech was a bridge. Silence left him stranded with the thing beneath his ribs.

The priest's mouth tightened, but his hands were gentle. He brought Thenit to a low shrine where Deoch's flame burned in a sheltered bronze cup. There, by warmth and prayer and the stern patience of a man who had cleaned too many wounds, he worked on the Sgrios scar. It lay across Thenit's spark in a blackened curve, not on the skin alone but beneath it, visible when the light shifted, as though his soul had bruised.

The healing hurt worse than the wound. It pulled at places inside him he had no names for. Thenit bit down on a leather strap and tasted old sweat and smoke.

"You can stop," the priest said once, when Thenit's hands began to shake.

Thenit spat the strap aside. "Can I?"

The priest did not answer.

When it was done, the scar had faded from black to a dull gray, it had all but vanished.

All but.

"You should go home," the priest said.

Thenit sat up too quickly and nearly vomited. "I will."

"Good."

"After."

The priest closed his eyes. For a moment he looked old enough to have buried the first fool.

"After what?"

Thenit looked southwest, toward the Cthonic Remains. His body was weak. His coin was low. His supplies were fewer. His fear was no longer imagined, which made it honest.

"After I teach a dead priest some manners."

The old Aisling stared at him.

"That is not wisdom," the priest said.

"No."

"Good. At least you know the name of the thing you are lacking."

Thenit reached for his cup and found his hand shaking again.

He lowered it before the priest could pretend not to see.

Chapter 10

That night, Thenit prayed to Fiosachd.

He did not kneel in the proper way. Properness had never improved his luck. He sat with his back against a stone, Hy-brasyl Azoth across his knees, traps laid out beside him like small cruel promises. Smoke Bombs. Surigum. Fine daggers meant for mechanisms rather than hands. A stained Magic Scroll he had purchased months ago on a dare and never used, because relying on scrollwork felt too much like admitting distance mattered.

He cleaned each piece. He counted each coin. He whispered not as a beggar, but as a gambler speaking across a table to another gambler who owned the house.

“Fiosachd,” he said, “I know better than to ask you to be kind. Kindness is expensive and you are famously careful with your purse. I am asking for a tilt. A stumble at the right time. A blind turn. A satyr too proud to watch its feet. Give me that, and I will call it luck. Give me nothing, and I will call it typical.”

The flame beside him bent though there was no wind.

Thenit smiled despite the pain.

“Ah,” he said. “So we are speaking.”

The smile fell in quiet fear.

The flame moved again, smaller this time.

Thenit looked down at his hands, scared but encouraged.

He returned before dawn.

The second descent was quieter. Not safer. Safety had left the tale early and would not be returning. But Thenit moved with less waste. He did not kill for proof. He did not linger over victories. He went through the first floors like a shadow that had learned humility.

Dhole Larvae twisted in the dark and never knew him. Bone Collectors paused with armfuls of ancient bone, listening to the space where he had been. Shamblers dragged themselves through corridors slick with old fluids, and Thenit let them pass close enough to smell the sour rot in their throats.

When a Flesh Golem blocked a stair, he did not challenge it. He set a Great Blind Snare near a broken column, threw a bit of shattered bracer, and slipped past while the thing smashed stone into dust, roaring at a false enemy. He did not smile until he was three corridors away.

“Growth,” he whispered. “Disgusting habit.”

He almost turned back to finish it. Some bright old part of him wanted the kill, the proof, the private applause of an empty corridor. Then his hand brushed the place beneath his ribs where Sgrios had written him.

He kept Walking.

Chapter 11

On the twenty-first floor, the Remains changed again.

The Unseelie Satyrs did not shamble. They prowled.

They were lean things, furred and horned, with hooves that struck sparks from stone and hands that looked almost Aisling in the wrong light. Their faces were narrow, clever, and cruel, with teeth made for meat and laughter. One crouched over the remains of a Shambler, pulling strips from it and sniffing each piece as though judging a market stall. Another dragged a Hy-Brasyl Gauntlet by its strap, not wearing it, merely hoarding its shine.

Thenit watched them for a long while.

The first satyr he chose was alone near a cracked basin filled with black water. Its horn was broken at the tip. Its left leg dragged slightly, though not enough to make it weak. Thenit had learned not to trust visible weakness. He laid his work carefully. Poison first, because time was the knife no one respected until it was inside them. Sleep beyond that, hidden in a narrow turn. Maiden Trap last, tucked near a pile of broken shields where the satyr would leap if pressed.

He drew it with a thrown surigum. The small blade nicked stone beside its head and clattered away.

The satyr froze. Its nostrils flared.

Then it smiled.

It stepped forward, missed the poison by a finger's width, and sprang onto the wall.

Thenit's stomach dropped. "Well," he breathed, "that is rude twice."

The satyr bounded along the wall with impossible grace and landed near him, not seeing him but hearing enough. Its claws swept through the space where his throat had been a blink earlier. Thenit threw a smoke bomb at his own feet. Blue-gray blindness burst outward. The satyr shrieked, and Thenit rolled away, shoulder striking stone hard enough to spark pain down his arm.

The satyr came through the smoke low and fast. It hit the Poison Snare then. Its hoof punched the trigger, and the trap bit deep. Green venom jetted into the leg. The satyr screamed with fury, not fear, and tore free, leaving a piece of itself behind. It

charged blindly, hit the Sleep Snare, and stiffened. Not long. Not enough. Its muscles fought the freezing with savage will.

Thenit moved.

He kicked the broken shield pile, drawing the satyr's twitching body toward sound. It lunged as the sleep failed, and its full weight landed on the Maiden Trap.

The trap opened beneath it like a steel flower.

Blades drove up through the satyr's abdomen, thighs, and ribs. Blood struck the ceiling in hot lines. One blade punched through its back and lifted it halfway off the floor. The satyr did not die. It grabbed the blade through its own belly with both hands and began pulling itself free, cutting its palms to ribbons. Its eyes found Thenit then, or seemed to. Hate can see through many things.

Thenit let Hide fall.

"Looking for me?" he said.

The satyr snarled, dragging itself forward.

Thenit stepped in and gave it Assassin Strike.

The Azoth entered beneath the breastbone and rose into the heart. The strike took everything he had. For a heartbeat, Thenit felt the satyr's life buck against the blade, hot and furious, refusing the dark. Then it snapped. The body slid down the Maiden Trap's teeth, leaving ropes of intestine looped over the blades.

Thenit bent over, gasping for air hard enough to bring tears.

When he searched the corpse, his hand found the fragment.

It was smaller than he expected, pale and faintly luminous, wedged in a pouch made from something's cured skin. Hy-Brasyl Fragment.

"Dream made hard."

The fragment was cold, but not dead-cold. It had the clean chill of river stones at dawn, of old promises, of metal buried so long it had forgotten hands. It was beautiful in a way that made Thenit immediately distrust it.

He held it in his bloody palm and laughed once, not from joy, but from the sudden absurdity of having survived so much for something so small.

Fiosachd, it seemed, had taken the bet.

He should have left at once. He knew that. Even in the memory, more than seventy deochs later, Thenit never lied to himself about that moment. The right choice had been clear. Hide. Retreat. Polish the fragment. Return to the Marauder. Offer the finished Hy-Brasyl. Wake with glory, prizes, legend, and breath still in his body. That was the clean ending. That was the sensible ending.

For one breath, he nearly chose it.

Then the Dark Cleric stepped into the corridor ahead.

The stone cross braced tightly in its grip.

Chapter 12

Thenit's spark went cold.

The cleric looked at him through the gloom, and its ruined mouth curved as if it remembered the taste of him. It raised one hand.

Thenit vanished under Hide.

Magic struck where he had stood and broke stone from the floor. He moved sideways, not back. Back was fear. Sideways was work. He laid a Blind Snare with one hand while throwing a smoke bomb with the other.

The cleric spoke, and the smoke curdled black. Thenit felt the spell pass near him, close enough to peel skin from his cheek in a long red strip. Blood ran warm to his jaw.

"Missed," he whispered. "Do not worry. Common problem among clergy."

The cleric turned toward his voice.

Thenit threw another surigum, not at the cleric but at the stone cross. The blade struck metal and made it ring. The cleric flinched. Only slightly. Enough. It stepped forward and triggered the Blind Snare. White film burst across its eyes, hissing where it touched dead flesh. The cleric did not scream. It smiled wider.

Thenit laid poison in its path and retreated. The cleric followed by sound, by malice, by whatever memory death had given it. It stepped into the snare. Venom climbed its leg in dark veins, but the thing kept coming. Thenit's throat tightened. Poison weakened living things. The cleric was not living enough to care properly.

It spoke again.

"Mor Creag."

Stone answered.

The floor buckled under Thenit's feet, not upward in a clean strike, but inward and around him. A slab tore loose from the wall and hammered into his left side with the dull authority of a falling door. Another burst from the floor and raked across his arm, splitting him from wrist to shoulder in a red opening so deep he saw the pale glisten of himself beneath the meat. His left shoulder twisted wrong. Skin parted. Blood came in sheets, hot at first, then strangely cold as it soaked the inside of his mantle.

He staggered, almost fell, and only pride kept him upright.

The Hy-brasyl Azoth trembled in his right hand. His left hung close to useless, fingers twitching as if they belonged to a man standing a few paces away. The pain was enormous and stupid. It filled the chamber. It made the world bright at the edges.

Thenit laid a Maiden Trap with one shaking hand and backed into the dark.

For several breaths he did nothing but survive.

He crouched behind a broken rib of stone while the cleric moved through the murk, blind eyes filmed white, stone cross ticking softly against its chest. Thenit held Hide around himself with brutal concentration. He could feel the spell wanting to loosen. He could feel his blood leaving him in slow, insulting warmth. The satyr's fragment pressed against him like a stolen star. He had what he came for. He could still leave. If he moved carefully, if Fiosachd had one more crooked kindness to spare, he could slip past the cleric and climb until the Remains gave him back to dawn.

The thought lived for one breath.

Then the cleric whispered something in the dark, and Thenit heard his own dying gasp inside the sound.

"No," he breathed. "You do not get to keep that."

He reached for the one trick that might make the impossible narrow enough to pass through. Amnesia was not a prayer and not a miracle. It was a dirty little turn of the mind, a rogue's interruption, a way to make an enemy forget the shape of its anger long enough for a blade to become an ending. He waited until the cleric came close enough for the air to sour with grave salt, then he leaned from the shadow and sent the skill forward.

The cleric stopped.

Its head tilted. The smile faltered. For the first time, it looked uncertain.

Thenit moved.

He came in low, right hand tight around the Azoth, the whole broken world narrowing toward the place beneath the ribs where Assassin Strike would matter. The conditions were there. He had not struck it directly. Traps had weakened it. Blindness had fouled its sight. Amnesia had loosened its knowing. This was the lock. This was the turn. This was the moment made for him.

Then his left foot slipped in his own blood.

It was not much. A handspan. Less than that. But his ruined shoulder lurched forward, and as he corrected himself, his deadened left hand brushed the cleric's robe.

Only cloth. Only a touch.

Enough.

The strike failed before it landed.

Thenit knew it in the marrow. The clean line shattered. The Azoth still drove forward, but the terrible rightness was gone. It became only a dagger in a wounded man's hand. The blade scraped bone and slid aside.

Hide fell from him all at once.

The cleric's blind eyes turned toward his face.

"Oh," Thenit said, because there was no time for anything cleverer.

The stone cross hit him.

It should not have been possible. That was the first thought, small and offended, passing through the instant before pain destroyed it. Spellcasters were supposed to be thin things, dangerous at distance, hateful with words, brittle when reached. The Dark Cleric swung the cross with both hands, and the blow caught Thenit across the left side of his chest with the force of a gatehouse collapsing.

His ribs broke inward.

He heard them before he felt them, a wet cracking cluster deep inside him. His breath vanished. His spine compressed under the force, every joint screaming in sudden white fire. The ruined left shoulder did not merely break. It came apart. Something tore loose beneath the mantle, and the arm went numb from collarbone to fingertips, hanging from him like a thing tied on badly.

Thenit hit the ground hard enough to see nothing.

For a moment there was only stone beneath his cheek and the impossible labor of trying to breathe. His mouth opened. Nothing came. His body convulsed around the absence. The cleric stood over him, robes hanging in poisoned strips, the cross dragging a dark line through the blood on the floor. It lifted the weapon again.

Thenit's right hand moved because the rest of him could not.

He set the Maiden Trap almost blindly.

It was not clean work. It was not masterful. It was the work of a man on the floor with crushed ribs and no air, forcing mechanism and instinct together while his vision pulsed black at the edges. The trap clicked open beneath his fingers. Its teeth waited low against the stone, hungry and hidden in the mess of blood, ash, and shadow.

The cleric stepped closer.

Thenit tried to breathe and failed.

He thought of the priest. He thought of the clean bed in Mileth Inn. He thought of Sgrios holding a scar in his palm. He thought of every clever thing he had ever said and how small they all seemed when the body was broken.

Then he thought of Wailen teaching him Shadow Figure, and of how poorly it had gone.

The skill had never answered him properly. Not once. It was too strange, too pure in its movement, a step behind the world rather than across it. He had practiced until his legs ached and his temper turned poisonous. He could cut, hide, trick, and kill. But Shadow Figure had always felt like asking his body to become a rumor.

Now, with the Dark Cleric above him and the stone cross rising, he tried it anyway.

The world folded.

There was no grace in it. No understanding. No clean mastery. One instant Thenit was on the floor beneath the cleric's shadow, and the next he was behind it, upright only because the skill had placed him there before his body could object. Pain slammed back into him a heartbeat later, and he nearly collapsed against the cleric's spine.

But he was behind it.

For the first time, he was behind it.

Thenit shoved.

He put everything that remained into that single motion. His right shoulder. His hip. His knees. His anger. His terror. The Dark Cleric stumbled forward, one dead foot sliding in his blood, and stepped directly into the Maiden Trap.

Steel erupted.

The trap caught it low first, blades punching through ankle, shin, and rotted thigh. Then the upper teeth sprang and drove inward through the pelvis and gut. The cleric folded around the mechanism with a sound like old wood splitting under an axe. Ash burst from its mouth. The stone cross slipped from its hands and struck the floor, ringing once.

Then it did not let it fall alone.

He came after it with the Azoth.

Stab Twice first, ugly and close, once beneath the ribs and once through the hollow where the heart should have been. The cleric twisted, caught in the trap, blind and poisoned and confused, its body trying to remember how to stand while the Maiden Trap cut deeper with every motion. Then it struck again with Midnight Slash, the blade opening its throat from one side to the other. No blood came. Only ash, thick and choking, spilling over his hand.

The cleric clawed at him.

Then it let it take the ruined left shoulder because there was nothing useful left there anyway. Its fingers sank into torn muscle and deadened flesh, and the pain nearly dropped him. He screamed into its face and drove the Azoth upward beneath its jaw.

The blade lodged in bone.

Then it twisted.

The Maiden Trap tightened as the cleric convulsed. Blades sawed through robe, sinew, and old sanctified rot. The thing's legs split beneath it. Its middle opened in wet layers, not blood, but gray-black slurry and ash packed around scraps of bone. The stone cross, cracked from its fall, lay between them like a failed blessing.

Still the cleric tried to speak.

Then it slammed his forehead into its ruined mouth.

Teeth broke. His own vision flashed white. He pulled the Azoth free and struck again. Again. Again. Stab and Twist became less a skill than a refusal. Midnight Slash followed where there was room. The dagger rose and fell until the cleric's hat split, until its face opened, until one blind eye slid loose and vanished into the trap's teeth.

At last the final blade sprang.

It punched through the cleric's skull from beneath the jaw, splitting the face up the center. Bone opened. Ash poured out in a soft collapsing rush. The stone cross snapped fully in half. The cleric sagged, caught upright by the trap, its ruined head tilted as though listening to a sermon only it could hear.

Then it stood over it, or tried to.

His knees bent. His breath came in broken little pieces. His left arm hung useless. Blood ran from him in several places, and each drop sounded too loud.

"I forgive you," he said, then spat blood onto its robe. "That was a lie. I am working on myself."

He pulled the Hy-brasyl Azoth free with the last of his strength.

Then, because he was alone, and because no one living could hear it, he whispered the truth.

"I am afraid."

The Remains gave no answer.

Chapter 13

There was no grand march back through the Remains. There was stumbling. There was choking on breath that would not come deep enough. There was blood running beneath his mantle and down his left side, warm at first, then cold as the stone around him. The Hy-Brasyl Fragment was clenched in his right hand so tightly that its edges cut into his palm. His left arm hung useless, and every step sent a broken answer through his ribs.

He made it two floors before his body took the matter from him.

Thenit collapsed on the nineteenth depth beside a wall slick with old damp, his knees striking first, then his shoulder, then his face. For a while he lay there with his cheek against the stone and listened to something dragging itself through the passage beyond. He tried to gather Hide around himself, but the spell slipped from his grasp like wet cloth. His thoughts would not hold shape. Pain had made ruins of them.

A Flesh Golem found the edge of the corridor.

Thenit saw its shadow before he saw the thing itself, a broad and wrong shape spilling across the floor. One of its many mouths opened and breathed near him. Warm. Wet. Full of old meat. Another mouth whispered through broken teeth. Its many hands flexed as it searched the dark, smelling blood, smelling life, smelling the small bright spark that had not yet gone out.

Thenit prayed without words.

He did not ask Fiosachd for mercy. He knew better. He asked for odds. A tilt. A stumble. A stone falling at the right moment. Anything small enough that a god of luck might offer it without feeling generous.

A stone fell somewhere down the corridor.

The golem turned.

Thenit did not say thank you. Not then. He had no breath to waste on manners.

He crawled.

There was no dignity in it. His dagger scraped against the floor. His ruined shoulder dragged when he forgot to keep it lifted, and each time it did, white pain burst behind his eyes. Twice he tried to stand. Twice the world folded under him. He passed

down another stair more by falling than walking, leaving blood on the steps in a broken trail that any hungry thing could have followed.

On the seventeenth depth, he collapsed again.

This time he did not rise quickly. He lay half beneath the shadow of a broken column, his fingers numb around the fragment, while something clicked and scraped in the chamber ahead. He reached into his pouch for a trap and found only torn leather, bent wire, and one small roll of parchment.

A Magic Scroll.

For a moment, Thenit only stared at it.

Then he laughed once, and the laugh became a cough, and the cough brought blood to his lips.

“Of course,” he whispered. “Not before the ribs. That would have been vulgar.”

The parchment was stained at the edge, tucked in among his ruined tools as if it had always belonged there. He remembered buying it now. He remembered mocking the merchant. He remembered saying any rogue who needed a scroll to escape had chosen the wrong profession.

Fiosachd, Thenit thought dimly, had a filthy sense of timing.

Thenit was in no condition to argue theology.

He broke the seal with his thumb.

The Remains vanished.

There was no graceful passage, no noble light. The world snapped sideways. Stone, rot, and whispering dark became open air, cold morning, and the shocked quiet of Abel. Thenit struck the ground hard enough to steal what little breath remained in him. For one terrible instant he thought he had died again and Sgrios had developed a crueller sense of humor.

Then he smelled salt, smoke, and living wood.

Abel.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the sky.

The priest found him before Thenit could decide whether moving was worth the trouble.

This time, the old Aisling did not waste words. He knelt beside him, one hand going to the Symbol of Deoch at his neck, the other pressing carefully against Thenit's chest. His expression tightened when he felt the ruined ribs, the crushed shoulder, the places where stone and cross had made one long argument against Thenit continuing to exist.

"Do not speak," the priest said.

Thenit opened his mouth.

"I said do not speak."

Thenit closed it, which proved how near death he truly was.

The priest began with Nuadhaich.

Warmth entered Thenit like fire remembering what it was made for. Bone shifted. That was the worst of it. Ribs that had broken inward dragged themselves back toward their proper shape. His shoulder answered with a deep grinding pain that made his heels kick against the dirt. Flesh pulled tight. Torn muscle knitted in hot threads. Breath returned to him in one brutal rush, and Thenit seized it greedily, coughing blood into the grass.

The priest held him down with surprising strength.

"Again," the priest said, and cast once more.

The second healing was cleaner, but not kinder. It mended what it could. It quieted the bleeding, sealed the longest tears, and drew him back from the edge where Sgrios might begin counting him twice. The left shoulder remained a ruin of ache and weakness, but it was attached. His ribs still hurt, but they moved. His spark, battered and thin, stayed with him.

Thenit blinked up at the priest.

The priest looked down at him, exhausted, angry, and relieved in a way he clearly resented.

Thenit swallowed, tasted blood, and managed a crooked smile.

"Of course you help me now."

The priest stared at him for a long moment.

Then, against all reason, the priest laughed.

It was not a large laugh. It was tired and unwilling and almost angry. But it was laughter, and for one breath Thenit felt the world make room for him again.

Chapter 14

Polishing the fragment should have felt like victory. Instead it felt like preparing an offering for something that had already eaten part of him. The Finished Hy-Brasyl shone too beautifully in his palm. That was the way of certain treasures. They did not care what they had cost.

They gleamed for saints and fools alike.

The priest watched him work and said nothing. That was becoming his most irritating habit.

When Thenit returned to Mehadi Heart West, the swamp seemed quieter. He picked another Nila Blossom. His hands shook only once before he ate it.

The frozen dream opened.

The Marauder waited among the white hills, skull lowered, fur moving in wind. Thenit could not feel.

Thenit held out the Finished Hy-Brasyl.

“There,” he said. “Dream made hard. Paid in blood, death, one excellent joke, and a glove I rather liked.”

The Marauder took the offering with those clever thief’s fingers. The Hy-Brasyl vanished into its palm. For the first time, the thing seemed less like a monster and more like a memory that had been hungry too long.

“I remember you”, it said.

“I was afraid of that.”

The skull tilted. Beneath it, the wet black grin widened.

“You came back colder.”

Thenit said nothing.

“You came back carrying a grave inside you.”

Still, Thenit said nothing.

The Marauder leaned closer. Its skull filled his sight. "Did you bring me , thief?"

Thenit looked at the place where the Hy-Brasyl had vanished. He thought of the clean bed. The priest's hands. The Dark Cleric's split skull. The Flesh Golem turning away because a stone had fallen at the right moment. The silver clasp from a woman too tired to notice him.

"No," Thenit said.

The Marauder's grin did not change.

"I brought you what you asked for."

For a long moment, the dream held still.

"Wake, Marauder of Hy-Brasyl."

Thenit woke with mud beneath him, the Marauder Mask and Marauder Hide heavy in his bag, and a legend mark newly burned into the unseen ledger of his life. Triumph should have risen in him cleanly. It did rise, but it brought shadows with it.

He laughed because he had done it. He laughed because he was alive. He laughed because the alternative was listening too closely to the part of him still standing before Sgrios with a black hook burning in his hand.

Then the laughter faded, and he sat alone in the swamp with the prize across his knees, waiting for victory to feel different than survival.

It did not.

Epilogue

Many Deochs later, when Thenit had become an archer and the bow answered him with a faith the dagger never had, people would ask about the old days. They wanted the clever version. The slick Thenit. The one who winked at danger and walked away richer. Sometimes he gave them that man, because generosity takes many forms and taverns are no place for naked truth.

But there were nights when the room grew honest.

It happened after the loud songs had thinned, after the fire had settled into coals, after some young Aisling with a new title and bright eyes spoke too warmly of going alone. Thenit would set his cup down. The movement was never dramatic, but those who knew him noticed it. His hand would drift once to the place beneath his ribs where no scar showed, and where something cold still remembered the shape of Sgrios.

He did not begin with the Satyr.

He began with the clean bed in Mileth Inn, and the shame of waking alive where ordinary people slept. He spoke of the tavern cup shaking in his hand, and of the Deoch priest who found him there without needing to ask what had happened. He spoke of how terrible it was to be healed by someone who had warned him first. He spoke of the second descent, not as courage, because courage was too polished a word for what carried him back. It was anger. It was unfinished business. It was the ugly little refusal to let a dead thing keep the last word.

Only after that did he speak of the deep floors.

He would describe the Cthonic Remains without raising his voice. That made it worse. The wet stone. The warmth where warmth should not have been. The Flesh Golem breathing with many mouths. The Unseelie Satyr dragging itself through its own ruin because hatred had given it strength where life had failed. The Dark Cleric waiting in the passage with the same stone cross at its throat, as if death had manners enough to introduce itself twice. Some listeners laughed early in the telling. They stopped before the end.

Thenit never asked them to understand. Understanding was a thing men claimed too easily from safe chairs. He only gave them the memory as it had been given to him, sharp-edged and costly, with no part of it polished smooth enough to carry comfortably.

The Marauder Mask and Hide became proof for others, but they were never the proof that mattered to him. The proof was quieter. It was the fact that his hand still steadied when it found a bowstring. It was the fact that he could look into darkness without pretending it owed him passage.

He never told the tale the same way twice. Some nights he remembered the swamp more clearly. Some nights the sound of the Maiden Trap returned so sharply that he paused mid-sentence and stared into the fire until someone looked away. Some nights he ended with the Marauder, skull lowered in the frozen dream, taking the Finished Hy-Brasyl from his bloody hand. Other nights he ended earlier, in the moment when the Dark Cleric split open and poured ash instead of blood.

But he always left them with the same truth, though he rarely gave it the same words.

A title can bring you to the threshold. Skill can carry you farther. Luck may open one door that should have stayed shut. But nothing beneath Temuair mistakes those things for wisdom.

And when the young ones left quieter than they had arrived, Thenit would sit a while longer by the dying fire, one hand resting near the place no scar showed.

Somewhere below the stone, perhaps still caught in the teeth of a Maiden Trap, a Dark Cleric with a split skull remained in the dark, keeping its broken sermon.

Thenit would touch the bowstring at his side until his hand steadied.

Only then would he sleep.