

*During the past season you had the dubious luck to overhear a strange story on your travels - perhaps shared over a hearth or while travelling on the road. The teller is an older fellow with forgettable features - though others you mention the encounter to believe they have a reputation for telling 'bothersome' stories and making a nuisance of themselves through their art by telling claiming some grander commentary through their choice of tales - and how they alter it to suit their whims. The story, which the storyteller says was told to him by a Ketsov cabalist from Ossium is as follows:*

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In a certain hall, in a lonely vale there dwelt a rough boyar - everything about them was boorish: they wore rusted armour and had unwashed hair. They took without giving thanks and gave to all who visited with them only hard bread and water while they themselves supped on the best their wealth had to offer. They spoke loosely - they bragged and gossipped and took joy in upsetting their neighbours with shocking claims and eerie jokes.

One day a stranger arrived at the gates - they came along the roads and had a strange look about them - but as the pine dies from crown to root so too did the lonely vale's stzena lay dim, distracted eyes upon the outsider as they offered only perfunctory questions: "Who are you?", "Where are you going?", "What do you want?" - the stzena asked.

"I am Ivan", "I am going to market", "I wish to spend the night." - the visitor replied - though they had no bundle for goods nor packs for provisions. But the stzena let them in all the same.

The outsider was brought to the rough boyar's hall and said: "I am Ivan, I am going to market and I am no danger to you, oh no!" as they took the hard bread and water in their bloodied hands. The people of the vale glanced uncomfortably at one another - 'Where is this person's manners?' - they thought. But the boyar adopted a boorish smirk and, like many with such minds do, saw a challenge in the visitor's transgression:

"Well - perhaps we are the danger to you?" the boyar announced, not leaving the matter well-alone, "Maybe we are Wolves ourselves ready to snap up the unwary?". They guffawed in glee as the other vale-folk turned their eyes aside at such a strain on hospitality.

"Yes, oh yes - maybe that is my grandmother in the fine stew that you keep for yourself." the stranger answered, their gore-rimed teeth bared. The vale-folk shuddered and they set their attention on their spoons, their appetites waning. The boyar tittered with delight - 'What fun!' - they thought - 'What a prank to say the unspeakable!' - and they offered up their own meal to the guest: "Perhaps we do eat up the unwary! You should try it!" they jeered, looking at their neighbours with relish.

The boyar's laughter faded as the clawed fingers of the stranger wrapped about their wrist, "If you insist." - the stranger answered and they had their fill.

No longer do folk visit the rough boyar's hall and the lonely vale lies quiet and empty.

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