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A Chance Meeting

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by

Clinton Nix

An elderly man with a brown sash tied at his waist stooped to gather fresh leaves from the ground. The sun hung high, baking light into all under the sky's canopy. The man was graying at the temples, and wore loose-fitting garments of simple cloth. He dropped the last leaf and root into his satchel, wiped his wet forehead, and let loose a delighted sigh.

Along the sunbaked trail, he watched the birds chirp their florid melodies, and the swaying leaves imitate the babbles of a brook. This likeness made him thirsty, so he rerouted for a drink from the nearest river.

A frog lingered in the stream, eyeing him as he approached. He knelt at the bank, dipping his dirty hands in the cool stream, cupping a pool to his face to sip. The rippling water mirrored his squared features and gentle smile with mirror-like crispness.

The frightened whinny of a horse broke his reverie, followed by the frantic clapping of hooves. He had caught sight of broken branches far in the distance, a sight which most people would strain to see.

"Help, kindly," a voice croaked.

The elderly man waited, and at the second cry, approached the disturbance. The stranger's voice grew hysterical at his approach.

"Help! You there! I am Alvadantia—a true-blooded Galdratian! For the love of our motherland, help me out of this earthen tomb!"

The man-sized pit was covered in freshly broken branches, but seemingly of a crude and elementary nature. The elderly man

leaned over the hole and espied a younger man with dark brown hair in his mid-thirties, clad in leather and mail vestments and with sword at waist. A jewel dangled from his neck which radiated a vibrant red hue. The man's knee was scraped, his leather torn and bloody from the fall.

"Good sir! Bless my luck that a hermit travels these woods. Would you kindly help me out of this pit? I seem to've gotten myself ensnared."

The hermit paused to get a good look at the traveler, deciding on how to act, and then turned his back to the hole.

"Sir—sir?"

"Grab the rope, if you are able," the hermit spoke from above, dropping a knotted rope into the pit.

The jewel bobbed and danced around the traveler's neck as he was hoisted out. Upon exit, the traveler bent over, chuckling.

"You have my gratitude," he said, putting out his hand for a shake. The hermit obliged, but the ruddy glow of the jewel stole his glances all the while. "Now this is peculiar—I didn't see the pit at all before, but now it's very plain." He stood, bracing his chin in ponderous thought.

"My horse was misbehaving—went into a mad fit. Right mad. I don't know what came over it. I was taking a short break from my travels, but the damned thing got the devil inside him and trotted off. He's gone for good, I surmise. Might I ask if you live nearby?"

The forest dweller lingered in thought a moment. "I do, yes; it isn't but a few paces

along this path. Allow me to take you there, if it is what you need.”

They approached a hovel built from glistening stones and freshly laid wooden beams. The smell of smoky wood filled the air, and a flock of sparrows landed on a nearby tree branch, singing as if to announce their arrival. Inside the hut, the hermit led the man to a wooden chair, tended to his wounds, and offered tea. He placed a clay pot over a small firepit, all the while fixing his eye upon the brimming jewel. The water went to boil, and he poured steaming herbal tea into two clay cups. The hermit had kept quiet the whole time, but finally broke the silence after sitting for tea.

“Mind if I ask what the necklace is? It has quite the shine.” He sipped the hot tea, his eyes trained on the jewel.

“Curious, are you? Certainly—this is an enchanted rune. Or so it was spoken to me. It glows in—” The traveler paused in thought. He lifted his cup and took a sip in contemplation, but spat and slammed the cup down, spilling scalding water on his hands. “Good heavens!”

“My apologies ... I am terrible with guests—my own senses have grown rather dull over the years,” the hermit said.

“A steely tongue,” the traveler added, picking up a towel to wipe his hands. “Ah yes, about the jewel. It had been enchanted with the sacred rituals of the high priests of Galdratia.” As he continued speaking, his voice wavered for dramatic effect. “Eleven priests, so they say, fasted for eleven days, fixating upon it the blessing of the divine tongue, *and so on and so forth.*” He paused for a smile, continuing: “Legends notwithstanding, the damnable thing has been glowing for the past hour straight, ever since I set foot in the forest, so I don’t know what to make of it,” he said, toying with the jewel.

“What a fantastic story,” the hermit added. “I am led to wonder, however ... if such tall tales as these simply melt away when brought to fire.”

“I’m beginning to wonder myself—by the way, you didn’t provide your name. Care to indulge me?”

“Oh, my name? I’ve spent many years in isolation ... I’m afraid I’ve forgotten,” he said, staring into his cup.

“Ah, wouldn’t you know—well, as I had so ungraciously blathered before, my name is Alvdantia—Alvdantia Demiro Thastrius *the Second*, officially—but you can spare the formality. Alvan will do.”

“It is a pleasure, Alvan. What brought you through these woods? It is rare to see a traveler.”

“I’m glad that you asked, sir—goodness—I’ll just call you ‘Hermit’—how does that sound? I’m glad that you asked, Hermit, as I am in pursuit of a—how shall I say—a legend.”

“‘Hermit’ will do—ah, a legend?”

Alvan picked up his cup, blowing ripples into the water. “There is a particular demon that I have vowed to hunt. He has been thus named the ‘Fiend of Galdratia,’ and I have thusly devoted my life to his vanquishment.” Alvan flushed with austerity, his eyes piercing the cup. “However, I’m beginning

to believe it’s nothing but windy whispers. My father was a hunter as well, and was slain, rather gruesomely, by—and get this—‘an abominable terror, gray, white, and black in color, like charred, ashen wood, and donning many ferocious arms,’ as witnesses had reported,” he said.

“Unfortunately, it is merely offhand prattle at the local bar of which I heard this news. My father . . .”

“This demon,” the hermit interrupted, pausing to contemplate, “if it really does *exist* in some form, do you believe it will be

as the legend says?”

Alvan slammed his cup down. “This is troubling,” he bemoaned, “and is left to be seen. But I have sworn upon my father’s good name—I will find the truth of it.”

“Your father—I’m terribly sorry. I assume your jewel ... it has something to do with this legend?”

“Correct,” Alvan replied, his voice trailing. “Ah—but to the matter at hand! Happen to witness any gruesome beasts or baddies traipsing by lately?”

“Can’t say so,” the hermit said, leaning back. “But I have a question for you.”

“Gladly.”

“Do you, by chance, believe in the soul?”

“In—the soul? Well, yes. That’s a rather silly question.”

“Do you believe,” the hermit continued, “that every living thing has a soul? Or rather, animals, or say, perhaps, even the very despised creatures one might not expect?”

Alvan paused to let his mind wrap around this question, his eyes squinting in discomfort. “No—no, I think rather not,” he said, shaking his head. “That’s preposterous. That creature is a soulless devil.” He pursed his lips to spit.

“I apologize for the unusual question—you must understand, time is in excess in these woods, and I tend to ponder eccentric notions. Pay no mind.”

Alvan let out an awkward chuckle. “Oh—by the way, whatever were the traps for? You also hunting? It’s quite the hazard for a passing traveler.”

“In a manner of speaking,” the hermit said. “Although they were set long, long ago.”

“Well, according to the rune, there seems to be *something* of import nearby.”

“Is that what it is for?”

“Ah, I wonder. This is the first time I’ve used the damnable thing. Couldn’t tell you either way. By the way, would you mind if I were to rest here for the night before I left? I could rather use a small reprieve from travel.”

“No mind,” the hermit said. “I will prepare a bed for you. Just sit and drink.”

* * * *

That night, Alvan tossed and turned, as from a terrible dream, sweating, calling out indecipherable words. The hermit, meanwhile, stood awake near a window, basking in the moonlight, as if to ponder some unsolvable riddle that sat far out in the forest. He crept silently over to the bed, hovering above the sleeping man. As the moon reached its meridian, the hermit’s shadow grew larger and played like a dancing flame in the night. The jewel sang ever louder, painting ruddy hues along the walls.

Early next morning, Alvan rose before the sun and set off in haste from the hermit’s abode. Walking through the dark forest trail, he was filled with a terrible sense of dread, as he had ghastly dreams of being eaten alive—and felt as though he were being watched, though upon waking from the night terror, there was in fact no one present—not even the hermit. However, the birds, deer, and other fauna of the forest seemed to be waiting for him to wake, peaking into the window to greet him. Alvan had decided to leave a note for his gracious caretaker before he left, as an attempt to soften the disrespect of departing without a formal goodbye.

Shortly thereafter, he took a break for water and rations, which the hermit had graciously prepared for him the previous night. He happened upon an oddity—the

jewel. The ruby light had dimmed to a faint glow. And it wasn't until he sat to chew on the dried berries and nuts—which were fresh and delicate on his tongue—when he had an epiphany, unexpectedly, and then spit out the half-chewed remains.

* * * *

In front of a bare stone jutting out of the ground like a crooked slab, the hermit sat in contemplation. The air was quiet and dark in the moments before sunrise. "*Fiend of Galdratia,*" he whispered. He ripped a few blades of grass from the earth, his eyes flickering from thought.

The hermit consigned himself to sitting, with no will to move. This silence was temporary, however: Alvan appeared, spotting him from a distance, and approached with his hand on the hilt of his sword, his rune screaming bloody hues. The grass swished underfoot as Alvan stepped, and he knew he *must* have heard it. He was to speak, but the hermit raised a sudden hand in the air to greet him.

"Take a look about you," the hermit said, still as stone. "What do you see?"

Alvan looked at the forest, noting the vibrant leaves, the lush shrubs and trees, the supple earth, the flowing river singing happy notes, and the flat stone jutting in front of the hermit.

"I've come for you," Alvan said, ignoring the question.

"So you understand now," said the hermit, "or, perhaps not?"

"I don't follow."

"Take a look at this stone. It may hold some significance," he said, pointing to the bare rock. However, it was no more a mere rock; it appeared as a makeshift gravestone, mossy and tarnished, with the words 'ALVADANTIA DEMIRO THASTRIUS'

carved in thick letters.

"I didn't think to write 'The First,'" the hermit said in low timbre, clenching his eyes shut.

Alvan gripped his sheathed weapon tight. He grit his teeth, muttered "father," and then charged. But by this moment, the hermit had already let loose of his illusion with a twitch of a finger. The once-lush forest metamorphosed, amid Alvan's stride, into a desolate field pocked with lifeless trees, dirt, and rocks. Clouds choked the sky from light, as if the sun itself were repelled. A decrepit skull lay near the tombstone; unable to be distinguished, it was a relic of some forgotten being.

Alvan's sword hummed as it slid from the sheath. He towered behind the hermit, his sword hoisted above like a readied guillotine.

"Do it," the hermit whispered. "Take revenge for your father."

Alvan's eyes lingered on the gravestone, splitting his mind for a brief moment, frozen in the act. His heart ached, and the desire for revenge washed away. In his thoughts he screamed, angry at himself for hesitating. Unable to accept this traitorous change of heart, however, he steeled his heart.

The sword fell with great fury, slicing the hermit's body in two, starting from collar bone, rending clean to left hip. Alvan was startled at how completely and ferociously his swing had severed the hermit's body, as if it were made of parchment paper—but attributed it to the terrible fury of his pent up rage. He stood for a moment, his ears ringing, his heart pounding.

The hermit, however, had maintained a recognizable shred of life even still.

"Please—will you honor me?" he croaked. "Turn me over, your slay, your kill; and give me a proper send-off."

Alvan did not speak, but grimaced, and

submitted to the hermit's request. He turned the severed body over, his own body moving as if not of his own will.

"My name—will you hear my name, and my final confession?" Blood spattered from the hermit's trembling lips as he spoke.

"Speak."

"I was named 'Gora' in those days—and your much sought after *Fiend of Galdratia*." He broke into a guttural cough, wrenching from the fatal wound. "I was terrible; a demoniac thing of legend, it is true—but I had long since abandoned that life. I made my repentance, content to live in this phantom forest for the rest of my days. I gave up the killing—nary a human, bug, nor animal was murdered by me then. It was ... a past life. But the past is relentless—a purveyor of justice. Your father was a hunter who came to slay me on account of my legend, just as you have come. And yes: I slew him, violently, and feasted upon his body." He paused, the words burning with the blood dripping from his lips. "However, I was much concerned, and unsatisfied with the life of savagery ..."

Memories seared anew in Alvan's mind, yet he felt an emptiness swallow him—the cavity of his chest, the former home of his

heart, vacant.

The demon coughed once more, straining to speak again.

"You have witnessed my confession. Now, take my name with you, carry it, bolster yourself with it. Alvadantia the Fiendslayer—avenger of your father's killer. Slayer of the demon 'Gora'!"

Alvan could not speak; it was as if the words were ripped from his throat. The hermit—Gora, the demon—spoke one final time.

"But we know of another, hidden truth. The peaceful hermit, who spent his days harmoniously—an illusory harmony, though it was. Say, do you believe—" he paused, his eyes drifting, "—in the purification and rebirth ... of a soul?"

"The absurdity," Alvan gasped, his hands slackening.

"I believe," the hermit whispered.

His lips curved into a serene smile, and his eyes grew dull and aimless. And with those words, the last drop of life seeped from him. And his final illusion faded with it, transfiguring his body into a six-armed monstrosity, smoky flesh gray and white like ash in a fire, that lay severed on the barren ground.