

SIR JOD AND THE MARE EISA

Sir Jod and the mare Eisa arrived at the top of a winding pass, which brought them up to the rim of the Grand Plateau. Sir Jod inhaled deeply of the cool morning air as he looked back over the edge down to where they had come from, from the Withering Forest.

In the course of their pilgrimage, the knight and the mare had been in a habit of rising early. Whether finding hospitality at a farm or whether making camp in the woods, the knight felt a weight grow upon his shoulders every hour he remained in a place that was not his own. His own was the fiefdom of Teieil, which was far, far, far to the north of his current whereabouts. Everywhere astray of Teieil, he was a guest and he wished to be transient, unseen, forgotten nearly as soon as he had passed on from any locale. He had left Teieil in vivid raiment and shining chainmail, a greatsword strapped at his back, a shortsword strapped at his side. The moment he had left sight of Teieil, he had stopped at the side of the path and removed his armor, and there he dug a hole and stowed it and his blades in the ground.

As he sat astride Eisa at the rim of the Grand Plateau, looking back at the Withering Forest, the knight was dressed in brown trousers and a black tunic, his beard grown out as the journey had gone on, his hair kept short enough that it would not get in his eyes. He stroked Eisa and spoke comforts to her as his eyes looked down at the woods looking for threats. They were safe now from the Withering Forest, so far up, but the journey through the woods had been a week that had felt longer than the

four months of the journey prior altogether. In the Withering Forest were no deer or wolves or bears, nor even squirrels or hares. A blanket of dead leaves covered the forest floor, and every creature that lived in those woods lived in that blanket. Crawling swarms of biting ants, lone poisonous pincher beetles, and snakes. More snakes had Sir Jod seen in the last week than he had in the rest of his lifetime. There was but one acceptable path through the Withering Forest: a series of black stones, each one six cubic feet, winding between the trees and, importantly, above the blanket of leaves. Sir Jod had walked beside Eisa on the entire journey, talking to her, assuring her. If she had fallen off the path or been spooked, it would have been the end. The seven camps along the path were ramps down into a circle of the raised stones, which, when Sir Jod and the mare Eisa arrived at them, were as covered in leaves as the rest of the forest floor. Sir Jod spent each evening raking the leaves from within the circle, clearing the ground and tossing out the snakes. In the Withering Forest especially, the two slept very little and arose very early.

Sir Jod turned away from the Withering Forest that was below them, and faced the barren face of the Grand Plateau. Far ahead, he could see a tree line. If it was the Speckled Woods, then he and Eisa were near their journey's end. Without a word, Eisa understood Sir Jod's intention and sauntered onward, beginning across the Grand Plateau.

As the miles were put behind them and the sun lingered in the sky, the day became warm. Sir Jod reached into a saddlebag and retrieved a wide brimmed canvas hat, and put it on. In the shade of the hat and with the rhythmic clop of Eisa's footsteps, Sir Jod nodded off as he rode. When he awoke, they had arrived at the edge of the woods. Eisa stood in place, looking at a pool of water just inside the woods. Sir Jod looked to the trees, and saw that the leaves were covered in red speckles. The knight dismounted and walked to the pool. Seeing that the water was clear, he returned to the mare and led her over to drink. He laid out a blanket on the short grass of the Speckled Woods and had his breakfast while Eisa grazed.

When the two were ready, Sir Jod packed his picnic and mounted Eisa once more, and the two walked along, deeper into

the Speckled Woods, leaving the Grand Plateau's barren face behind them, out of sight.

As Sir Jod rode, he felt a swelling in his chest, and tears came to his eyes. He wiped them away, and thanked Eisa for the trip they had gone on, no matter what was to come or not to come at this final stop.

As they arrived at a clearing with a circle of stones within it, Sir Jod teared up all over again. At the edge of the clearing, the knight dismounted, and relieved the mare of all her tack. He disrobed of his trousers and tunic and undergarments, he and she as naked as one another. He walked around the outside of the circle of stones, squatting at many of them to take a closer look. On each stone was engraved a finely detailed organ: a heart, a brain, a lung, a tooth, a foot, a paw, a hoof, a claw, and so forth. The sun shined into the clearing from overhead. Within the circle was short grass, which Eisa grazed in as Sir Jod examined the place.

Done with looking at the engravings for the time being, Sir Jod went to Eisa and stood against her, stroking her, telling her of his countless thanks.

After some minutes, Eisa neighed, and Sir Jod looked up to follow her gaze. Approaching from the shade of the Speckled Woods was a woman in a white dress, who seemed not to walk but to glide. Sir Jod turned to face her fully, keeping an assuring hand on Eisa, though the mare did not seem alarmed. The woman in the white dress stopped at the edge of the clearing, smiling at the knight and the mare.

"Lady Awen," Sir Jod said, and knelt down, bowing his head.

The lady laughed, and skipped towards the knight and the mare. "Rise, rise! If you know me by name, you should surely know that there is no need of this rigor. If I have come, you have already won me over: I have already sensed the bond of love here."

Sir Jod stood, and wiped at the corner of his eye. "I thank you, Lady Awen," he said, and bowed his head again. "The habit of deference is ingrained in me. I am Sir Jod of Teieil."

"Ah, a knight. This explains much. I admit, I have never heard of Teieil. Is it new in the last six or so centuries?"

“It is a modest fiefdom less than a century old, and quite far away from here. It is north of Jeklen.”

“North of Jeklen! Pray tell, why have you come so far? Are you on business from your lord in Teiel?”

Sir Jod unbowed his head enough to look at the lady, and to give her a prankish smile. “My lord believes I have come here on his behalf.”

Lady Awen snorted as she laughed. “Does he indeed?” she asked, and sighed a fulfilling sigh. “Pray tell, what is it that your master has sent you for?”

“He wishes for better yields on his harvests.”

The lady did not feign to care. She said merely, “Such is not my domain. Even so, I should say that north of Jeklen, it surprises me the frosts have allowed any yield at all.”

The knight nodded, bowing his head again. “I know. He is a fool who knows none of the blessings he has received already.”

“Why have you truly come?” Lady Awen asked.

Sir Jod unbowed his head again, and this time looked up to the mare Eisa. In that moment, Eisa stepped forward and thrust her head against the lady, who took the mare and rubbed her nose agreeably. Sir Jod stepped forward and joined in stroking the mare. “If I have heard true, then you are without par the best to come to to petition miracles of fertility. If it deign you, I would ask a blessing from you.”

“A blessing for... oh! Oh, you... you wish to conceive with her?”

Sir Jod bowed his head again, and nodded.

The lady pondered, stroking Eisa. Finally, she said, “The love she feels towards you buys you much today, sir knight. It will be done. Here, within this circle, mate with her. She is ready for you.”

Sir Jod walked to the mare Eisa’s flank, and found that the lady spoke true. As Lady Awen stood at the mare Eisa’s head, Sir Jod put himself upon the mare, until his seed was in her womb. Afterwards, the lady approached the knight, and embraced him.

“I wish a good life upon both of you, and your descendants, sir knight,” the lady said, and then turned and walked into the forest, and was gone.

Sir Jod and the mare Eisa left the clearing in their own time, and spent the night camped at the edge of the Speckled Woods. The seasons changed and the two arrived home to their fiefdom of Teiel, and the mare Eisa gave birth to twin foals, and she and her knight raised their miraculous family.