The Price



Everything in this world has a cost. If you wish to Heal, you must discover the price.

Word Count: 2,944

*Included dinkus artwork drawn by the author



Leina's hip ached with the dull throb of winter chill as she paused on the narrow pathway, wisps of frozen air drawing crimson to her cheeks. A journey during this season, to a destination this remote, was a task better left to the strongest and most formidable of warriors.

While Leina considered herself neither strong nor formidable, like a warrior she often felt the yearning for destruction brewing in her gut. Though, she was unsure if it was the destruction of others or herself she most longed for.

She swallowed down her grimace and forced her shoulders to relax despite the weight of her pack. Snow gathered in drifts as the world grew dimmer, until the only light was a thin sliver of gold illuminating a trail lined with *kask* and *saar* trees, leading to a ramshackle cabin.

Hidden in this hovel resided the Gifted Healer, Armastus. Leina first learned of him from Valuta, a Gifted Healer whose face was equal parts scar and beauty. From the swirling lines carved into her jaw to the keloids decorating her sloped ears, the price of every cure was permanently marked into her flesh with obscenely lovely designs.

Gifted Healers of Valuta's skill never deigned to work on Leina. None would sacrifice their limited flesh for someone as inconsequential as a laundress from the lower Kingdom, not when worthy soldiers returned from the frontlines each day in desperate need of repair.

That had not stopped Leina from trying, though. It was in her most recent bout of desperation that Valuta offered the location of Armastus, another Gifted Healer rumored to take on even the unworthiest clients.

Leina staggered as a gust of wind tipped her forward. Drawing her cloak tighter, she braved the last few steps and hit the door with the flat of her palm, her hand too stiff to form into a proper fist.

The door swung open on weather-stained hinges, revealing a male. He was thin, with a spine that curved his posture into a gentle arc and sloped ears denoting his Gifted status. Keen blue eyes sat beneath thick, white brows that hung low as he scanned her form.

Leina could focus on little but his skin. The tawny swathes were marred only by lines of age scribbled out from every feature. He could have been a strange sort of handsome, even at his advanced age, had the absence of scars not meant the end of Leina's aspirations. *This is not the flesh of a Gifted Healer,* she thought to herself*, but of a coward.*

"Leina. Valuta said you might come." The male nodded once and stepped aside, gesturing with a sweeping motion of his arm. Determined to seek the healing power of a warm cup of tea if nothing else, Leina entered.

"Sit," he ushered, waving in the direction of a cracked leather chair draped with *eesti* furs. "I will prepare tea."

A groan spilled from Leina's lips as pain shot through her hip. It was not befitting of a female in search of Healing to display such low tolerance, lest she be deemed unworthy. She hastily stifled the noise, sparing a wary glance towards the male who busied himself at a station of herbs.

Instead of reacting, he turned and held a cup aloft. "This won't cure what ails you," the male said, pressing its warmth into her trembling fingers. "But it will allow us to begin the process."

Leina's brows raised, and she took a long sip. "You *are* the Healer, then?"

"I am Armastus," the male confirmed, tipping his chin.

Doubt shone on Leina's face, though she fought to conceal it for the sake of being polite. It was a waste of a journey. She should have turned and left the second his unblemished skin entered her line of sight.

Armastus' eyes glimmered with fond amusement. "I know I do not look it, but I am a Gifted Healer of some renown."

"Where are your scars?" she couldn't help but ask.

Armastus tilted his head. "In my years of study, I have researched many with the Gift, and how they procure its talents. Our Gifted Mages leech their own power to fortify our forces. Gifted Scholars relinquish their intellect upon retirement to bolster our collective pursuit of knowledge. And our Gifted Healers abide by the idea that the price of Healing flesh is giving of their own through ritualistic scarification. Though they differ in manner, the foundation is that each talent requires sacrifice, because the Gift demands restoration of balance. Would you agree?"

Leina nodded. It was why Gifted Healing, as opposed to the simple use of tonics and salves, was a luxury. A Gifted Healer gave of their own flesh to restore another, a sacrifice too expensive to waste on anyone unworthy.

"Everything in this world has a cost. If you wish to Heal, you must discover the price." Armastus made a low sound in the back of his throat. "And I have found that to balance the removal of pain, one pays through enduring it."

Leina's mouth opened wordlessly. She was a female well-acquainted with stolen vocalizations, phrases lodging in her throat as though silence could shield her. "If that is to be believed, you must live in agony," she finally managed.

“There are many kinds of torment,” Armastus mused. “Denying others my Gift in order to live comfortably is its own misery, one far beyond any I inflict upon myself in the pursuit of Healing.”

Leina was unconvinced. A lifetime of living in a body that punished her simplest movements, that haunted her every breath with the threat of suffering, had hardened her to the idea of enduring any pain beyond what was already forced upon her. But if the Healer was willing, she would not object. “How does it work?” she asked.

The teacup clinked as Armastus placed it on the small table beside his chair. “It is not a simple process,” he warned. “It is not only me who must experience the pain, but you as well.”

Leina frowned. “I am already in pain. Is that not sufficient?”

“Perhaps. Pain knows many forms. Some are sharp and immediate, like the wound from a knife. Others are dull and growing, like the ache of an infected tooth. And others still are far more insidious,” Armastus commented, steepling his fingers. “Tell me, which do you feel?”

“It would be easier to describe what I do *not* experience,” Leina admitted with a huff, mentally parsing through her body. The pound of her head, the throb of her hip, the sensation of her heartbeat in her throat a *koolibri* bird whose frantic wings flapped too rapidly. “There is no part of me that does not ache, and on the rare day I am free from that chain, I am tethered instead by the knowledge that it will assuredly return, only stronger, my punishment for audaciously seeking liberation.”

Despite the admission of weakness, Armastus’ face did not twist with derision the way Leina feared. Instead, something like familiarity softened his eyes. “There is a kind of pain that lives inside of us, a rot deep in the roots of our being. We feel it in our aching muscles, in the tense

set of our jaw, in the twist of our gut. And we assume that those parts of our body must be damaged, so we dutifully apply salves, don braces, and consume tinctures."

"I have tried those methods," Leina interjected. "They help for a time, but the ailment persists."

"A salve for the muscle may cure a strain, but it will only mask the ache temporarily if the origin of the pain is not found in the muscle at all," Armastus murmured.

This was something Leina had not considered before, and curiosity flared in her sharp mind. "Then what do I do?"

"You must find the root, however deeply buried or gnarled it may be. I can be your guide to discovering it, but I cannot spare you the torment, only share it alongside you. The price of Healing is feeling the pain you have shielded yourself from." The Healer spoke with a confidence honed from experience.

"I exist in pain," Leina protested. "I am not preventing myself from feeling anything."

"You lament the physical manifestation of your anguish without discovering its origin. For respite, the pain you must endure is the cause, not the effect. You must follow the pathway of your memories to find it, otherwise the misery of your past will continue to torment you."

"There is no use in rehashing the past, no matter how awful. Not when the Kingdom is at war, and there are chores to be done and people to be fed." Leina said the words with such finality that she almost believed them. "Recollections are nuisances at best and terrors at worst."

"Memories do not wish to harm. I know why you fear it, but grief is merely a guest seeking shelter from a winter storm, longing for a place of solace and a warm cup of tea. It only lashes out when it goes unheard." Armastus raised his cup and took a heavy draw, his eyes growing wistful.

“Rubbish,” Leina retorted with a huff, leaning back in her chair. “It is senseless to pretend that peace can be bought with memories.”

“Torment does not evaporate when one absolves themselves from even the recollection of it,” Armastus warned, mimicking Leina's relaxed posture. “For every decision to avoid pain, the price is an infliction of it upon another, no matter how indeliberate. Until you are willing to feel the agony you hide from, you are doomed to hurt, either yourself or others.”

Her teeth ground together, sending a deep ache through her jaw, a reminder of the cost she already paid with her body. Though it felt foolish, and though she longed to leave certain memories untouched, she could not resist the alluring call of possible relief. No memory, no matter how painful or shameful, could eclipse the torment of being trapped in a prison of her own flesh for any longer. “How is it done?”

Armastus’ resulting smile was a tight sort of expression that spoke of profound joy and despair in equal measure. He moved his chair directly across from hers, then sat, so close that their knees brushed. “Give me your hands,” he instructed, extending his own.

Leina delicately placed her hands in his, their fingers wrapping neatly around one another.

“Excellent. Now, close your eyes, and I want you to think back to a memory from before this pain took root.”

Leina pinched her eyelids shut, the sudden darkness sending her tumbling through her mind. In the span of a heartbeat, she shifted from clutching Armastus’ wrinkled fingers to regaining her footing in a meadow.

The memory of this place stained Leina’s soul, every color a reminder of the best and worst of her. The vibrant patchwork of blue and purple *mestalill* flowers matched the hue of the fingerprint shaped marks that frequently decorated her arms. Years of perpetual sunlight had dyed

the grass a golden green, the same shade as the bile of her stomach. But most jarring of all were the flame-colored strands of *kois* rope, braided together to hold her favorite swing from the sturdy boughs of the *tamm* tree. A warm breeze brushed along her arms, and for a moment, Leina swore she saw that same rope corded around her wrists.

"It's beautiful," a low voice murmured.

Leina turned, finding a young male with sloped ears and a sharp jawline, his azure eyes locked on her. "Armastus?" she asked.

He gave her a wry grin. "I promised to guide you, did I not?"

"You look different," Leina said, the warming of her cheeks certainly a flush from the sun and not the result of admiring the handsome features of his youthful form.

"Memories can be kind," he replied, adjusting the collar of his shirt. "Where are we?"

Leina nodded to the swing wistfully. "It's a meadow, just outside of my childhood home. I spent many hours here in my youth."

As if beckoned by her words, a blur of pumping arms and snarled blonde hair darted through Armastus and Leina like air. The young girl clambered onto the swing, her torn dress raising as she kicked furiously until she swung through the sky in swooping arcs. Her voice carried, bellows of energy blending with shrieks of delight.

The raw joy on her face surprised Leina. She had nearly forgotten that there was a version of herself that existed before the pain, who burned with fire and whose voice rang unrestrained. Leina longed to suspend herself in this memory, to cry out wildly and fly untamed amidst the clouds, free of the torment of her body or other recollections.

"We aren't meant to dwell," Armastus said, placing a hand on her elbow. "No matter how inviting, the memory will not make space for us to overstay our welcome."

Reluctantly, Leina pulled her focus from her past self. “Where do we go from here?”

“Close your eyes and follow the path. The memories will find you.”

Leina did as he said, and as her eyes shut, the scene shifted. This time, the first thing Leina registered was the pair of thick, worn leather gloves resting beside a coiled strand of *kois* rope. She froze, panic ripping through her like a shot of lightning directed into her heart by a Gifted Weathersinger.

“We need to leave,” she whispered urgently, unable to tear her gaze from those gloves. They were hypnotic in a way, a sight she had focused on countless times throughout her childhood.

“We can’t go back.” Armastus grasped her hand tightly in his, his other finding her shoulder.

Leina whimpered in warning. “Staying will hurt.”

“It’s meant to.”

Footfalls more familiar than her own heartbeat echoed. She had spent a lifetime memorizing the unique sound of the seventeen weighted paces that carried her father, Kurat, from the living room to the kitchen. His gaze narrowed out the window that faced Leina’s beloved meadow. Sunlight poured in, but instead of warming the ice in his gaze, it stoked the hot rage brewing in the tense hold of his shoulders.

A young Leina scampered inside, then her body went rigid; prey recognizing the damnation of a hunter’s arrow.

She was barely a few sun cycles older than the reckless and wild thing that had arced through the air and boldly cried out, but the difference was palpable. This Leina had her hair neatly plaited and a dress free of tears, her appearance at once an apology and plea for safety. Indents

marred her lips and the torn flesh around her fingernails was the same red as the marks across her wrists.

Leina couldn't help but wonder if the universe itself demanded balance the way the Gift did. If the price of sparing the rest of the world from her father's ire was her own childhood. If her mother brought her into this world knowingly, a desperate female's bid for a balance she didn't live to see.

"I can't watch," Leina rasped.

"You must. There is no other way through," Armastus said. "Do not do your grief a disservice by failing to witness. I am here and I will endure it with you. You will survive this again."

Armastus' presence steadied her as the memory unfolded. The heady smell of mead on Kurat's breath mixed with the sunshine-warmed scent on her youthful skin, the air filled with the snap of leather to flesh. Leina's hip burned, reliving the sensation.

While the young girl's eyes locked on Kurat's worn gloves, grounding herself through the abuse, Leina stood an unbearable vigil. The more hits that landed, the less her younger self reacted, fearful silence the child's only protection from the man meant to protect her.

Agony stronger than any she'd ever felt gripped Leina's heart. For every brick that her younger self placed, Leina tore one away, until she shattered. She gave voice to each stifled sob, releasing the pain the way her past self could not. She screamed. She raged. She wept.

She *felt*.

And *Gifts Above*, it hurt.

When Kurat finally stumbled off, trailing slurred curses behind him, Leina sagged into Armastus' hold. The room shifted, memory bleeding into reality until the pair were once again seated in Armastus' cabin, clasping each other tightly.

"It's over," she whispered.

"And it's only begun," Armastus said, brushing a tear from Leina's cheek with a gentle swipe of his thumb.

That knowledge, of confronting how many grief-saturated memories she carried, was perhaps the most exquisite torment of all. But it was the Healing pain of cutting open a wound to drain the infection. Suffering with a purpose, a direction, a pathway.

She brushed a finger over her aching hip, the echo of her father's lashes changing, the agony snaking its way out rather than burrowing deeper. "Pain for pain," she repeated, recalling Armastus' earlier words. "Everything has a price."

"It does not go away all at once. But the more you remember and relive, the more you will be freed of pain's hold on you. And," Armastus added, wistfulness once again filling his gaze. "When you're as weathered as I am, you will sit across from someone who aches with an inescapable agony, and you will discover your calling. To balance their silence by granting voice. To balance their learned restraint by offering liberation. And to balance their grief, not by obscuring it, but through illuminating it with love. Gift or not, that is the price we all pay to Heal."