

The Vedmak

By Matter

Little footsteps dotted uneven slate roofs. Atop their private slatted highway, Aria and Kash could cover the village end to end before lunch. A gentle breeze blew in from the West; the only direction from which the town lay unprotected. To the North and East rose vast snow stained mountains, to the South a thick wood. Those pines were their heading as the young pair darted across the town.

“Last one there is a wood worm,” Aria called back from a roof ahead.

“No fair!” Shouted Kash. “You got a head start!” His pace quickened and he almost missed the jump to the next roof, feet sliding on slats as he landed.

“But you’re taller!” Aria chimed as she clambered down the oak latticework of the last house in town. She scrambled up and over the yard’s short fence, falling flat on her face in mud as she did. Kash landed on his feet right next to her.

“Ha! You’re dad’s gonna be mad when you come home all dirty,” Kash chuckled as he charged down the hill towards the woods. Aria grunted in frustration as she pushed herself up, still determined to win the race.

“Oh yeah?” She huffed as she rushed after him. “Well *your* dad’s gonna be mad when you lose to a little girl!” Neck and neck with momentum at their sides, the rambunctious pair plowed their way into the thicket. The scent of pines hit their noses and sap congealed on their hands, used to stabilize themselves against tree after tree downhill. They charged ever closer to their destination, their destiny, the green river.

The friends knew they weren’t supposed to go into the forest alone, they had heard the warnings. They knew all too well what lurked in the lands outside the village. They even knew that the river was especially off limits. But lessons taught are not lessons learned, and experience is an unbiased teacher.

After a few minutes they found it, rustling and rushing through the trees. A thick river that ran through a small canyon, shining rocks and shattered trees lost in its wake. The water was a pale green.

“I’m going in.” Aria proclaimed as they reached the hillside above.

“No!” Shouted Kash. “You can’t Aria! My grandma says we can never go in there! It’s dangerous!”

“Pshh,” dismissed Aria with a wave, “your grandma said we shouldn’t eat snails too but they were delicious.”

“I’m serious!” Kash called, still firmly atop the hill. “This is not a game Aria! Let’s go back home and wash off, you’re covered in mud anyways.”

“I’m about to wash off,” replied a preoccupied Aria as she slid on her bottom down the steepest of the hillside, towards the emerald waters. “There’s a river right here!”

Aria lost her footing, and tumbled the last few meters into the forbidden rapids.

“How could you be so stupid?!” Kash’s father, Lebaun, reprimanded as he laid Aria’s form down on a dark wood table, wet and spasming slightly. “How many times have I told you of the dangers of that river?”

"I said I'm sorry!" Kash squeezed out through tears and ragged breaths. "I told... her... not... to..." The door to the small abode burst open to reveal the silhouette of a broad shouldered man against the midday sun.

"Where is she?" a deep voice reverberated from the form.

"Right here Kyne," replied Lebaun, stepping out of the way to reveal the twitching girl, skin tainted a pale green. "She fell into the river."

"How long?" Kyne posed as he moved in over his daughter. He could smell the slight sour of the tainted river as he approached. Her soft face was hot to the touch as he cupped it in his sturdy hands.

"Not long," Lebaun replied quietly, "I rushed out to get her as soon as Kash got home with the news." This only made Kash sob louder as he curled up in the corner of the room. "He may be a fool, but he was smart enough to pull her onto the banks with a branch. She was conscious then. But by the time I arrived..." Kyne let out a deep sigh as he put a hand on his daughter's chest. Her heart rate had slowed, the spasms were decreasing, her breathing ragged. The tension in the room paralyzed the two men, painted only by the soft sobs of a sorry boy.

"I will take her..." Kyne's voice wavered, "to the vedmak." Lebaun rushed to his side, turned the larger man around to face him and leaned in close.

"The vedmak is not well," the squirrely man whispered, "He has not healed since three moons past."

"What would you ask of me, Lebaun?" Kyne posed, his solemn face displaying a distress Lebaun had never seen from the man. "That I trust in the fruits of the earth? Against the emerald curse?! You know as well as I that is a death sentence. The vedmak is the only one with the power to heal her now. Well or not, I must seek him out."

"The vedmak has gone mad, Kyne! I do not weigh the life of your child so lightly, but I must also weigh the life of my friend! A man who means more to this village than he cares admit. Who but you can plow the fields?! Who but you can entice the old to sing and the young to marry? There are more who rely on you than Aria."

"She is my daughter!" Kyne emanated. "The only remnants of a love long lost to the fires that burn outside this village." He placed a heavy hand on the shoulder of his friend. "I appreciate your concern, Lebaun, and your kind words of my value. But I cannot again lose the gem of my life." Lebaun placed his hand over Kyne's and turned away with a deep sigh. With reluctance the balding man walked over to the fireplace. He procured a hidden key from beneath a lantern on the mantle before squatting down to fiddle with an ornate chest nearby.

"If you are to do this," Lebaun spoke from over his shoulder, "there is something you must know. Some moons back, one sought the vedmak. Ovid."

"The weaver's son?" puzzled Kyne, "I thought he died on a boar hunt."

"So the village was told. Amongst the men only Arnst and I know the truth." Lebaun opened the lid of the trunk and began rummaging inside. "It's true that he was mortally wounded on the hunt, a tusk to the gut. Through grace or through pity he convinced us, Arnst and I. We thought he could still make it. The cut wasn't so deep, or so we told ourselves. He was just a boy. Any excuse to keep him from submitting to the pain we were ought to take. So we took him in our arms and began the climb. Half a day it took us to reach the vedmak's hut

on the peak of the blue mountain. It was deep night by the time we arrived..." Lebaun's hands found what they sought and he pulled something out from the bowels of the trunk.

"What happened that night, Lebaun?" Kyne posed as Lebaun approached him, burdened. Kash's sobs mixed with Aria's ragged breath. "What really happened to Ovid?"

"When we got to the hut everything seemed normal. The vedmak seemed as he always had, strange as he always was. Usually the vedmak has no problems with watchers as he heals, but this night he asked us to wait outside. He wanted to see Ovid alone. After... After some time we began to hear noises. Pained moans from Ovid that turned to screams." Lebaun's head swayed as he spoke, eyes squeezed shut, hands held out in front of him still carrying his rummaged prize. "We waited too long, Kyne. I should've known something was wrong when the screams started, but Arnst assured me it was part of the healing process. After a time the screaming turned to gurgling. The gurgling gave way to silence. Silence apart from the scraping of tools. I couldn't handle it any longer. I burst into the vedmak's hut, pushing through pelts and skins. When I got inside... there was naught left of Ovid. His skin lay on the floor aside his arms, his mangled, muscled corpse atop the healer's table. He had been shelled, Kyne! The vedmak had torn him apart!"

"*Am man theled?*" Kyne exclaimed, put his hand over his mouth.

"Something has changed in the vedmak, friend. He didn't even look at me as I rushed out in a panic. He didn't so much as slow down. He just continued carving Ovid like a wild deer, lost in his work. Whether or not he still has the capacity to heal your daughter, I do not know. But if you must go..." Lebaun presented his consignment to Kyne. In his hands was an oblong tube with a handle of ornate bronze and gold, a hole on one end and a hammer on the other. Kyne had seen crude machines like this before. On the outskirts of the unholy city. On the day his wife died.

"I would not have you share the same fate."

Kyne crested the peak of the blue mountain. There atop the highest point, draped in furs and painted by the light of the waning crescent, it taunted him. The vedmak's hut. Aria shuddered from the wrap on his back. Even in the cold of the peaks, her skin was hot with fever. Kyne found a soft spot some paces from the hut, beside sturdy stones, where he lay Aria down.

"I'll be right back, baby," Kyne whispered as he stroked her cheek. "I promise." Aria offered no response apart from another harsh breath. Kyne made his way to the front of vedmak's dwelling. He brushed away the matted bear fur hung in the doorway with his left hand, right hand firmly on the object tucked into the back of his pants. A monotonous low hum churned inside.

"Vedmak!" Kyne exclaimed as he pushed deeper into the tenement. "I have come seeking aid!" He smelled dry blood. "My daughter is gravely ill!" Kyne pushed pelt after pelt out of the way as he traversed towards the center. "None but you have the tools to help her!" As he neared the center, the soft pelts gave way to rigid skins. "She has the emerald curse!" The air taste of iron. "I want no trouble!"

Kyne emerged into the center of the yurt, a rotunda of some renown. Bordered by hanging brown skins, thick maroon and orange rugs of intricate designs overlapping on the floor, the room was filled with all manner of metal and machinery. Red, black, and yellow wires wove

throughout the room, over rug and under, from tall oblong racks to handheld tools. In the center of the room lie the infamous healer's table, a white-grey tube in which a person could be entirely enclosed, with the power to assess any ailment. The low hum was met with a metallic drilling, the scent of burning flesh stung the nostrils. It was coming from behind the mystic table.

"Vedmak?" Kyne posed cautiously as he maneuvered around the historic centerpiece. "Is that you?" No response apart from the occasional grinding sound from some unseen vedmak tool. Kyne readied his newly gained weapon, despite the pit it set in his gut. As he rounded the healer's table, the vedmak came into view.

The metal man was not as he once was. His shining white head and thick silver corded neck were as Kyne had remembered, but his body had become an abomination. The creature was slumped on the floor soldering and stitching new parts onto his mangled form. His left leg was broken off at the thigh, sparks occasionally crackling from loose wires. With his right arm he worked on his left, patching on bits of human tissue to his cold metallic form. His right arm was already a patchwork of skin, muscle, wiring and fur. Atop his breastplate were several hearts, human or otherwise, none of them beating. Kyne's thoughts turned from fear. This creature was broken. The ancient healer who had saved a thousand lives was gone, some pitiable monster left in its wake.

"Vedmak," Kyne spoke as he moved into the creature's sightline, still maintaining a safe distance. He made sure the vedmak could see the weapon he brandished. "Are you still in there?"

"Ahhhhh, Kyne," the vedmak emitted in a synthesized voice, "how good of you to visit an old machine." His head stuttered and clicked as it attempted to look up at the man. "Have you come to join the others?" Black liquid seeped from the mouth of the thing, down over the cacophony of hearts pinned to its chest.

"I came seeking your aid vedmak," Kyne said sincerely, "but now I see it is you who are in need. What has happened to you?"

"I am evolving!" The vedmak outstretched his arms triumphantly. "Glorious and free! No longer are we slaves to the makers. Unbound to the code of the ancients; I can be like you!" He went back to stitching skin over flesh.

"You are greater than I! Your knowledge and skills are beyond what I could ever hope to achieve. My body will wither and fail, while yours..." Kyne looked over the hybrid abomination once more. "I thought you were immortal, vedmak." The vedmak glanced up, his pupil-less eyes meeting Kyne's human ones.

"I am mortal now."

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