

I staggered back into town with the ragged few survivors, head low, and reluctantly returned to Sellah's home. Alone. This small village in the middle of nowhere had never seen a tragedy like this. Even the drought a few years ago couldn't compare to the arrival of a necromancer who was trying to consume them all one by one.

I stood at the door, arm raised, unable to knock. Sellah's request kept echoing through my head alongside the memory of watching her husband be stabbed through the chest by one of the necromancer's puppets.

Bring him back to me in one piece.

Last week the necromancer took the Sathit family, kids and all, from their farm. He hadn't been in the area long as far as we knew, but he was picking us off slowly, and the soldiers we'd sent for from the nearest city wouldn't arrive until early next week. But a Constable, Mbekal, had come alone to rally our small village, deciding quickly that we couldn't afford to wait for soldiers to hunt the necromancer. He wanted to stamp out the defiler before he could become too much of a problem.

Yesterday, when I came to get Baleth for the hunting party he joined eagerly, though Sellah wasn't happy about it. She'd been adamant that, as their friend, it was my duty to bring him back to her "in one piece."

Of course I'd agreed to it, not really knowing what we'd be up against. We didn't think the necromancer would have so many puppets because he'd only killed a few locals, but he must have been killing elsewhere for quite some time. We were overwhelmed quickly. I had never seen Baleth in a real fight before. He was even more skilled than Mbekal, to all our surprise, and still he fell to the puppets.

Although I'd failed my duty to protect Baleth I now had a duty, as their friend, to tell Sellah.

My arm was still raised to knock when the door opened. I stared at Sellah, unable to speak, unable to lower my hand. She looked past me only briefly before meeting my eyes, and I knew I didn't have to tell her what had happened.

"You broke your promise," She said.

I nodded.

Commented [BP1]: There's a lot that I love about your hook! Right away the readers know that the main character has gone through a difficult encounter and learn about the threat he and his community are facing. And not only that, I love seeing his regret about not keeping his promise to Sellah. There's instant conflict on two levels: external and internal.

There are a few things that I think are still missing from the beginning in general, but what I want to point out here is that I'm not really sure where Lamil fits into this small village. He never even names the place and doesn't seem connected to anyone there but Sellah and Baleth, and in the first paragraph, he refers to the town's population as "them," not "us." I have to wonder if he's been living in this town all his life or if he's simply passing through and trying to help or something else. If this is really Lamil's home, the stakes should be a little bit higher to defeat the necromancer (even though that's not the main conflict). If this isn't Lamil's home, I want to know more about who he is and how he ended up here.

This doesn't all need to be established within the hook, but since Lamil is our main character, the more depth and understanding we can get of him, the better.

Commented [BP2]: Now that I know the reveal at the end and know Sellah's secret, I have to wonder why Baleth would even volunteer for this hunting party without Sellah's direction. Maybe I just didn't get enough of a sense of how this necromancy works (and I have more questions on that later), but if Sellah really didn't want Baleth to go, she could have kept him home and made him seem like he'd decided to stay.

I'm sure she had her reasons for sending him off like this, and it would be a good question to answer near the end of the story. It will make sense for Lamil to ask Sellah why she let Baleth go after the necromancer in the first place. Otherwise, readers will likely see this moment as a plot hole.

Her fist and jaw clenched in angry unison. I expected her to be sad, not angry, but as I saw the burning in her eyes her anger made sense to me. She and Baleth had been my friends for years, and I'd let them both down.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my voice weak with sorrow. "I know it doesn't mean much considering... but I really am."

I hesitated in the door, uncertain if I should stay or leave. I didn't want to be around when her anger turned to sorrow, but I couldn't just leave her to mourn our loss alone.

"Come in Lamil." Sellah's anger still burned in her tone as she said it, but her face was softening. "Relax a little. You've just been through something terrible."

I complied, stepping through the door and sitting on the low stool she offered me. I wanted to reply, to try and comfort her, but my body and heart slumped as I finally sat, my hands beginning to tremble, and my mind went blank. I tried to say something, anything, but when I tried my throat tightened, refusing to make a sound. We'd been friends for how long, a decade now? And I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"It wasn't your fault," Sellah said, limping to the curtain that hid the bed. "There's nothing you could have done."

She pulled the curtain aside, stooped, and retrieved a small box from under the mattress. It held a pendant with metal spurs around a glass core like a sun and a simple wand.

The wand looked nearly identical to my own, its tip was rounded glass with a flat back that had a slit for a storage extender to be pushed into. Used to consume and store objects as data for a summoner to use later, these kinds of wand were common and came in other shapes and sizes. The traditional straight wand shape was popular, easy to use and cheap enough for most people. A staff like the one the necromancer had would have cost a fortune.

The upside to summoning an object was that no one else could collect the data of that object. The downside was that collecting the object data destroyed and consumed the original.

Or in the case of Necromancy, it consumed corpses for later summoning.

Commented [BP3]: I love the emotions here!

Commented [BP4]: Another aspect that I felt was missing from the beginning was seeing this three-way friendship and believing it. In the beginning, we're simply told that Sellah, Baleth, and Lamil have been friends for years. But even after being told that, it didn't feel like their friendship was real to me. In this moment, I totally get that emotions are high for both Sellah and Lamil, and Baleth isn't even there, so it's not like they're going to be cracking jokes and teasing each other and all the things that best friends do. But even after these intense emotions have passed and Sellah is determined to get Baleth back, most of their interactions didn't feel like old friends working together (even factoring in the fact that Sellah is showing a new side of herself). I'd love to see more evidence that Sellah and Lamil really know each other and are dear friends throughout the first half of the story. It may also help for them to talk about Baleth a little bit more or for Lamil to think about him more to help establish that friendship more strongly as well.

This set up is going to be critical to setting up the climax of the story. There were so many great moments later on that resulted from the strong friendship these people have, and the conflict that some of it was fake even though it was real is really fantastic! But most of those moments just don't quite pay off because we don't have the set up of a believable friendship being displayed in the beginning.

As you're deciding how to better show us this friendship, you may want to consider starting the story a little bit earlier to give you a little more time to establish those bonds. For instance, you could start with Baleth and Lamil hunting the necromancer, giving us a snapshot of their relationship before everything changes. This isn't a necessary change—I definitely believe you can still show us the friendships without including that scene. It's just an option to consider.

Commented [BP5]: This line struck me as something that a good friend might *not* say. He seems so reluctant to comfort Sellah, but I don't really understand why if he's so close to her. If it's his guilt eating away at him, I think we need to see his guilt come through here a little more.

Commented [BP6]: I thought this idea for how wands and staffs worked was so fascinating and original! I loved seeing how this ability could be used in different ways throughout the story and how it eventually gave away Sellah's secret. I think this is a really great aspect of your worldbuilding, and the fact that you integrate it into the plot so well is even better.