

MINSTREL

It is not enough just to stay alive. Even as death closes its ghastly grip all around these doomed cavernous depths, as my thoughts and heartbeat race, consumed by panic, I keep repeating this to myself. To live is so much more than just to survive.

There were so many times when falling to survival was tempting. These days on the noisy streets of Aulstrad, the never-ending bickering and jostling for prestige and power of in the cramped rooms of the orphanage, both innocent and vicious. The thefts, the mockery, the backstabbing. Some lowered themselves to whatever depth their offender would sink to, not realizing that the low road leaves us all wallowing in dirt.

I learned to sing and made my coin that way, lifting the spirits of those who would pass by my street corner, seeing their shoulders becomes less hunched and a semblance of light come back to their eyes even for a minute. I sang and I hoped that day when they would come to their families they would bring back a reflection of this light, making their day brighter in turn. I am no fool and I know how tiny these specks of light are against the darkness that envelops us since the Calamity, yet not trying would be to admit defeat and I am not ready for that.

I sang and played in halls of inns and noble households, hoping that the words of my sagas would inspire the rulers to be more just and the warriors' hearts to be more resolute in the face of danger. I sang and their spirits would be lifted and in the coming weeks the rulers would go back to breaking the back of their people and stuffing their coffers, and the warriors would turn craven and flee, leaving exposed those in need. I saw it time and time again, yet I do not despair, for I know that for every hundred songs that leave no trace there is one that strikes true and that shred of light in one person can give birth to many more rays of hope that would spread farther than my work. Some call me a fool but I would rather be a hopeful fool than a forlorn wise woman, paralyzed by fear and uncertainty.

I went with them because I saw fear in their eyes as they talked about their expedition into the forbidden ruins far beyond the mining complex. I went for the secrets of the ancients to inspire my craft and to bring more light back from the darkest depths. Once more the darkness prevailed as the deadly ambush left my companions dead, me wounded, and my precious lute almost smashed to pieces.

Now I will carry with me their story and all other stories that I will collect down here among the ruins of the past. I will bring these stories with me and I will tell them through my songs to all that would hear me. They will inspire and they will embolden, and they will prove that even after catastrophe that seems absolute there is reason to raise your head and to keep striving. My light may be extinguished yet, but it is sharing it with others, not simply keeping it burning that I care about. Now, more than ever, survival is insufficient.