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A Bard's Sorrow

A Bard's Sorrow

by Luke H. Hara

The City of Besi, also known throughout the Empire of Besiliere as the City of the God of All Gods, erupts into a festival of dance and song every summer night suffused with moonlight. Few alive today know why we offer flowers and sing to the splashing of sea waves against the sand, but I shall set down the tale here as best I can.

#

Evelina—or Evie—sat by Pyrceval in the docks. Her blonde hair danced in the wind, though her buttocks burned against the wooden boards. She watched caravans sail south, west, and—gods bless them—east. Most of the time, the boy told her stories, and she listened under protest, not admitting she had fun. Her friend described the Eastern Dragon's blue scales, and he told her how his flaming sword would pierce through them and slay the beast, how its blood would gush from it like a waterfall, although flies would swarm around it and rats would bite into its flesh and none would dare to touch it, lest they take in its stench.

"That's disgusting," said Evie, yet she chuckled, covering her mouth with her hands. His hero stories made her seasick, but the boy seemed to have so much fun that she couldn't help laughing, even through her focus. She stared straight into the boy's aquamarine eyes, which hid behind his aquamarine hair, tapping her fingers against her temple so as to allow her mind to focus, to align hers to his. The sensation, the feeling she got from attempting to mindread, reminded her of aiming at a dragon—which at this point was evidently imaginary, she could only hope—with a bow and arrow. If she did this right, she could stop him from falling into the ocean's claws as always.

Pyrceval glanced at Evie, seeming not to notice, then chuckled, too, which distracted her. His copper skin lay under the hot sun, although his dark cloak covered it. "So?"

She blinked twice, the process of mindreading far from her mind, much like the sound of a distant raven flapping its wings on the horizon. A smile split her face as she spoke: "I'd rather smell Old Man Lin's food—it'll work this time, I'm sure—but, please, keep your dragon; enjoy it while it lasts. I'm headed to the Three Moons." Evie got up, hurried past returning and voyaging sailors—humans and goblins—who reeked of salted sea and sweat and blood, then started her way up the hill, her brown skirts trailing behind her.

Evie looked back at Pyrceval, saw him gaze out at the ocean's infinite blue and a smile creep on his lips. He got up and sprinted toward her.

"You could have waited," he said, panting, hands on his knees when he stopped.

Purple and blue flowers adorned the hills like crystal jewels not far from the boy's house where his mother cooked and his father had lived before his accident at sea. *The gods-damned sea*, the girl thought. She gritted her teeth at the splashing of the waves, at her friend's stories about his *mistress*, though she knew no one made her smile as much as him—the boy who loved the sea. He told her stories and fed her, and in return, she watched over him so that the ocean wouldn't claim him and make him its own as it had with her parents.

The rushing of horses and the thumping of their feet into the earth boomed in daylight. Stone-built huts stood on either side of the path they walked along. They kept their eyes on the floor at all times, then began crawling like babes to imitate a snake or perhaps a small rabbit as the young ones often do, the rags they wore stained with mud and reeking of sweat and horse crap. Finally, after ten minutes, they got up, brushed some of the dirt off their robes, and contemplated a dark alley between the Temple and the Three Moons' Tavern, both of which towered over the city. As Pyrceval and Evie marched into the alley, the smell of rotting rats and corpses hit them, and they frowned and covered their noses.

"No, stop, *stop it!*" a maiden cried from the darkness, her voice strained. She shot out her hands at a man's chest while his arms held her against him and while his hands pressed her bottom. As he turned to face the children, the woman stomped on his feet with the might of dragon fire, heard his shriek boom into the streets, and hurried out.

After silence settled over him, he looked down at the kids with one white eye, scratched his bald head, puffed out his chest, and crossed his arms. Evie, who trembled at the whispers of the cold wind she knew not where it came from, glanced back to the street wondering—should they have given up on their mission? Then she turned ahead, and while she watched Pyrceval straighten his back and puff out his chest as the man had done before him, she felt her fingers brushing against a gold coin in her leather pouch.

“So,” said Old Man Lin, “what d’you kids want? I’ve a lot of work right now.”

“Take this,” said Evie, a lute duelling against the man’s gruff voice. Behind her voice was a strained effort not to use her powers on him: somehow, her victims always beat her up, and her lips would bleed, her eyes a shade of purple, though Pyrceval never, not even once, talked to her about it. He never lifted a finger. No, he was a gentle soul, she knew, a friend who had given her food, who never seemed to have noticed she toyed with his mind and for whom she ended up caring after a while. She reached out, a gold coin in her hand, though there was no shine to it, no magic, and no spell.

Old Man Lin took it and held it before his white eye. He sighed. “I asked for Eastern Dragon-Fire Gold. This is just a coin. A *beggar* can get this.”

Evie’s lips quivered and her eyes watered, but she stopped when a door crept open with the touch of the wind that carried the scents of ale and fried fish. *Oh, gods!* Her stomach growled, her tongue, long dry, longed for a sip. She had never smelled anything this good, for what Pyrceval’s mother cooked didn’t come close to this, but in the streets, you take what you can get. Could she hurry in? No, she couldn’t leave him behind, she told herself, yet quenching her thirst seemed a nobler cause than standing by her friend.

“And where can I get some of that?” Pyrceval asked.

Old Man Lin looked down at him from his corner, where two rats stood behind his legs, making love and hissing. His right foot stomped on them, forcing out of them a squeak and onto the sole of his boot a splash of blood. A smile radiated out as if he knew the question would come. “The Company of Brienne Stonefield carries such type in their ships. Bring me gold forged in *dragon fire*, and I’ll let you in free of charge.” The man’s eye burnt red now, a lonely fire in the edge of darkness.

“If you promise that, then fine,” said the boy. “I’ll do it.”

A quarrel roared inside Evie. She had to speak up, yet whenever she opened her mouth, it shut. Her lips trembled at the thought of saying, “No,” but she had to stop *this* prophecy, so she clutched his hand, their fingers intertwined. Yet the tavern, the ale, the food, her friend... images of fried fish and lobsters and the sound of her friend’s laughter—and she would happily hear his stories then, she had to admit—that would be living indeed. Still, the clouds only darkened above them. Seeing that, she let go of his hand. When all talking was done, the children fled into the night in silence.

The next day, Evie and Pyrceval met at dawn at the docks. They watched the ships go by, stared at sailors loading boxes of barley, hops, and malt, some grains falling through the planks as waves of orange swept them by. The girl in her mind cursed the gods and all their damned excuses and schemes, cursed the bards and the poets for their play with words and for filling a boy’s mind with the spirit of heroes. But, most of all, she cursed herself for allowing him to tell her such legends. She clutched at her chest, then crossed her arms, and after doing so, she looked at him, gazing upon his copper skin and aquamarine eyes and hair.

Pyrceval stood up and looked at her, the winds from the south warm against their cheeks, the smell of ocean pure against a cloudless sky. “Mrs. Stonefield says we can come with her, and we’ll be back in a week,” said the boy.

“Your mom always says the sea’s dangerous, but I’ll wait. I promise, I promise I will,” she said and looked away. Her teeth bit into her lip. She tasted her own blood and enjoyed the taste.

Silence reigned once more. “It won’t be as dangerous as you think, would you plea—”

“But I’ll, I’ll be here when you’re back, and—”

A woman with green hair and brown skin walked towards them. Her dark cape floated in the wind, and her boots tapped against the floor. “Are you kids coming?” she asked.

Evie willed him not to go. The voice of her mind spoke to him, and usually, her telepathy worked, but this time, he only stopped dead in his tracks and looked at her. Had she lost it? She had kept him safe before, kept him from throwing himself into the wide-open sea or from walking into a flame. One “no” and a trick of the mind—that’s all it took. And now, when she needed it most, her magic had seemingly faded.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Pyrceval. Then he looked at Evie. “Sorry. I’m—I’m just sorry. I’ll come back to you, I promise.”

She watched him climb on board to the song of seagulls chanting in the wind. The closest lands to the East would be Falling Man’s Land, a piece of earth sunken into darkness. As the wind took the ship away from the shore, his smile faded, and a tear rolled down his face. *Was this real?* She had wanted to see him cry, but perhaps her telepathy was backfiring. *Gods!* She wiped a tear away, ruffled her brown dress, got up, and staggered back into the streets. In the days that followed, Pyrceval’s mother took her in and had her stay in the boy’s bedroom. At first, she waited by her bedside near the window, watched fireflies swarm outside like stars, the glass blurred by her breath. Then she began telling herself stories of a girl who voyages across the Thousand Seas to distant lands and of her heroic feats, smiling as she whispered in the darkness.

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As my quill brushes against this parchment, I ask myself: will you, the reader, believe me? Trust me if you will, for the Bard herself sang of the deeds of heroes and of her life, although few listened to her cries at first but the masters, and now the texts they wrote wither in the Temple, save for the copy I hold and to you translate. May the people understand once this account is penned what stands behind our greatest tradition to date.

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The first week that followed Pyrceval’s departure was filled with hope. But when the boy and the rest of the crew failed to return on the seventh day, rumors took over Besiliere. Some people believed the company’s ship had sunk after hitting an iceberg during a storm, that a search would retrieve their corpses from the sea’s claws; some thought the company had changed routes and would take longer to return. However, when the weeks turned into months, the inhabitants of Besiliere agreed on the truth: the sea had engulfed them and fed on their souls.

Because twice she fell just short of beheading Old Man Lin and due to the fear the melody of her hidden powers would begin to play again, Evie often walked through the streets without ever crossing the tavern, and she looked to the ground alone. She grew into a fine young woman, but when her host’s expectations for her to take a husband grew, she cursed her off and left for the streets once more, where she survived as before, from crumbs of bread and raindrops. Every summer night under a full moon following the boy’s departure, she would go to the docks and reminisce. There the ocean claimed the flowers she’d picked up near Pyrceval’s house and heard songs of adventure about a young boy who feared too little and spoke too much. And, as they grew used to her songs with the passage of days, passersby had no choice but to join her, and this union made her a bard of renown at the time, though poor she remained. If the crowd sang with her, would the sea bring him back?

The sea once claimed the life of a young boy, this much the city’s people agree on, but what they never realized, what they could never have imagined, is that, in doing so, the sea also claimed the life of a young girl. On the last night of her twenty-first summer, a young boy’s voice whispered to her from the depths of the ocean. Hands waved at her, begging her to join him in the darkness. She smiled as the salt of the waves corrupted her teeth and bones and stuffed her lungs, after which the sea was crowned with flowers like the head of a young girl.

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The tradition of sea-chanting continued after Evelina went missing. Besi became the town of young lovers and children who longed to adventure far away. This writer, who put together this book of legends, sobs each night and reads tales of love to the sea amidst strangers from all islands of the Empire who have no idea why we devote our lives to praising and adorning with flowers some imaginary mistress. Immortality, as they say, is a curse.