

A Cautionary Tale

All that Glitters is not Gold

A tale set in the Kingdom of Balcia in the land of Alkainos

Morning

On a brisk winter morning, an unremarkable man of middling years wound his way through the quiet city streets of the Balcian capital, Bal Magna. Plainly clad in dark breeches and waistcoat, he held a worn leather satchel in one hand and clasped a coarse woollen cloak tightly around him with the other. His wide brimmed hat hid his face entirely as he shuffled along with his head bowed, mumbling softly to himself as he walked.

The city was just beginning to rouse itself from its slumber. The sun was making itself known and the shadows of the night were beginning to recede. Lumpers were making their way to the docks and merchants were laying out their stalls.

The man paid scant attention to all this. He ignored everything and everyone, just as he did every morning as he made his way from his lodgings above a fabric merchant in Gowt Street to the Citadel, the mighty square stone fortress that towered above the dock, dominating the city.

As he climbed the steps up from the docks, a Priest of Kain greeted him. "Good day, brother" the Priest smiled as he waved an empty tin, "blessings on you on this, the day of the Gods".

The man paused on the steps. "I hope it is brother. I could really use a good day" he said, the phlegm catching in his throat. Keeping his head bowed, he continued on his way.

Citadel

He entered the Citadel through the Southern gate. His reputation was well enough known that the guards let him pass in silence.

Across the wide courtyard of the Citadel stood the Librarium, the heart of all knowledge in the kingdom. A circular building, with four squat wings protruding from the points of the compass, and a thick tower in the centre. It had been loosely designed to resemble a lantern, and bore the inscription '*Light of Balcia, Light of Kain*' above the great wooden doors of the entrance.

He made his way across the circular, dome shaped central library to the spiral stairs on the east wing. The sun was casting bright beams of light into the dim, dusty interior. A few scribes and scholars were milling around, starting on their business for the day. He climbed the stairs to the third level and walked down the short corridor to one of the small alcoves which were dotted along its length. The alcove contained a small desk, writing materials and a shuttered window, which had already been opened for him by one of the Librarium acolytes.

The man's name was Harald Fastaus. He was a Librarium scribe, and this was the same desk he had sat at for the last ten years. On his desk was a copy of '*Rare Flora and Fauna of Achshara*', a pile of fresh parchment and a small box containing quills and ink. He opened the book at the page he had bookmarked before leaving at sunset yesterday, and set about continuing with his transcription. Taking out some small glasses from his waistcoat and deliberately clasped them to his nose, he let out a small sigh as he started his work 'plants', he thought morosely to himself, 'that it should have come to this'.

He had been the brightest and best in his class back in his youth as an acolyte. The brightest in a generation he had heard said. He was destined to

become a great scholar at the Librarium, whispered to perhaps even become scholar to the King one day. But now, now he was copying works about plants. Blasted plants. He despised plants. As he looked at the drawings in the book he could feel his bitterness take a grip of him once more. "Fool. Damn fool!" he chastised himself. His lips tightened and his fists clenched as he let the feeling flood through him. He made to grab his quill to start work, but in his haste knocked the small pot of ink over..

The small jar tipped and the ink streamed like black tears down his parchment.

"Silly billy bumpy.." the words came immediately to his mind. Spoken in her voice. She always used to say that when he was being clumsy, or absent minded.. "silly billy bumpy.." He felt the anger drain from him and he smiled. 'Bumpy' was her secret, special name for him. She gave it to him on the day they met - he had been clumsy then too, he had banged his head (on something, he couldn't remember now) and knocked himself unconscious. When he came to - she had been there, tending to him. Rosie. He never saw her before, but there she was. "Silly billy bumpy.." she had said, and helped him up.

From that moment on they became friends, and later lovers. It was forbidden for an acolyte at the Librarium to have a relationship, so they had to meet in secret. Once he was a full scholar, though he could not wed, everyone would turn a blind eye to the relationship. He loved her fiercely, and would do anything to be with her. She was always the one who was looking out for him, "You need to pay more attention to detail, bumpy" she would always say - like when he tried to leave her with her lip paint still on his face. He felt young and unstoppable back then. He was going to be a renowned scholar, and be with Rosie and together they would have the most wonderful life.

Offer

He was brought back to reality by a forced cough from behind him. "Excuse me master..", a young boy's voice ventured nervously.

"I'm not a master, boy", Fastaus snapped, still working on his document. "How many times must I tell you."

"Sorry,.. ma.., 'sir", he faltered nervously.. "begging your pardon, but Master Howell requested to speak with you". Fastaus put down his quill. That was unexpected, he thought, Howell only ever wanted to see him after he had finished scribing a manuscript, and he had just started this one. Another cough from behind him. "He, he did say it was quite urgent, if you please sir."

Master Howell's suite occupied several adjoining rooms high in the Librarium tower, with view out across the Citadel, and the city beyond. A scribe led him to the main chamber. Inside was a huge oak desk in front of the main window, piled with scrolls and papers. Every wall was covered in shelving, bulging with papers, books and parchment. It was always a bitter-sweet experience for Fastaus to enter this chambers. Howell did not have long left in the role before ill health meant he must retire to more sedate duties. Fastaus could have, should have, been his natural successor - he was the right age, and he was always the brightest in his class. But the what happened all those years ago meant that was never to be.

"Ahh - sit down lad", said Howell. He always called Fastaus 'lad', even though he was older than most men in the city. Fastaus had a soft spot for the old man. Despite all his bitterness at the world, he couldn't help but warm to him. He was always fair to him, and had offered him kind words in the past after the incident - it was he who encouraged him to take the lowly scribe position at the Citadel "it doesn't matter what the world thinks lad, it's what you think that matters. And the knowledge in this place can take your mind

anywhere you choose”.

“Now lad.. You probably haven’t heard yet, but there was an accident in the Librarium last night.. Master Craddock fell out of the window - he had been working late and the first we knew was when his body was uncovered this morning. No one knows exactly what happened - we can only guess that he was tired and maybe disoriented and fell in the dark.”

“Master Craddock works on the occult library doesn’t he?”, Faustus asked.

“Yes, that’s right lad.”

“I’ve seen inside that chamber once Master. The only window is located halfway up the wall. Is it the same?”

“Mmmm”, Howells nodded, and rolled his eyes to the floor. “It’s true.” He paused, “when I said disoriented and fell... I missed the part about pushing the desk to the wall, piling it with books to allow him to climb up to the window to ‘fall out’ from”.

“Between you and me, we’d prefer to leave that part out. Spooks the young ones” he looked for agreement. Faustus nodded slowly. “..and the old ones too, truth be told” he murmured, shaking his head slowly.

“Now, as we’ll probably never know what actually caused Craddock to pursue the course of action he took last night, it’s rather pointless deliberating over it right now. Our immediate problem is that we have ongoing work to do in that section, and no Master available to do it. Hence why I asked you here this morning. Faustus - we all know your skills are wasted scribing those boring, dry botanical documents. How would you like a stint in the occult section, picking up Craddock’s work?”

“But, you have to be a master to work on that section?”

“Aye, in normal circumstances lad, but our current masters are suddenly all too preoccupied. That section also suits someone who keeps themselves to themselves. You know the knowledge in there is among our most secret, and never to leave this Citadel. You seem the perfect choice to me. I’ve discussed it with the other masters, and of course they aren’t happy, but they agree for you to take on the role for now”.

“Now Fastaus, don’t let this think there is any chance of becoming a Master from this, That door remains closed. I don’t have to remind you why. This is a temporary role - but if you do well, it may turn into a long running one. I’ll do my best to make sure that happens lad. You deserve it”.

“What do you say, lad?”

“When do I start?” replied Fastaus eagerly.

Book

The library of the occult was isolated at the very top of the Librarium tower. Fastaus climbed the tight, winding staircase and unlocked the heavy iron-studded door at the top. Only those that had a purpose in that room walked these stairs. Inside, the room was just as Craddock had left it, though the table had been pulled back away from the single window, which was now closed tightly.

The room was high and circular, with tall wooden shelving straining with tightly packed books, scrolls and boxes. With the window closed the light was dim, and the air oppressive. Fastaus tried to open the window, but it had been sealed - “I must speak to master Howell to get that opened again”, he thought, “this will be unbearable to work in”. He didn't relish a walk back down the staircase again so soon. “I shall raise it with him first thing in the morning.

But for now - let's see what old Craddock was working on before his fortuitous exit..”.

He moved the desk slightly to get better light and sat down in front of a pile of parchment. Craddock seemed to have been working on a translation of a work by the famous Pavian occultist Biaga Dionara of his travels in the otherworld. He picked it up and read the last paragraph Dionara had been translating:

‘.. And so I came upon the gates of the City of Suffering. A great wailing from the Choir of the Lost was thrown up from behind those shuttered gates. Rising and falling, ever greater as if torment upon torment were heaped upon those miserable souls, with barely any respite between. ‘Abandon this path’ my guide urged, I can no longer be party to this foolish enterprise’. But my mind was set, go through the gate I must..’

Fastaus smiled to himself, “now this, this is more like it”. He would have to start again though, of course. Craddock was a good man, but his grasp of ancient Pavian was too limited to do this text justice.

Just as he leaned to pick one of the quills, he noticed a book he had not seen before. It was partially hidden beneath Craddock’s pile of parchment on one corner of the desk. It was unusual for Craddock to have left it discarded like that. Scribes and scholars were drilled to treat all books with utmost respect and their first discipline was always to place them back on the shelving when not in use. Also, the golden bindings and clasp which were partially visible were usually only reserved for extra special and rare works, and looked at odds with the dull and stained book cover.

Fastaus closed Biaga’s journeys and slowly pulled the book from the under the pile. He examined the cover - it had no title on the front or spine, and appeared to be bound in some sort of treated animal skin. He undid the clasp, opened the book and began reading:

“An account of my journey through the veil, and subsequent summoning of dread Gal

Marok to the mortal realm, whereupon I was granted all my worldly desires in return for my mortal soul”.

It was not signed with a name, but it was obviously a very old text. Reading further, it appeared to be a detailed account of how the author summoned a powerful daemon from the afterlife to the mortal realm, whereupon he was able to strike a bargain for thirty years of power in return for relinquishing his soul to the daemon in the world beyond the veil after his death.

Fastaus was immediately captivated, and read speedily. The book covered the full thirty years of the life of the man, detailing how he suddenly came to fantastic wealth, took a wife, and travelled the length and breadth of the kingdoms. It seemed a grand and exciting existence, Faustus had always longed for a life like that. The final chapter explained how he bargained another year in return for writing this book, before the daemon finally took his soul into the afterlife.

At the very end of the book were crammed in extra parchments which went into great detail on the ritual he performed. It looked to be based on an ancient text the author had picked up in Achshara. Fastaus spent the afternoon reading the summoning ritual in detail, as a thought started forming in his mind.

“I would gladly trade my mortal soul for another chance in this painful world”, he thought. “It would be a small price to pay to live such a life. This ritual is straightforward enough for someone with my keen mind. It's merely chalk, fire, incantation and Godstone. To be performed on the day of the Gods, which is today by no small coincidence. How fortuitous. This cannot be simple happenchance. It must be pre-ordained.”

A chill ran through him even as he had the thought.

As the sun began to set, he realised he had spent the whole day on this

book. He went to put it back on the shelf, but paused, and slipped it into his satchel, along with some pieces of chalk, and a small bell which was scholars kept for summoning an assistant.

On his way out of the Librarium, he took a short detour past the reading room, which was empty at this late hour. On a shelf near the hearth among several small artefacts was wooden carving of the creation gate, inlaid with small dull blue stones. He knew these to be Godstone, a rare but non precious material said to possess certain alchemical properties. He bundled the small carving under his cloak and left the Citadel.

Tavern

On his way down the steps to the docks, he passed the same priest he met that morning.

“So?”, asked the priest as he walked by. Faustus stopped, taken aback that he was being spoken to. He turned to face the priest. “So? So what?” He asked? “Are you talking to me, priest?”

“So, did you have a good day”, the priest asked, with a slight smile.

Faustus recognised it was the same one he had spoken to that morning. He chuckled. “That remains to be seen. It is certainly turning out to be an interesting one.” He moved to walk on, and then paused. Turning around, he put a hand in his pocket and pulled out a few pennies, which he dropped into the priest’s bowl. “Tell me priest”, he asked, “when dead, what use have the gods for the soul of a man who they appeared to have no love for when he was alive?”

The priest looked at Faustus solemnly. “A man’s soul is his sacred bond with creation, and at the end of his life to the gods it will return. Your immortal soul has many chances for redemption, if you have not achieved

enlightenment in this life, perhaps you will in the next. Do not abandon it so easily, for once it is gone..."

"So you advocate misery in this life for reward in the one after?", he interrupted.

"In the ever after, for eternity. And don't give up on this life so easily, fortunes may change in the blink of an eye. Who knows what the gods have in store for you yet, brother. Your story isn't over. Today was a good day you say, perhaps tomorrow will be even better. Never lose hope."

Faustus considered this. Surprising himself, he felt buoyed by the priests comments. "Perhaps I have been the source of my own misery, and perhaps it is time to make a change. I should maybe keep my soul in higher regard, and keep it's destiny in my own hands."

He thanked the priest and continued on his way.

The streets were busy with people celebrating Gods Day. Faustus didn't feel like going back to his gloomy, quiet room just yet. He seldom joined in with frivolous fun these days, but as he passed the open door of the 'Kings Folly' tavern, the raucous laughter from inside pricked a memory in him. Perhaps he should start living again, or at least make an effort.

For the first time in many years, he voluntarily walked towards a crowded room, and entered the public bar in the Inn.

Finding a free seat in the corner, he sat down and placed a silver piece on the table. A passing serving girl scooped it up and replaced it with a jug of ale and a tankard. Filling his tankard, Faustus watched the scene inside the inn, and started tapping his foot to the music coming from an adjacent room..

After a few more tankards, a man sat down at the table next to him. His clothes were old and tattered at the edges, and his teeth has seen better days.

“Praise the gods, brother”, Fastaus said, in a surprisingly happy mood. His conversation with the priest, and the ale, had lifted his spirits and dispelled his earlier thoughts.

“Curse the gods!” the man snapped, and spat on the floor. He looked into the distance, then turned slowly and winked at Fastaus. “You of all folk should know that.” He laughed coarsely as he thumped his tankard down.

“What do you mean?”, asked Fastaus. He felt his mood immediately darken again.

“Oh nothing..”, he said, “nothing, don’t mind an old drunk”.

“Only, well it's none of my business of course.”, he continued, “.. but if I were a man who had the blood of a young girl on his hands, I'd be in no hurry to meet my judgement...”, he looked up, “.. up there..”. Again he smiled at Fastaus.

Fastaus fists clenched. Through gritted teeth he said “what do you mean old man? Speak your mind and let’s have it.”

The man seemed oblivious to Fastaus' rising anger, or seemed not to care.. “that girl. the one you knew all those years ago. I know what happened to her. Rosie, yes that was her name. Loved you, she did, and you repaid her by killing her. They should have thrown you out for that. Or done worse. In my opinion, like.”

“They took away everything from me!”, Fastaus spat through gritted teeth. “It was an accident - I never knew she would die... Dear Kain! Who are you - why do you torment me so.. I felt peace for the first in years tonight, and then you appear, spouting your filthy, evil lies”.. His hand grasped his tankard tightly.. “Who are you?!”..

“Loved you she did, that girl..” the man whispered, and looked right into Fastaus’ face, smiling.

Fastaus couldn't restrain himself - he whipped the tankard across the man's face, knocking him from his chair. He fell off his chair, collapsing on top of the man. Tankard still in hand, he began to smash it down repeatedly on his face, each strike drawing more blood. Just as he realised what was happening, something hard hit him across the back of his head, and his world went black.

It was sunny. A girl with blond hair leaned over him. “Silly billy bumpy”.. she whispered. “Rosie!” he gasped... he felt her grab his arm to pull him up.. “you know what you must do” she said.

He felt a rough yanking on his arm and was suddenly back in the tavern.. A body lay next to him, covered in blood and giggling as the inn-keep dragged him roughly to his feet..

“We'll have no trouble here - not on this day” he was saying as he pulled him up.

Fastaus ripped his arm away. “What time is it?!” - he barked - “how long until midnight..”

“Wha?. still a couple of hours off, but you'll not be here for it. You're lucky I don't get the Watch”

And with that Fastaus gathered up his satchel and ran out of the tavern as fast he could towards his lodgings.

Summoning

Reaching the fabric merchants, he ran up the stairs and burst into his

room. "Too small, too small.." he fretted as he looked around at the floor, "and too exposed". He rushed to the window to try and get a glimpse of the moon to gauge the time, but he couldn't see it past the jumble of rooftops outside his small window.

He suddenly grabbed a pillow and removed the casing. Opening a small cabinet, he threw a knife and then an armful of candles and filled the case. He lit one and placed it in a lamp, and then just as he had ran into the room, he ran back out and down the stairs. In the entrance lobby he double-backed to a small door under the staircase. He had been down to the cellar once before and remembered it was large and had a stone floor.

He set up candles all around the cellar. The merchant used it for storage, but the only stock was few crates and some old rolls of fabric. He used a worn sweeping brush in the corner and cleared a large space in the centre of the room.

He took out the book and chalk from his satchel and proceeded to draw two large circles, about a foot apart. Each circle contained an inner circle, and in the space between he meticulously copied the patterns from diagrams in the parchment. They appeared to be written in some sort of ancient Ashkaran script. He had to move fast, but at the same time he knew he had to be precise.

Once he was satisfied, he took the book, bell, Godstone and scissors and sat in the centre of the first circle. Clearing his mind, he took several deep breaths and then started reading the words from the incantation. Between each round of the incantation he rang the small bell.

After maybe fifteen minutes he thought he sensed a change in the room. He was sure it was getting colder, and darker. He checked the candles but they were still all burning. He continued with the incantation cycle, his voice rising and becoming more intense on each cycle. As he approached the tenth cycle he was spitting the words, almost growling the incantation, partly

involuntarily as the pressure in the room seemed to be growing, and the edges of the room warped slightly. After he finished the tenth, he sat there sweating despite the chill, an expectant hush descended in the dark cellar.

He placed the Godstone embedded figure on the floor in front of him, and taking the old fabric scissors in one hand, he sliced across his open palm, letting the blood drip heavily onto the Godstone. He thought he heard an expectant sigh beyond his consciousness. He picked the dripping red artefact up and tossed it across to the other circle, and started a round of new incantations, these were rapid and fast, repeating quickly..

A darkness seemed to form above the second circle.

A single bell tolled. It was the Temple of Kain signifying the end of God's Day, the first of the traditional three tolls at midnight.

He continued the incantation, foam spitting from his mouth as he spat the words out.

The second toll sounded

The darkness seemed to coalesce. he thought he could make out two small pinpricks of light, like eyes as he strained to complete the ritual..

The third toll.

Fastaus slumped forward, exhausted. He suddenly felt the pain in his hand, and the cold stones beneath him. He felt nauseous and heaved, bringing up some of the ale from earlier onto himself..

He sat like that for a few moments with his eyes close. "Another failure, Faustus" he thought to himself. "Look at yourself, soiled and bloodied, you're a mess, man."

He opened his eyes, expecting to see an empty room. But in the other circle was an old man. Frail, balding with wisps of white hair he stood barefoot in a rough white hemp robe. He stood watching Fastaus intently, wide eyed and unblinking, a faint smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

Fastaus was too startled to know what to do or say. Suddenly he felt very very afraid, and very very sober. He sat back on his hands, breathing heavily. The thing in the circle didn't look like he was expecting. As he had that thought, he realised he'd never really considered what form the daemon would take. He assumed it was Gal Marok though, for who or what else could it be.

The old man walked forward to the edge of the circle, where he stopped.

Faustus felt some relief that the protective circles seemed to be working.

"Hai.." he coughed, "Hail Gal Marok" he spoke, trying to sound in control of himself. "I have summoned thee to the mortal realm for thirty years of your service, in return for my mortal soul in the ever after. How shall we seal the deal?"

The old man said nothing. He shuffled sideways, moving slowly clockwise round the inner circle, never taking his eyes off Fastaus the whole time. He seemed to be feeling out the circle with his toes as he moved.

"The deal" tried Fastaus again "..as described in the book. This book.." and he held the book up to show the daemon.

The old man continued, walking slowly backwards round the inside of the circle, testing with his heel. Near the back of the circle he stopped. After a few heartbeats, he smiled and slowly stepped out of it, backwards.

Fastaus gasped. The protections didn't work.

The old man walked slowly towards him, skirting the edge of the circle he had just left. He approached Fastaus' circle, moving slowly and deliberately. When he reached the edge, he stopped and continued to look directly at Fastaus. A sickly sweet smell wafted into Fastaus' circle, and he held his sleeve to his nose.

Again, the man began walking around the perimeter of the circle, this time anti-clockwise.

Fastaus dropped to his knees and started desperately checking his chalk marks, reapplying them frantically.

After walking round the circle a full circuit, the old man stopped. He looked at the circle by his feet, and then stared at Fastaus for a few moments. He spoke. His voice seemed like two voices playing over each other in unison, one light and lilting, the other deep and full of menace.

"They are correct. It takes a clever man to open a portal such that I may pass, few possess the skills to make the circles, and fewer still can read the incantations. A clever man." he kept looking directly at Fastaus.

"And it takes a desperate one to trust the instructions in a book that were written at the behest of a monster."

"Clever and desperate... a rare combination. One that has proven difficult to find."

"Until now."

He walked slowly into the circle. Fastaus tried to run, but found he was unable to move. It wasn't just fear holding him, he felt pressure on his body, as if from the circle he was in, pinning him tightly in the centre. He let out a breathless gasp and fell to his knees.

The old man stood over him. Bending over, he clasped his neck in one thin, bony hand. His touch was both burning and ice cold as it held him tightly. Fastaus could feel his skin peeling, curling, as if recoiling of its own volition from the daemon's touch.

It effortlessly lifted Fastaus clean off the ground. The old man seemed bigger now, he was holding Fastaus eye to eye, yet his feet didn't touch the floor. The daemons eyes flashed from black orbs to flickering fire. He stared long and deep into Fastaus' eyes as he pulled him closer.

“Silly billy, bumpy”.. the daemon whispered. His eyes flashed bright momentarily and Fastaus was no more.

- Daughter of Demorax
 - Ostlander
 - Sassy, funny
- Taran Mystic
 - He's a mystic - but 7ft built like an outhouse

Scene:

- Bar/office- remote location
- Woman enters looking for info
- Men in bar decide to turn on her - she's joking and egging them on
- She has a sword but they're not afraid of her - even if she is a daughter of demorax (only one of them has an idea what that means)
- As they approach she pulls out metal tube - she won't stop them with her sword, but she can stop them with this - they think it is magic, but its a whistle
- When she blows the Tara comes running in, but then stops when he sees the men - sees they are no threat. He's unhappy because using the whistle is like treating him like a dog - she laughs - they have banter
- She says she needs info - 'which one' he says - she points at one of the guys 'always the biggest' - and walks noncelently toward him - the big guy winds up to strike him, but the big Taran evades easily and picks the guy up by the throats and slams him to the floor... etc .. Cuts off a finger