

Morning: The Narrow Road

Bast almost made it out the back door of the Waystone inn.

He actually *had* made it outside, both feet were over the threshold and the door was almost entirely eased shut behind him before he heard his master's voice.

Bast paused, hand on the latch. He frowned at the door, hardly a handspan from being closed. He hadn't made any noise. He knew it. He was familiar with all the silent pieces of the inn, which floorboards sighed beneath a foot, which windows stuck...

The back door's hinges creaked sometimes, depending on their mood, but that was easy to work around. Bast shifted his grip on the latch, lifted up so that the door's weight didn't hang so heavy, then eased it slowly closed. No creak. The swinging door was softer than a sigh.

Bast stood upright and grinned. His face was sweet and sly and wild. He looked like a naughty child who had managed to steal the moon and eat it. His smile was like the last sliver of remaining moon, sharp and white and dangerous.

"Bast!" The call came again, louder this time. Nothing so crass as a shout, his master would never stoop to bellowing. But when he wanted to be heard, his baritone would not be stopped by anything so insubstantial as an oaken door. His voice carried like a horn, and Bast felt his name tug at him like a hand around his heart.

Bast sighed, then opened the door lightly and strode back inside. He was dark, and tall, and lovely. When he walked he looked like he was dancing. "Yes, Reshi?" he called.

After a moment the innkeeper stepped into the kitchen, he wore a clean white apron and his hair was red. Other than that, he was painfully unremarkable. His face held the doughy placidness of bored innkeepers everywhere. Despite the early hour, he looked tired.

He handed Bast a leather book. "You almost forgot this," he said without a hint of sarcasm.

Bast took the book and made a show of looking surprised. "Oh! Thank you, Reshi!"

The innkeeper shrugged and his mouth made the shape of a smile. "No bother, Bast. While you're out on your errands, would you mind picking up some eggs?"

Bast nodded, tucking the book under his arm. "Anything else?" he asked dutifully.

"Maybe some carrots too. I'm thinking we'll do stew tonight. It's Felling, so we'll need to be ready for a crowd." His mouth turned up slightly at one corner as he said this.

The innkeeper started to turn away, then stopped. "Oh. The Williams boy stopped by last night,

looking for you. Didn't leave any sort of message." He raised an eyebrow at Bast. The look said more than it said.

"I haven't the slightest idea what he wants," Bast said.

The innkeeper made a noncommittal noise and turned back toward the common room.

Before he'd taken three steps Bast was already out the door and running through the early-morning sunlight.

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By the time Bast arrived, there were already two children waiting. They played on the huge greystone that lay half-fallen at the bottom of the hill, climbing up the tilting side of it, then jumping down into the tall grass.

Knowing they were watching, Bast took his time climbing the tiny hill. At the top stood what the children called the lightning tree, though these days it was little more than a branchless trunk barely taller than a man. All the bark had long since fallen away, and the sun had bleached the wood as white as bone. All except the very top, where even after all these years the wood was charred a jagged black.

Bast touched the trunk with his fingertips and made a slow circuit of the tree. He went deasil, the same direction as the turning sun. The proper way for making. Then he turned and switched hands, making three slow circles widdershins. That turning was against the world. It was the way of breaking. Back and forth he went, as if the tree were a bobbin and he was winding and unwinding.

Finally he sat with his back against the tree and set the book on a nearby stone. The sun shone on the gold gilt letters, *Celum Tinture*. Then he amused himself by tossing stones into the nearby stream that cut into the low slope of the hill opposite the greystone.

After a minute, a round little blonde boy trudged up the hill. He was the baker's youngest son, Brann. He smelled of sweat and fresh bread and ... something else. Something out of place.

The boy's slow approach had an air of ritual about it. He crested the small hill and stood there for a moment quietly, the only noise coming from the other two children playing below.

Finally Bast turned to look the boy over. He was no more than eight or nine, well-dressed, and plumper than most of the other town's children. He carried a wad of white cloth in his hand.

The boy swallowed nervously. "I need a lie."

Bast nodded. "What sort of lie?"

The boy gingerly opened his hand, revealing the wad of cloth to be a makeshift bandage, spattered with bright red. It stuck to his hand slightly. Bast nodded; that was what he'd smelled before.

"I was playing with my mum's knives," Brann said.

Bast examined the cut. It ran shallow along the meat near the thumb. Nothing serious. "Hurt much?"

"Nothing like the birching I'll get if she finds out I was messing with her knives."

Bast nodded sympathetically. "You clean the knife and put it back?"

Brann nodded.

Bast tapped his lips thoughtfully. "You thought you saw a big black rat. It scared you. You threw a knife at it and cut yourself. Yesterday one of the other children told you a story about rats chewing off soldier's ears and toes while they slept. It gave you nightmares."

Brann gave a shudder. "Who told me the story?"

Bast shrugged. "Pick someone you don't like."

The boy grinned viciously.

Bast began to tick off things on his fingers. "Get some blood on the knife before you throw it." He pointed at the cloth the boy had wrapped his hand in. "Get rid of that, too. The blood is dry, obviously old. Can you work up a good cry?"

The boy shook his head, seeming a little embarrassed by the fact.

"Put some salt in your eyes. Get all snotty and teary before you run to them. Howl and blubber. Then when they're asking you about your hand, tell your mum you're sorry if you broke her knife."

Brann listened, nodding slowly at first, then faster. He smiled. "That's good." He looked around nervously. "What do I owe you?"

"Any secrets?" Bast asked.

The baker's boy thought for a minute. "Old Lant's tuppung the Widow Creel..." he said hopefully.

Bast waved his hand. "For years. Everyone knows." Bast rubbed his nose, then said, "Can you bring me two sweet buns later today?"

Brann nodded.

"That's a good start," Bast said. "What have you got in your pockets?"

The boy dug around and held up both his hands. He had two iron shims, a flat greenish stone, a bird skull, a tangle of string, and a bit of chalk.

Bast claimed the string. Then, careful not to touch the shims, he took the greenish stone between two fingers and arched an eyebrow at the boy.

After a moment's hesitation, the boy nodded.

Bast put the stone in his pocket.

"What if I get a birching anyway?" Brann asked.

Bast shrugged. "That's your business. You wanted a lie. I gave you a good one. If you want me to get you out of trouble, that's something else entirely."

The baker's boy looked disappointed, but he nodded and headed down the hill.

Next up the hill was a slightly older boy in tattered homespun. One of the Alard boys, Kale. He had a split lip and a crust of blood around one nostril. He was as furious as only a boy of ten can be. His expression was a thunderstorm.

"I caught my brother kissing Gretta behind the old mill!" he said as soon as he crested the hill, not waiting for Bast to ask. "He knew I was sweet on her!"

Bast spread his hands helplessly, shrugging.

"Revenge," the boy spat.

"Public revenge?" Bast asked. "Or secret revenge?"

The boy touched his split lip with his tongue. "Secret revenge," he said in a low voice.

"How much revenge?" Bast asked.

The boy thought for a bit, then held up his hands about two feet apart. "This much."

"HmMMM," Bast said. "How much on a scale from mouse to bull?"

The boy rubbed his nose for a while. "About a cat's worth," he said. "Maybe a dog's worth. Not like Crazy Martin's dog though. Like the Bentons' dogs."

Bast nodded and tilted his head back in a thoughtful way. "Okay," he said. "Piss in his shoes."

The boy looked skeptical. "That don't sound like a whole dog's worth of revenge."

Bast shook his head. "You piss in a cup and hide it. Let it sit for a day or two. Then one night when he's put his shoes by the fire, pour the piss on his shoes. Don't make a puddle, just get them damp. In the morning they'll be dry and probably won't even smell too much..."

"What's the point?" the boy interrupted angrily. "That's not a flea's worth of revenge!"

Bast held up a pacifying hand. "When his feet get sweaty, he'll start to smell like piss." Bast said calmly. "If he steps in a puddle, he'll smell like piss. When he walks in the snow, he'll smell like piss. It will be hard for him to figure out exactly where it's coming from, but everyone will know your brother is the one that reeks." Bast grinned at the boy. "I'm guessing your Gretta isn't going to want to kiss the boy who can't stop pissing himself."

Raw admiration spread across the young boy's face like sunrise in the mountains. "That's the most bastardy thing I've ever heard," he said, awestruck.

Bast tried to look modest and failed. "Have you got anything for me?"

"I found a wild bee hive," the boy said.

"That will do for a start," Bast said. "Where?"

"It's off past the Orissons'. Past Littlecreek." The boy squatted down and drew a map in the dirt. "You see?"

Bast nodded. "Anything else?"

"Well... I know where Crazy Martin keeps his still...."

Bast raised his eyebrows at that, "Really?"

The boy drew another map and gave some directions. Then he stood and dusted off his knees. "We square?"

Bast scuffed his foot in the dirt, destroying the map. "We're square."

The boy dusted off his knees, "I've got a message too. Rike wants to see you."

Bast shook his head firmly. "He knows the rules. Tell him no."

"I already told him," the boy said with a comically exaggerated shrug. "But I'll tell him again if I see

him...."

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There were no more children waiting after Kale, so Bast tucked the leather book under his arm and went on a long, rambling stroll. He found some wild raspberries and ate them. He took a drink from the Ostlar's well.

Eventually Bast climbed to the top of a nearby bluff where he gave a great stretch before tucking the leather-bound copy of *Celum Tinture* into a spreading hawthorn tree where a wide branch made a cozy nook against the trunk.

He looked up at the sky then, clear and bright. No clouds. Not much wind. Warm but not hot. Hadn't rained for a solid span. It wasn't a market day. Hours before noon on Felling...

Bast's brow furrowed a bit, as if performing some complex calculation. Then he nodded to himself.

Then Bast headed back down the bluff, past Old Lant's place and around the brambles that bordered the Alard farm. When he came to Littlecreek he cut some reeds and idly whittled at them with a small bright knife. Then brought the string out of his pocket and bound them together, fashioning a tidy set of shepherd's pipes.

He blew across the top of them and cocked his head to listen to their sweet discord. His bright knife trimmed some more, and he blew again. This time the tune was closer, which made the discord far more grating.

Bast's knife flicked again, once, twice, thrice. Then he put it away and brought the pipes closer to his face. He breathed in through his nose, smelling the wet green of them. Then he licked the fresh-cut tops of the reeds, the flicker of his tongue a sudden, startling red.

Then he drew a breath and blew against the pipes. This time the sound was bright as moonlight, lively as a leaping fish, sweet as stolen fruit. Smiling, Bast headed off into the Bentons' back hills, and it wasn't long before he heard the low, mindless bleat of distant sheep.

A minute later, Bast came over the crest of a hill and saw two dozen fat, daft sheep cropping grass in the green valley below. It was shadowy here, and secluded. The lack of recent rain meant the grazing was better here. The steep sides of the valley meant the sheep weren't prone to straying and didn't need much looking after.

A young woman sat in the shade of a spreading elm that overlooked the valley. She had taken off her shoes and bonnet. Her long, thick hair was the color of ripe wheat. Bast began playing then. A dangerous tune. It was sweet and bright and slow and sly.

The shepherdess perked up at the sound of it, or so it seemed at first. She lifted her head, excited....

but no. She didn't look in his direction at all. She was merely climbing to her feet to have stretch, rising high up onto her toes, hands twining over her head.

Still apparently unaware she was being serenaded, the young woman picked up a nearby blanket and spread it beneath the tree, and sat back down. It was a little odd, as she'd been sitting there before without the blanket. Perhaps she'd just grown chilly. Bast continued to play as he walked down the slope of the valley toward her. He did not hurry, and the music he made was sweet and playful and languorous all at once.

The shepherdess showed no sign of noticing the music or Bast himself. In fact she looked away from him, toward the far end of the little valley, as if curious what the sheep might be doing there. When she turned her head, it exposed the lovely line of her neck from her perfect shell-like ear, down to the gentle swell of breast that showed above her bodice.

Eyes intent on the young woman, Bast stepped on a loose stone and stumbled awkwardly down the hill. He blew one hard, squawking note, then dropped a few more from his song as he threw out one arm wildly to catch his balance.

The shepherdess laughed then, but she was pointedly looking at the other end of the valley. Perhaps the sheep had done something humorous. Yes. That was surely it. They could be funny animals at times.

Even so, one can only look at sheep for so long. She sighed and relaxed, leaning back against the sloping trunk of the tree. The motion accidentally pulled the hem of her skirt up slightly past her knee. Her calves were round and tan and covered with the lightest down of honey-colored hair.

Bast continued down the hill. His steps delicate and graceful. He looked like a stalking cat. He looked like he were dancing.

Apparently satisfied the sheep were safe, the shepherdess sighed again, closed her eyes, and lay her head against the trunk of the tree. Her face tilted up to catch the sun. She seemed about to sleep, but for all her sighing her breath seemed to be coming rather quickly. And when she shifted restlessly to make herself more comfortable, one hand fell in such a way that it accidentally drew the hem of her dress even further up until it showed a pale expanse of thigh.

It is hard to grin while playing shepherd's pipes. Somehow Bast managed it.