

The summer night was warm and still, the ground still wet from a days' rain. Verath sat at a corner table outside the local inn, his black leather hood up, his features mostly hidden in its shadow. It was one of those nights when the main hall of the inn had pretty much moved outside, serving girls walking through the mud of the yard with servings of beer, spirits and food for the tables. In the middle of the yard a big bonfire roared and next to the fire a makeshift stage made of upturned crates. He'd only just arrived in whatever this town was called, it had a name of course, all places had names, he just didn't care what it was. It was like every other town out here in the Weary, a collection of thirty or so houses huddled inside of a tall, circular, stone wall, and surrounded on all sides by the vast expanse of short brown grass and grey lichen covered boulders that were the defining features of the Weary. The only other things growing out there on the windswept, arid plains were hardy flowers like thistle and lilac or gnarled old bushes, the plants were much like the people out here, gnarled, hardy and prickly. He liked that name, The Weary, it was one of those names that fit. And having spent as much time out there as he had he knew for damned sure that those solid stone walls were really, really, necessary. He'd passed a farmstead a day or so ago, just a small stone house and a wooden barn out in the middle of nothing, sheeps dung all over the ground around it. He wasn't surprised to find it empty, and not long empty either, there was still good food in the cupboards and none of the furnishings were broken or ravaged by the weather. But empty it was, no people and not a single sheep to be seen. The fact that there wasn't any blood or signs of struggle hadn't given him the least bit of comfort, so he helped himself to what food he could carry and left the place as soon as he could. They hadn't even built a fence around the place. Anyone from the Weary would have built a pallisade on the first day, lived in tents till the place was as fortified as could be. Houses and barns could wait, walls couldn't. Whoever they were that'd lived there had been northerners or westerners, he knew the type too well. Some fuckwit who came out here to "forge a new life" or "conquer the wilds" and sadly fuckwits had a tendency to not just get themselves vanished but their families and livestock too.

The sound of a lute being plucked brought him back to the present. He drank deeply from his cup as the minstrel started to play, the sound of his lute mixing with the chatter of the other patrons. He wasn't too bad this minstrel, quite good truth be told. Verath leaned back and let the music and chatter wash over him, relaxing his nerves as best they could be relaxed. He looked around the courtyard, it was the usual mix of people. Merchants, mercenaries and other travelers mixing with the local farmers and shepherds, all relaxing and getting drunk at days end. A few of the local watch sat at a table to the side, still wearing midnight blue and silver, the colors of lord Waster Bordon, the only western lord with any holdings in the Weary. The Bordon's had never been a prominent family, all their holdings were in the Crowpeaks and stretching eastwards just beyond the borders of the Weary. Arid plains and rugged mountains had bred hardy folk, strong, good warriors, but poor. Or rather, poor by the standards of nobility. No amount of martial prowess could compensate for a lack of resources and being at the edge of the Empire.

The minstrel sang a melancholy tune he'd never heard before, couldn't place the language either. Probably some Gearathie dialect. The boy looked Gearathi, olive skin and dark hair, eyes the color of ocean. Probably from Lamos or the Azure isles. He liked the song, it was beautiful and soothing, mix that with a beer that wasn't the normal warm piss you usually got out here and Verath was feeling more relaxed than he had in weeks. Everything has a name he thought, shit he had a whole host of em' "Ravens omen, Verath kinslayer, Verath deathless, He who was never born. That last one was particularly stupid, all men, even he, had a mother. And then of course there was the one most knew him by: The Black Blade. Atleast he couldn't argue with that one. He'd have to find out the name of this song though, and the minstrels too. Sometimes names were good things to know.

Three local men had walked up close to his table and were looking up at the sky. The moon peered out behind ragged clouds, it was a deep orange and made the grey clouds around it glow as if they were on fire. It had been like that for days.

"Blood moon that is. Means somewhere blood's spilt. Like lots of it. Beneath a red moon the blood of men will flow, s' what my grandad always said" One of them, a large burly bearded fellow, was speaking.

"That ain't no blood moon. Ain't red that. More sort of yellowy." That came from the wiry fellow to his right. The last of the three, a fat balding man, looked at his companions and huffed.

"Don't think that's no omen or nothin. Probalby just means there's rain and thunder comin.

"How the hell is that not an omen? Fuckin' sky 's bleedin'. Blood moon, mark my words, bloods bein spilt as we speak." the bearded one again.

"Blood moons' supposed t'be red dumbass." the wiry one, annoying squeal in the tone of his voice.

"That's fuckin red. Or it's fuckin reddish atleast."

"Blood moon ain't reddish. Reddish moons' somethin else."

"What the hell would you call it then?"

"That's an ember moon." The men turned around at the sound of Veraths' voice. He looked at them, the yellow candle-light reflecting in his pale skin, the myriad scars criss crossing the sharp features of his face moving as if to make way for his toothy grin.

There was a moments pause before the fat one spoke up.

"An ember moon?"

Verath, not being one to pass up an opportunity for dramatic flair, drew back his hood and rubbed his bald head before looking up at the man, staring him square in the eye, drawing out the silence between them slightly longer than comfortable.

"Means the world's gonna burn."