

# The Old Hearth

It had been over eight years since Nerak had left the island where he died in the care of a demon. Now, he stood upon its shore, looking toward the cage that he had grown up in.

He found himself adjusting his glasses as he examined the tilted building before him.

The old manor loomed, a reflection of his adoptive father, its oaken arches twisting and bending. Weedy red grass brushed against his well-worn shoes with each step toward it.

A ball of dread formed in his stomach. He could retreat to his canoe, letting the crimson waters take him elsewhere. Anything was better than being stuck on this shoddy islet.

For a place known as the Fimbulhearth, he found himself pulling his coat tight, trying not to shiver. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel the lashes of a thick cane against his back.

The young man shook his head, jostling the autumn-coloured fringes dangling above his brow. There were other things at stake here. He was no child anymore, even if he was of *uncommon birth*. Experience had changed him.

The man rapped on the door of the old manor, feeling the vibrations ring out through his bones. A minute passed, and he heard the mechanical grindings of a lock being undone. On the other side stood a face he had not seen in a long time, one he wished he would not have to see again.

“Ah, is that you, Nerak? It is most *wonderful* to see you again! I received your letter... and I’m eager to discuss *your plans for the future*.”

Lord Tassa Fimbulhearth was a gaunt man, the kind reminiscent of a once-great oak. Bent and gnarled as if great winds had warped his body, the horns stretching out of his head resembled the trees uprooted for the lumber of his manor. His skin held a faint, pink pallor, his feline visage stitched from wrinkled leather. He smelt of musty papers, and his amber eyes glowed in the dim evening light, like the hearth of his namesake.

In contrast, Nerak often felt out of place with his soft cheeks and smooth skin. Not even the slightest nub of a horn graced his head - he was Uncrowned and was treated as such.

“And I am most glad to return sire”, he lied. “You wouldn’t believe the strange things they’ve been saying; few believe that I’ve been raised by a noble of your bloodline and ability. Over a dozen clients asked if I had gone through *some kind of accident*, that I needed to shave my supposed horns off!”

Nerak still remembered the mistrust he saw in their eyes; when realisation dawned that their doctor with no lineage, no bloodline.

“Hah! Well, I can’t blame them - few of my bloodline see the *value* in someone like you. But I hope that running a clinic has been more interesting than tending to an old, frail man such as myself.”

Tassa raised his hand and Nerak flinched, expecting a blow across the face. But instead, he received a tug on his cheeks. With a quick smirk, the old man stepped back into the halls, with Nerak trailing close after, his hands clenched tight.

The halls of Lord Tassa’s homestead were narrow, and Nerak found that he had to tuck his shoulders in as he brushed past the trinkets lining the walls. Navigating these halls had been simple as a child, but no longer. Each step threatened to knock some tchotchke to the floor and Nerak cursed Tassa’s fondness for exotic artefacts under his breath. He hid a brief grimace as a thin layer of dust and grime slicked off onto his ironed coat. Either the old man couldn’t take care of himself, or whoever had acted as his servant in the interim was poor at their job.

“Have you been taking care of yourself, Nerak? Surely it must be tough, running a business as a *dullblood*?”

Nerak ran a calloused hand through his hair. A few years had passed since he had started. He did not miss people asking where his employer was or asking to see a different doctor.

“Caring for the ill is a stressful line of work, Lord Tassa. I do not have much time for rest and recuperation. Serving you in our time together has been a much more interesting experience.” The old lord snorted, a playful twinkle in his eyes. Nerak knew that look; one of reminiscence.

“A demon raising an uncrowned child such as yourself... Why, that’s been an interesting experience for both of us, hasn’t it? In a different time, it would be like a hound raising a lamb!”

Few Seydren referred to themselves as demons, despite their physical resemblance to the beings of myths and legends. But Tassa Fimbulhearth was unlike most with potent blood. From the few scant opportunities that Nerak had to see his lord practise the Arts of his bloodline, it proved an accurate description.

They walked over a carpet with a notable umber stain splattered across it.

A single tap of the foot, a clap of the hands, tore a bandit invader to a bloody pulp in an instant. The first few steps in a choreography of violence. The entrails had vanished, but Nerak cleaned up what remained.

They dawdled, Tassa leading the way forward as Nerak's mind wandered through the aged, familiar setting of his youth.

Paintings, scrolls and tapestries, if it was committed to written word, then Tassa would have hung it somewhere in this very manor. From paint borrowing pigmentation from red rivers to remnants of battle and desecrated sanctuaries... It was a museum run by an artefact.

Until Nerak was sent away, he would have assumed he too, would become one of the exhibits.

Three paintings were arranged along a wall, lit by ever-burning lamps.

The first depicted demons belching fire, devouring children and razing villages.

The second illustrated crusaders, garbed in armour, splitting monsters from head to tail.

The third portrayed dignitaries, horns and tails held high welcomed to a gathering attended by a rainbow of cultures.

Nerak's staring caught Tassa's attention, the old man reciting an inscription underneath the paintings.

*"One must change their ways to claim victory."*

He turned to his charge, a thin smile across his feline visage.

*"That is the nature of growth. The Seydren, in conquering our basest urges, have grown to become something superior. Even with your rare lack of heritage, wouldn't you agree? I've taught you the practice of medicine so that you could contribute something to the world."*

Nerak shook his head. Though the Seydren dressed like the nobility of the other nations he'd visited around the red river capillaries, a monstrous *edge* to their actions and culture remained. Though little blood spilt in battle, he shivered at the gleeful barbarism of the public executions. But he dared not speak on this topic.

Healing wounds by rubbing clay against your cuts, poetry that rouses the blood and cleanses impurity... He thought back to the way his scalpel twisted, the painstaking hours of surgery he practised. The sanitization, the cauterization. Learning how to use

the arts of healing through the gifts you were born with seemed simple in comparison.

“Many of the other councilmen find it unusual that someone of your caste is so persistent in exploring Crownless healing.”

Medicine will only grow less relevant as the Arts develop. Whether it was the Seydren or another bloodline, they all had some means of healing. The Crownless, the dullbloods... they were fated to be replaced. Soon enough, they'd all die regardless, bred out of society by those with some measure of magic in their blood.

Lord Tassa guffawed a rich, bassy laugh that made him sound thirty years younger.

“Nerak, my boy! You're being short-sighted! If every form of medicine needed some *magic* in a person to practise, then dullbloods would have little else to offer!”

The money, the contract. As long as they could still give their bodies, their labour, their flesh, the other bloodlines would still see a drop of worth in them. In practice, the majority of them languished. When Nerak treated his patients, including his fellow dullbloods, he thought that they would all end up in the same place. That wasn't the case. The dullblood patients who didn't survive were simply left out for the hounds. He could still remember the smell of the bodies, not even worth the simplest of burials.

“Are you well, Nerak? You look a little tense.” There was a hint of concern in his voice - or was it merely a trick?

“Just reflecting on the experiences I've had while we were apart, Lord Tassa.”

The old man stopped, blocking the door frame. Over his shoulder, Nerak could see the glow of the dining hall, a candelabra already lit. It was a modest room where he had spent hundreds of his days, supping with the monster who had raised him.

Lord Tassa turned, bestowing a playful flick to Nerak's forehead below the split in the short curtains of his tawny hair. He bit his lip, watching as the old man slinked past him and through the worn doorframes of the old home.

A small candelabra was lit in the dining room. There were two chairs placed facing one another, one tall, another one small, just enough to be an awkward seat for a grown man.

The lord took his seat first, folding himself up, his hands resting atop his knees as he sat atop the tiny wooden chair. Nerak remained standing.

*“You must only seat yourself when you are told to. Understand?”*

He could still remember the sound of cutlery crashing to the floor, an incensed lord striking his charge again and again. Where had that old cane gone? There was a slight hope that it had been turned into firewood.

“Would you please put some tea on? I’d much appreciate it. It wouldn’t do to not have any refreshments when we’re to discuss your *future*, yes?”

Nerak nodded – the sooner he got it done with, the better.

Brewing tea was instinctual at this point.

Paper, kettle, tea leaves.

He withdrew a thin sheet of parchment from one of the creaking drawers, with dried, glittering blood in the shape of a circle. Bloodlines, commoditized. Someone had to bleed for this stove.

In one swift motion, he traced the curved line with a finger, watching as a flame burst into existence above the paper.

The glittering blood dissipated bit by bit as Nerak arranged a stand over the fire.

Saucer, cups, a cube of sweet treacle.

Putting the pot onto a stand above the fierce flame, water soon came to a boil. Still the same kind of brew, almost a decade later. Some men don’t change with time. There was no doubt that Tassa was still the same, cruel man underneath the rags of age.

Nerak withdrew an innocuous packet from the pocket sewn into the inside of his shirt.

His fingers twisted, small flecks of powder disappearing into the steeped tea.

Carrying over the cups, Lord Tassa gave an affirming nod, with Nerak finally taking his seat at the table. Taking a deep breath in, he posed his only question.

“I’m afraid I must depart quite soon, Lord Tassa. As such, I must be direct: Would you consider passing your position as councillor onto me... your student?”

The thought of calling him a father would likely offend them both. There was a brief pause.

“No.”

The curt response was followed by a curled pinky finger, Tassa taking a sip from his cup.

Nerak placed his teacup back onto the saucer.

*"I see."*

His fingers tensed, hands clenching and unclenching. He adjusted his glasses, then adjusted them again. He spoke.

"Would you mind telling me why you declined this offer? Do you have someone else in mind to hold onto the position?"

Lord Tassa wore a thin smile.

"I must apologise, Nerak – but you must have *patience*, boy, because you'll soon—"

Nerak snapped his fingers.

There was a gentle clink as the Lord's head fell onto the table, jostling the silverware and the tea.

Nerak's face contorted with rage, raising his voice for the first time this evening.

"And WHY NOT, you unscrupulous fogley? I've worked my bloody veins dry, toiling in a city that doesn't even acknowledge how I'm one of the few people keeping its *citizenry* alive!"

No reply came as Nerak watched the old man sleep.

His fingers felt around for the dagger he kept hidden on the inside of his vest, slamming the sharpened blade into the rich wooden table.

"I could have killed you from the moment I stepped through your door! That's right! A 'dullblood' like me could have done you in like a peasant sleeping in a gutter!"

Why?

Why had this senile bastard continued to offer his 'kindness' to everyone else?

Was Nerak a plaything, another trinket in this fossil's collection?

Were the lashes from the cane, the isolation and the servitude not enough?

Had Tassa accepted Nerak's meeting to torment him?

He lifted his knife, pondering the options. Powdered sleeping jinx was hard to come by. If nobody intervened, Tassa would never wake up again. It would be weeks until they found him.

Nerak withdrew a single vial and syringe, angling the sharpened point toward one of the veins on Tassa's neck. His blood flowed like ink climbing up the core of a pen. The brass tube drank its fill, but Nerak paced around the room, circling the table and the vulnerable sleeping lord.

He held the vial up to the candlesticks, observing how the blood seemed to suck light into itself. A memento of the occasion, drawn from a well soon to dry.

The vial was tucked away in his coat and he gripped his knife once again. A single, small feather had been embedded into the knife's hilt, preserved in hardened sap.

*"Fool. Whelp. What purpose does it serve, caring for a lost cause? Do you wish to waste medicine?"*

*A little feathered thing, reduced to gore and bone with a single strike. Beaten with a cane. His first friend.*

He thrust the knife down, eyes focused a thousand metres deep into a memory. Ichor, black and night oozed forth, the pink complexion fading from Lord Tassa's body. All he ever was trickled out of his wound, seeping into the peeling skin of the Fimbulhearth.

He staggered back, his eyes blinking, his glasses knocked askew by his outburst. Dead as he was, Lord Tassa now looked like part of the scenery, his ink-black blood dying the table and the clothing draped over him.

Nerak's fingers dug against the table as he clung to its edge for balance. Sweat dripped from his face and he could feel his heart thrumming in his chest.

Moments passed, and he breathed deep once more. *"Steady yourself before making every cut. You'd regret a poorly planned incision much more."*

He brushed his sweat-soaked hair aside, glancing at the corpse sitting aside from him. A corner of paper, a beige island amidst the inky black, stuck out from the deceased lord's pocket. Nerak reached over to his once-lord's body, pulling it out.

A letter of position transfer missing both signatures.

The dark flow of Seydren's blood, a dye darker than ink, had erased any trace of legitimacy. Turning his head over, the old man's eyes were closed. He had died with a smile on his face - or was it a smirk?

Nerak's teeth ground against each other as he balled the letter up, tossing it onto the floor. Even in death - he had been cheated out of what he rightfully deserved.

*"Goodbye, Lord Tassa."*

With one, simple sweep of the hand, Nerak pushed over a candelabra. The flames flickered, wax spilling out onto woven carpets and wooden flooring. A spark, a flame, a body. The first thing they consumed was the bloodstained letter.

The scenery, the tchotchkes and the tapestries all rushed by as Nerak made his exit. Already, his mind scrambled to throw the memories out. The knife. The ink. The blood.

Nerak stepped outside, breathing deep. He clutched his head, tugging at his hair—if only he had waited a few more minutes!

There was no need to think about it for now.

That door closed.

This wound couldn't be healed.

He turned, staring back at the manor. Staggering steps brought him backwards until he fell onto his rear, enraptured by the sight before him. A blaze began to roar in the Fimbulhearth for the first time in a generation. The night sky was rendered in a false sunset, stars replaced by embers as Nerak basked in the sound of wooden collapse and crackling firewood.

The vial he held in his breast pocket was a cold, heavy presence in contrast to the flames warming his skin.

His canoe was still moored at the shore, safely away from the burning funeral pyre, the only escape from the growing inferno.

But for now, he was content to sit and watch.

As ashes drifted into the sky, a young man, bereft of crowns and captor, stared into the burning star that used to be his home.

He felt alive.