

The Witch and the Flame

By: _____

"Sir!"

The general, startled by the sudden and unexpected intrusion, tried to swallow his food whole and stand to attention. A wad of the bread however became stuck in his throat causing him to cough twice in vain. He began bashing his hand against his thick metal chestplate in attempt to dislodge the chunk. When he finally expelled what was now a mushy blob it fell between his chainmail and his plate. The saliva from it began to ooze onto his skin. The soldier who had interrupted him quickly retreated out of the war tent.

"I'm- I'm-"

The general barged out. Although the other soldier was taller, he had no where near the meaty mass of his commanding officer, who easily body checked him to the ground.

"I gave explicit orders that no one interrupt my dinner unless it was incredibly important! Now unless what you have to say next outweighs ruining a perfectly good meal I will have you bound, gagged, and thrown into the body of dead villagers until the maggots come and eat you alive!"

"Well sir we've uh-"

"We've what?"

The soldier on the ground was shaking, and continued to stumble with his words as the general glared down at him.

"Out with it!"

"We found the storyteller you asked for sir. He was at the clinic being treated for burns."

The general leaned down and pulled the man up by his shoulders. Their faces were now an inch apart.

"You sure he's the one who saw the mage?"

"Y-y-yes. Yes, sir. He was the only one who survived seeing her."

The general threw him back to the ground.

"Bring me to him."

The clinic was a large single wooden room littered with makeshift cotts. Lying on each one, in agony, were those who thought they could stop the Empire from taking their town and were lucky enough to survive. The general and three of his men marched right through as the frightened villagers parted to make a path for them. They stopped at one cott where an old man

lay with burns on his arms and legs. He looked very weak.

"I hear you've got a memory that's better than paper," said the general.

The storyteller closed his eyes and turned his face away. The general signalled to one of his men, who hit the old man's stomach with the wooden end of his spear. He wheezed in pain, and turned back to the soldiers.

"My body may be frail, my eyes may be weak, but my mind is sharp. I remember all I see; just as I shall remember the faces of every single person who died by your hands today."

The general grabbed his soldier's spear and put the blade's edge to the old man's neck.

"Look here storyteller, you know what I think of this town which your friends died to defend? I think it's a shit-hole. You're still building things out wood. We've got stone, we've got metal, and we've got castles so large they probably rival the ones you hear about in the tales of old! You should be grateful that we came in to shape up this place, but instead you threw bodies at us. Bodies our armies hacked through like they slabs of meat."

The general applied an extra ounce of force to the blade.

"If you have all these great things," asked the storyteller, "why do you want a mage?"

"Well we've also got hundreds of magical artifacts that we don't know how to work. We need a mage, so if you don't want to join the pile of bodies outside I suggest you start talking. Aren't you supposed to be good with words or something?"

The storyteller replied with great reluctance.

"I will tell you what I saw."

I have heard context is an important part of any story, so I suppose I'll start by painting the scene. It was late into the evening; the air outside the inn, both cool and crisp, wafts in and keeps everyone sitting straight despite their laid-back attitude. The place is pretty basic. The bar, where John serves the patrons, sits opposite the double doors where they enter. If you count those who stand, the place serves about twenty five or so. Upstairs is just a bunch of cotts, not too unlike what we have here, used in case travellers need to stay over. Behind the bar is a single door which leads to the back room. That's the place where all the magic happens.

You see, in addition to having the best brew in town, John also served the best Briska. What generated all the intrigue wasn't that it was the best in town, but that no one knew how he could possibly cook it up quite so fast. Everyone knows a fire on wood takes a good twenty minutes to make a proper dish of Briska, yet every time John did it in ten. Each of the regulars had their own theory on the matter. Michael, our best farmer, thought it was elves. George on the other hand, who runs the general store, said with great confidence that elves can't cook and it must have been a dwarf. As if either of them knew what a mythical creature could or could not do. Me, a man who believes what he sees, just figured it was natural skill. I clearly have too much faith in people.

Have patience, we're getting to the bit you'll want to hear.

I was sitting where I usually do, in the far corner furthest from the doors. I close my eyes

and listen to the social landscape of town, picking up on all the natural stories it creates. Suddenly, every voice died down. I smiled. I had heard this happen before. Every time a new woman strolls in every male head in the bar quiets, turns, and watches. The young make me laugh sometimes. I opened my eyes and turned to the door, and all thoughts of laughter died inside me. I suppose my guess was close.

Every part of her but her hands were covered in a black robe. The hood covered the top of her face, while its shadow covered the rest. She balanced her weight onto a cane she held in her right hand, and what a weight it was. Her body proportions were, from what I could tell, normal except for the massive bulge on her back. It extruded almost a foot, and I could tell it was heavy because of the way she walked. A lot of weight went into every step.

And two steps were all she took. Two steps and her presence seized the room, pulling the crowd's wills right out of their mouths. As a storyteller I believe in the power of words, but her silence had more strength than any poem I've ever written.

She banged her oddly shaped cane on the ground, and the room sounded like it exploded. I covered my face and turned away. When I looked back I was surprised to find the world still around me. It was almost how I'd left it, just with a lot more screaming and running. Everyone, even the regulars, ducked and fled with their hands covering their ears. I'm not sure what the witch did, but that awful jarring noise had left my ears ringing. In the panic and confusion I hid under my table and watched what followed.

It was just the two now: her and John. She pointed her cane, or more likely her wand, at the bartender. He was unfazed, and stared right back with defiant grin.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"The artifact."

"What artifact?"

"The artifact."

John reached under the bar, took out a cloth, and started cleaning the counter. He wasn't even bothering to look at her anymore.

"I don't have a clue what you're talking, but what I do know is you're scaring off my customers. Would you mind leaving?"

Her unwavering composure answered in a way words could not.

"What," he said, "you think you've got a monopoly on magic or something. You can't own it anymore than I can own the wheel. You mages are just a bunch of disfigured miscreants running around pretending to be heralds of justice. Even this dirty old rag's cleaner than you."

He tossed it apathetically in her direction. Without a flinch she raised her hand and a jet of flame intercepted it midair. John tried to keep his wits, but I saw him wince as the rag's ashes fell to the ground.

"Give me the artifact," she said.

I could see John mulling over the idea, and then his fear faded. He smiled, nodded, and moved into the back room. When he came back he was carrying a large strange cylindrical

metal object I'd never seen before. It was about a quarter of his height tall. He put it down on top of the counter, and rested his hand on top of it.

"Alright, it's here. Come and get it."

She didn't move. I saw John reaching for something.

"How about I give it to you?"

This part's hard to remember.

I heard a hiss, saw a flicker, and suddenly the air was full of flame. I couldn't tell how he did it, but the artifact was now shooting fire. The mage leaped out of the way and rolled with surprising grace. The jet of flame hit the inn's double doors instead, which blew open and caught ablaze. From there the fire sizzled and spread, running like mad across the wood - likely following the stains of many years of spilled drinks.

Without apparent means of escape I chose to wait instead and watch. John tried to run up the stairs, but on the steps he lost his footing and fell out of my sight. The fire followed him before the mage could even get up, and he greeted it with his screams. I saw him now only by his shadow on the wall, which twisted and danced in the orange light. She just stood and watched him burn.

I was trapped and forced to listen, but soon even his cries were drowned by the coughs fighting their way out of my throat. The smoke was growing thicker and thicker, and all I could do was pull myself closer to the ground as I choked on the acrid taste of my favourite watering hole. All the memories and stories of the place rushed into my lungs and burnt them from the inside.

Then I saw and thought no more. Last thing I felt was the warm embrace of flame surround and prepare to engulf me, then a sudden surge of frost.

Some time later I woke up in the middle of town, a crowd around me trying to bring me back from the brink. They took me here.

For a few minutes, none of the soldiers said anything.

"Burned alive..." one of them finally said.

The general shivered.

"It must have been cursed or something," said the general, "he tried to use it and it killed him."

"The magical artifacts we've found - what if they're cursed as well, sir?"

"We can't take the risk. Throw 'em out; get rid of 'em. We can't risk losing an army or even a platoon out here so close to the West."

"But... what if they don't want to be thrown out? What if they- what if they..."

"Soldier! Get a hold of yourself. Bring them all far away from everyone else and dispose of them yourself. We can't risk more than one person."

“Uh...”

“Soldier! Do it and report these findings to the Emperor immediately!”

“Yes... yes sir! Will do!”

“Now storyteller,” said the general, “do you know where this mage went? Any idea at all?”

“I do not know.”

“And you don’t know how you got out?”

“No. Must have been a miracle.”

The general sighed, signalled his soldiers, and left. The storyteller went back to sleep.

One night once he was feeling better the storyteller returned home. He climbed the front steps and pushed open the door. Something creaked, and he stopped. For the forty years he’d lived here the door had never creaked. He stood there, too apprehensive to turn around.

“Did you tell it?” a familiar female voice behind him spoke.

“Yes.” he said, staring into the black abyss of his house. The candles inside were unlit.

“Like I told you to tell it?”

“... Yes.”

“That is how it must always be told.”

He didn't understand.

“Why?”

“Fear. People need to fear what they don’t understand. The child only knows to avoid the fire after his curiosity leads him to pain. His fear teaches him. His fear keeps him safe.”

“What did you do to bartender?”

“The truth rarely helps anyone.”

“How can he learn if he's dead?”

“Do not concern yourself with the details.”

He couldn’t take it anymore

“No!”

The storyteller turned around. For the entire conversation he had been preparing himself for this moment, to see her grotesque features, to see the disfigured face of some heartless hunchback.

The storyteller was a molder of fiction, a creator of lies, and was very often wrong.

“Your eyes may be old,” she said staring into his, “but they haven’t seen what I have seen. They haven’t seen a world growing without fear; a world spiraling into chaos. A world not mature enough for its reach. A land of children untouched by flame, and perfectly ready to burn their friends for power and greed. Too eager to play with things they do not understand.”

He stood there staring into those eyes.

“If I ever hear rumors of another version of the tale, I’ll come back. Neither of us wants that.”

He couldn't tell if it was fear or surprise, but he had never been so lost for words.

“I have heard...” he finally said, “that mages... do not have hearts. That nothing beats behind their breast. Is that-”

“Stories shape our world,” she said, and left him to his life.

She pushed open the doors, and before she had taken two steps inside every face was on her. Her hood covered her eyes, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t feel their stares. There wasn’t a place she could go where her image didn’t bring that effect.

She waited a few moments and allowed her presence to sink into the room. She closed her eyes and tried to feel the tension building until the moment she sensed someone was about to muster up the courage to speak.

Then she pulled the trigger.

The shotgun blast fired into the ground. The people screamed, and their fear drove them out the door. It was now just the two of them. She looked up.

“Where is it?”

“Wha- what do you-”

“The artifact. Where is it?”

He scrambled into the back room and returned quickly with a propane tank, which he dropped onto the counter. He raised his hands into the air.

“Please, please I was just using it to cook. It makes a flame so pure and steady. I was just trying to make my customers happy.”

“The Empire is coming,” she said.

“The... the Empire? Do-do-do you need this to stop them?”

“Yes.”

“Then take it. Please just take it I don’t want any trouble.”

“I don’t need to take it.”

"Then... then what do you need?"

"Fear."

She lifted the gun. He ran. She shot the tank.

The explosion consumed the room. She took a step back and clicked the release on her right hand, firing a blast of liquid nitrogen from one of the tanks strapped to her back. She warded off the fire and watched as the bartender raced upstairs to escape. She followed.

He was cornered now against a back window. The flames were following them, and the two of them stood alone.

"Please! Have mercy..."

She dropped her weapon and grabbed him, holding him over the open window.

"Have you no heart?" he screamed.

She raised a hand to his face, and he saw the last thirty seconds of his life flash before his eyes. The last ten were spent burning, his body battered from the fall. The five before that were spent watching as the ground grew closer and closer while his clothes sizzled around him. The first fifteen were spent looking into her eyes for the first time: the eyes of a monster. Though when her hood lifted, he saw something entirely different. He looked into those eyes, and they looked back. He didn't understand, and then his world went dark.

He slumped to the ground, and the mage rubbed her knuckles. She lifted his unconscious body, and from her robes pulled out a long rope with a metal hook. She lowered herself and the bartender out the window and safely onto the ground. It would be at least a day's walk to get him to another town outside the Empire's control, but she had no choice. Just a moment before she left however, she heard a sound: the sound of coughing from inside the inn.