Stumbling along at Death's door, Soren nearly slips away, before coming to in the house of a strange and yet familiar man.

Soren dreamed of a vast desert.

He knew it to be a dream. When he was last awake, he had been in Crimea, leagues away from the only desert on the continent. A mere figment of the imagination, born from his fevered recollections of a book he had been reading the day before. Yet knowing it was a dream did nothing to placate his concerns, nor provide any solace from the pounding heat of the sun above. His only companions were the endless rolling dunes of sand that surrounded him.

Stubbornly, Soren pressed onward. Deep inside him, he 'knew' that if he did not find water, he would die, despite the desert's illusory nature. No help would be coming for him. No comfort was to be found in the searing sands. His one chance of survival was to secure a source of water with his own two hands. One bare calloused foot in front of the other, he trudged up one dune and down the next, hoping that his sense of direction kept him walking straight forward.

The impending sense of death didn't concern him altogether much. He had long ago grown accustomed to the ever-hanging specter of death following him. Here, at least, the desert did not actively wish him harm. The desert didn't single him out for punishment. It did not turn its head as he passed, whisper behind his back, pull its children away. It merely couldn't support his continued living.

As Soren continued to walk across the dunes, his mind wandered further. Maybe the dream was trying to tell him something. Maybe the world wasn't meant for him to live in. Such dark thoughts
had crossed his mind before, but he had always pushed them away, motivated by a stubborn streak
that shouted at him to live on, despite the hardships. But one by one, every kindness he had received
had been torn away, and his life had devolved into a constant struggle. Maybe he truly was cursed.
As he hesitated, the sand shifted beneath his feet, robbing him of his footing and sending him
tumbling down the dune, until he landed on his back, staring up at the harsh unforgiving gaze of the
sun.

Soren laid there for a time. He had lost the energy to do anything else. What could motivate him to
press onward? What could convince him that life was worth living? That someone, anyone, could
accept him, look out for him?

He thought of the blue haired boy.

With a desperate heave, Soren tried once more to get up. As he pushed, however, the sand below
him grew soft, and he slipped down, down, down, under-

---

Soren woke with a yell as he shot upright in his - bed? It was a bed, that was certain. With a proper
mattress, sheets, a pillow, everything he had never dreamed of. He had always been lucky to even
get a pile of straw to sleep on, and here he was now in a real-- He quickly patted himself down. His
books, his pouches, even his hidden reserve of coins was-

"Keep it down, keep it down," came a voice from behind a nearby door. "It's way too early for this
nonsense," it continued, as Soren looked around for anything he could use to defend himself with.
Grabbing a pocketknife lying on a nearby table, he held it out in front of him, pointed straight at the
door as it opened.

From behind it a giant of a man unfolded into the room. Half as tall again as Soren, with muscles that
seemed hewn from rock itself, the man took a half step into the room before seeing Soren with the

The man let out a deep laugh. "You've got spunk, kid, I like that." He raised his hands above his
head. "Look, I've got nothing on me. You happy?"

Soren didn't move. "Where am I? What have you done with me?" he snapped inquisitively.

"You're in a bed. I put you in it. Now do you want breakfast or not?"

Breakfast. At the mere mention of it, Soren's stomach betrayed him. It had been several days since he
had last had a proper meal, and the grumbling of his stomach made that all too clear to the man, who
laughed once more. Soren pointed the knife at him again, refusing to let his guard down. "Where are
my things? Where'd you put them?"

The man wordlessly pointed down below Soren's bed. Soren looked down to see his books and bags
in a small pile. "Now if you want food, I've got stew cooking. Get over to the table when you're
ready," the man said, walking out the door with his hands still over his head in an exaggerated
gesture of peace.

Soren hesitated. While he still didn't know who this was or what they wanted from him, if they had
meant harm to him they could easily have taken care of him in the middle of the night. And as he
was now, he was sure that even with a knife he couldn't stand a chance against that man. For now,
his best choice was probably to play along. The food was promising, and once fed he could plan his
escape. For a second, he considered the possibility that the man truly was benevolent, but he found
As Soren carefully entered the dining room, following the smell of lamb stew, he saw the man once again, bent over the pot, taking small tastes and adding small dashes of spices to it. Soren took a seat at the table, closely watching the man's movements.

The man rose from his place over the fire, holding a bowl of stew and clearly satisfied with his creation, before turning and startling at the sight of Soren at the table. "Well, you're a right sneaky one, aren't you?" he said, composing himself once more. Soren made no response, only glaring back. "You some kind of thief? If not, you should be. It'll get you more food than you're getting now." He placed the bowl in front of Soren. "Eat up. It'll be a while before my son's back, so eat as much as you want before he finishes it off."

Soren carefully eyed the proffered stew. Reassuring himself once more that there was no need for the man to try anything sneaky, he took the spoon from the bowl and took a bite of the stew.

To Soren, it was the best food he had had in his entire life. He was sure that by normal standards it was a simple dish, good but hardly notable. But for Soren, who had never had anyone give him an iota of care? Who had never had a dish someone made to be worth eating? It was a gift from the gods themselves. Without being able to help himself, he immediately began wolfing it down.

"You really were hungry, weren't you? Don't feel shy, eat up. This'll put some hair on your chest, help keep you warm for the winter."

Soren looked up from the stew, bits of broth splashed on his face. Wiping it away, suddenly conscious of his appearance once more, he mustered the courage to ask once more. "Where am I?"

The man sat down on the bench on the opposite side of the table. "First off, let's get introductions out of the way. My name's Greil, kid." Greil reached his hand across the table. "What's yours?"

"Soren." Soren took Greil's hand in his own and shook as best he could, his hand being dwarfed in Greil's. Bizarrely, he noticed that Greil's grip was barely as strong as his own, despite the muscles and build.

"Pleasure to meet you, Soren. You," Greil added, waving his arms out dramatically, "are in my house. I found you collapsed in a ditch while I was in town, feverish and covered in mud. I took you home, washed you up, stuck you in bed, and had my daughter whip up some medicine for your fever. Looks like it's mostly passed now, if you're up and about like this."

Soren put his palm up against his forehead. Indeed, he felt normal now. He couldn't really remember anything that happened before waking up here, but... he thought of the dream he had, once more, despite himself. "Why did you help me?"

Greil scoffed. "Why? Why the he- why wouldn't I?"

"I have nothing to offer you, nor do I wish to be indebted. You have no reason to-"

Greil cut him off with a wave, scowling. "I won't have any kind of that talk in my household. Here we help people who are in need. Simple as that."

"But, I'm..." Soren trailed off. He didn't want to say he was cursed, because he had no proof, but he definitely didn't feel like someone who deserved altruism.
"You know what you were? Hungry and sick. Now you're not. That's what matters."

Soren stared. He shouldn't stare a gift horse in the mouth, but... "Respectfully, sir, I don't understand."

Greil laughed. "You've got guts if you grill someone who's feeding you this much. I see how you've made it this far on your own." Greil perked his head at an unknown sound. "They're finally home, about time- Ike! Titania! Food's on the table, and we have company!" Greil shouted down the halls.

The sound of small stamping feet echoed through the house, as Soren could hear a female voice - presumably the Titania Greil was yelling at - shouting "Slow down, it's not going to disappear" after them. As the owner of the footsteps turned the corner, Soren's heart skipped a beat.

It was the blue haired boy. Soren couldn't forget the boy. It had been several years, several long, painful years, and the boy had grown since they first met, but it was unquestionably him. The one who reached out to him when no one else would. The one he was so afraid had died.

Soren realized he had involuntarily stood up in shock. "He-hello," he blurted out, bowing to the boy. "I'm Soren." He cursed himself for being so awkward.

Ike waved back. "Hey Soren! Nice to meet you!" Before Soren could say anything else, however, Ike ran over to Greil. "C'mon, dad, what's for breakfast? I'm starving!"

As Greil and Ike bantered with each other, Soren sat down and resumed eating, his mind turning. Ike must not have recognized him. That was only fair - it had been a long time, and Soren had changed a lot in that time. Plus, after being washed up by Greil, he probably looked completely different. And what had been a lifechanging moment for Soren had probably just been another day in the life for Ike. At first, he was depressed by the thought, but thinking on it more, he was fine with it. He didn't want to be remembered as a miserable wretch, desperate for food.

Twice, now. Twice he had been saved by this family. He owed them his life, there was no question about it. How could he repay them?

"Sir?" Soren asked, as Greil finally handed over a giant bowl of stew to Ike. "Are you a mercenary?"

Greil looked at him questioningly. "You could say I am. How'd you know?"

"You have the bearing of a soldier, but clearly serve no army. You seem too in shape to be retired, and your son is too young to support the household."

Greil shook his head. "You're a real rascal. I am, what of it?"

Soren gulped. "I'd like to join. I have talents as a mage, and I believe I can be of service."

Greil stared. Ike continued eating his meal, oblivious to the tension. Breaking the silence, Greil asked, "You ever see a dead body, kid?"

Soren nodded. "Yes."

Greil whispered something under his breath. "No kid should ever have to go through that. I'm not letting you into combat, but I'm sure we'll find something for you to do. You can stay here til we get that sorted out."

Soren let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding, returning to his stew once more. Not only did he have a reason to keep living, now he had the ability to. He wasn't alone in the desert anymore. He
had no idea how long he could take advantage of their kindness, but he’d do everything in his power to pay the family back for being there for him.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!