

WITCH AND THE DEAD PROSE SAMPLE

Anna is an herbalist from a small, independent village in the Arid Plains. Her father, an Oracle, once predicted year after year when the rain would come, giving hope and security to the families of the desert village. Now, he is dying, and the future of the village is all on Anna. She has not revealed to anyone that she's failed to learn her father's trade.

In this scene, she has been captured by a pair soldiers of the Imperial Military. One, named Valoor, was once from a struggling village very much like her own. Anna and him have a moment alone by the fire.

The sun continued to fall, and the three made camp. The coal they had scavenged along the way was not enough for a nightlong fire, so they made her burn her leaves, her herbs, even her bag. She was allowed only her waterskin, which they did not check, and her small pouch, for the short soldier took one sniff of the purple blood and nearly vomited. He tossed it, and said nothing when she carefully picked it back up.

The desert cooled. Night brought the stalkers from their tunnels to the plains, and the White One wandered out to hunt.

The Espin and Anna sat by the fire. He stoked it with his pike and watched it with a serious and unflinching gaze.

Anna did not know what happened to people who lived in a place when the Empire arrived. Some said they were killed, others said taken. She imagined them as slaves toiling in a mine somewhere, but this man before her wore armor and held a weapon. His helmet was emblazoned with the Imperial crest. But he obeyed.

After a deep silence, she asked, "How long have you been a slave?"

His laugh reverberated in the helmet. "I am no slave, Walken. Unlike you."

"There is no slavery in the plains."

He pressed his pike into the fire. Embers flared. Anna watched them sprinkle the ground like falling leaves. "Look me in the eyes, Walken." She did. The flames danced in his black eyes. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you are a slave to nothing."

Only an Oracle can save us.

"I am a slave to no one," she replied meekly.

His eyes narrowed into thin, piercing slits. Her throat tightened. He grinned.

"I said no-thing, Walken. Funny how our barbaric language works, isn't it? In Fanix there are no such tricks." He snorted and threw her last herb into the fire. It burst in a crackling, red storm. "These plains reek of misery and death. This stench used to be all I knew. Toil the only means to life."

Anna watched the hot flames light the scar beneath his chin. "How long ago was that?"

He sneered; his teeth unnaturally sharp. "Not long enough to forget. Yes, I was once like you, Walken, before the Empire came to my village. An unwanted child. I was a slave then, like you are now. One shackle in the soil, the other in the hearth. The Empire shattered one when we were taken from that place, moved to where we would be more useful. The other they broke when my parents were executed for trying to keep me after my fourteenth harvest. Their little boy, the source of all their misery and suffering, they could not surrender the bag of meat which took their lashings in silence... So, I turned them in myself."

Dust swirled in the distance where his commander tackled the dirt. When her gaze returned to Valoor, his eyes were set firmly once more on the flame. Their corners crinkled in a painful grin.

Anna played with the hem of her dress. The worn fabric separated between her fingers. The sand was woven in as tightly as the frazzled threads.

"I had no one, at first," she admitted slowly, pressing her thumb through a freshly worn hole. The soldier continued to tend to the fire in welcoming silence. "My village, parents, all landless when the dry season became too much. I was small, too small to remember anything but sadness and anger. I don't remember a single name of those who disappeared as we wandered the plains until my mother and I were the only ones left. And then even she..."

Anna looked up. Valoor was still tending the fire. She wiped away a small, hot tear that had pressed against her eye, and continued.

"A man found me and took me to a village. There, everyone welcomed me, said the sadness was alright, that if I shared it everything would be alright. Only he told me the truth: that the pain would hurt them. That if they knew what would happen to them if fortune were so cruel, it would be too much. He understood. He read it all in the stars."

Valoor shed no tears for her. And for that, she was thankful.

"The walls of a family home obscure much," is all he offered her, but even that much she sensed was difficult. "Like cloth above a bruise."

"My father killed the babies we knew would not survive so the families did not have to. He did it in a ritual he said carried no sin, left no soul for the moon to capture." She paused. "With him, you would have never been born."

He hummed in an almost sick amusement at the jest of his own death. "I am needed for much in the Empire, Walken. And for that, I've paid nothing I wanted to keep."

"No one is free of the dead," she said.

He stirred the embers in satisfaction. "Keep telling yourself that, Walken, if it justifies your burden. Everyone in the Empire knows their worth, it is calculated each day. I wonder if you will ever feel worthy. If there will be anything left once you've given it all to someone else."

Over the whizzing flies and the trickle of a distant stream, the sound of a pommel beating the life from some creature resounded over the plains. Anna watched the commander's silhouette engage in a brutal killing.

"It does not seem like your worth matters much to him," she said.

He chortled darkly. Somehow, she had amused him. "Blood still carries some meaning in the Empire. But all blood runs thin over time. Soon, only merit will remain."

Anna wrapped her arms around her knees, wondering what that meant. Blood meant nothing to the village. Their only language was love. Even all the way out here, her father's voice lingered. Love is for them, not us.

"You don't still hear them?" she asked in the final moments they had left with no one but each other. "Your parents?"

"No," he snorted.

"Where are they now?"

His eyes returned to hers, joyless now. His voice grew grim. "Burned and buried, Walken," he declared. "As all grief should be."

The iguana cooked in the hot coals. It tasted charred and soulless, and her sleep was little better.