

With night came the cold. He huddled closer to the fire, desperate to soak up its warmth, desperate for some relief for his aching bones and sore joints. He gazed across the dancing flames at the little girl as she slept peacefully, the fur-lined folds of her fathers cloak rising and falling with each breath and the green felt of her stuffed dragon peeking out below it. A fool and a princess got lost in a desert... There was a joke in there somewhere.

He chuckled to himself, but the sound that escaped him was something closer to a ragged cough, and as he winced at the pain in his burnt lungs his dry lips cracked. He felt the scarred stump of his tongue moving at the back of his throat, as if trying to lick his lips. Strange that, he thought, how some reflexes never went away, as if the body never really knew itself.

They'd taken it decades ago now. He remembered well that day, the searing pain of the blade as it cut, the warm iron taste of the blood as it filled his mouth and the smell of burning flesh as the wound was cauterized. That was a proud day, the proudest he'd had. Few ever rose to those heights within the guild, and fewer still dared embrace the way of the silent fool, to surrender their voice for the ancient arts of the mime. But he had, and it had taken him farther than he had even dared dream. Jaquero, the kings own fool. Once a thought that warmed his heart, now that love had grief within it, he felt himself about to weep but swallowed hard, he didn't want to wake the girl with his mewling.

Above them a million stars twinkled in the dark blue of the desert sky, and there just above the horizon the red star that had led them here. The fools star they called it. Follow the fool and though your journey may be winding in the end the fool will lead you home, they said that too.

He often wondered who they were, they who called things things, they who said things about things. That thought bouncing through his mind he drifted off to sleep. A fool and a princess lost in the desert, their tiny fire a speck of light in a vast ocean of sand and stone, following a star to some unknown fate. There was a joke in there somewhere, he just couldn't find it.

He awoke with the sun and sat up blinking. His throat was dry as parchment and he felt as if he'd swallowed half the desert during the night. She was already awake, sitting silently at the other side of the glowing embers of their fire. As he sat up she walked over to him, her fathers cloak still draped around her, and handed him the water flask. He put it to his lips and pretended to drink, but all he really did was wet his lips, no sense in wasting water on him. Leave it for her, leave it for the princess. He got up, ignoring the pain searing through every bit of him and did the usual morning routine. Invisible creatures and objects appearing and disappearing and then end with a glorious pratfall. As he hit the sand he heard her giggle and saw that gleam in her blue eyes. Fools magic. He got up off the rapidly heating sand and with a gesture she climbed up on his back and off they went across the sands, the unrelenting sun glowing in the sky above.

He didn't know how long they'd walked, the sun baking his brain and the thirst shattering his thoughts. Visions of what had happened filled his eyes. Flames and steel. Blood soaking the floor. And the kings final words to him as his life slipped away still rang in his ears. It had fallen on him to protect the most precious thing in all the world, and if one could not trust in the loyalty of a fool then in whom could one trust. A chilling sense of dread snapped him out of it. They were closing in. He'd hoped to lose them in the desert, but they were only getting closer. He could feel the dark tendrils of the searchers coursing through the veins of the earth beneath the sand. Looking, seeking, finding. Half a day more, just half a day more was all he needed. He picked up the pace as his muscled screamed for release and made for a range of low mountains on the horizon, the princess bobbing on his back.

The sun was setting as they climbed up a rocky path, her tiny hand in his. They were almost upon them now, he could feel their presence like shards of black ice in his back. He even thought he could here the whinnying of their horses far below. As they reached the top of the ridge he began frantically searching the rock face. She stood silently watching him, her fathers cloak under one arm and the green felt dragon in the other. They were getting closer, far too close, he could no longer feel those dark tendrils and that terrified him. It meant they were no longer looking, they knew where they were and knew they could not get away. And then he found it. The sign was small

and ancient, imperceptible to those who did not know the ancient ways. He knew they would be upon them at any moment, knew it in his bones, but now at least there was hope.

He got down on one knee before her and leaned in. He so wanted to reassure her but his tongueless mouth could not form words and all that escaped him were grunts and cackles. She hushed him and put his face in her tiny hands and with that she put her forehead against his and in a low voice whispered "Thank you.". When she let go of him she had a smudge of white paint where their foreheads had touched, a piece of his face he thought as he felt tears streaming down his face. And that is when they came. The sound was like a razor cutting through the seams of reality itself, a screeching and grinding wail. He turned around and stood up, gesturing for her to get behind him. The first of the searchers crested the ridge, it was clad in black and wisps of smoke curled off the tattoos that covered its hairless white skin, there was a cold joy in its obsidian eyes. Beside it a second appeared, then a third, a fourth and a fifth, and behind them the uniformed forms of the traitors as they clambered up the mountain side, rapiers dangling from their belts and moonlight gleaming off the gold filigree of their discredited uniforms. He looked back one last time at the girl he knew was the most precious thing in all the world and then, a dagger of nothing in each hand, the fool charged.

A princess and a fool were lost in the desert, fleeing darkness with nothing to protect them. Perhaps there was no joke in that. Perhaps there was nothing.