

The Art of Restoration: Part 5

"That's it?" Druil asked. "Three lessons?"

"Yes. Three lessons and a lifetime of practice. For humans, it is a lack of time. For elves, it's a question of dedication. For you, a mix of both. I am unsure. You have a true understanding of the technical aspects required."

"And the last lesson?"

"Come."

Together, Sorit and Druil walked through the House of the Great Healer, careful to avoid the eyes of other elves going about their business. In the viewing theatre, Sorit motioned Druil close to one of the leafy walls. With a wave of his hands, Sorit opened a gap between two of the tree trunk columns, revealing a staircase down into the earth. Sorit took up one of the candles and led Druil down.

In the cellar, stone walls encased them and echoed back Druil and Sorit's footsteps. After the warm embrace of the trees, the stone felt empty and cold. The candle lit their way down, but four torches rested in sconces on the walls on either side of the main chamber. The room was split by a wall of iron bars with no visible opening. Inside was a huddled shape, twisted into a small ball in the cell's corner. Chains rattled as he moved, but the figure made no attempt to speak to them. Druil turned to Sorit for an explanation, but the Great Healer only handed him the candle. Mustering his courage, Druil approached the cell.

The elf in the cell was horribly disfigured. Both of his arms were missing, his right up to the elbow and his left all the way up to the shoulder. His left leg was lost up to the hip and his other foot was missing. Only his right eye was in the socket, the left ear was missing, and the elf opened and closed his mouth, though there was no sound it could make besides a pained gargle. Swathes of his skin were missing, red and infected wounds covering his torso.

"What happened to him?" Druil asked.

"Look at the sigil around the edge of the cell."

Kneeling close to the floor, Druil studied the floor of the poor elf's cell. It was carefully etched into the stone deep enough that they wouldn't fade away. There was something familiar about it, but it was not for protection or security. The sigil had familiar runes, but

the only place Druil could think of seeing them was when he had traced out the sigil when he—

Druil stood quickly, dropping the candle at his feet and rounding on the Great Healer. Sorit sighed, though it may as well have been sobbing in Druil's eyes. "I cannot create a limb from nothing. It has to come from somewhere. The sigil in this cell connects to another in my viewing theatre. I'm afraid this poor soul is nearing the end of his usefulness to my craft. There is always—"

Rushing close and grabbing the Great Healer by his robes, Druil forced Sorit up against the walls. Their feet scraped against the stone, but Sorit showed no signs of discomfort beyond the shock of making impact with the wall. "He is a living being!"

"He is as much a monster as I am," Sorit said. "He was a murderer and a follower of a monstrous cult that was intent of destroying the Isle of Tribose. This was his punishment as deemed by a jury of—"

"This is torture!"

"Would it be better to waste his body? That magic you saw me work two days ago you called a miracle. Now, because you are aware of it's cost, it becomes cruel? It was always cruel, Druil. It is just a better use of cruelty."

"Do people know?"

"They believe he is dead, but he is more useful to society this way."

"Society? Does he even know what you're doing to him?"

"I imagine. I don't have time to come down here before each casting to relieve the pain."

"Animal!" Druil shouted, shoving Sorit hard against the wall and baring his teeth. "Do you feel nothing?"

"And that is the final test!" Sorit said, his calm voice edging towards rage with a raise in volume. "There is always a cost, Druil! Would you rather this murderer simply rot in the ground when his limbs can be used to save those who would use it better? The last lesson of the Art of Restoration requires a knowledge of sacrifice. You need to shut yourself off to it and focus on the good a sacrifice will do. When you begin using your own sigil of exchange, you'll have to—"

"Using my own?" Druil scoffed. "You can't be serious!"

“Without an exchange—something that magic can take to reform—you will never be able to use the Art of Restoration.”

“I would sooner die. I’m leaving.”

“Druil, don’t be—”

“No! I am leaving now. And I will never cast the Art of Restoration again, so long as I live!”

“Very well. Then I have only one last thing to ask of you.”

“Make it quick,” Druil said, unclenching his hands and setting the healer down. “My patience wares thin.”

“Tell no one of what you’ve seen here. Only a handful of people know and—”

“You plan to keep doing this?”

“For the greater good,” Sorit bowed his head. “I ask you, please, let me continue to heal people. You may not understand it, but the Art of Restoration is a tool that I use to save lives.”

Druil shook his head. “I won’t say it, but I won’t lie either. If anyone asks what I’ve seen I’ll tell them. No doubt, the news won’t reach your island.”

“That will have to do,” Sorit nodded. “You were—for what it’s worth—a very talented student. There are few who even make it to the last lesson.”

Druil left without another word, rushing up the staircase in near darkness.

It didn’t take long for him to pack his things and head to the front door of the Healer’s House. An attendant was waiting for him by the door, a small cage covered in a beautifully detailed silk covering. “A parting gift from Great Healer Sorit. He regrets he’s unable to give it to you himself, but he has important work to do.”

With a huff, Druil snatched the cage and carried it outside without speaking to the attendant. Any words coming from him right now would only harm the attendant and she had done nothing. She probably didn’t even know about the secret basement. Druil didn’t even acknowledge the cage until he was down at the docks, waiting for the captain of the Ember Wave to signal that they were ready to take on passengers. He sat on a bench and settled with the parcel on his lap.

Pulling back the cloth, Druil nearly wept. The mouse in the cage was missing one of her front legs, staggering around in a panic trying to find her way around the cage without the

limb. Druil took a deep breath and set the mouse cage down on his lap. "There is such a thing as a cost too great," Druil rasped to the mouse, "we'll find a better way."

The captain of the Ember Wave called passengers aboard and Druil prepared to leave the island behind.