

Valdin rested on the nearest rock that he could find. His tired bones screamed for relief. The trek through the woods had taken him longer than he imagined. He loosed the grip on his worn staff, letting it slump into the wet dirt on the side. The last village had taken more out of him than he thought. Valdin shut his sunken in eyes, grateful for the moment of quiet. The hair on his head had shifted from deep black to ash white over the past few months. Age and stress taking more of a toll than he had anticipated.

Everyone needed healers, and those were less of them every day. Magic was dwindling and no one knew when, or if, it would return to the amount that people expected. The little bit of power that he had stored was used up within the first day and he had spent as much time as he could gaining it back. But the next village would wipe him clean again. He needed to take a moment to rest. If he didn't, he could find himself burned out like all the others.

Valdin held out his hand. Snapping his fingers trying to make a small fire appear. Each snap sent pain through his body. He was trying to find something to make sure that he would be able to help. He had nothing to offer besides his magic. Once he burned out, there would be nothing left for him to do.

He kept snapping hoping that he would see the small flame, but the pain was unbearable. He was on the edge of his abilities now. Pushing himself further would make it harder for him to get going in the morning.

There was a rumor of other mages forming a small community for themselves outside of the realm of the usual kingdom. But that was nothing more than rumours, and Valdin couldn't sustain himself on that. Most were trying to avoid getting drafted into the war. The terror that the arcane could unleash upon forces was more than enough for people to fear seeing even one in the line.

He had to keep pushing himself. There were people that needed help, and he couldn't sit by while they waited. Even this far from the wars, people felt the effects. If all that he could do was entertain with the few light tricks, that would be enough for some. Travelling weavers made their living doing things such as that. Many became embedded in the royal courts if they lasted long enough. Valdin regretted the path he chose at times, but he pressed on no matter the situation.

He stood, his legs still unsteady. Valdin had to keep pressing on. The next village was still more than a day's trek from where he was. The longer he waited, the more likely it was that there would be more than he could handle in the village. The road was clear, people rarely traveled this time of year. Valdin moved forward, maintaining a steady pace as he worked his way towards the village.

He arrived in the village of Carthik in the early hours of the morning. The sun barely peeking over the trees of the surrounding forest. Most were still shut up inside of their homes. It would be hours before everyone was awake and moving. A few people had started their day, going about their usual tasks. They stopped and stared at Valdin as he entered the village. No one expected a wandering wizard to arrive in their town, but once one was there the news would spread like wild fire.

Valdin nodded to the people as he passed. He could tell none of them had seen someone pass through their village in a long time. Some ran for their homes as soon as they

saw who he was. He would be swarmed within moments. He would have to find a place to stay and fast.

The nearest inn was a thin two-story building made of rough-hewn stone with a simple thatch roof. It looked as though it had stood for years without needing replacement, though the deterioration of time was starting to show.

The inside fared slightly better. A few tables scattered around a large fireplace that burned with faint cinders from the night before. The new logs wouldn't be placed until the innkeeper came down to serve the morning meals.

Valdin eased himself into one of the tables. Enjoying the faint warmth that the fireplace was able to give him. It wasn't enough to fully remove the chill that he held, but it was a pleasant feeling. He waited for the rest of the village to wake. Valdin could spy the people around the city watching him as he rested. They didn't wish to disturb him yet, but he knew that it was only a matter of time.

The innkeeper descended the stairs later. The first of the people to rise inside the building. She was barely awake when she noticed Valdin sitting at the table. She rushed over to him. Quickly tidying herself. She wanted to make a good first impression on the mage. Without saying anything she brought a thick bowl of porridge over. She could tell that he had been travelling. Valdin pulled out a few coins, but she raised her hands refusing. His money would be no good here.

"Thank you." His voice was hoarse from disuse. He hadn't needed to speak in his few days of travel. He cleared his throat. "Thank you" He spoke again.

"Don't worry about it." She tried to brush off her kindness. It was just a normal part of how she operated her business. "Did someone call you into town?"

"No." He lifted the spoon towards his mouth. The porridge was still hot, small crushed nuts floating in the watery dish. "Just passing through town." He looked up at her as he spoke. Saying that he was just passing through would allow him some freedom in how he moved. People would still ask for miracles if he was visiting someone, but this might allow him to have a little more movement around the town.

"Ah. That's commendable. The lord's son has had a fever for ages, and no one knows when someone will be able to get in." She wasn't sad to mention the lord's ailing child. It was just a fact of life to her. Something that everyone took in stride and didn't question. "He's sent people out but none of them have returned." She settled herself into a chair by Valdin. She saw the people gathering outside the windows. It would only be a matter of time before they burst into the inn to submit their requests.

"Has anyone figured out what ails him?" Valdin asked.

"No one is allowed to see the child. Only the lord and his immediate family know."

Valdin scooped the last little bit of porridge into his mouth. It wasn't good but it satiated him well enough for him to keep going for a little bit longer. There were other things that he had to see too.

"Might I trouble you for a room here later?"

"I'll make sure it's prepared." The innkeeper stood and went about the rest of her daily preparations. Valdin stood and moved towards the door. Some backed away, not having anything that they wanted to request. Others flung questions his way. Their requests were as varied as each individual.

Some wanted a blessing for their crops, some healing, and others needed something to keep their houses warm for the coming winter. Valdin had heard it all before. He announced that he would be taking their requests once he returned. None of them wanted to hear something like that. They had not seen a mage in months, and he was telling them to wait. When would he return? Would he still be capable of helping once he did? They needed the answers in that very moment, but Valdin would not provide them.

"I am seeking the lord of your town." He remained as calm as he could. Refusing to help could lead to him being driven out of town. It wouldn't have been the first time that he had. But he refused to allow it to happen more than needed.

The town backed off after he announced it. They knew that their lord would want to speak to him as soon as he heard of Valdin's arrival. There were other things that they could do to occupy the time until he came back.

Valdin wished them well and set off for the keep. He didn't need to ask for directions, he could see it rise high above the rest of the village. Looking down on the whole thing as he climbed towards it. People saw him as he passed. They wished to ask questions, much like the rest of the village, but delayed once he saw where he was headed.

The portcullis was sealed shut, guards standing atop the towers making sure that no one was trying to sneak in. The rusted metal told that it had not been opened in a while. Whatever the lord was keeping behind these doors was something that he felt needed to remain hidden.

"Is anyone there?" Valdin called out. He waited for a response, listening to the sound of clanking metal as whoever manned the top rushed around. Hushed whispers fell from the roof. No one up there knew how to approach the situation.

A balding man with an oversized helmet peered over the edge of the wall. "What do you want?" he called out.

Valdin straightened himself, doing his best to appear proper. "I have come to see your lord. I hear that his child is ill." He waited for a moment, hoping to get a response. When one didn't arrive swiftly, he added, "I am trained in the healing arts. I may be able to assist."

"Did one of the messengers inform you?"

"No, I was just passing through when I heard of his plight."

The guard ducked behind the wall again, leaving Valdin to wait just a little longer. He looked at the keep's surroundings. The garden was well maintained for a distance before descending into weeds. The closer things were to the keep the more well kept they were. Everything around here felt as though it revolved around the keep. If someone in the village needed something it likely needed approval of the lord to be brought it.

The portcullis raised as a set of guards stepped outside to surround Valdin. He was being let in, but they would keep a close eye on him to make certain that nothing went awry.

The inside of the keep was similar to the outside. Well maintained for the most part, but cracks were starting to show. They did their best to cover it with plaster and other materials, but even that was fading as time went on. Servants rushed through without noise. They didn't want to be seen disturbing the peace. Valdin didn't try to make idle conversation with any of the guards. He knew that they would not respond to him if he tried. They all wore the same mail that had been passed down from whoever they took the position from.

Valdin was led through the halls towards the dining room. The lord was already well awake and being served breakfast by the time he arrived. The smell of fresh roasted meat and warm wine filled the room as he entered. The lord sat on the far side of the room at the end of an opulent dining table. Everything was pushed towards him as he filled his face with everything that he could. There was no way that the man could eat everything in front of him.

But his guards stood to the side, not having anything for themselves. They could ask but Valdin had the expectation that the answer would be no. He waited to be told to sit, as customary of a man in his position.

The lord kept eating the food that was before him. No one else had anything offered to them. If there was anything that the lord wished for his people to have, he would have offered it to them. Valdin stood in position, patiently waiting. He didn't expect to be treated especially well or with reverence, but the way that he watched told him that things were about to proceed exactly as he expected.

As he finished each plate a servant brought another to replace it. It had been going like this for quite some time. Valdin cleared his throat, trying to get the attention of everyone in the room. The guards looked at him, worry in their eyes. They wanted to make sure that he didn't get into trouble if he could avoid it. The lord seemed to react to the noise, though it seemed more like a mild annoyance than someone trying to get his attention.

"Sir." Valdin started.

The lord held up his hand. He wasn't ready to receive an audience at the moment. He waved for the guards to come closer. It was their duty to clear the plates and make room on the table for everything else. It was completed quickly, Valdin could see the face of the man watching from the edge of the table.

"You may sit now." The lord said. He appeared to be in a good mood compared to earlier. Valdin eased himself into the chair at the far end of the table. He waited for the lord to speak again, not wanting to push him any further than he already had.

"What brings you to my small kingdom?" The lord asked, leaning forward. His eyes were scrutinizing Valdin as he spoke. Valdin did not know how to respond. He thought that most people would have an idea of what to do with a mage once they came face to face with one. No matter how little anyone understood of the magical arts they had to have some idea of what they did. Valdin waited to respond. The lord enjoyed hearing himself talk, he would go on until Valdin felt it was the right moment to speak back.

"It's been so long since a mage has come to my doorstep. Are you one of the ones my messengers sent for?"

Valdin shook his head. The messengers must have been sent a while ago if the whole town knew of them and the lack of their return. The lord leaned back, unsatisfied with the response.

"I'm just passing through. I heard about your son-" The lord quickly cut him off as soon as his son was mentioned.

"How did you hear about that?"

"The innkeeper told me." Valdin spoke nothing but the truth. It kept the lord on edge. "She thought I was sent by one of the messengers as well." Valdin kept himself sitting straight up. He wasn't going to let the lord bully him into doing exactly as he wished. Valdin, though down on his luck, still had a sense of pride he wished to hold onto.

“What good does she do spewing information like that?” The lord almost stood. He was ready to head into the town itself to solve the issue as he saw fit. The servants returned to the room. They held themselves at the edge of the room, refusing to step further until told. “Please take a seat.” He finally seemed to notice that Valdin stood the entire time that he spoke. He spoke more as a casual reminder rather than an order. Valdin took a seat but remained silent. The lord was more than capable of speaking as long as he wanted.

He stopped stuffing his face for a moment. Staring down Valdin. It was the first time he made eye contact with him. Something shifted as he stared.

“You say you can help my son?” His voice was soft, unlike any other time he had spoken.

“I can’t guarantee anything.” Valdin replied. “But I am willing to take a look.”

The lord kept his seat. He appeared deep in thought. Valdin knew that trusting a random person to wander in from the woods to look at a child was a long shot. Most people knew of the drain that magic had taken over the past years. It was getting harder and harder to perform miracles that many needed. People still tried, but there was a sense that they would never get back to where they were. Valdin sat where he was. It would not be his decision to see the child. He had to make sure that the lord felt like he could do something. Even if he knew that it might be beyond his own abilities.

“I can tell you what is wrong.” Valdin started, trying to sell himself. “If I cannot solve it, I can send for someone else I know. They should be able to solve it.” Valdin sat straight up. He needed to appear to be in control of everything, or at least appear that he was. The lord bought it. He stood and walked over to the other side of the table. The servants followed but he quickly dismissed them. They rushed out of the room, knowing that they were not to be privy to what would happen next.

The lord took a seat next to Valdin. The weathered face had been waiting until a moment like this to drop. His eyes had sunken further in as the exhaustion crept its way back in. He slumped forward onto the table. He met Valdin’s eyes as an equal, not as a lord.

“Do you really know if you can manage to help him?” His voice was hoarse, as though he hadn’t spoken in this manner for a long time.

Valdin eased back. He didn’t want to give the lord anymore hope than he had already lost. But it was something that he had to make sure of. “I will see what I can do. I make no promises.”

Without a word the lord stood. “Follow me.” He said. Valdin obliged quickly. There was little time to spare.

They traveled through long winding hallways, decorated with thick tapestries detailing the lords conquests over the years. He paid no mind to them as they passed, they were his old life. Nothing else mattered besides getting Valdin to his son.

There were no guards or servants in these quarters. It was desolate except for the two men. Valdin wanted to ask questions, learn more about the ailment and what had been happening. He felt that it was better for him to figure out things with the child. There would be time later to ask about what it was that had happened.

They pair stopped at a large wooden door. It was barred shut. No one was to be allowed in without the express permission of the lord. He fished through his pockets and produced a worn rusted key. The door had been sealed long enough for the key to crumble. The lord braced

himself as he stepped forward. Valdin knew that it would be a struggle to get through the day, but he didn't expect it to be as hard as it was.

The door creaked open. The lord stepped to the side, he would allow Valdin to do whatever work he needed to do in privacy. There was a trust and a sense that if he saw what happened it would break him. Valdin moved into the room, before he could cross the threshold, the lord grabbed his arm and pulled him close.

"Make him better." His voice was a low growl. "I will see you handsomely rewarded if you can." He released his grip on Valdin, allowing him to continue inside.

The room was plain, nothing but a bed and a few dressers for clothing. It looked as if it had at one point contained expensive furnishings, but those were stripped away into only the necessities as time went on. Laying in the bed was a small child, no older than ten, struggling to breathe. His eyes were open, he knew that someone was inside to check on him. Even if he could not speak.

Valdin took his time approaching the bed. He wanted to take in everything that was present in the room. He knew that the boy didn't get out, but it appeared that he was cared for nonetheless. The furnishings, though minimal, were of the highest quality. The lord had sent for whatever he felt would make the pain slightly easier to bear. The boy croaked out a few sounds, trying to form words. Valdin took a few steps towards the bed. He listened to what the child was trying to say. Maybe he could figure something out that would ease the process a little.

A chair was placed by the bed, certainly for the lord anytime he decided to sit in the room. It wasn't as nice as the rest of the furnishings, but it was comfortable enough. Valdin eased himself down. The boy looked him in the eyes. Even through the haze that was affecting him, he recognized that Valdin wasn't his usual visitor.

The boy tried to speak, but Valdin held up his hand.

"Save your strength for later." He said. "It might be a while before we can accomplish anything." Valdin wondered what the lord had done to keep this level of furnishings in the room. The village outside these doors was starving, scared to approach the keep if Valdin's own journey was anything to go by. But inside here, it appeared that everything had become frozen in time. The look of the bed was years behind the time. And yet the boy looked frozen to the age that he had kept.

The lord could have been his grandfather by the way that he looked, and yet he referred to him as his son. Valdin never wanted to raise questions. His job as a mage was to make sure that everyone was taken care of even in the worst of times. Even with his own magical abilities fading, he kept to that creed. He had never been properly tested, dropping out ages before the rest of the world started to feel the effects.

Valdin reached out to the touch the boy and see what he could glean from that. His forehead was thick with sweat. He was cool to the touch, as though the boy had been dipped in ice and left to remain there for weeks at a time. It contrasted the thick heated air of the room. Whatever was causing the boy ill wasn't a naturally occurring fever. The lord had been right to call for a mage to assist.

Though Valdin wasn't certain that he would be able to. He had plenty of practice in healing, but it was still one of his weaker abilities. But he told himself that he was going to help. Even if there wasn't an obvious solution Valdin would search and find one. He didn't have much time left himself, if he could find something to cement a legacy that would make it all worth it.

He pushed a little energy into the boy, searching for the source of what ailed him. Valdin couldn't see anything that told him exactly what it was. The boy's thoughts were strangled in a strange jumble. Nothing made sense as they turned and twisted back into each other.

Valdin removed his hand. He couldn't tell where the power was going, but the boy seemed to be drawing it into himself. His face didn't change, he just kept staring at him with his deep unblinking eyes. Valdin braced himself and tried to send something through again.

He felt his power go through the same twisting and winding paths. Looping back on itself as he tried to dig deeper.

There was a push back against the flows going into the boy. As though he was fighting it himself. Valdin had no idea whether the attempt was a conscious effort made by the boy. His eyes glazed over as the power flowed into him, but it still drew as much as Valdin could muster. He wanted to pull away, but something told him to keep the connection intact.

The boy suddenly reached out and seized Valdin's hand. His grip was like a vice, Valdin tried to pull away but he was too strong. He forced more of Valdin's power into himself. He would take everything that he could if Valdin was unable to free himself.

He looked deeper into the boy's eyes. This was the way that things had always been. No one had spoken of why no mages had returned from before. They all knew what would happen. The innkeeper must have been trying to warn him. The way that the villagers looked at him as he passed had been visions of the ones who came before. Did the lord know that this was what happened whenever someone came into their home? He had to. The lord had welcomed Valdin into his home without a second thought. He never interrogated his thought process as to why he suddenly showed up. Perhaps Valdin should have just stayed back and moved onto the next village. His thoughts kept spiraling inward as more and more was drained from him.

He snapped back, locking eyes with the boy. He was still holding onto Valdin, but his grip had loosened a bit. There was a sense that the boy no longer wanted to keep up with everything. He looked tired. Valdin could understand that. Deep within the recesses of his mind, Valdin could feel that the boy held an untapped well of magical power. It would take a while for it to run itself dry if allowed to be set free.

Maybe that was what the boy wanted. He was barely able to control whatever it was that caused him to siphon energy into him. Maybe he sensed that Valdin was strong enough to help him. He couldn't be certain however.

Valdin eased his hand back, the grip was loose enough that he could remove contact. The boy still held onto him, but it was a light grip. He wanted to be helped, even if he wasn't sure exactly what it was that Valdin would do.

"What do you want me to try?" Valdin asked. He wasn't even sure what he could do. The boy remained silent. The strength to keep his hand on Valdin was using most of his energy. He kept looking at him though, his eyes pleading to make whatever he was going to do swift. Valdin still had no idea what it was that he could manage.

He dived into the boy's mind again. He let his power swim quickly through the twisting halls. Before it could catch up to him he grabbed what seemed to be the source and started to pull back with it. It almost drained Valdin just to seize it, let alone run with it. But he kept holding it tight. He would pull the power from the boy. Even if he was uncertain if he would be able to hold onto it himself. He had to try something.

Retreating from the insides of his mind Valdin could feel the power closing in on him. He knew that he had to pull it back quickly if he wanted to keep himself safe. The tendrils wrapped around him as he fled. They would slow him down, but Valdin forced more power into the delving, it had to be enough to get him out. He felt the power slip for a moment, cut away from what he knew that he could hold. But after that Valdin would have to find a new way out.

The tendrils crept closer, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. They were toying with him now, confident in their abilities to strike him down. Valdin would use that to his advantage. They wanted him just as badly as they wanted the source of the power he carried. He could split off from it and force them to chase after both. But how would he get the source out of here? If he let them take it all the way back he would be exactly where he started.

There was only one thing for him to try. He released the source of the tendrils. Immediately they stopped chasing after him as they swarmed around the orb. Valdin still wanted to see if he could get it out. His own force was enough to fight them back, but only if he relinquished control. He let himself slip further inside, letting more and more of his power into the boy. If this failed, he would wither and disappear on the spot.

The more power he funneled in the further the tendrils retreated. He had to keep pushing. He had to have enough within him to retrieve whatever it was that they defended.

They were almost gone, one more burst would do it. But he knew he was at the edge of his power. That wasn't going to stop him. He flooded the area with what little he could still muster. The tendrils flailed as they receded into the depths of the boy's mind. Valdin quickly grabbed the source and retreated.

Within moments he was back within his own body. Drenched in sweat, the air in the room almost too thick to breathe. The boy lay still before him, his eyes finally closed. A small smile formed on his lips. Valdin didn't know what he had done, he had acted on instinct alone, but that was enough for him to survive.

Valdin searched within himself for the source of the power. He felt a surge that he hadn't known in years. Whatever it was that the boy had been carrying, it gave Valdin a renewed sense of vigor. It wouldn't last him long, but it was enough to keep him going for a little while longer. Long enough for him to get out of the keep.

Valdin stood and moved towards the door. He had to figure out reasoning quickly. The lord would want to hear what happened. He likely didn't expect Valdin to survive.

He was standing on the outside of the door, waiting for Valdin. He appeared to be ready to burst into the room at any moment.

"Is everything alright?" the lord asked, trying to hide his surprise.

"I'm afraid..." Valdin let his voice trail off. The fact that he was still standing here was enough for the lord to know the truth.

"What did you do?" He erupted. The lord pushed back Valdin. He had to see what he already knew waited for him in the room. Valdin held his position, watching as the lord splayed himself over the body of his boy. The sobs were tight and controlled, as though he had been preparing for this day for a long time. He didn't move for a moment, letting his grief run its course. Valdin waited until he was ready. The lord still owed him for what he had done. Even if he doubted that he would get everything that he asked for.

The lord retreated from the boy, laying a blanket over his face. He would be brought out of the keep in due time. He regained his composure as he paced back towards Valdin.

“What do you expect from this?”

“What was promised to me.”

“For *murdering* my son?”

Valdin held his tongue. It would do him no good to fight the lord when he was in this sort of mood. The lord moved down the hall, hailing guards as he went. Valdin waited for them to come to him. Fighting would only make things worse.

The guards looked conflicted as they hauled Valdin out towards the gate. The Lord shouted the entire time about Valdin should be grateful that he was getting out of here with his head still intact. Valdin never allowed how near he had been to death to cross his mind. He knew that if he lingered any longer in the boys mind, he would have been gone. Like many before him. How many? Valdin shuddered to think of the answer.

As Valdin returned to town, he became more of a curiosity than what he was earlier. They all expected to never see him again. The innkeeper had kept her promise however. There was a room waiting for him when he returned. They exchanged pleasantries but nothing else. She knew that Valdin was just happy to have returned. She pushed people out of the inn once he arrived, saying that he needed rest.

Valdin promised to help them in the morning, but agreed that he needed to sleep.

He collapsed into bed, his mind still tumbling. He was trying to get the power within him to slumber, but it would not let up. He had to find a way to push it out, but that was something that could wait.