

The Stoneshaper:

Darkness encompassed the mountainside, weaving black along the frozen ground, up thick pine trunks, and soaking into the needles of every tree. An occasional crack of icy wood echoed over the unbroken snow— its own crystal ice sparkling below a moonlit sky.

A quarter of a mile from the mountain's summit was the town of Kroisis where soft golden lights drifted from frosted windows transforming the heavy glooming evening into a glittering landscape. The firelight was joined by puffs of warm wispy air from dozens of denizens nestled beside their hearths, tucked away from the skin tightening cold outside.

Several thousand feet from the still skirts of the town rested Kroisis's most important building, their inn: The Winter's Respite. After most evenings many gathered within to drink and chatter. Some came from far, some for trade, but most are simple townsfolk continuing years of tradition— to end a long day with a strong drink. This evening was no different; a crowd amassed inside. A collective of men and women sucking sips of spiced or warmed ale gathered around broad wooden tables and sturdy stools.

Near an adjacent wall, a young man and a small woman leaned against the business' stage. It was modest, five feet in length on each side, but elevated an even foot off the floor to create a sense of elegance. It would certainly fit both the man and woman, if they stood stationary, but hardly allowed for the enthusiasm they preferred to endow in their performances.

The small halfling woman stood only two feet taller than the stage. She huffed at a few copper hairs in her face as her palms danced over the wooden platform. "You'll probably be up there, and I can move about," she said to the young elven man.

His deep hazelnut eyes fluttered behind a curtain of thick curling chestnut hair, and with a wave of his golden-brown hand, he brushed the strands behind a pointed ear as his attention shifted to the stage. His set jaw was covered by the shadow of stubble. "I don't much care to be up there." Twisting his gaze to his companion, he asked, "we're starting with one of your stories? I don't want them staring at me strum a few chords. You're the one the focus should be on."

The woman grinned and winked an emerald eye. "Don't you worry your pretty little head, Vin. I know how to keep myself at the center of attention." After eliciting a quick laugh from him, she surveyed the rest of the room, and with a short intake of breath she stepped across the floor, her shoes drumming against the wood, to retrieve an unoccupied chair.

"Here," she said, slapping the legs beside him. "You can play that pretty thing in this seat." She gestured towards the instrument he held carefully. "That way the people know where to find ya. For the tips," she added with a short laugh and another bat of an eye.

Taking a seat, he flashed a set of perfect teeth. "Give me a few moments to tune."

She nodded. "Imma get a drink. You want one before we start?"

Her small form worked its way to the bar before he could finish shaking his head, then all his attention shifted to the lute settled in his lap. Calloused fingers skimmed the smooth wood of the body before strumming the metal strings. Eyes closed he struck each one, allowing the individual notes to reverberate through his hands, the lute, and finally to escape alone into the space around him. After a few, he shifted his finger to the keys at the neck and tuned them appropriately.

The lute itself was a freshly finished and dark oak, adorned with shining silver strings. Below the cavity was the form of a rodent standing on its hindquarters, eyes closed, and snout raised towards the musician engraved in gold. Curved lines accompanied small musical notes, swirling themselves around the small mammal's form like a playful fall breeze.

His companion returned as his fingers twisted the final string into place. Between both hands she clutched a large tankard; the liquid sloshed against and over the rim with the tap of her shoes.

"A little full there, huh, Lil?"

She chuckled. "Every good tale needs room to breathe. Time to flow through even the simplest brain in the audience. You know that."

"Yeah, but that's a little much."

"Well, Vin. A good ghost story needs even more breath. For tension." After placing her beverage onto the stage, she patted her hand against his arm. "I'll show you. Start me off with a few light chords, real dreamy like. Think faerietale. Afterward, shift how you please. You've yet to disappoint me, my student."

He smiled and pulled his instrument to his chest, its heart against his. Firmly he pressed his fingers into the neck as his other hand strummed a few deep chords pulling the tavern's gentle roar into near silence. Their attention shifted to him briefly before resting on the halfling before him.

She stood in a simple clean dress of dandelion and tiger lily, posture straight, arms folded neatly behind her back. Copper locks hung straight to her collarbone while a set of brilliant green irises took in the room. A toothy grin hung below her freckled nose reflecting itself in the faces of those who met her gaze. Her stage presence seemed to triple her size. No one's eyes shifted back to him; their attention was drawn to the experienced professional.

"Good evening all!" her voice chimed through the space. A genuine glee permeated her words and gleamed in her eyes. "For such a chilly eve' full of stillness and dark, I'd like to start our tales with a bit of a fright. We have no younglings or small men in the house tonight, do we?"

She laughed like a bell and a rowdy round from the tavern followed. One of the tables called out a friend they deemed small generating a greater roar from the crowd. The halfling continued her giggles as if she personally knew the man in question. His face grew crimson, she winked, and it deepened.

Her laughter faded perfectly with theirs. She exhaled deeply, like they'd granted her a greater joy than she'd had in a while. She acted as if a drink was required for the recovery of her composure and reached for the tankard. They all grinned. They felt accomplished. They made the spinner of stories lose herself. The chronicle collector, generator of laughs and good times brought to pause by their joke. Of course it was a simple joke. One every tavern made, but she made it seem original, debilitatingly hilarious every time. It made them friends instantly. In moments, she was a part of a social circle the town had spent decades cultivating and therefore they would open their hearts to her, their wallets.

"You must love them in order for them to love you, Vin," she'd once said. "They must think they are the center of every tale. Each word for them. Each detail and secret divulged only to them. Never tell the same story twice."

She retells tales, but never the same way. She changes them, so that they are always different.

She sighed again, placing the tankard back onto the stage.

"Let us begin, in a span that seemed eons ago, a near three millennia, an age lost to even the most ancient tomes, the legend of one of the world's oldest ghost stories begins—the one of an ancient witch. One plenty of towns tell their youth about to keep them out of the woods at night even today."

She paused with a giggle and to allow a few snorts around the room to be heard.

"Of course we laugh. We remember the stories, the words of warning from our own parents' lips before we each slipped out in the evening to meet and make mayhem or lose our lungs to the breath of a hidden lover."

She winked, her eyes resting on the reddened man from earlier. His gaze fell to his hands while they fiddled with his full cup.

Her laugh continued to ring. "I would be a hypocrite if I said I'd not done the same, many, many, many times. Such excursions were the beginnings of my collection of tales." She paused with a smirk, "none of which I will ever take ownership of. Always a friend, friend of a friend, twice removed cousin and such."

"However in all my own young adventures, I had never crossed the fabled witch, but she does exist. But it is not to stalk the undergrowth in the pitch of the eve, nor to swoop from the branches upon unsuspecting prey. No, she is much more subtle than that. She sulks beneath our feet. Dives under the dirt and swims through the stones that frame our homes. Listening to our words, hoarding our secrets, and

stealing our privacy. It is through this harmony she has between her flesh and stone that she has been renamed the Stoneshaper.”

A thick palpable silence drifted through the tavern as she lifted her tankard to her face. She lazily pulled large sips into her mouth dragging the quiet into moments of discomfort.

After a minute, a man in the corner stood. “That isn’t a name we take lightly around these parts.” Grunts and nods rippled from him.

The musician watched his companion continue her measured drinks. Eyes closed she tipped the mug back, dumping the contents through her lips. He glanced back to the audience shifting in their seats. Had she lost them? Touched a nerve? Named a story too revered to be spoken of so lightly? Finally, she pulled the tankard away with a deep audible breath.

“We will laugh at a concept.” The crescent smile returned to its position. “But tremble once it has been named.”

The man twitched. He was Dwarven, only a few inches taller than the halfling batting her sweet emerald eyes at him. His arms were strong from a life of physical labor and thick braided black hair hung down his back. A beard matching in color and length shaped his face, a face that no longer reflected the halfling’s.

Sweeping her metallic hair behind an ear, her mouth twitched, a twitch many eyes caught, before it fell. Dropped with her gaze. “I am not shaming you. I would not spread this tale. This warning if I did not feel the same.” She let her attention remain on the floorboards as she slowly wrapped her arms around her torso. “If you will heed it.

“No one knows exactly when or where she was born, only that she was elven. Those who know her true name dare not utter it. Any breath that rekindles the connection between her current and former self is quickly extinguished. Which is why all, friend or foe, only address her as the Stoneshaper.”

Head still bent, the performer’s eyes glanced up at the Dwarven man. Meeting each other’s gaze, he lowered himself into his seat.

The musician kept playing, only dipping his speed for the debacle. Watching his master, he continued his slow and quiet tones. His brown eyes fixated on her form as it raised itself slightly and began to float on quiet steps through the room. She looked carefully into the faces of her audience while her arms draped themselves across table tops and chair backs. Her voice was soft and deliberate. They harmonized perfectly.

“In terms of how her talents were forged, some tales tell of a great master strong as stone and as perfectly formed while others insist she trained alone in the black caves beneath Inieath, where covered in sweat and blood she bonded herself physically and mentally with the strongest and darkest minerals on this plane. Some say she was cursed; that she had traded verbal strikes with a mage of great import when she was still a teen, that a great offense caused her banishment to a raw and lawless plane of pure stone and to survive she merged with her environment.

“Who she was before her affiliation with nature is lost to time. What we do know is that she was graceful, beautiful, and possessed great strength in her connection with the world. She heard voices singing in the wind, felt a heartbeat reverberate through the stone beneath her feet, and saw lifeblood in the water’s waves. She used this relationship to further the harmonization between this world’s natural voices and those of the people around her.

“For a milenia she served on councils, attended meetings, and whispered into the ears of kings. A thousand years is a long time, even for elves. Rumors claim she was granted immortality for her accomplishments. One year for each good deed.”

“Lies!” Interjected an older gentleman near the bar. He had slammed his drink into the table, splashing the liquid onto calloused hands. “That witch is decrepit, hideous, and heinous. She steals the hearts of young men with the guise of a beautiful maiden! Strands innocent children in everchanging groves where the trees twitch and turn in the corner of the eye! Poisons lovers with mistletoe, lulls young women

into endless sleeps, and shapes flesh into stone! She was no king's right hand! No voice of a council! She is the embodiment of cruelty and hate!"

The halfling sighed. "Hate is not something people are born with. It is adapted from our pain as a way to survive other's cruelty. Besides, old timer, haven't you ever heard that the higher you sit, the further you have to fall." She drifted over to him and placed a small hand over his.

After his fingers released his cup, she continued. "It was through her years of service that she met him. A young ambitious elven man who had followed her from one of her many meetings. He threw himself at her feet and begged her to teach him how to hear the earth— to communicate with it the way she did. He was handsome and optimistic. His hair was a dusty dull brown like stone and his eyes matched, with one distinction; beneath the depths of earthy brown, were golden rays shining like sunlight through water. He was gentle and kind to a degree that made even her honorable actions seem selfish. He saw opportunities to bring kindness in each endeavor and acted on every chance he could to bring joy to the people around him. They say his smile held the sun and his heart knew no malice, and that is why history has named him the Sunkeeper.

"She could not refuse him. She knew nothing about him, but in his presence the world shined brighter, birds sang, and the winds whispered in her ear, 'take him, teach him.'

"They spent years together while she passed on her knowledge. Wherever she went, he was only steps behind. She introduced him to political figures, major families, and the elements themselves. Everyone who met him, fell in love, but he only had eyes for one— she who had reformed him. She who expanded his world. And so, they were together in all that they did. Never apart."

The room was silent, as they each chewed their thoughts, digested the idea that the monster that haunted their mountains and forest ruined for others what she once had herself. Could any of it be true? Was it another tale spun to earn coin? How does a performer earn their keep if their audience does not trust their story?

The halfling swallowed a few more sips of ale. "So of course he has to die, right? There would be no heinous hag if she had never lost her sunlit second half." Every pair of eyes bore into her. She didn't so much as blink. "He was murdered. Life taken by hands he tried to help. Betrayed. Lost because he loved too much to shield himself."

She'd just given away the end, and an inelegant manner as well. Her display went against all she'd taught her student. She'd told him to savor, to meander in meaningful ways, to hand out the pieces of a story the way one feeds birds in a park, crumb by crumb. His master had just dumped the loaf of bread directly into the grass.

However, no one moved. Still, they watched. They waited, and after another sip, she continued the tale.

"Together for a thousand years. Together they both watched our world form. They parted seas, raised mountains, and enriched the land to prepare for what was to come. They held the hands of humanity and led them to their creation. Together they became the Worldmakers.

"Many generations passed for the world as it grew and expanded, and populations of every race and background reached great success, spearheaded the creation of priceless inventions and tools, and repurposed the world to thrive. And thrive they did; in some places population was growing out of control.

"One, now infamous, kingdom could not provide enough to feed their expanding civilization. They needed more. More food. More water. So they took it. First, they had appealed to the Stoneshaper and the Sunkeeper for aid. They enriched their land. It wasn't enough. They reshaped the earth, brought in more water, and leveled a mountain for cropland. The kingdom gnawed through it as a mealworm through a leaf.

"Soon they grew desperate and paranoid. They began to doubt the Worldmakers' friendship. They believed the Worldmakers were holding back, that they were trying to deprive the kingdom of what it needed to thrive. How else would their neighbors have all that they needed while they starved? So, they declared war. Secretly, of course. You don't openly declare war on a thousand-year-old couple titled the

Worldmakers. Instead, they invited them to a grand banquet in their honor. They disguised their malicious intentions as an expression of gratitude, then scrambled to concoct a poison for them before the event.”

The performer stopped again, to let her silent audience breathe. Let her words sink into their flesh, their blood, and their minds. A few of them took sips from their cups, many simply stared into the stagnant liquid, and a handful glanced at their compatriots beside them. A woman who sat in the front right of the tavern raised her head towards the halfling. “Isn’t the Stoneshaper immune to poison? They say it runs through her veins like blood.”

“It does,” the performer continued. “The Worldmakers were strengthened by the earth and their connection to it; made them impenetrable to disease and immune to poison. This was known throughout the lands, but to the dying kingdom it meant the Worldmakers would not expect it to be their fall.

“Their first attempt involved finding and mixing together every poisonous plant in the region. Distilled into a liquid form, it proved lethal to any human, but only potent as a form of nausea and inconvenience when used on trade shipments on their way to Dwarven cities. So, they disposed of it the only way they knew how– dumping it in their lakes. All the fish died, the water became undrinkable, and the kingdom was forced to rely on a limited underground water supply.

“Their second attempt was to combine oil, tar, and several acids into a liquid so thick and black they named it the Starless Night. But, it was too difficult to hide in food or drink, so with their lake already dead, they buried the substance. It burned through the earth until finally it dissolved into a pool of lava, leaving behind thick trenches of poisoned stone and dirt. Their fields lost their yields, and no plant would grow in their soil.

“Their food and water was tainted or depleted and their population decimated. So in their quest for vengeance, they’d solved their original problem. The king was ashamed of his kingdom and in order to hide their weakened country, he erected great metal walls. This act diminished their treasury. They had built their own demise, but with it rose their hate.

“Their third and final attempt was to beg for an answer from the gods, and days before their feast, an answer came to their prayers, but it did not come from any god.

“An entity shrouded in a velvet cloak rode to the front of their shining gates to plea for an audience with their king. With them, they brought a small vial of silver liquid. They claimed it was from a body of water in their native land, and that the liquid, with the utterance of a certain phrase, could become anything, even a poison strong enough to kill a being capable of shaping a world.”

The halfling paused to withdraw a vial from one of her hidden pockets. Inside sloshed a bit of silvery liquid. A few small gasps emanated from groups in the crowd. Hushed wisps of whispers weaved through the tavern. All eyes glistened at the glass.

The musician smirked. It was a trick. His companion used a bit of illusory magic to weave the silver light out of a vial of water. It was simple. Harmless as well. No one truly believed it to be what she suggested, but the greed in their eyes betrayed their true desires. They wanted to give in to the little part of themselves that entertained the idea that it might be.

“On bent knee,” the halfling continued propping a leg on an empty chair. “The being offered this boon to the king. ‘This,’ they said, ‘shall allow you to make any poison you desire.’”

The performer extended her arm and the vial upward bowing her own head, her voice drawn from the back of her throat to project the offer throughout the tavern. “After a brief silence they continued. ‘In exchange, every child in your kingdom leaves with me, today, to stay in my domain until I release them’

“As the king opened his mouth to protest; they raised their head to meet the king’s gaze. Their eyes were crystal blue with foamy white waves shining the reflection of some unseen light through their pupils. ‘With this exchange will also come another promise, that your kingdom shall be undying. Surely this should allow for the opportunity to create more children.’

“At this the king rose from his throne. ‘Deal,’ he proclaimed. ‘Make your liquid into a poison that will kill a Worldmaker and you may have your payment!’

“The entity smiled with a simple nod of the head.” A small mischievous smile shaped itself upon the performer’s lips; she held for a moment before returning the vial to her pocket and continuing to her walk around the room.

“After the words were uttered and the magic imbued into the liquid, the king pulled his kingdom’s children from their families and ushered them out with the entity. Quickly he forgot them. His focus shifted to the feast. Without regard for his people’s future, and with trust in the entity’s promise, the king spent the rest of his financial reserves on hosting their banquet. Spent on golden silverware, a long dark wooden table, the restoration of his great hall, the best chefs, rare and expensive foods, imported brews, fine furnishings, and the reconstruction of the roads the Worldmakers would take into the city.

“When the day of the event arrived, the king sent a carriage to escort the Worldmakers to their final meal.

“In his finest clothes, the king paraded the Worldmakers through his castle. He proclaimed that they’d come to a solution all their own but wanted to offer his deepest gratitude for all that the ancient elves had done to sustain them until now.

“The Sunkeeper welcomed the man with open arms. He treated him as a brother, but he knew the kingdom was dying; both him and the Stoneshaper did. Despite the ostentatious decor and exuberant guests, the Worldmakers could see the starved bones of the people, smell the rot beyond the flower lined streets, and hear the labored breaths of the earth around them. However they both sensed the truth in the king’s words, and the Sunkeeper chose to trust in his solution.

“The Stoneshaper, however, did not. While her lover eased her fears, his confidence in the king did not erase her suspicion.

“They spent much of the early evening in quiet debate. The Stoneshaper wanted to confront the king about the specifics of his solution, while the Sunkeeper argued that the evening of a fine banquet was no place for such discussions, lest they be perceived as accusations. With a bright grin and batted eyelashes, he urged her to wait until morning. He claimed they would stay in the castle, as they were invited to, and request a meeting with the king in the morning. He brushed several strands of her hair behind her shoulder before uttering his final words to her— ‘One night will change nothing.’”

Stopping once more for a sip of ale, the halfling sent another hidden wink towards her companion.

The rest of the bar reflected her perceivable action by inhaling deep slurps of their tankards. No word was uttered. They drank in silent reflection.

The performer returned to her position before the tavern’s stage and, with a single substantial inhale continued. “In their chairs at the dying kingdom’s great banquet, thrown in their honor, the Worldmakers sat while the king began his great speech. He spoke of their efforts and their failures, but dwelled on their inability to give up despite being faced with constant unsuccess before proposing a toast in their honor. A servant with separate pitchers stood behind each guest to pour out their drinks simultaneously.

“The king drank his empty before turning to watch the Worldmakers. The Sunkeeper guzzled his down to find his partner in hesitation. They made brief eye contact before she too drank. After lowering her cup, she was met with his smile and the pair of brilliantly lit eyes watching her. Legends speak of his charm, a warm and irresistible ray of golden sun. The Stoneshaper closed her lids as she leaned toward her love for a kiss. To tell him he was right and signify she trusted in his judgement. But before she made contact, his corpse hit the floor.

“Eyes abruptly opened, she found the Sunkeeper on his back. Hurling herself to his side, she peeled back his eyelids. The deep earthy brown color was dim; they no longer kept the sun. His lips were pale and his pulse absent. She frantically scanned the hall while her mouth screamed for aid, for supplies, herbs, a bed to move him to, but no one moved.

“They waited. For her form to match his. They waited. To see her own light dim. Unfortunately for them, it already had.”

The halfling woman took a seat at the edge of the tavern's stage allowing a deep sigh to fill the silence of the room. She glanced at the tankard resting beside her and, after a few moments, lifted the mug to her mouth. Very few eyes rested on her now. The patrons dwelled on the shadowed reflections rippling through their frosts, the dark knotted grains of wood upon the tables, the creases and blue veins of their own hands.

"Everyone froze. They waited for a death that would never come. And she saw it in the stillness of their hands, the emptiness of their eyes, and the coldness of their hearts. She did not wait for excuses, for explanations, for lies. She released the grip on her beloved and stood tall."

The performer recreated the posture on the stage, sitting straight with shoulders back. She looked strong, even intimidating despite her smaller stature.

"The Stoneshaper was held upright by a rushing anger. Before their eyes her beautiful form shifted. She morphed to become what she embodied— a mountainous structure of solid stone so tall it broke through the great hall's high ceilings, so wide it snapped the banquet table in half and so heavy it cracked the solid stone floors. She painted that which did not break crimson.

"Of the party attendees, only the king and his most tactical guards survived the onslaught.

"And after the decimation of the castle, the Stoneshaper, in her mountain form, carried her lost love out of the city. Those of the kingdom who remained assumed she would never be seen again."

She paused to slurp a single sip.

"They were wrong, but the Stoneshaper would not return for years. In the time between the dying kingdom continued to deteriorate. Their land and water poisoned, the population continued to plummet. So few mothers remained in good enough health to carry a child until birth; the few that did, their infants rarely lived longer than a single winter.

"Without the ability to harvest their own food and water, the dying kingdom sought to take from other countries. Their armies were weak and small, but the king smirked at his generals as they surrounded the war table.

"Our kingdom shall last forever. It is undying,' he had said.

"But battle after battle they were defeated. Battle after battle more soldiers fell, and without their children no young men could be pulled into the army.

"To make matters worse, many of his forces began to disappear. They were sent to march on a village or farmstead, but never reached their destination. If they did their numbers were drastically dwindled. Those that survived had no recollection of when they'd lost their allies."

The halfling's eyes shifted around the room. Her audience waited. This part was familiar to them. Disappearances. This was what their legends were. The dots were beginning to connect and each face waited for the pieces to snap into place, to be reassured they'd been right. The musician could see it in their eyes, a hunger he has felt all too often, for validation.

"Little by little more soldiers died or disappeared, and the king grew paranoid. He locked his metal walls and forbade any to enter or exit his city. With little food or water, the kingdom's people continued to die. Those strong enough rioted in the streets and attempted but failed to take his throne. His advisors' were ignored given the same response they'd always gotten: their kingdom was undying; it could not be lost, so they too turned against him.

"With no one left at his side, the king sealed up his castle, living in a series of five rooms at the center, chewing the wood of his furniture and drinking the remnants of rain as it leaked through the rundown roofs.

"Day and night his doors trembled against the fists of his people. Until one day, they stopped. He assumed it was a trick. He worried they waited wielding his death on the other side. His kingdom was destined to live on, but the entity said nothing about him. He realized this during the hours, silent and still that he watched the door.

"Then a voice rang out behind him.

“The last years of my life have not moved, the world moves while I stand still. My heart can no longer beat without what you took. So, I shall see that you do the same. Frozen without future, knowing all you had loved is gone. What you so desperately sought to keep will be taken from you.’

“Frantic he peered around his chambers, finding no source to the sound. He’d forgotten the Stoneshaper. He thought her vanquished. Too broken to return.

“The door creaked open, no one beyond it. Only silence. The sun shined radiant and bright in his courtyard, while a bird’s song emanated from the across the threshold.

“‘Come, cowardly *king*. Come see the world *you* have made.’

“The voice feminine and bitter bit into the king’s core, worming into his heart as a friendly plea. His fears faded; he wanted to satisfy her, so he moved into the light.

“In his courtyard were perfect stone statues of his citizens. All of them, at least all that were left, stood frozen, their faces twisted up in shock or fear.

“‘No,’ he cried. ‘This can’t be, my kingdom, it was going to be undying. You lied to me!’ He screamed into the cloudless sky.” Hands above her head, the performer did the same to the ceiling.

“‘It will be,’ replied the Stoneshaper,” She managed the voice changes flawlessly. “Her beautiful form rose from the earth. ‘I’ve found the solution to your problem, your *highness*. Your people will never want for food or drink again. Undying and unmoving you will all live forever.’

“Her eyes flashed a blue as deep as sapphire while her mouth muttered the curse.”

At this point the performer chanted words of some language her compatriot knew didn’t exist. It was gibberish to add flare. No one would believe the words of course because who would chant the actual words of an ancient curse. The phrase did serve a secondary purpose, woven between the made-up sounds were the verbal requirements of one of his master’s most impressive spells.

Head pointed up, the halfling’s green eyes bore into the ceiling, her arms outstretched before her. Between them emerged the mirage of a middle-aged man. He was disheveled and pale. Robes of forest green and gold riddled with holes hung from his emaciated body. His head and face were covered with messy and thin patches of black hair peppered with chunks of dull gray. The illusory king’s pale wide eyes peered past the crowd. His expression caused many of them to turn to where he directed his gaze. Expecting to find an image of the Stoneshaper, a few flinched while others moved in hesitation, but she wasn’t there. His teacher would not create an image of her. It would only lessen their fear to truly know her face.

“She muttered the curse,” she repeated, her dramatic stance still held. The gibberish was pronounced again, and with attention returned to her. She reshaped the illusion, slowly transforming the king into a black statue of stone. The image held, as the performer said her final words.

“Revenge exacted, the Stoneshaper was not satisfied. She continues to haunt human cities, taking loved ones from those she blames for the loss of hers.”

The king faded, the image crumbling to nothing.

There was a pause. A good sign. The elven student grinned, he always grinned in the pause. He watched them blink and glance around the room, reemerging into reality. She’d delved so deep and they followed her.

Then came the applause. Their faces matched his as they clapped. His teacher bowed, an arm folded before her torso, so solid and deep that her copper hair brushed their tips against the wood. A bow was just as important as the tale itself. Humble, she’d taught him. Bow humble. Too much and you will lose them. You are their servant and you should always act as such. It was a lengthy applause that resounded throughout the tavern.

“Thank you! Thank you so much! Get a drink. Order some food. We’ve got plenty more tales for you tonight, so settle in my friends.”

With another humble bow, she retreated towards her companion. He still grinned. “I’ve never heard that one before. What made you decide to tell it? The weather? I could see how a chilly silent night would make a good atmosphere for a ghost story. Both moons are near full as well.”

“Vinnie, dear, everyone knows a new moon is much better for monsters than a full one. There is limited natural light. Only werewolves, bears and such prance around in full moonlight. Not very good survival instincts if you ask me.” She waved her hands between them, “but that’s not the point. You asked me last night if I had anything to help you with your research. I only tell a tale in its entirety, so I figured I’d add you to my audience.”

“What does the Stoneshaper have to do with my research?”

The woman shrugged, her shoulders light and posture relaxed. “I have a suspicion. One better fit for your digging than mine.”

The elven man raised a dark eyebrow at her, “Which is?”

“Isn’t it odd that the only two infamous druids in our land both primarily practice lithomancy? It seems impossible that one does not know about the other and likewise. Just like when two storytellers share the same tale, one must have trained the other, or they ripped off the original. Either way, they had to have met.”

“Lil, my mom isn’t like the Stoneshaper.”

“She did drop a city.”

His jaw set. “I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“I’m just suggesting places to dig, little mouse, not what you will find. I’ll give you some time, but I expect you’ll take the one after this.”

His brown eyes skimmed over her then he nodded. She glided over the floor to the bar where she was received like an old friend. They cheered and clapped their hands against her back. Hands were shaking and a round was bought.

Vinnie’s lute sat in his lap gleaming up at him while he traced the golden lines of its engraving. A fingertip slid over the head of the mouse as he muttered to himself, “I think I may be beginning to understand why you worry so much, Mom.”