

Darkness Dawns

By Veriax

(first draft)

Prologue: The Last Hope

Magador, 15th of Fallingtide, 390

“You are our last hope,” General Vargard had told him. “You must get word of our blight to the fortress of Khallan.”

“I shall my lord” Brovik had replied. “I will not fail you.”

“It would not just be me you would fail. Without aid, the city will fall.”

“I shall not fail” Brovik had repeated. “And this city will not fall. I swear it.”

As he was finishing saddling his horse, Captain Brovik hoped that he had been right. The task he had been called for, some would say, was utter folly. Yet, they had to try. They had been trapped now for several days, and with each night that passed they became weaker; the city’s defences slowly eroding away against the mindless onslaught which beset them.

There was a distant rumble. Neither Brovik nor even his steed, Ash, paid any heed to it. The eruptions had been happening for two weeks now. Elden Peak had not erupted for centuries but now, of all times, it decided to belch forth its clouds of smoke and dust into the heavens. The eruptions were carpeting the skies, obscuring the sun behind a dusty, dull haze. And this only aided their enemies who, it seemed, found weakness in Auraura’s gaze. It was because of the eruptions that *they* could come out during the daylight hours, surviving but a few moments before the weak sunlight turned whatever they were to ash. That wasn’t long, but it was still long enough for them to pluck a rider from his horse and drag him into the one of the crevasses outside the city walls. And it was a long ride down the mountain.

Brovik was a brave man, proud, and a good soldier. He wore his red and white uniform of Magador with pride, even though now it was filthy and battered. He had seen almost forty winters and it was true he was passed his prime; his body, well built and tall, was covered in a lifetime of scars. His face, though handsome, beheld cuts from countless battles he’d fought.

Still, his brown eyes remained kind – his humanity had remained despite the slaughters he’d witnessed. Brovik had faced many enemies during his life-long career in the service of the Magadorian Army, but he had never feared for his life quite how he did this day. But there was no time to dwell on any of this or that now – there was no more time to wait. It was noon, and everything was prepared. He and his troupe had to get out of the city and get word of the attack to the fortress of Khallan. The city of Zanth had to receive aid.

“Carry us like the wind today, Ash” he whispered in his horse’s ear “Run like you’ve never run before.” Ash snorted in reply, nodding his long grey head as if understanding. Ash had served him for the last five years of his career, and he’d never had a more steadfast steed.

Brovik took Ash by the reigns and led him out of his stall and into the street.

He was greeted by silence. The streets were, for the most part, deserted, and he found it hard to believe that not a week previous they'd been filled with people going about their daily business just like they'd always done.

He made his way down to the market square; Ash's hooves echoed eerily against the stone walls around him. The silence was oppressive. The smell of carrion was thick. The paving stones were stained dark with blood and fire.

"Brovik" he heard someone call off to his left. He knew who it was as soon as he heard the voice, and was glad hear it.

Another, younger soldier approached him, though the newcomer's uniform was not of the red and white of Magador, but of the blue of neighbouring Oun. It was as equally battered as his own; the chain mail ripped and barely of any use any more. The newcomer's blonde hair was un-kept and blew about his head wildly, akin to that of a lion's mane.

"Tirrius, my friend." Brovik smiled. "It is good to see you."

Brovik halted his walk, and the two locked wrists.

"And you," Tirrius bowed his head slightly. "I came to wish you luck today."

"I will need it," Brovik said grimly, turning his head skywards. "The clouds are thick and the day is dark."

"They are always dark, these days, but you ride towards the light. For all of us. I know you will succeed!"

Brovik raised his eyebrows, and smiled a little. "Are you all so optimistic north of the border?" he asked, resuming walking. Tirrius followed by his side, his walk as casual as someone taking a stroll on a warm afternoon.

"Sometimes you have to be. It can sometimes be all you have." The words were dark, but the tone light. "I wish I could go with you."

"We need riders, not warriors. Vargard has deemed it best you and your men stay within the city."

"Aye. I am unsure if my men feel that is a blessing or a curse."

"They are both curses of their own I think. You and your men each fight with the ferocity of a dozen warriors."

Tirrius smiled sadly. "You will need that on the way down."

"I know, but it is not something I have influence in."

Tirrius' face darkened. "What of Rutherford?"

Brovik pursed his lips. "Vargard answers to him, yes. I am unsure what input he has had in this."

"Likely none. He hides within the keep and expects everyone to die for him."

"Such is the benefit of having a private guard and the wealth to pay them."

"It should not be as such. What good is wealth to the dead?"

"None at all, my friend. But Zanth was built for coin, and coin holds just as much respect here as honour does within Oun."

It was difficult for the young man from Oun to understand, Brovik knew. He could not be blamed. The differences between the two neighbouring countries were stark, and many.

He waved a hand dismissively. "Regardless, you're needed within the city."

Tirrius nodded, letting the matter lie. "And we shall see it still here when you return.

Remember, better to live like a lion than die a coward."

Brovik smiled, admiring the man's attitude. They resumed walking, in silence, until they neared a corner that would lead out to the plaza before the main gate.

Brovik turned to his Ounish counterpart and they locked wrists once more. “Goodbye, my friend.”

“Until we meet again. May the Fates guard you.”

With that, Brovik lead Ash into the plaza.

The Entrance Plaza was a large square, flanked on all sides by the gutted shells of buildings. Brovik walked Ash passed piles of rubble and mounds of wreckage towards the great gatehouse on the opposite side. Zanth had been built long, long ago, by the dwarves, and the strong, thick walls, built of large blocks of granite, now held fast against the enemy that surrounded them.

Men, women and children were gathered around, all watching; he felt the intensity of their gaze burn upon him. The air was filled with quiet murmurs, and the tension in the air was palpable. He looked up for a brief moment and saw a young girl with a dirty, tear-streaked face standing alone and clutching the remains of a rag doll; another potent reminder of the suffering he strived to end. He felt uncomfortable at the thought that half the population of Zanth may well see him and almost twenty others die that day, but quickly brushed that thought aside as he neared the riders he would be leading. As he approached the men selected to accompany him, standing readily to attention next to their horses, they saluted him.

Two others stood at hand. One, a Magadorian was a tall, commanding man, with long wild dark hair, chiselled features, and bronzed skin. General Vargard was his name, though there were few who did not know his nickname: ‘The Bear’.

The other was no officer or soldier. He was a young, portly man, dressed in fine robes of satin and silk and cotton which clashed lewdly with the squalor of his surroundings. He was flanked by a dozen men whom, while armed, dressed not in any uniform of Magador or Oun, but were the private guard of the man they surrounded: Rutherford, Baron-Merchant of Zanth.

Nothing had been seen of Rutherford nor his guard during the fighting. They hid within the keep; it’s strong, tall, solid walls keeping them safe from the massacres outside. The resentment for the small group was barely concealed, yet none challenged them for all were either too exhausted or too disillusioned to try.

“Captain Brovik,” said Vargard loudly as he approached, “and those of you who will ride out today...” he seemed to falter, then said: “There is nothing more to say that has not already been said. The Fates be with all of you, and may you all reach Khallan and return as swift as the arrow flies.”

“Thank you, General Vargard,” Brovik saluted.

“Yes, and may you kill a few of them on your way out as well, eh?!” laughed Rutherford with an ugly smile. “I hope you do myself and Magador proud hm? Don’t let me down eh, I’m counting on you.”

Brovik acknowledged the comment with a forced smile, barely able to keep his contempt for that snivelling excuse of a man from showing. *So it was you who choose me for this suicide mission, you bastard,* Brovik raged inwardly. His disdain for Rutherford had been ill-disguised in the past, and this was just the kind of trick Rutherford would pull in order to dispose of him. Still, he was determined not to waver, and to do his duty.

Vargard shot Brovik an apologetic look as he passed. General of the soldiers he might have been, but Rutherford still had the proverbial keys to the city's treasury and, by right, ruled Zanth alone.

Brovik walked past the riders gathered, looking at each man as he passed. Brave men they were - he'd fought and killed beside all of them.

"Mount up!" Brovik was never one for speeches. They all knew what they were going to do and why, and Brovik himself was growing impatient and wanted to spend no more time waiting.

The cavalry swung into their saddles, equipped their shields, and the great wooden gate, scratched and scorched, but still intact, swung open before them. For a moment, Brovik studied the winding road that meandered down the mountain upon which Zanth was built upon. He let his gaze wander out longingly eastwards, onto the open fields, and to the woods beyond. He then looked back at the men behind him. They were ready. Everything was ready.

"Draw steel!" he shouted; blades unsheathing from their scabbards behind him.

"HAA!" Brovik urged Ash through the gate at a gallop and on out of the city of Zanth.

The others followed, all matching his speed, and a thunderous cheer suddenly came up from the battlements high above as the hundreds gathered spurred them on. It filled with Brovik with such a sense of pride that his fear was banished in a second, and he rode low in the saddle as Ash hurtled down the road which was carved from the living rock itself. Brovik was dimly aware of the sound of the gate closing again, shutting them out and leaving no way back. They made the first turn, where the road began to snake back and forth down the mountainside, and nothing happened; their foul besiegers lurked further down the road.

They raced down the track as fast as they dare, their horses hooves scraping on loose stones in the path. Above them, the crowds still cheered them on, and as they reached the second bend and the road doubled back upon itself again. They were half way there.

An awful scream pierced the air, shattering Brovik's growing hopes of escaping unscathed entirely. He glanced back and saw a horse which no longer had a rider. Even as he looked, a giant bat-like shadow came across the horse's path, obscuring it from view for the blink of an eye, and then bearing the terrified animal off the road and out of sight.

"Keep riding!" He yelled at the top of his lungs as he spurred Ash ever faster down the road, unheeding of the risk that the horse may easily break his leg or lose his footing.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another of the fell beasts come at them.

"Watch out!"

His warning came too late, as a man had half of his torso removed, sending his horse veering wildly into the middle of the road. Horrified yells came from two of the men behind, who pulled up on their reins in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid the rider-less horse. All three horses stumbled and fell in a heap of flailing limbs and panicked cries. The sickening sound of cracking bone resounded off the rough rock walls and, even as they galloped away, Brovik and the others could still hear the terrified yells of the survivors as they were left behind.

The shouts of encouragement from the city walls subsided. Whether it was because of the increased distance, the sound of the wind and battle in his ears, or just that they stopped cheering after what they were witnessing, Brovik couldn't tell.

Brovik wasn't even aware that he had tears in his eyes as the road turned again, and he caught a glimpse of the green and yellow fields that lay beyond.

"Onward! Almost there!" he yelled, not knowing how many of his men remained.

His words caught in his throat as one of the things appeared before him. Without a thought he lashed out at the creature with his blade, making contact and wrenching the weapon from his grasp. As he desperately reached for his dagger in his belt, another leapt at him seemingly from the very rock itself. It hit him with immense force, sending a sharp pain through his forearm and nearly toppling him from Ash, who had kept running and turned the final corner.

Brovik could see end of the path not a hundred yards away, and gripped the reigns with his right hand as his left hung uselessly by his side, trying to reach the safety of the open road beyond.

With just dozens feet left to go Ash reared up, letting out a high pitched whinny. Brovik saw two more of them blocking his way ahead, advancing silently and with breathtaking speed, but already they had begun to smolder in the dim daylight. Brovik gritted his teeth and dug his heels into Ash's flanks. "On! Onwards boy! We cannot stop!"

Ash bravely set off again, charging towards the two horrors. As they met, Ash launched himself into the air, leaping over them. They hissed in anger, and lashed out. Brovik cried out as a tearing pain shot through his right calf, and then they landed heavily, jarring his spine and sending the wind out of his lungs. Ash kept his legs under him, and kept on running. Brovik could do naught but to hold on for his life as they galloped out into the fields.

From the walls, those gathered watched in deathly silence as the lone horse galloped away from the city, with the rider hanging limp from the saddle. They had witnessed every other man and steed alike slain and dragged into the crags as they'd made their break for freedom. And for all they could see, the rider who rode into the fields was dead as well.

The Lioness

She rose from her crouched fighting position, breathing heavily and shaking a little after the rush of combat. Another victory, but another close call, and another scar to show for it. She collected her throwing knife from where it had become embedded within the giant wolf's brain.

"Iiana! I thought I was never going to catch you!"

Iiana, her blonde hair flowing in the light wind, turned to look in the direction of the call and saw her companion joining her.

"It bolted as we planned" she called to him. "Except it ran the wrong way. I had to take it down myself." She looked down at the dead beast, and set about removing the giant wolf's teeth as proof of the kill.

"My poisons would have been just as effective as your dagger. And less dangerous for both of us."

"I know," she told him as she worked. He bounded up to hear, leaping from rock to rock. The adventurer looked at her small elf friend.

Brass was a member of a curious, unpredictable, and mischievous race known as the fae. Several months ago she'd rescued him from a group of ruffians who had captured him and were carrying him off to some terrible fate.

His features were pointed, his sharp green eyes observed everything around him and showed intelligence and cunning. He was dressed in a mixture of red and green, and reminded her of a little court jester. Members of his race, well known for being mysterious and elusive creatures of the forests, were rarely seen outside of their deep woodland habitats. Why then, that this one had decided to follow this woman as her companion, was quite a mystery to all who observed.

"I dealt with it well enough. Too much use of your poisons would make me lazy, Brass," she told him, dropping the teeth into a leather pouch at her belt.

Brass wasn't his real name. His real name consisted of seventeen syllables and Iiana had no chance to remember them all. So she remembered one, and that suited them both fine. "It caught you," he told her, as if she hadn't realised. Her arm was bleeding where the wolf had managed to nick her with its claws. Blood flowed slowly down her arm in a crimson smear.

"It's not bad."

"Let me see."

"Oh... alright" Iiana relented, and sat down so that Brass could examine her wounds.

After a short while he said: "Barely worth mixing a potion for. I'll just use magic."

"Be careful", she told him.

The powers of magic, though potent, were known to backfire on careless mages. Brass was no careless mage, however, and it was a very minor incantation he called forth. She felt her skin tighten and heat up. The bleeding stopped, and the wound was healed. Brass's healing magic had saved her life in the past, so she felt it best not to reject his help.

Sometimes she wondered if he'd made the right choice in staying with her after she rescued him. She had offered him freedom, but he had instead insisted he come with her. In truth she was glad of it, for she had been travelling alone for some time at that point. A fae was an odd companion to travel alongside, but he had swiftly become one of the best friends she had ever had.

But, despite his potent magical abilities, his race was not suited to the life of a wanderer, and she often felt guilty about dragging him over The Realms and endangering his life as they earned their coin. He would have been better off befriending a weaver or cook, she mused inwardly.

"You're sure this is the wolf they meant?" he asked, shattering her thoughts as he was finishing cleaning her arm.

She nodded. "Yes, it was certainly big enough. And see the markings on its head? Just like they said."

"Yes... yes I think I can make it out, though all the blood and brain-matter."

Gharath saw the woman coming from some distance away. It took him a while longer in the dying light to see the good-for-nothing fae that accompanied her, but it was there also, tagging behind her like some obedient lapdog.

As she neared he let his eyes wander all over her body. She was a fine specimen of a woman if ever there was one. An Ouniush beauty; tall, toned, with exotic pale skin and blonde straight hair; a stark contrast to the bronzed, dark and curly haired people that Magador tended to consist of.

He idly wondered how she'd ended up there, in the lawless wilderness at the foothills of The Spine, leaving behind the order and discipline of Oun. A deserter or runaway no doubt, he mused, but in the end it mattered not.

He was still watching them closely as the strange pair entered his small camp, which in itself was not much to look at. Five crude, durable tents were erected around a campfire, and the smell of cooking mutton drifted into the still night air as the four men hunched around it and prepared their supper. Bales of wool lay nearby, though Gharath was not a shepherd.

The two adventurers stood before him now.

"Welcome back!" he spread his arms out and smiled. "You kill the wolf?"

Iiana took the teeth out of the leather pouch and handed them to him. "Yes, there's no doubt – it had the markings like you said. The biggest one I've seen this year. "

"Ahh well done, well done," Gharath said, his voice thick with badly disguised enthusiasm, his mind already on other matters. "Now come, come, join us. We have a drink round the fire, yes?"

Gharath's four boys started to show an interest and got up, leering menacingly with wicked glints in their eyes.

"No, thanks," Iiana said. "I'll take my pay and leave."

"You'll take what you're given!" one of the men barked. There was a chorus of approval; unpleasant laughter ringing out from the four men.

Iiana glanced down. Brass had already disappeared.

"I think you'll stay for a bit, yes?" Gharath's voice was etched in menace as he smiled a toothless smile. "Drink with us."

"You can't drink with the dead!" she spat.

One of the men gasped out hard and made a strangled croaking noise before slumping to the ground. Alarmed shouts rang out, and swords were unsheathed, including Iiana's.

"Sorcery!" Gharath gasped, lunging at her.

Iiana nimbly dodged the man's clumsy sword thrust and swiftly disembowelled him. He looked at the wound, disbelieving, as he stood there holding his insides – he hadn't even seen her draw her blade.

Two others fell dead with their hands on their chests as they collapsed, gasping, as the poison delivered by Brass's deadly poison darts froze their hearts.

The last man charged Iiana, yelling out a fierce and desperate cry as he attacked. He didn't have time to even bring his weapon to bare; her throwing dagger piercing his chest. Gharath finally slumped down to the earth with a gargled groan. He had seen all his boys killed before he died.

Iiana dragged the corpses far away from the camp and rolled them down into a steep gully, so to not attract jackals and other such beasts too near to the camp. It was grueling work; all the men were heavier than she, and once the task was done she slumped down next to the fire, exhausted.

Brass finished preparing the meal the men were going to have – adding some herbs of his own to make it more palatable. He brought some over to her. “Here,” he said quietly.

“Thanks, Brass,” she smiled, wearily. “You’re a great cook.”

“It’s about all I’m good for.”

She frowned. “Hey, don’t talk like that.”

“I’m sure the extra spice in your food will make up for you having to drag those bodies by yourself.”

“It’s alright. You do help, Brass.”

“Feh! Cooking and healing paper-cuts. Istrid’s Mane, I feel so useless when I see you having to work like that.”

“Are we having this conversation again? I was on my own before I found you, and would have to do it if you watched or not.”

He snorted.

She almost smiled. He was too small to help with physical tasks, yet he did more for her than he realised. She had tried to make him see, many times before, how his potions, his poisons, his *company*, more than made up for any shortcomings he might have.

She sipped a sample of the stew he’d made, rather than repeat the same sentiments over again. It was warm, and good. It made her feel better instantly, soothing her aches.

Perhaps he’d added more than simple herbs to it.

He wandered off a ways as she ate, rifling through the belongings of the camps original owners.

"Is there much we can use?" Iiana asked him.

"About eighty coin, in total," he chirped; his mood bouncing back already.

She grinned. "Good! That should buy us a few weeks in an inn."

He nodded eagerly. "Maybe somewhere nice this time? I’m not a fan of fleas."

"We’ll see what we can do."

After eking out a living off the rocks of The Spine and going hungry so many times before, maybe their luck had finally changed.

She awoke to the clatter of bells and the sound of sheep. Iiana sat up. Brass was already awake, and he nodded in the direction of the noises. A shepherd was approaching slowly with a flock of thirty or so sheep. Iiana rose and went to see what he wanted.

"Greetings," Iiana called to him.

"Ullo," came the unsure reply, "I'm here to see Gharath about the season's payment..."

"Gharath's- what did you say?"

"The payment. I'm supposed to give him a tenth of my flock."

Iiana sifted her weight onto one leg, and folded her arms across her chest. "A tenth huh? In exchange for what?"

The shepherd looked around anxiously. "Protection. He gives us protection against wolves and bandits..."

That must be why Gharath hired us. Have us remove the wolf he could keep up the payments from these poor shepherd-folk.

The shepherd looked at her straight for the first time. "You're not... I mean are you... err... with him...?"

Iana threw back her head and laughed at the sky. "No my good man. I'm afraid Gharath died last night."

The shepherd blinked. "Dead?"

"Yes. As are his men. You need not pay anything."

"Gharath's dead? You killed him?!" He said, disbelieving.

"I and my companion here were forced into it."

"Companion?" the shepherd's gaze drifted past her and found Brass standing within the camp. His eyes widened as he saw the odd, freakish being, and he swallowed hard and looked back at Iana.

"Gharath's dead!" he continued, "Oh praise be to you lady, you have freed us from a tyrant. He would demand impossible quotas from us, and if we did not pay he would hurt us, our families..."

Iana motioned for him to be silent. "You can take anything you want from the camp after I'm done here. We will take most of the coin as payment."

The shepherd bowed, clearly for the first time in his life. "Aye, take the coin. Take it!

Would you return the wool to us? It was taken in instead of coin, if he had naught."

"Yes, I have no need of it."

"Thank you, lady, and... and your... friend."

"You are welcome. It seemed the man deserved as such."

"Aye lady, he did. And thank ye again!"

Judgement

At midday, a few days later, Iana gave Arthur's Smithy an incredulous look when she saw that it was closed, as if it was the fault of the building itself.

"That's just typical." She spat. She finally had the funds to buy the bracers she'd had her eyes on for a while, and the shop was shut. It was always open usually – always!

Brass looked up at her with a wry grin. "You know, since no one is inside..."

"No," she shook her head with a slight roll of her eyes. "No thieving. I'll not be having it."

She knew Brass could never really understand why she disliked stealing things. She supposed no one really owned anything in a forest.

"We're in no hurry anyway," she reasoned. "It might be open again soon."

"Do you think anything else will be too?"

Wondering what he meant, she glanced around. She'd been so caught up in thinking of her reward to herself, that she hadn't even noticed that the other stores in the street were closed also. The butchers had shut its doors, the general store had no one inside it, and the fletcher's shop had no light in the windows. Come to think of it, none of the buildings showed any sign of life. And where in Inferis was everyone? The streets were practically bare.

"Brass, what do you make of this?"

"I hear a crowd down there," he indicated to their left. "At the market square."

Brass's hearing, like all of his senses, were a lot more sensitive than her own, and she could hear nothing but the banging of a loose window shutter in the wind.

Trusting his judgement she set off down the street towards the market square, and as she neared it she too heard the shouts and cries of a crowd of people. She hurried along;

intent on finding out what the big event was that had caused Farsell to shut down, and emerged into the small town's market square.

The Market Square was not square at all, but more an odd triangular shape, with roads and side alleys snaking off at various points between the buildings. It was ringed by the oldest and hardiest buildings in the town; three storied, stone built structures which contrasted sharply to the ramshackle huts that were springing up on the outskirts.

The majority of Farsell's occupants were crowded on the far side of the area. A grubby lot, Iiana realised. She had been to Farsell many times before to rest and buy supplies, and was becoming known by name by some of the folk that lived here, but she had never really realised quite how unclean they were compared to those in her native Oun until she saw them all together now.

They were facing away from her, gesturing and cheering occasionally, and she realised that someone must be making a speech.

She looked down as two small boys carrying a heavy looking sack came purposefully towards her.

"Ten stones fur a coin, ma'am?" one of them chirped.

"Stones? No boy, why would I want stones?"

"Fur da witch!" the other boy who can't have been much older than five said. "Stone da witch!" he shouted, jumping up and down in excitement.

Iiana frowned. "Witch? What witch?"

The older boy, who might've seen eight summers or so, shrugged. "Ten stones fur a coin?"

"It doesn't matter," Brass said, who had perched himself on a barrel and had been watching the crowd, and now turned to look at her. "A witch is a witch. It gives them something to do."

Iiana scowled in distaste. She had no intention of watching a brutal stoning, and she half turned to leave when her ears picked up a woman's anguished cry above the crowds' banter.

Uncharacteristically, she hesitated. *This has nothing to do with you!* she told herself: *Just walk away and wait until it's over.*

Her shouts came again. Panicked, maddened, desperate to live.

Could she walk away from it? Could she let the backward, superstitious inhabitants of Magador put a woman to death for what was likely to be an unjustified claim? Then again, would she take it upon herself to stop every atrocity that happened in the world? Charity was not her forte, and she'd probably gain nothing from doing this. It would likely harm her by putting her at odds with a community whose trade she had relied upon for several months now.

Why then, was she walking towards the crowd, against all her reason? *Just to check it out*, she thought, *don't get involved, not even for all the coin in Vordaal!*

The crowd was made up of a hundred or so people, gathered in front of a wall against which a crude wooden platform had been erected. It had been used for when the town crier had stood upon it, announcing grim news from the south, monster sightings in the mountains, eerie lights in the night (which she'd seen, and reasoned it was the campfires of the shepherds in the highlands reflecting off the wet rock of the mountains), and that they had to be vigilant against anything unnatural.

Now upon the makeshift stage there was a short man, with a barrel chest and a voice that rang out clear over the crowd now that she was closer. He was middle aged, clean shaven and his dark hair was well groomed. She recognised him as Symon, mayor of Farsell. On the dais with him were two men, who passed as town guards, but she'd found just to be bullies who Symon would rather have with him than against him.

Between these men, tied to a pole which protruded out of the dais like a ships mast, was a tall, slight woman, and Iiana felt pity well up within her as she saw her. She understood the situation instantly. The woman was an atia.

In her own country, the atia were well respected for their kinship with magic, their keen intellect, and the possibility that, in ages passed, the atia helped from the human civilisation of Oun itself. All these things were lost on many of the people of Magador, who viewed magic and anything else they did not understand as evil and wicked. An atia encountered would be branded a witch purely on sight.

The atia looked around the crowd, wide eyed, as she struggled uselessly to free herself from the bonds that tied her to the pole by her legs and wrists. She was, like most atia, completely bald, with a slightly enlarged cranium, large eyes and keen ears that ended in slight points. Even in this situation, with tears streaming down her face and her frame shivering from fear, Iiana could sense a nobility about her – a deep sense of pride and passion.

Iiana was so caught up in watching her that she did not notice the other man come up onto the stage until he had started talking. "This foul creature tried to kill me yesterday with her bewitched staff!" he said. It was Arthur, the blacksmith. He was holding aloft an elegant but plain looking stave to the crowd. "You saw the light, didn't you?" he asked, pointing to someone in the crowd.

"Yes, it burned the eyes!" a townswoman yelled back feverously.

The crowd was working itself up into a frenzy; akin to a pack of baying hounds, fighting to be the first to sink their teeth into fresh prey. Most had sacks of large stones to hand, and were eager to start using them. Iiana was sickened by the sight. The woman was screaming now, tears running down her face. "I'm not a witch!" she screamed for which must have been the thousandth time, for her voice was as coarse as rusty iron.

Iiana had pushed herself to the front of the crowd, and then suddenly she found herself springing up onto the platform.

"Stop!" she shouted at Arthur and Symon. "You cannot do this!"

Everyone quietened and gazed at her, some in surprise and some in anger. She realised the vulnerability of her position; they could easily decide to stone her too, now. A rock hurled silently and cracking into the back of her head would mean the end of her.

What *was* she doing, risking her life for someone she'd never met before, and no guaranteed reward to cash in on? She caught sight of Brass dart under the platform and out of sight. At least he was safe.

"What do you want, sell-sword?" Symon chided. "This is no concern of yours."

"Help me... please," the atia sobbed. Iiana sensed that it wounded her pride to beg like that; to be seen in such a state. She knew the atia well enough to know that.

"What is her crime?" Iiana demanded.

"She attacked me with this!" Arthur hissed, pointing the staff he held at Iiana, who had the instinctive reaction of moving her hand to her sword hilt. "An enchanted weapon of witchcraft. It almost blew my head off!"

“I was trying to help...” the atia spat, her teeth clenched in her small mouth.

“It was demon light! Evil light!” shouted the faceless woman in the crowd.

A ruckus began in the crowd; this delay was angering them.

“Move out of the way Iiana!” demanded Symon, dismissing her with a wave of his hand as if she was one of his lackeys. “Do not stand in the way of justice.”

“Justice?” Iiana spat, staying where she was. “No law, no trial, no real crime I think, and a stoning, and that’s justice?”

Arthur drew up before her. “Why do you stand for the witch? It seems strange to me...” his eyes narrowing, his voice lowering. “You keep odd company, do you not? That little creature... where is it? Your pet. Or is it your *familiar*?” His face was a sneer now. His breath stank of ale, and he was red in the face with anger. “She protects her own!” he shouted at the crowd.

Iiana’s backhand blow connected squarely with the side of Arthur’s head and he staggered backwards, losing his grip on staff. It bounced and rolled towards the atia.

“Shut up!” she barked, standing over him. “Brass is no more mine than I am yours!”

The crowd went wild, baying for blood. A few loose stones flew past her. The two guards that flanked the atia advanced a little on her. She saw them, and she was ready for them, and Brass would have her back...

“Cease this, please!”

Another man ran onto the platform, waving his arms and trying to get peoples attention. Iiana recognised him as the shepherd she had seen at Gharath’s camp. Arthur scrambled away.

“Iiana is no witch!” he shouted. Some of the jeering stopped; the crowd hearing one of their own. “This woman has done a great service for me. Without her, your wool and lamb supplies would have suffered, perhaps even died out! She saved us from a lunatic who was demanding tax before anything reached here – stopped it when our own ‘guards’ did nothing! No witch would do such a thing!”

Murmurs of agreement echoed through some parts of the rabble. Iiana never took her eyes off the two armed men who were poised to strike.

Symon seemed to analyse the situation well. He knew of Iiana, and knew what she could do with her blade. Yes, the crowd would take her down, but not before there was bloodshed. Lots of bloodshed.

“Go, then!” he announced. “Take the witch with you, and never return to this place again, or we will flay you alive!”

Iiana cast him a fiery glance. “I’d rather be flayed alive than come back here!” she snapped.

The crowd were dead silent, but their stones were ready in hands. Some moved forwards a little, as if wanting to pursue them. Brass had appeared, and was cutting the ropes binding the atia with a tiny knife. He made short work of them, and the atia’s first act once free was to quietly bend and pick her staff up from by her feet. No blast of evil magic came forth at that moment; no fiery death or acid rain consumed them. She merely leaned against it, supporting her tired frame.

“Go!” barked Symon, flanked by his guards and with Arthur behind, and they ushered the three of them off the stage. The shepherd gave her a wave goodbye, which she acknowledged with a nod of thanks, before backing down the stairs and down the nearest alleyway

Respite

“Brass! Where are you going?” Iiana exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, as he darted out of the other side of the alley.

“Just stay there,” came his hushed reply. “I won’t be long.”

With that he was gone, leaving Iiana alone with the atia.

“Thank you,” the atia breathed, leaning against the wall. “You surely saved my life!”

“Maybe not yet. We still have to get out of here.”

“My name is Lea’Nissa.”

“I am Iiana,” she replied curtly. It was not out of rudeness; she’d heard someone approach. Readying her blade, she was relieved to see it was Brass who poked his head around the corner.

He waved them towards him: “Come on!”

The streets were deserted still, but they knew they’d soon fill up again once the crowd dispersed. Behind them still, she could hear the rabble loudly quarrelling amongst each other. Iiana moved forwards, Lea’Nissa following. Iiana then stopped and gaped a moment.

“What do you think?” Brass chirped.

With him strode a large black horse, ready saddled. It followed Brass as obediently as a dog, for the fae were well known to have a kinship with animals.

“I think you’re insane. Where did you get him?”

“Symon’s house,” Brass grinned. “Now come, we have to be away!”

Iiana had no time to argue. A horse would be very useful, but she would have preferred one which didn’t belong to the town mayor.

The animal bore the two women and small elf easily, and Iiana guided her new steed at a gallop away from the town and west, up into the nearby foothills of The Spine.

This was a peaty, grassy area of rolling hills, sparsely dotted with boulders and clusters of trees and steams, which graduated into the rocky mountains of The Spine. Iiana knew this area well. She knew it better than the locals, who feared to venture into it because of the “spirits and ghosts” dwelling there. She grinned inwardly to herself as she thought of it; backward inbreeds, that’s all they were. It would do her good to get Brass and herself away from here and into more favourable lands. Where those lands would be exactly she couldn’t think; certainly not Oun. But her immediate situation took prevalence in her mind, and her new friend pulled gently on her shoulder, making Iiana slow the horse a little so she could see what she wanted.

“May we stop soon?” she asked her. She sounded weary, but more composed. She was no longer shaking.

“Not to worry, just a little ways and I’ll have us somewhere safe.”

Several miles from Farsell they came to a small, gentle valley in the hills through which a wide, shallow river meandered lazily along its base.

There was an old mill here which did not seem to have been used in decades. Its wheel half rotten away into the water and the slate roof was angling inwards to a degree that one might think it was going to collapse at any moment. But a roof was a roof, and when

Iiana and Brass had found the mill several weeks ago, uninhabited and forgotten, they acquired it and took up residence there whenever they needed to.

They dismounted, Brass leaping from the horse and onto the ground before heading towards the mill to check that it was still empty. Iiana helped Lea’Nissa down after, who accepted the help with some hesitation. Atia strongly disliked physical contact, Iiana knew, and aimed to respect that as much as she could while still maintaining a degree of practicality to their situation.

The atia moved slowly, clearly exhausted. She sat down on a large rock, and though weary there was grace in her delicate movements. She sat as if seated at some royal banquet, with her back straight and her chin up. Her breathing was steady, and despite what she must have been through she looked remarkably calm, though she still clutched the staff which seemed to mean so much to her. Her regal composure was so out of place and unlike anything that Iiana had encountered thus far in Magador, that she found herself liking it. In an odd way, it reminded her of home.

Iiana sat nearby – in a far more casual manor – letting the horse graze freely. She kept a wary eye on Brass as he entered the mill, looking for any signs of trouble.

“Thank you,” Lea’Nissa said suddenly. “I would have been killed by them... stoned to death. It was horrible. Truly horrible” She looked up into Iiana’s eyes for the first time. “It’s alright.” Iiana said. “No one deserved a fate such as that.”

Lea’Nissa looked in earnest at her. “I cannot thank you enough for this, but I have very little to offer. All my things were taken from me back there.” She cast a look in the direction they had come.

“Possessions can be replaced.” Iiana told her.

“What was your name again? Iiana”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“It means ‘untamed’ in the language of my people. Did you know that?”

“I did, yes.” Ounish names were often derived from atian words – such was the degree that atias were embedded into the society there.

“I am sure it suits you well,” Lea’Nissa smiled, and then said. “I am sorry. You have helped me so much, and I have little in the way to repay you.”

“Do not worry about payment.”

Lea’Nissa glanced at her. “No? Then why did you rescue me? Very little in this world is given for free.”

It was a point she agreed on, and it was a question Iiana actually found easy to answer. The words still stuck in her mouth, playing on her tongue as she judged whether it was wise to say them. She decided honesty was better than half-baked lie.

I felt sorry for you,” she said. “I know those people – they tried to do the same to me when they first saw Brass, thinking him my familiar. Some still thought me a witch even after they saw I needed no magical power once they learned my skill with a blade.”

”Some? Like that blacksmith?” Lea’Nissa shivered a little. “Arthur?”

“Yes, he’s one of the worst. These people do not trust magic. It makes me wonder how you came across them in the first place.” Iiana spoke true. The people of Magador, especially in the wilds, were notoriously distrustful of anything they could not tangibly touch. Why an atia would be out here alone did make her wonder, and given their recent encounter, Iiana felt it reasonable to pose the half-question, and gauge the response.

Lea’Nissa was about to reply when Brass popped back out from the mill. “All clear!” he called. “And our supplies are undiscovered. Shall I start to prepare something?” Iiana thought briefly. They were as safe here as anywhere, and Lea’Nissa looked as if she was famished, so told Brass to begin making predations for a meal.

The mill was dark and damp inside, with algae covering the walls and the stones that lay strewn all over. There used to be two stories to the building at some point, but the second floor had given way and lay cast over the ground, leaving the building as an empty shell. The fireplace as intact however, and they got it alight by burning some peat Iiana and Brass had left to dry out from when they had last visited the mill. The crackling and popping it made echoed around the stone interior as the three of them settled before it to ward off the oncoming night.

Lea’Nissa had scrubbed down her cloak of the mud it had been covered in, which now hung close to the fire over a wooden beam. It had been ripped in places but was still serviceable. The rest of her garments had escaped much damage. She wore high fur boots and a long dark green dress, made of durable linen.

The atia seemed to be of the practical sort who was used to life on the road. They had cooked some fish Lea’Nissa had insisted on catching from the river once she was rested enough, and were just finishing eating it as dusk was falling. Iiana rested back on a larger stone, her hands up behind her head. “That was good,” she said, never underestimating the value of a full belly.

Brass was a little further away from the fire and, unlike his two companions, wasn’t covered in a speck of dirt or mud. His bright eyes darted this way and that, and his ears twitched. He was always alert, but Iiana knew that he wasn’t relaxed with their new visitor around.

“You are not at ease with me, little one,” Lea’Nissa spoke softly to him, breaking the silence that had settled since they’d finished their humble feast.

He shook his head. “Why should I be? You bring danger with you. We are not safe with you around.”

Iiana had to share his sentiment. She too, realised that they had not only cut their ties with the village of Farsell (which, while distasteful, had been a useful trading post and place to rest), but also risked being associated with the atia if word spread or they were seen with her, and that would lead to more angry mobs to deal with. But, as it was so soon after their rescue, Iiana had not let these feelings surface, and she was simply relieved to be alive at all.

Brass, however, had seemed to have had no such qualms.

“I understand,” Lea’Nissa said. There was no sadness or resentment in her voice, just a statement of fact. The atia were a straightforward, honest people, and it seemed Lea’Nissa was not an exception. “I do not wish to burden you. I will continue my journey alone. But I do ask to rest here this night, to regain my strength.”

Iiana nodded her approval of this. Brass cast her an annoyed glance, but remained silent. He would have preferred to be rid of her that instant, she knew. It was not because he was selfish, or unkind, it was because he held a deep seated mistrust of everyone save for Iiana. Iiana understood why this was, judging from what little she’d learned of his past.

She

“Your journey?” Iiana asked, changing the subject slightly. “Where do you travel?”

Lea’Nissa’s large eyes turned to Iiana. “Nowhere. And everywhere. I travelled for years with my father, learning to fish and forage. After he passed on, I continued alone. We... I try to go where my skills are needed.” she stopped regarding their questioning faces.

“Like many of my people, and my father before me, I am a mage.”

“So you are a witch?” Brass interjected rudely.

“Brass!” Iiana snapped. His contribution was wholly unwarranted... especially since he was a magic-user himself. *A pure one*, he would say, *not something I learned from some dusty book*.

For the first time, Lea’Nissa looked annoyed, though the frown quickly faded from her hairless brows “No. Such a wizard practices Witchcraft. That I will not do, as I am a mage of the Light, not the Dark. I have dedicated my studies to help eradicate such magics from the world as much as I can.”

Ironic, then, that you were nearly killed for being accused of the opposite, Iiana thought, but said: “if what you say is true, your magics will find many uses in these parts, if you can convince people to let you use them.”

Lea’Nissa nodded. “So I have found. And expected as much as I came here. I attempt to hide such things until I feel it necessary to do so.”

“You felt it necessary in Farsell?” Brass asked, incredulously.

“I had heard tales of monsters in these mountains. Villages slaughtered by demons of blackness.” (Iiana had heard such tales recently also, but discounted them as wild rumours and scaremongering.) “When I spoke of these things to the people of Farsell, they seemed interested, and enquired about how I would help. Trusting them, I showed them, and it was then I was attacked.”

“Showed them what?” Iiana asked.

“I am still weak, but can demonstrate, if I may...?” Lea’Nissa left the question hanging, slowly reaching for her staff.

Iiana felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and saw Brass tense slightly, ready for trouble. Iiana hadn’t any reason to doubt anything Lea’Nissa had told them so far, but these were wild and unpredictable lands, and danger was never far away.

Nevertheless, she nodded her head slightly for the atia to continue.

The staff Lea’Nissa held in her hand was around five feet in length and was made from a dark, polished wood. It seemed to be light, strong, and very well made, but otherwise mundane.

That changed when Lea’Nissa softly spoke in a tongue which Iiana recognised as that similar to when Brass would cast one of his incantations; the language of magic. As she chanted for a few moments, Lea’Nissa’s staff started to change, first turning white and then emitting a bright glow that filled the mill.

Never had Brass nor Iiana felt anything like what they experienced while they were bathed in the glow. A warm comfort swept over them, as if sinking into hot, relaxing bathwater, and they felt their senses being lifted, their worries trickling away, and the aches and pains of their bodies subsiding.

The glow lasted for a brief few seconds, ebbing away quickly until it faded completely, and the magical staff returned back to its dark wooden colour. Iiana was sorry to see it go. Brass, also, looked to have lost much of his previous tension.

“Any creatures of dark magic would have been seared by the spell,” Lea’Nissa said, and smiled faintly for the first time since their meeting. “It is good to know neither of you are such a beast.” The atia looked more drawn than before. She yawned. “I must rest.”

“The people of the village attacked you when you did that?” Iiana asked, basking in the aftermath of the glow and disbelieving that such an act could be committed after experiencing such a thing.

She shook her head. “I tried. As soon as I spoke the words and the spell began, I was struck from behind.

Fools. Iiana thought. *Damn ignorant fools!*

The day was drawing late. It was already dark outside. They were all weary, and settled down in the abandoned mill for the night.

Retribution

An urgent hiss – “Wake up! Company!” – pierced her sleep.

Recognizing Brass’s voice, Iiana was jarred instantly awake, glancing around as she rolled out of her hammock onto her feet. Brass was peering out through a slit in the wall; the sounds of voices outside had awoken him. Dull sunlight was drifting into the building – dawn had already broken.

Damn. We should have awoken early and left before now! She cursed inwardly, asking: “Who?”

“Who do you think? Farsell’s come back for us – for her.” Brass shot a sharp glance at Lea’Nissa, who rose, looking as if she awaited instructions.

“Get ready to leave, fast!” Iiana told her in an urgent, hushed tone, and she did, snatching her cloak up and wrapping herself in it.

“You in there!” boomed a man from outside.

“Brass, how many?” Iiana questioned.

“Too many – almost twenty!”

Iiana looked out of a gap in the wall to see men approaching down the bank towards the mill and the river. *Nothing like a good old fashioned witch hunt,* Iiana thought bitterly. There was no time to don armour or gather supplies or treasures. They could but grab what was most useful. Lea’nissa picked up her staff. Iiana buckled on her sword belt and tucked her dagger into her boot.

“We saw your witch-lights shine in the night! Come out now and we will make your deaths as painless as possible!” Symon’s voice was clearly recognisable.

“Generous type isn’t he?” Brass mumbled, readying his blowpipe.

“We can’t fight them all – we need to get to the horse.” Iiana told them. The men were approaching fast, and it would be doubtful that Symon’s old steed, which had wandered and stood drinking a few hundred yards downstream, could be reached without a fight. Iiana cursed her complacency in not tying the animal close to the mill, instead relying on Brass’s bond with it to keep it in the area. She had been extremely lax that past night, and it could cost them all their lives.

Though she could rely on Brass’s backup in a fight, she could only assume that Lea’Nissa couldn’t fight at all, and despite their defensible position she realised that their enemies’ numbers would prevail against them in the end.

Lea’Nissa gripped her staff firmly. It gave Iiana an idea: “Can you use your magic? Calm the men or repel them?” But Lea’Nissa shook her head.

“My magics will only effect dark creatures, and help those who wish it. These men are neither of those things.”

Iiana spat in frustration, yet remained calm. She was a warrior, and her trained mind regarded the situation as thoughtfully as one might approach any difficult problem. She drew her blade. They had to make a break for the horse. They would die in this mill, like rats stuck in a trap. She would not let it end like that. She resigned herself to death, and told herself to ensure the survival of her companions. Iiana doubted that they could make it to the horse at all – men were already reaching the mill - but she had to get them moving.

“We cannot stay here. We can make it to the horse if we hurry. Lea’nissa, I hope you can run!”

“When the need arises,” Lea’Nissa replied, eagerness in her voice.

“It does now – move!” Iiana burst from the building, Lea’Nissa swiftly following after, Brass leapt through a hole in the wall and outside onto the grass and bolted along the riverbank in his leaps and bounds.

A sudden movement to her left caused Iiana to instantly go into a deft forwards roll as she ducked under the heavy shovel that was aimed at her. Judging where her assailant stood, she swiped backwards, her thin blade catching the man in his leg. With a yell he fell to the ground with a thump, and Iiana continued to make for the horse without looking back.

“Stop them! Don’t let them steal my horse again!!” Symon bellowed from behind. Iiana glanced to her left as she followed the river, seeing the rag-tag group that had been assembled perusing them with their rusty swords and garden tools. She gritted her teeth in frustration, for even though each of them was trying to put an end to her life, she was still reluctant to end any of theirs. With the exception of Symon, she had nothing against any of them.

Symon’s horse was not ignorant to what was going on around it, and, seeing twenty people running towards it, waving weapons and shouting, he started to panic.

Snorting and shaking its head, Brass saw that it was going to bolt at any moment and leave them for dead. “Iiana, stop!” he cried. “The horse will bolt!”

“We’re dead if we stop!” she shouted back.

“Hold them off, please!” Brass called. “I will bring him!”

Iiana paused, and turned. Lea’Nissa also ceased to run, but backed away from the rabble, behind Iiana.

The fae was surprisingly swift. It only took him seconds to reach the horse and spring onto the back of its neck.

But that was all it took for their pursuers to catch Iiana.

Her first attacker was upon her. He was a big man, a farmer, who’d worked long and hard in the fields and who was fit and strong. But he was not a fighter; the swipe with his scythe was slow and poorly aimed, enabling Iiana to gracefully spin out of its arc.

Lunging back in at him, she leapt and struck him clean in the chin with her knee with massive force, knocking the sense and half of his teeth out of him. He collapsed like an old oak tree as she landed in a crouch, sword held below her as a younger, leaner man charged her with a make-shift spear. He intended to skewer her on its tip, but his lunge

carried him too long and too far forwards, and he only succeeded in tripping over himself as she swiped his spear away and smacked him with the hilt of her blade, sending him sprawling.

She gasped in shock and pain as something slashed her shoulder blade with searing hot pain. Whirling around, she saw that one of the villagers had managed to outflank her, and the greasy, spindly looking man now looked at her with his blooded sickle in his hand a grin on his face. Taking an instant dislike to him, she slashed his face from chin to forehead in one fluid motion, hearing his despairing wail of pain as he threw his hands to his disfigured face and collapsed on his back, writhing in pain.

Allowing herself a small grin of satisfaction, she backed off as two more men approached, more wary now. They had strung out across the valley, but the others were gaining and would be swarming her in mere moments.

Her heart pounded and she was panting for breath now. She could feel blood dripping down her back from the stinging slash she'd just received. As they closed in around her, she resolved to spare them mercy and make them pay for killing her.

The man closest to her then gripped his chest and collapsed, gasping. Those behind stared dumbfounded, their forward steps faltering, and murmurs of magic and sorceries echoing amongst them.

“Kill her!” demanded Symon, who lurked at the back of the pack of dogs against the cornered lioness. She saw him waving his arms in frenzy, pushing the men closest to him forwards.

Coward. Her blue eyes narrowed into angry slits. *One last shot – make it count.* She crouched and allowed her left hand to find the dagger in her boot; its cool, smooth metal handle familiar to her touch. Holding it deftly between thumb and finger, she let the delicate sliver of metal slide out of its sheath just as the men advanced again, their faces grim and determined.

She pounced, like a hunting cat striking at its prey, leaping high and assuring a good view of her target. With a shout, she brought her arm forwards, releasing the dagger, sending it spinning fast and true, and as she landed it sliced into Symon's throat. Blood erupted in a fountain from him as he gagged and coughed, his arms pressed to his neck as he was engulfed in spasms, falling to the ground, flopping about like a dying fish. She took a sick pleasure in hearing his suffering, and she hoped that in her last act she had done the world at least a small favour.

“Iiana!”

She turned, seeing Lea'Nissa atop the steed, galloping toward her, with Brass brandishing his blowpipe as he straddled the horse's neck.

A rock flew past her head, thrown by some cowardly knave who dare not face her blade, as her rescuers reached her, and she leapt up onto the back of the horse behind the atia, and felt it lurch away swiftly; the sounds of the enraged men fading to the trample of the horse's hooves and the blood pounding in her ears as they galloped away.

Infection

They rode the horse long and hard for much of the morning after that, following the river further into the wilds where they were sure not to be followed. Iiana knew the people of

Farsell would bother them no longer; with the ringleader Symon gone they would lose all heart for the hunt.

Lea’Nissa could certainly ride well; she handled their new horse firmly as she guided him up into the foothills of The Spine. Brass straddled the back of his neck, and soothed and cooed it. Iiana resolved not to slow them down by mentioning the wound on her back, deciding to instead wait until they stopped before treating it.

The grass became browner and coarser, and the earth sandy and rocky. The Spine loomed before them, unwelcoming and foreboding, but no less than the flatter lands behind them. Around midday they stopped at a small pool, which was fed by a modest waterfall.

Sparse trees surrounded them, though they could still see out onto the planes and woods below, stretching out like a perfect painting for miles and miles before them.

Their steed, which Brass had decided to name Keepsake, greedily drank at it as they finally got off his back.

As Iiana dismounted, the wound at her back complained angrily at her movement, and she could not help but to gasp in pain.

Brass bounded over hurriedly. “Iiana! You’re wounded!”

“Not too badly,” she grunted, slipping down by the water.

“You always say that!”

She accepted Brass’s help, as she couldn’t reach the wound herself, and she knew arguing against it would be pointless anyway. Lea’Nissa seemed content to keep her distance and let them have their own time.

The wound wasn’t the worst she’d had, and had since stopped bleeding on its own. Brass angrily chastised her, citing his rhetoric on infections, and she nodded wearily at his words and admitted that she should have stopped them earlier to have it dressed. Another mistake to pile on the others she had made. She felt weak with all the blood loss, and tiredness dulled her senses. As Brass washed it with the freezing water, she felt the stickiness dissipate from her back and cotton undergarment, and the cold numb the pain.

“You really shouldn’t move your right arm for a while.” Brass told her. “I could fix a sling up.”

She shook her head. “I need to eat.” She told him.

He grinned, his child-like features lighting up on his face. “Not a problem!” he exclaimed, before diving straight into the pool before them, startling Keepsake who whinnied in alarm as his drink was disturbed.

“He cares for you very much.” Lea’Nissa said to her, watching the water settle from Brass’s dive.

Iiana smiled. “Yes, and I him.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Months... four months, almost.”

“That doesn’t seem like long. But I suppose bonds are formed quickly in harsh places such as this.”

Iiana was about to reply when Brass broke the surface of the water again, and tossed a small fish onto the side of the pond where it flopped around. Iiana caught it under her hand.

“There are many of them,” he said. His eyes were bright and his face radiant – he was enjoying himself. “They are not much, but enough of them will fill even your belly Iiana.”

She chuckled at him. “We’ll see about that, shan’t we?”

Taking that as a challenge, he dived back into the pond with a grin.

“You are from Oun, are you not?”

The warrior-woman killed the fish on a rock. “Yes.”

“The land that lies other side of this mountain range.”

Iiana smiled bitterly. “About as close as I’m going to get to it.”

Lea’Nissa looked concerned. “Why? You are banished?”

She looked up at the atia. Brass broke the surface with another fish before she could speak, but her expression answered the question anyway.

Time passed on and Brass dried out while watching the fish he’d caught cook in a narrow slab of stone over a small fire.

They enjoyed their small meal, the sun, and the peace. Conversation was slow at first but Lea’Nissa was a talkative and inquisitive sort. She spoke of herself first, saying that she had been alone since the loss of her father, and that it was nice to have someone to talk to.

She told them of how he had raised her in a small, isolated village in the foothills of the Kezamkain Mountains, close to the border with the ragged wilderness known as The Scar. He had been a healer and teacher, and had taught her everything she knew. They had lived well, with no animosity towards them from the townsfolk, who had valued them as part of the community.

Then the attack had come. Demons sweeping from the mountains. She and her father had done what they could to protect the town, using their magics to burn the demons away, but it had not been enough. Her father had been killed, and she only barely escaped as the demons destroyed the entire village and all who lived there. From that point on she had wandered west, along the northern borders of Magador, trying to find a new place for herself.

Lea’Nissa then told them of her ordeal in Farsell, how she had been captured and bundled through the street like a trophy, how Symon had taken one look at her and sentenced her to death, how she had been locked up the night before her capture in a rat infested and cramped basement. There was much pain in telling her story – much remorse also. After she was done, Lea’Nissa looked oddly satisfied, as if speaking of the tale had helped her.

It still brought her great sorrow, Iiana saw, though she hid it well. There were questions on her mind, but she decided they were best saved for another time. Instead, Iiana told some of her story.

“I hail from a city named Zaradorn. If you know of Oun, you’ll know that all men there are forced to do at least two years military service in their youth. Of course, not being a male, I was not forced to do such a thing, but I did become a dancer at a military court. My grace caught the eye of the commander of The Swordmaidens – an entirely female regiment based in Zaradorn, who use the style of fighting you saw me utilise; grace and agility matched with speed and precision. It was a great honour to be chosen, and I accepted. That is where I learned to fight.”

She told more of her time in the Swordmaidens – describing the battle-skirt and corset which was their uniform; bone white and pure, and the bracers and shin-guards they wore that were the only pieces of armour they bore. They fought with a single, long, thin blade, striking fast and deadly as a snake, and using mobility and speed against their cumbersome enemies. She had also trained herself with throwing knives, which had been frowned upon by some since it went against the ethos of the maidens, but was an activity they could not stop. She purposefully mentioned nothing of her experiences while in the Swordmaidens, why she left, or the nature of her fear of returning to her own country. “Ah, most impressive,” Lea’Nissa said when Iiana was done. “You are a marvellous fighter.”

Brass, then, cleared his throat. He had been silent for a good while now, chewing on his fish, and listening. Now it seemed it was his turn to tell his story.

“I think the fire is dying. I’ll go and get more wood.” He said, and quickly left.

Iiana wasn’t surprised. Despite the time they had spent together, she knew only a little of Brass, his people, or his past. “You must forgive him. He has much pain inside him.”

“I understand.” Lea’Nissa said. “He is far from his homeland.”

“I don’t even know where his homeland is,” Iiana admitted. “I know little about him or his people at all.”

“Could you perhaps tell me how you met him?”

“I saved him when I came across his kidnappers. They had him bundled in a bag, destined for some cruel fate I expect, and when I queried them, they attacked. I slew them, freed him, and he had stuck by me ever since.”

“I see…” the atia said thoughtfully, and gave Iiana the strange impression that she actually did see more than Iiana realised. “You have a habit of saving odd people from cruel fates it seems,” she smiled.

Iiana smiled too. That seemed to be very true.

Brass returned. Iiana regained her strength and they decided to make camp, Iiana made a point of tying Keepsake to a nearby tree, and they set watch. Iiana took the first, and it passed peacefully. She listened to the waterfall and the crickets, and wished she could see the stars or that Luminus would shine through the ever-present clouds and show her what the view looked like in the moonlight, but it did not. She thought about where their journey might take them now and if Lea’Nissa would accompany them further, or if she would leave as she had said she would on the previous night. It seemed that a lot had changed since then. She resolved to have a long conversation about their future plans in the morning.

After several hours she carefully awoke Brass and allowed herself to sleep.

“A horse!”

Brass’s hushed, coarse whisper once again pierced through Iiana’s growing sleep and shattered it. She was awake in a second, and Lea’Nissa was sitting up like she had never been asleep at all.

“Where?” Iiana whispered, as she saw him peering back down the trail where they had come. It was pitch black save for the dull embers of the fire which did nothing to aid their vision. Had they been followed by the people of Farsell all the way up here?

“Coming this way,” came Brass’s reply. “One man, alone.” Brass’s vision was piercing the darkness, becoming both their eyes and ears.

They could all hear the horse now above the sound of the waterfall; its iron-shod hooves coming closer. Its steps were irregular though, and sometimes stopped for a few moments before starting again. Peering over a rock, Iiana could just make out the grey horse and rider upon it. He was not more than a few hundred feet away, and his horse was slowly approaching the pool. She noticed that the rider had his head bowed, and his shoulders hunched, as if he was asleep.

“One man can’t be dangerous,” Lea’Nissa softly mused.

Iiana shook her head in disagreement. Strangers were always dangerous, especially those that venture out into the mountains in the black of night.

The stranger would already know they were there – the dim light from the fire would be a beacon in the blackness, so there was no need to play it coy.

“Hail!” she called to him. Her voice rang clear and loud in the still night, and unsettled some birds that had nestled in a nearby cluster of trees, but the man remained silent, his approach continuing.

“Not any closer, stranger!” Brass shouted, a little urgently. His voice, usually sounding akin to an adolescents, was amplified by the rocks and made it sound deeper. “You have crossbows pointed at your heart and we won’t hesitate to use them!”

Iiana glanced at him, and he shrugged. The man still continued to approach, not more than fifty feet away down the mountain path, yet still cloaked in darkness and silence.

Then he collapsed from his horse and fell on the ground hard and with a loud thud.

Lea’Nissa looked urgently at Iiana. “We must help him!” she said, gathering herself and moving towards him.

“Wait!” hissed the fighter, fearing an ambush, and tried to grab the hem of her dress to stop her, but it was too late and she was gone. “Blast!” she spit, and followed the atia from their makeshift camp, Brass followed silently and invisible in the blackness.

She caught up to find Lea’Nissa crouched over the man, who was moving slightly and moving something unintelligible.

“Nu... Khal... Must... Get... Kha...”

Lea’Nissa glanced over her shoulder to them. “He’s fevered; we need to get him warm.”

Iiana looked not to the man, but to the foliage around them. If it was a ruse, then his fellows would now be ambushing them, but nothing happened.

Lea’Nissa examined him further. “I found a wound on his lower leg... but it’s strange...” she gasped suddenly.

Brass, who could see in the dark, was suddenly by them. “There’s nothing around here, he must be on his...”

Iiana heard Brass uncharacteristically trail off. “What is it?” Iiana asked him.

Before he could reply, Lea’Nissa’s voice rose up.

“Elas Tralum!” she spoke, and Iiana had to cover her eyes momentarily from the brightness that suddenly lit the area, originating from a small ball of light hanging a few feet above them that Lea’Nissa had conjured.

The light was not the same spell as the previous night – this incantation was a visual aid only with no feeling of warmth or goodness flowing from it.

Iiana’s eyes got used to the glow, and she could now see Lea’Nissa hunched over the man. He wore a uniform – the red and white uniform of Magador. Seeing his face, she

reasoned that the soldier was old for his job, and he might have been handsome if not for the small scars on his face. Beads of sweat dotted his skin and he was shuddering violently. She glanced at the wound on his leg and recoiled. The wound was black and *boiling*.

Lea’Nissa hunched over his leg with a small ball of brilliant light shimmering above. “Iana, I need your help to move him back to the fire so I can try to heal him.” she said urgently.

Iana nodded her support, and knelt down to help her.

Between the two of them they managed to drag him unceremoniously up the track and lay him in front of the ebbing fire. Brass was coaxing it back into life; its ember glow growing, bouncing off the water and the rocks, and illuminating the camp with a shimmering red glow as Lea’Nissa’s light spell dwindled.

The soldier’s grey horse followed them slowly, and waited by the pool next to Keepsake. It was only now that Iana saw the full extent of the wound. His leg had swollen to almost twice its normal size, and was scarred by a gaping cut which oozed and seeped blood and black puss. The flesh around it was dark and festering and she was sure she could see it move by itself a little, or maybe it was a trick of the light of the flickering fire.

Nevertheless it made it hard to look at and, battled hardened as she was, she had to look away as nausea filled her.

Lea’Nissa seemed to have no such qualms. She examined the man for a few moments more, checking his pulse, listening to his breathing. While she did this, Iana offered him water from her skin, which he sipped through his parched lips.

Lea’Nissa had a grave look about her, still examining the man’s leg. “I have seen wounds akin to this before. At my village...” she trailed off.

“Could we not amputate?” Brass offered. “Could be the best way, if it saves his life I’m sure he’d thank you for it.”

Lea’Nissa shook her head again. “It will be in the blood, like poison. It won’t make a difference.”

The soldier coughed violently.

“Brass, what about mixing a medicine together?” Iana suggested.

The elf drew away slightly. “I know of nothing that could help with whatever that is, Iana. And even if I did, I doubt the ingredients could be found around here.”

“So how can we help him?” Iana asked.

Lea’Nissa looked up at her, uncertainty etched on her face, which gave way to determination. “I will try with a spell.”

Hairs rose on the back of the fighter’s neck. She had allowed Brass to use his magics on her but, as far as she knew, they were minor incantations with little or no risk to them.

From the way the atia spoke, she was suggesting something much, much different.

“If you are sure.” She cautioned.

“It is the only way to save him. I shall try.”

Iana beamed at Lea’Nissa’s bravery. She could tell that the atia was afraid of what she was going to attempt, but she was willing to try anyway. That would have been brave enough to save a companion, but this man was a total stranger. She resolved to help in any way she could. “Alright... what do you want us to do?”

“Just hold him down.... I will try to draw the evil out of him, but I am inexperienced. If things go awry, then stop me. Also... Brass. I might need your help.”

Her tone had changed subtly in that last statement.

“What do you mean?” the elf asked.

“You are Fae. Born of magic.”

He shook his head, looking wholly uncomfortable. “No... no, you cannot make me!”

“I cannot,” she agreed, “but I beg you to. He may die. I may also.”

“Use your staff instead!”

“The staff is used for magic of the Light. This requires the aspect of Healing – something you have.”

Brass still shook his head.

Iiana, bewildered, said: “Brass, I know not what she speaks of, but if she needs help, please aid her.”

He looked at her, anguish etched into his small face. The man below them let out a groan of agony that seemed to wrack his entire body.

“Alright,” he said softly.

Without another word, Lea’Nissa placed her hands a few inches above the wound, palms facing down ward. Iiana gripped the man’s shoulders, and she and Brass both watched intently, almost transfixed. Iiana had never seen anything like this before.

Lea’Nissa had closed her eyes and had started softly chanting to herself. The language of magic, once again, ushered from Lea’Nissa’s lips.

The words continued as she moved her small palms slowly over the wound without touching it. The action made the infection seem even angrier, and the soldier shifted, mumbling incoherently. His brow furrowed, and a pained expression developed upon his features. Lea’Nissa chanted louder, sweating with the strain of the spell she was casting, her normally quiet voice changing deeper and more commanding that belied her small frame, the sound echoing off the rocks around them.

“Nuh...!” the man mumbled, shifting more often now. Iiana pinned his torso down, moving her weight over him.

There was suddenly a pale green light which emanated from Lea’Nissa’s hands that drowned out the amber glow of the fire completely, turning everything a sickly lime colour. Her chanting became ever the louder, and Lea’Nissa finally placed her hands on the wound.

The effect was instantaneous.

The soldier screamed and sat bolt upright, knocking Iiana aside as if she hadn’t been there at all. She sprang back atop him once again, forcing him down, as he struggled under them. His body writhed, but had no direction to the movements.

He spoke, but the voice was not his: *Foolss!* he screamed, the voice unnaturally high pitched and rasping. “*Death awaitss you all!*” Iiana instinctively looked at his face, and found herself looking not into a pair of eyes, but into two deathly black orbs, bereft of any colour nor movement and striking a chill deep within her pounding heart.

“Brass!” cried Lea’Nissa, her voice full of anguish, her body shuddering, gasping in panic. “Help me!”

He was there, standing by her. He was perfectly still for a long, long moment, and then closed his eyes, extended his hand, and touched the atia’s arm.

Magic erupted all around them.

Noise blanketed everything.

There was a wailing cry.

Then there was blackness.

Revelation

Lea’Nissa snapped awake, sitting bolt upright with a shuddering gasp, her chest heaving and eyes wide.

She looked around frantically.

She lay on a bed of moss. Dawn was starting to break. Iiana and the soldier lay nearby, sleeping, or unconscious – she could not tell.

Brass was there, looking at her intently.

“I... we... removed it,” Lea’nissa said shakily. “That... thing. It... it tried to draw itself into me... tried to grip me too!” Her face widened with sudden horror, remembering.

“Auroura, the pain!”

She spoke the name of the sun goddess, a foreign word in the dark, god-forsaken land of Magador. Lea’Nissa put her head in her hands and shuddered.

Somewhat gingerly, Brass came by her and touched her arm. No magical explosion occurred this time.

“Thank you...” she said, composing herself. “You saved me.”

“You should rest.” he told her.

She shook her head, though. “No. I cannot. Not after what I saw.”

“Then leave.”

She blinked, surprised.

“We were doing fine before you came along. You’ve ruined everything.”

“I did not mean for any of this!”

“I don’t care. I just want you to leave. Do you understand? I don’t want to be here anymore.”

She put her head down. She would have cried then if she could have. “Alright. I will leave as soon as I can.”

Iiana had awoken an hour after Lea’Nissa had. They ate a quiet, simple breakfast comprised of fish, herbs and berries. Keepsake and the grey horse of the soldier grazed on the tough mountain grass nearby. When the explosion had happened, the grey had bolted. Brass thought the horse gone for good, and refused to go and look for it when it would mean leaving them all alone and unconscious. But it had surprised Brass when it returned half an hour later.

“What happened?” Iiana tentatively asked after a time, the question obviously playing on her mind.

“A lot of things happened last night,” Lea’Nissa said.

“I mean what happened between you two?”

The atia and the elf exchanged glances. It was Brass who spoke. “I am one of the fae, Iiana. I was born of magic deep within the forests, south of here, in Maleri. This grants me affinity with magic that gives me some powers as you know. But there is something else.” He took a long breath. “Mages can... use me. As a kind of conduit. I can heighten their powers so that they can cast more powerful magics. It is dangerous, though. If it happens too much I could die.”

“You risked his life?” Iiana said, an edge to her voice.

“Nay, there was no danger to him, I swear. It is only through extreme use that can happen.”

“Last night seemed quite extreme to me.”

“Nay,” Lea’Nissa repeated. “It was... relatively simple. But I needed his help last night. You see, my focus is Light magic, which banishes dark things from the world; undead and demons. My staff, Lisanius, acts as a vessel through which my Light magic can flow. But the wound also needed Healing to remove it, and in that I am something of a novice. Brass did the same thing for my Healing as my staff does for my Light magic.”

Iiana nodded slowly, understanding. “That’s why you were captured, wasn’t it?” she asked Brass. “When I rescued you, you were to be taken captive by a mage?”

“Yes. The men that captured me were taking me to a buyer” he shuddered. “You saved me from a life of servitude. One I don’t want to return to.”

He gave Lea’Nissa an odd look which Iiana didn’t quite understand. She beamed at Brass. “Are you alright? You were very brave last night.”

“Yes,” said Lea’Nissa, “you saved both myself and this man.”

Brass showed a hint of a proud little smile.

Iiana turned to the man, “But... saved you from what? What was wrong with him? Is he cured?”

“An infection. A dark, horrific infection, caused by a demon.” Lea’Nissa spoke lowly. “It was sentient. Had I not been also skilled in Light magic, it would have taken me too.”

Her eyes clouded over as she remembered what happened when she touched the wound.

“I saw fire and death,” her voice came out weakly, barely audible; more panicked. “I felt pain and anguish, so strong. There is a battle nearby. At a city. People... all dying.

Monsters everywhere. Demons. The same demons that killed my home and my father!”

“Be calm, you are safe here,” Iiana said, though had little indication if what she was saying was actually true.

The atia regarded them for a moment, and she gave an apologetic look. She continued:

“Black things, made of shadow and darkness. They’re tunnelling beneath... a tunnel through rock. They want to kill. All they do is want to kill!” A terrible feeling grew within her, grasping her aching heart, making her feel such rage, such loss, such agony. She shuddered inwardly.

“Kill who? What are you talking about?”

“My father... he died of a wound like that.” She swallowed hard, the subject hard for her, but continued – determined to see it through. “In his fever, he’d say things... horrible things. I couldn’t help him. Couldn’t heal him. I had to... I had to...!”

She gritted her teeth in frustration, her thin body shaking.

Iiana understood, deep pity and empathy for her new friend welling up within her. She wanted to reach out and hold her new friend, offer comfort of some kind. But the atia’s ways were different from humans, and she held herself back.

“I’m sorry,” was all she could think to say, and they fell silent.

It wasn’t until midday when the soldier awoke. He stirred groggily at first, dimly aware of his surroundings and meekly accepting the fish and water they offered him. After half an hour he snapped awake.

“Who are you people?” he demanded, immediately trying to stand, but could barely sit upright. “Where am I?!”

“Calm down,” Lea’Nissa told him softly. “We do not mean you harm.”

He didn’t calm down. He seemed too weak or disoriented to move properly, and regarded Lea’Nissa with fear, rearing away from her. “What happened? Where are my men?”

Iiana moved next to him. “You were alone, and wounded and unconscious when we found you. Your horse seemed to have carried you here. Can you tell us what happened? What about that wound on your leg?”

At the mention of it, he hurriedly examined his leg, and a mixture of jubilation and disbelief came over him. “It’s gone! It wasn’t like this... it was spreading...”

“You’ve been healed,” Lea’Nissa told him, leaning forwards and putting the palm of her hand on his forehead and finding it cool.

He mumbled, brushing her hand away, still getting his bearings. “Where am I?”

“You are in the foothills of the mountains, about half days ride from Farsell,” Iiana informed him.

“Farsell...?” he seemed to think a little, and then groaned. “Curse the Fates, I’ve gone the wrong way! I must go!” he gasped, once again trying to scramble to his feet, struggling to lift his shoulders off the ground.

Iiana caught him as he was about to fall backwards but, determined as he was, he did manage to sit up straight. “I don’t think you’re in any condition to go anywhere right now.”

“But you don’t understand...”

“Why don’t you start off by telling us who you are?” Brass suggested.

He hadn’t seen the elf before, and his eyes widened shock and fear. His gaze darted from the atia to the elf and back again. Iiana had hoped that the man that had stumbled upon them had been one of the more accepting that inhabited Magador but, unfortunately, that did not seem to be the case.

She attempted to put him at ease: “I am Iiana, of Oun.” she told him, making him look at her. “And this is Brass, my friend and loyal companion, and Lea’Nissa, You would have died if they had not healed your wound with their *magic*.”

There, she’d said it. She had to get it over with, and knew all too well what his disposition would be, but hoped the situation would subdue his fears.

“You are a witch?” he hissed Lea’Nissa, shying away from her a little and fear creeping into his tone.

“No,” said she. “I healed you.”

To their surprise, he relaxed despite his strange company. “Why?”

“Why?” Lea’Nissa felt the question most odd. “If we came across a horse or deer suffering as you were, I’d have done the same thing.”

Iiana felt like ensuring him he was in no danger was like trying to coax an animal out of its lair with soft words and slow movements.

“Thank you...” he breathed.

“We do not need your thanks, noble sir.” Lea’Nissa bowed her head slightly. Brass grunted his quiet disagreement in the background.

“My name is Captain Brovik,” he told them slowly.

“And from where do you hail, captain?”

His eyes wandered, as if trying from remember. “From Zanth. We’ve been attacked, and I was sent out for aid. But I was wounded in my escape, and the wound almost cost me my life and my mission.”

“They are black, aren’t they?” Lea’Nissa said softly. She couldn’t help herself from saying it. “Those that attack you - they fear the sun.”

Brovik snapped his head towards her, eyes accusing. “How do you know this?”

“They are the Tar’tchii!” she wailed, the name escaping her lips like a curse. “As I drew the wound from you, it was sentient. It tried to tell me things. Did the same not happen to you? Did you not see...things...?”

Brovik only shook his head fearfully.

Lea’Nissa’s face dropped. She looked wide eyed at the man. “You saw nothing? No dreams... visions?”

The soldier shook his head again. “I remember nothing other than escaping the city and waking here.”

How could this be? How had he not seen anything? “What about others?” Lea’Nissa pressed, a little frantic “In the city – the wounded. Have any of them seen anything?”

Her eagerness to press him so had set him on edge: “Nay, none of us are tainted so with magic as you!” Brovik snapped. He turned to Iiana and said: “Iiana, I do not know you, but I beg you to see sense – a woman of flesh and bone as you are that wields steel as I.” He jabbed a finger at Lea’Nissa “This atia bitch is a witch and an evil one at that!”

Brovik spat. “She knows my enemies! And will aid them!”

“I-“ Iiana began.

“Stop it!” Lea’Nissa shouted, anger flaring up inside her, springing to her feet. “I’m sick of this! Sick of you stupid people! I healed you – I saved your *life*, and I still get accused of being sick and evil. Well I’m not evil, it’s *you* and *your* ignorance that is! You’d be dead if it wasn’t for me! *Dead!*” She then stormed off, standing by keepsake several yards away.

Fury welled within her – a feeling she was not accustomed to. Nothing went right, everyone she met thought she was evil and wanted her to leave, and she’d never hurt anyone. Even Brass rejected her, and he was as different as she.

“She is in league!” Brovik was uttering, scrambling away as if attempting to scuttle away from a spreading fire, “Her and her familiar!” He looked around for his sword and, when he failed to find one, attempted to pick up a medium-sized rock, but found himself too weak to even lift it.

Lea’nissa watched as Iiana squatted next to Brovik and spoke softly with him. She couldn’t hear what was being said, and the atia turned away, resting herself against a tree. She looked up to see Brass looking down at her as he stood atop a branch. He had a strange expression on his face.

“It’s hard being different.” He said. His voice was soft. “I know how you feel.”

“Yes, I think you do.” Lea’Nissa thought of the treatment he must have had, being what he was so far from his homeland. There was no cloak such as the one she could wear to mask his physical differences as she did.

“I’m sorry about your father. It must be hard.”

She smiled at him, grateful for the words. “Thank you, Brass.”

Movements behind her made her turn around. Brovik was on his feet, unsteady but upright. Iiana had talked some sense into him, she hoped. The warrior maiden accompanied him as hesitantly he came to her. She stood unmoving, stroking Keepsakes’ mane.

“I... apologize, my lady,” He said, making a slight bow. “You have done me great service and I have not acted well to you. Forgive me.”

She didn't reply. She was glad of the apology, but didn't accept it. She was still too angry at her treatment for that.

“You say you had these visions, saw them attack...?” he asked after a moment.

This was a subject she was willing to discuss. “Yes, it was vague and blurry, but I saw them.”

“Did you see anything that could be of aid? I have lost time in my quest, but it may not be in vain if I could glean some information about our foes.”

“What sort of information would be useful?” she asked, feeling a stubbornness build within her. Now suddenly she was supposed to help him?

“We have no idea of our foe. They seem to have no weakness, save the sun, and that just keeps them at bay during these cloud-covered days. They come out at night. It is then that my people suffer and die.”

The earnestly in his voice quelled her resistance. Anything she told him would not be helping him, but the people in the city. “They feel such rage towards the city – you invaded their home, so they invade yours. I felt their hate.”

“Their home?”

“In the mountains.”

“Our people mine the mountains! We need the ore. We...” His voice went quiet, realizing the mines were where the things came from.

She paused, something else returning to her. “I saw them mining, also, they're mining upwards in the dark, through rock.”

“Mining through the rock? Under the city?”

“I believe so.”

Brovik's dark eyes widened in horror, and he almost lost his balance. “They mean to come from underneath! The city will fall if they break through! Do you know how fast they tunnel? How far they have gone?”

“No, I am sorry. I just saw it – felt the idea. They are clawing at the bare rock with their talons. It is slow but, they make progress.”

“By the Fates! This is terrible! I... I cannot go to Khallan now! The city must be warned, must be evacuated, no matter the cost. I have to get back there and warn them!”

Iiana stepped in, ready as always, an anchor to stop everything getting swept away. “You are too weak to go anywhere alone.” She said sternly. “You need to recover your strength.”

“There is no time...” he said, then held his head with an arm and slumped down to the earth weakly, a sudden coughing fit taking him. “No time...”

“This path leads to the city.” Iiana told him. “We are traveling in that direction anyway.”

“You would aid us?” Brovik gasped.

Iiana faltered. The fight was not hers. It seemed only a fool would get involved.

“I will,” stated Lea'Nissa, and met their stares evenly. “The creatures that attack you did harm to me also, destroying my home and family. I would fight them now. I am no witch, but I command magic, it is true. Magic that can aid you against your foes.”

“Magic that can defeat all of them?” he asked hopefully. “Can they bring us victory?”

Lea'Nissa couldn't help but scoff a little. This man, who was so fearful of her abilities with the Arcs but a few moments ago, would now be eager to accept her help if it would

lead to the battle being won. Sadly, though, it would not. She couldn't stop an attack on her small town, so she wouldn't be able to prevent the siege of this Zanth, which seemed much bigger. "Magic that can help." She stated evenly.

Welcome to Zanth

They could not part ways then. Iiana and Brass would accompany Brovik and Lea'Nissa most of the way, she had said. Zathe was a full day's ride away. They would descend from the foothills of The Spine and then pass through woods which led into the lowlands that surrounded the city. It was when those woods ended that they would separate, and she and Brass would leave them to their conflict with the tar'tchii.

Lea'Nissa understood their decision. It was not their fight. They had survived on their own and would continue to do so, and had little or no loyalty for the people of Zanth, nor a grudge against the creatures, the tar'tchii, that attacked it.

Brovik did not understand. He would debate with Iiana as they rode, for she rode with him on his grey steed, Ash, because he was too weak to ride on his own, while Lea'Nissa and Brass rode on Keepsake. His impassioned pleas did not sway her, however. What sense of duty, loyalty, and belonging she might have had to anything greater than herself and those she cared about had long been crushed when she had left Oun.

As they made camp in the woods that night, intending for Zanth to be reached early the following morning, Brovik's patience finally gave way, and was replaced by rage.

"You are a selfish woman!" he exclaimed. "We need every hand we can get!"

Iiana understood his frustration. She heard the desperation in his voice. She appreciated his need to protect his people. But her needs were different, now. Things had changed. Maybe she was selfish, but going to Zanth would mean Brass would also go, and, by the sounds of things, they would likely die there. She was not about to sacrifice both their lives for people they had no loyalty to, against an enemy they knew nothing about.

"I cannot go." She repeated, for what must have been the hundredth time. "I am sorry. It is not my fight, nor Brass's."

"Not your fight," Brovik muttered. "It would be if you had an ounce of loyalty to those of your homeland. There is a detachment of your countrymen trapped in the city alongside us. You are Ounish. You should have no qualms in fighting alongside them, even if it is hopeless."

He was right. The people of Oun were renowned for their bravery in battle and their honour in life. Brovik seemed to have many of those qualities himself. It pained her to tell him no.

"Bah!" he spat. "Better to live like a lion than die a coward."

The mention of the phrase passed through her like a bolt of lightning. "What did you say?!"

He sat up, looking at her in surprise.

"Say it again. Why did you say that?"

"It..." he stammered in surprise, "A friend of mine says it."

"Who? What's his name?"

She knew what the answer would be before Brovik voiced it: Tirrius of Zaradorn.

"He is in the city? Now?"

Brovik nodded. "Aye, he is. And alive last I knew."

Tirrius, here. Barely half a day's ride away. For a brief moment she forgot about the siege and the obstacles that stood in her way, and her thoughts were filled with him. But no sooner had the feeling of the love she and Tirrius had once shared washed through her like a cascade of warmth similar to Lea'Nissa's glowing spell, when it was replaced with anguish and doubt. It had been long, so long. He would have found another by now. He was trapped within a besieged city and ranks of foul enemies stood between them. She had been cast away, and there was no chance of them seeing each other again. Why would he have held onto their love? It would have been like trying to reel in a giant shark with a length of twine. The twine had snapped long ago. He would have let the shark go, and found another.

Sitting there with the others was too much for her. "I need to go... get some more water for us," she told them, clearing her throat and leaving the camp without picking up a single water skin.

She stalked away a few hundred yards away, slumped against a wide, ancient tree, and hid her head with her hands.

How could he be there? Of course, the answer was obvious – he had been stationed to Magador after letting her escape from Zaradorn. He had let her go, rather than risk seeing her put to death, and they had punished him for it by sending him to Magador. And now he was in Zanth, with the tar'tchii trapping him in there.

She looked up, a tear falling down her cheek, as she watched the light of day dwindle and dusk slowly take hold. In that instant she decided what she was going to do. *Just one more night*, she thought, *survive just one more night, and I will see you again tomorrow.* "Iiana?"

The voice behind her startled her, and she span around to see Brass looking up at her. And then she realised that in those few moments she had forgotten all about him. The thoughts of Tirrius had pushed all others from her mind, and he had been the only one who had mattered to her.

But she had not seen Tirrius in over a year. Brass had been there though much of the time since, and she loved him as deeply as she would love a brother. And yet she had forgotten him. Painful, heavy guilt filled her gut.

She quickly wiped her tear away. "Brass..."

"I just wanted you to know. If you are going into Zanth, then I'm going to come with you."

"Oh, Brass, but I haven't..."

"I know you've already decided to go," he stopped her. "I can see it in your face. I know you, Iiana."

"But..." She stopped. She couldn't find any words, with such a myriad of conflicting emotions swelling within her. She had never mentioned Tirrius to him, not once, but somehow he knew how she felt.

"I know it is dangerous, but I will follow you wherever you decide to go. You've taken care of me up until now, and I cannot imagine life without you."

"I'm sorry." She said, shakily, "I need to find him. I need to know..."

"I know. I'm with you. I will always be with you."

Her resolve broke, and she sank down to the earth with him and took his small body in her arms, holding him close and tight as she sobbed unashamed. "Thank you."

Tirrius of Zaradorn looked out from the battlements over towards the woods. The dawn had once again brought with it a respite from the fighting. He heard Elden Peak rumble in the distance, its crater belching forth the dust which obscured the sun. He watched as the plumes rose up from the mountain, covering not only the sky with its black smoke, but also staining the stones of the city with ash. He slumped, exhausted, against the parapet, but his eyes wouldn't close. He'd witnessed too much death to be able to sleep now; each time he closed his eyes he saw what he'd witnessed the night previous. He'd been a soldier all his life, and had fought and killed many times before. But not like this. He had never fought against a foe so merciless and unyielding; so bent upon destruction. There seemed to be no reasoning behind the attack – just the desire to kill every man, woman and child within the walls. There was no bargaining with them. No way to communicate. They were all going to die.

So caught up in his thoughts was he, that Tirrius at first did not notice the two horses emerge from the woods, and even when he did his eyes refused to acknowledge that they were real until they were almost half way to the city.

“Riders!” he called. “Riders approach!”

Up on the gatehouse a group of soldiers rose from fitful slumber to look out to where he was pointing.

“Get Vargard!” Tirrius barked.

The horses neared the city, one dark and one a lighter colour. As they came in closer, he could see that the lighter of the horses bore two people. Tirrius could make little of them, but it looked as if one was wearing a Magadorian uniform. They stopped a few hundred feet from the base of the rock. Tirrius wondered what they were doing. No riders had dared come near the city for over a week now.

The twang of a bowstring sounded as a note-baring arrow was fired near the riders.

The note told them not to approach the city, and that it was under siege from a hidden enemy. It read that whoever reads the note should get word to Rustor or Khallan as soon as they could. Those few who had approached the city in the past week, farmers and other common folk, had certainly heeded the message not to approach. Whether they would go and find help, though, was less certain. Vargard would have offered a reward, but the baron within the city, Rutherford, had deemed it unnecessary. “*They are duty bound to obey the order, no matter who they are,*” he had said. Vargard had silently cursed him for a fool, for that is exactly what he was.

The uniform-wearing rider dismounted and read the letter. He looked as if he was trying to shout something back up to them, but the distance was too great and the for anyone to hear anything of what he said.

A crowd began to develop upon the walls. People gazed out at the riders. Vargard pushed his way through them and stood next to Tirrius.

“It's been a long time since I've seen anything move out there.” The general said after studying them. “Let us hope they go and find a way to help us.”

There was a tone in the general's voice that showed that, while he tried to hide it, he realised inside that they'd not win this fight.

“That would make a welcome change.” Tirrius intoned.

“They’re coming this way!” a soldier suddenly exclaimed from the gatehouse, and true enough they had sped their steeds towards the city – at full gallop!

“Fools!” spat Vargard, “They’ll be torn to shreds!”

Shouts of warning were called out to the riders, but there was no chance that they could hear. They reached the base of the rock hundreds of feet below and began to climb.

“Blasted fools!” Vargard spat again, resigned to the fact that he would again have to witness yet another massacre.

The riders made it to the first turn when the tar’tchii struck. One of the dark demons seemed to materialise out of the rocks and go for the lighter horse, which trailed the black. The rider dodged the tar’tchii, and must have landed a blow as the monster fell to the rock surface and disintegrated.

It was only at this point, as they neared and detail was clearer, that Tirrius made note of that rider’s horse, which was an off-white colour. The colour of ash!

“General! That’s Captain Brovik!”

“It can’t be, he-”

“It must be, look at his horse!”

Another tar’tchii dived out of the rock, again going for the second horse. This time the second rider cut it down. Tirrius glanced what he thought was a blaze of brilliant blonde hair.

They seemed to be faring better than Brovik and his men had done five days previous, but once again it looked as if they’d be overwhelmed by numbers and surprise. They could see the tar’tchii gathering en masse in the rocks further up the pathway; a tide of shadows got ready to overflow onto the road.

The group neared the next bend in the slope, and when they turned it, the trap would be sprung.

Tirrius made his throat hurt as he tried to call a futile warning, but it was useless.

And then flash of brilliant bright light blasted forth from the first steed, blinding those who looked at it. The effect was more dramatic for the demons who fled from the glow, diving back into the rocks. A strange sound filled the air. Faint, but growing as they drew closer. It was the sound of suffering. It was the sound of the demons screaming.

“They’re going to make it!” Vargard exclaimed. “Open the gate!”

Make it they did, galloping in through the battered and scratched main gates as they were opened but a fraction; just enough to let their horses pass through, before they slammed shut behind them.

Behind the gates the large square which lay beyond was quickly being filled by people who rushed excitedly to see what the commotion was about. Iiana’s initial elation at making it inside the city was swiftly washed aside as she drank in their filthy, haunted faces, along with the wreckage of city which lay beyond. Once proud stone buildings now stood as empty husks, and the usually busy streets were now filthy and unused. Iiana had never been to Zanth before, but she could sense the grandeur of the trading city just as easily as the oppressive sorrow which she was faced with.

A mix of commoners and soldiers surrounding them, a babble of voices rising as a large man in a Magadorian uniform pushed his way to the front. Ash and Keepsake reared away uneasily.

“Commander Vargard!” Brovik exclaimed, swinging down from his horse. He met the big man with locked wrists, and then a brief embrace.

Iiana could not help but search the sea of faces for the one she sought. She wanted to raise her questions now, but bit her tongue, knowing she would have to wait a little longer, and hoping that her journey here had not been for naught.

“Brovik,” the huge man, Vargard, regarded his fellow with a broad grin, “It is good to see you alive! I admit that I did not think it would be the case.”

“I do not blame you. And it would have been true, if I hadn’t have stumbled upon these travellers, here. This Lea’Nissa, and Erin, and Iiana, of Oun.”

Iiana bowed her head to Vargard, though he barely noticed, his attention fixed on the other two. The others in the crowd had also done so. Their initial excited babble had subsided, becoming instead hushed, urgent whispers.

Lea’Nissa sensed the danger. “Hail to you, Vargard,” she nodded to him. “And to the people of Zanth. We come to aid you in your struggle against the demons outside these walls.”

The entire square fell silent when she spoke. An oppressive tension was building.

“That is most kind of you,” Vargard replied evenly. “And I thank you for returning our friend Brovik to us. Though I must admit you are not the help I expected him to bring back to our city.”

“She can help,” Brovik interjected quickly, somewhat on the defensive. “You saw how we entered the city. How they fled from us?”

Vargard nodded slowly, still addressing the atia. “And how did you accomplished these things?” Vargard knew the answer already. They all knew the answer already. It was a line of questioning that was leading them to a place they did not want to be.

Lea’nissa opened her mouth to speak, but it was Brovik who spoke up again. “Without her aid, I would have died. She has power, Vargard, power to defeat the tar’chii!”

“You have a name for our foes now?” Vargard’s eyes narrowed. “Power, you say? Great power it must be indeed to defeat a foe that we have struggled so futilely against since they came to our walls.”

Lea’Nissa nodded slowly. “I bring the power of light to conquer darkness.”

“She brings foul magics! Just like those that attack us!” someone from the crowd shouted. There were murmurs of approval.

Iiana suddenly wished that Erin was instead sat with her on Ash rather than with Lea’Nissa. She saw him grip the horse’s mane tight. She had to help. “Those of you on the walls, did you not see how the tar’chii fled from her light! They fear it!” She called. “And they do right to! I fear it also!” shouted a woman.

“I saw the light. It burned like the sun – burned my eyes!”

“No! Listen all of you!” Lea’Nissa exclaimed.

“Do not let her speak! She will cast a spell on us!”

Something came flying from the crowd – a small rock, or spoiled potato – and flew towards them. It hit Keepsake in the flank, and the startled horse reared up with a startled whinny.

Lea’Nissa fell backwards, unable to react in time. The baying crowd were already surging forwards, covering the final few feet between them and the magic users in a second.

liana saw all this, and she heard Erin cry out. She called to him, her hand on the hilt of her sword, ready to come to their aid. And then she felt a strong arm wrap around her waist and drag her off her horse. Her head struck with something hard, and heard and saw no more.

Reunited

liana stirred. The back of her head was throbbing in pain. For a good few moments, it was all she was aware of and her initial thoughts were to return to unconsciousness and be rid of it. She was aware of another sensation, though. Someone was dabbing a wet cloth to her head. Still, this did not rouse her. She tried to ignore it. The pain was greater than the soothing feeling of the cloth on her brow.

Then something more urgent than the pain pierced her thoughts. Memories swirled back to her in a whirlpool of images and sound. The crowd. The chaos. Being dragged from the back of the horse. Brass's desperate cry for help.

Her eyes snapped open.

The man who was dabbing her forehead startled in alarm and she, too, gasped in surprise. It was Tirrus.

"Lie still." He told her at once, seeing her reaction. He placed his hand on her head, pressing her into the pillow beneath. "Rest."

She gazed at him. He was here! Here with her, right now. They were together. She was suddenly lost in a wave of elation as she saw him. She tried to reach out to touch his face. "Tirrus."

Slight annoyance crossed his features as she moved despite his request, but swiftly subsided as her palm couched the side of his face.

He was warm. His face, normally clean shaven, was covered in what was almost a full blonde beard now. They had never been to her taste. "You need to shave." She said quietly. The vibration of the words going through her skull as she spoke hurt. She swallowed hard.

He laughed. "I had not expected to see you," he told her, and then his features darkened.

"What are you doing here?"

"To find you."

He frowned. "But how did... ah... Brovik. Of course."

She was unable to move her head, but her eyes picked out that they were in a chamber of bare stone which had been finely crafted and set. It was dark, with only flickering candles to illuminate it. She couldn't see much. Still, she could see from the size of the stones and skill of the masonry that they were in a building of sizable structure and importance.

"Where am I?" she asked. "What happened.?" Despite the pain in her head, she focussed herself to concentrate on Tirrus' words.

"You are in the keep within the city, in the bowels of the building. You are safe here. I made sure that you were brought here," he told her. "It has been a few hours since your entrance to the city. I was watching from the parapets when you made your charge, and I recognised you as soon as I saw you..." He broke off a little, cleared his throat, and went on. "I am sorry for what happened. I'm afraid there was little I could do that the time. Your friend - Lea'Nissa - has been imprisoned. Vargard did the best that he could for her. He is not as close minded as others, but he has his misgivings nonetheless. He and his

guard managed to subdue the crowd enough to prevent your atia friend from being beaten to death. Believe me, being locked away is probably the best place for her at the moment.”

“And what of Brass? The elf...?” Iiana asked eagerly, fully aware that he had not been mentioned in any of this. Her heart beat within her chest and her emotions welled up. She fully feared the worst and if anything had happened to him then she could never forgive herself for bringing him here.

“I do not know. He seems to have disappeared. There have been searches but so far, no one has seen anything of him.”

She relaxed a little, letting the news sink in. It revived her senses a little. She even smiled slightly. *Escaped, gone without a trace. That sounds like him*, she thought. Still, he was alone, and trapped in a strange city. She pined for him already, and her first thought was to go out and look for him. Momentarily forgetting her head wound, she tried to move, wincing hard as she tilted her head.

“Sorry about that,” Tirrius said, and gave her an apologetic look as she shot him a questioning glance

“You stopped me?!” The sudden memory of that arm wrapping around her waist and pulling her from Ash flashed in her mind. It had surprised her; prevented her in helping her friends be set upon by the mob.

“I had to stop you. You would have been killed,” he sighed. “Sorry about your head. You hit the wall as I pulled you from your horse.”

He had saved her, she admitted grudgingly, although she wasn’t going to let the matter lie easily. “My friends were in danger... and still are. What would you have done?”

“Help them. Sensibly.”

“I need to find him.”

“I will go and look for you.”

She grunted and closed her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. She didn’t hear his reply – she was asleep immediately.

When she opened them again she was aware that much time had passed, even though she swore it had been only for a few seconds. The candles had burned down and Tirrius was now asleep. He was sitting upright on a crude wooden chair nearby, propped against some gigantic barrels. Tentatively she moved herself. Her head still pained her, but it wasn’t as bad as earlier. She managed to sit up. She could see that they were in some vast storeroom, probably deep within the keep. It was dark and it was cold, but it was quiet, and it was safe.

She had been stripped of her armour, but was relieved to see it, and her bade, lying beside the bed on the floor.

Just as she regarded Tirrius, he woke. His eyes blinked three times and he looked at her, already alert. His eyes were as bright as ever, but he looked tired. Of course, from what she knew of this place, the nights were spent in constant battle against the assault of the tar’tchii.

“You should lie down,” he told her.

“I’m fine,” she said, a little annoyed. It annoyed her that he was telling her what to do. She had lived and fought within Magador as a mercenary for over a year now, and was quite capable of taking care of herself. The only person she’d accepted help from during that time was Brass.

She ached inside, torn between her worry for Brass and her regret for coming to this awful place at all, and her delight for seeing Tirrius alive again. And Lea’Nissa, who had come here to help in the fight, had now been imprisoned as if she was an enemy who attempted to harm those she had intended to aid.

And here she was, bed-ridden with an aching head, unable to do anything at all to help anyone.

“When you fell asleep, I looked for your friend, Brass. I could not find him. I’ve told the men I trust to keep an eye out for him. Do not worry, we will find him.”

“What men?”

“There is Ounish garrison here. Two hundred of us. Less than half that, now, though.”

“What happened, Tirrius? How did you come to be here?”

He chuckled briefly. “It is obvious, is it not? I had to be punished for what I did. It was I, of course, who let you flee from Zaradorn.”

The memories of that dreadful night came surging into her conscience. “So your punishment is to be stationed here?”

“Yes. For three years.”

Her initial thought was to ask him why he did not flee, though she had no need to ask the question. He had no family to return to in Oun, and yet there was the underlying sense of duty to which all people from Oun are bound by; indoctrinated to serve Oun first and others second. *Always Oun, Ever Oun*, a mantra repeated several times a day when on military duty. Iiana was surprised how much of this edict had been eroded during her time in Magador. She had always been a free spirit, though equally had always met the requirements asked of her as part of Ounish society – there had been no other option, perhaps. She had been free for over a year, and only now really realised how strange the Ounish way of life must look to foreigners. And then she realised how strange she must look to him, and how she had changed the past year, having been forced to live in the wilds of Magador. She had learnt so much; so many things that she otherwise would not have. She had grown much more than he would have done, in their time apart.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last.

He shook his head. “I would do it again. I do not regret it. There has not been a day when I have not thought of the last time I saw you, Iiana, but never have I regretted letting you go. Especially not now.”

“Especially not now?” she asked. She heard something in his voice; it almost broke as he spoke. There as a longing there. His eyes sparkled.

He stood up from the chair and came to her, speaking as he did, until he sat on her bed beside her: “Now that I see you here, alive. The worst part was not knowing what happened to you. Whether you escaped into Magador. Whether you still lived. Those questions have haunted me ever since.”

She smiled a gentle smile, touching his face again. “I have missed you.”

And with that he leant in and kissed her. Initially gently, then with more passion as she moaned against him. A kiss that was over a year in the making, that they had both longed for, and neither had ever thought possible.

The door handle turned. The Ounish guard who walked in then stopped momentarily as they broke the kiss. He cleared his throat, embarrassed about what he had just seen.

“Knock next time.” Tirrius said.

“Yes... my apologies. Tirrius. Darkness is falling. Vargard asks that you return to the battlements.”

“Tell him I will be there very shortly.” Tirrius replied, and the soldier nodded and left, closing the door quickly behind him.

Darkness was coming, and with it another night of attacks. The tar'tchii would fall upon the walls of the city akin to waves crashing upon a cliff face, and every man available must stand firm and ready to repel the onslaught of the coming tide to ensure that the cliffs do not shatter and fall.

“I will come with you!” Iiana gasped earnestly, grasping at his arm.

He smiled calmly. “You can barely stand, if at all. You would do no good to anyone out there.”

“Then do not go. I do not want to lose you.”

“I have fought against these things every night these past week; I do not plan on being killed now.”

She would have pleaded with him to stay, and a dozen counter-arguments sprang up in her mind, but she bit her tongue, for she knew that it was pointless. He would face down their enemy once again, not only for the sake of his honour-bound duty, nor for the plight of the city, but also because he was the commander of the Ounish contingent of soldiers within the city and, whether they felt their stationing here punishment or not, were now locked in their desperate battle for survival with their Magadorian allies. He had to go to lead his men against the demons.

She gripped him tighter, then. “Make sure I see you in the morn,” she breathed in his ear, and they kissed briefly once more before he stood and left the room.

She woke again, dazed from her wound. Her vision was blurred, and as it came too she thought she was still dreaming.

Brass was at the foot of her bed.

“Hello, Iiana.” He said to her.

“Hello,” she replied, not sure of if she was awake.

“I followed your friend here. He’s taken good care of you.”

“He’s a good friend, Brass. You are too.”

He smiled, coming to her. He held her hand. She found she couldn’t move hers.

“I have you something. Herb medicine. It will make you better but it will make you sleepy for a while.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

“I’m going to go, Iiana. Coming here was a mistake. For me, anyway. I’ve seen you with him. You’re so happy. You’re happier with him than you were with me.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

He smiled, his eyes were sad. “I don’t want to either. But I should go home. You want me, but no one else here does. And I... don’t want to share you, Iiana. I love you.”

“I love you too, Brass.”

He squeezed her hand. “Sleep, now.”

She smiled, and did.

The Wicked Within

Lea’Nissa had been bound taken within the keep to the deepest pits within it, where she had lay behind sturdy metal bars and lamented in a cold and dank prison, alone, for over a day. The cells were arranged oddly; their metal grills opening into a square area within which the guards sat and played cards. This area was in turn overlooked by a walkway which ringed its edge, some fifteen feet above the cell floor.

Then the guards had come for her – guards neither wearing the blue of Oun nor the red and white of Magador. She was brought forth up spiral stairs and down corridors that became grander and wider as they went, until she stood, shivering, in audience of Count Rutherford.

The count, a young, portly man, who had enjoyed too much luxury in his young life, and had grown arrogant and ignorant as a result, sneered at the woman before him in between mouthfuls of juicy melon fruit.

“So, this is the witch that claims to come to our aid,” he announced, with no small amount of sarcasm. His voice projected well throughout the large hall, which was filled with ornate tapestries and lavish trimmings, and occupied by a gaggle of well dressed nobleman and women, who spoke in urgent, hushed voices to one another as they regarded her.

Lea’Nissa looked directly ahead at the count. She did not know his name, and was unaware of his status. He could be king or prince, it mattered not; she would not bend her knee nor bow her head to such an obviously putrid individual.

One of the four guards who surrounded her and held her shackles nodded. “Yes, m’lord,” he intoned humbly.

“She does not bow? Nor speak? Ah but, let us be patient, for she knows not who she addresses!” He stood, then, sweeping back his red velvet cloak and presenting his podgy body, adorned in silk tunic and cotton leggings, and raising his arms high in an exaggerated manner. “I am Count Feridan Rutherford, Trade Lord of Zanthé and governor of the surrounding lands therein.”

Lea’Nissa remained silent. His name meant nothing to her. She was acutely aware of the hostility towards her within the room. Every eye was upon her, fearfully watching as if they expected her to implode the entire keep around them. She resented them as much as the people of Farsell, for they were no better despite their lavish surroundings. These people were ignorant, selfish, and, though they would not admit it, afraid.

“These are my courtiers,” Rutherford continued, indicating the galleries that towered on either side of her, “and we all bid you welcome, witch, to our court!”

Light laughter and polite applause rippled throughout those gathered. Lea’Nissa decided not to speak unless spoken to. Her eyes darted amongst those gathered, hoping to catch sight of a familiar face. But neither Iiana nor any of the others she had travelled with were present. There were no allies here.

“Well, witch? Have you nothing to say?”

“I am Lea’Nissa!” she announced proudly, holding her head up, her voice sounding out loud and clear across the hall, unwavering and defiant. “I came here to aid you against these monsters. My magic can help-”

“Ah!” Rutherford cut her off, “Then you freely admit your magic-using ability?”

“Of course! I am an atia, and my race have natural affinity-”

“A witch from a race of witches! My lords and ladies, this demi-human’s brazen impudence is quite astounding!”

Within the cloister of those gathered there stood the stocky, stern figure of Bain Firebeard. Bain, a dwarf from the northern lands, stiffened as he heard the term “demi-human”. The pompous ass which was speaking had once used the term to address Bain himself, once, and it riled the dwarf to think the humans regarded themselves as a basis upon which all other life is an off-shoot of. His people were ancient, and had watched (and even helped) the humans develop from the cave dwellers they had been into the infection they had grown into.

Lea’Nissa tensed as he chided her. She realized that this person would not listen to reason. In desperation, she turned to address the others in the court. ““Would I have come here if I had meant you harm? Would I have ridden up the hill to you, in plain sight, accompanied by others who you would call allies? Did you not see my spell push the demons back from me?”

“They say it burned the eyes!” someone called.

“Yes, who’s to say it wouldn’t do the same to us?”

“Because you are not demons!” the atia cried out, exasperated. “If you would but let me show you...”

“No,” Rutherford snapped. “I am sure that is your plan, and then you would slay us all with your foul spells. I think not.”

“Then, what?!” Lea’Nissa snapped back, anger once again boiling within her at being confronted by this wall of ignorance. These people did not even deserve to be saved, even though the tar’tchii needed to be destroyed nonetheless. “What is going to happen now?”

“You will be executed.” Rutherford stated, “And this matter, along with you, laid to rest.” He took no small pleasure in telling her this, she would realise later, but at the time the impact of the statement shook through her and all anger she felt was replaced by the fear of her life being cut short so unfairly. “You will be taken immediately and be decapitated, and your remains burned, so that we are sure we are rid of your taint.”

Bain Firebeard’s blood boiled. He held no allegiance to the atia, who stood pinned to the spot upon hearing the news, yet he felt compelled to do something. What he was witnessing was a travesty of justice if ever there was one.

“STOP!”

The shout bellowed inside the room like a trumpet blare, startling everyone with its sudden ferocity. Everyone including Bain Firebeard, for it had not been he that had made it.

Lea’Nissa whirled around, toward the direction the shout had come from, to see two men enter swiftly into the chamber. She recognized them both as Brovik and as the giant of a man who seemed to be in command of Magador’s forces, Vargard. Her heart lifted as she saw them stride into the room. Surely they would be here to aid her!

“It seems I missed your invitation to this meeting, m’lord,” Vargard’s voice rang with mock surprise, as they both knew no such invitation would ever have been sent. Vargard bowed his head ever so slightly to Rutherford, who startled.

“What are you doing here, Vargard? I thought your time better used preparing the city’s defenses.”

“Of course my primary concern is the safety of this city, m’lord,” Vargard dipped his head again in an even shallower incline. “Yet this is not so removed from that. If a stranger comes to the city saying they can help, it is my business to investigate.”

“We have this under control, Vargard. This woman is a witch. She is to be killed.”

Without thinking, Brovik stepped forwards, out of Vargard’s shadow “No!”

Rutherford regarded him mockingly. “You object?”

“I do!” Brovik spoke eagerly, anger and desperation lacing his voice. “When I met her I thought the same. But she is not. She can help us. When I came across her, and the others she was with, I was gravely wounded by the demons and would not be alive standing here before you if it was not for her healing me.”

“And how do we know you were not bewitched during this event?” Rutherford asked, more to the court than to Brovik directly. “Your mind may not be your own, Brovik. Your desire was to leave the city, which you accomplished, and yet you return without news of allies from Khallan nor anywhere else, as you were entrusted to do. By me. You simply bring her here. Such a change of motive is most odd. You have failed in your mission and thus you have failed as a soldier of Magador. All this I would think is due to your will being altered by magical effects.”

“No, I came back because I learnt...” Brovik began, but stopped as Vargard flagged him down with a hand motion.

This is not the time.

“My lord,” Vargard stated. “I would suggest that you not put this woman to death to soon. I propose that we test her.”

“A test? Why?”

“If she is able to help us as she claims, then we must take all the aid we can get. Our city is dying, and we must do all we can to save it.”

Rutherford’s mouth worked for a moment. “Why would she aid us, even if she could?”

“Because like you I am now stuck here,” Lea’Nissa spoke up, tiring of having others speaking for her, yet overjoyed that someone was willing to aid her. “They would slay me just as they would you.”

“M’lord, we have many wounded. Let her try her healing. Many would be desperate enough to risk it...” Brovik began

“No,” Rutherford dismissed the idea, and Brovik, with a wave of his hand. “That is just as she would want – so she can bewitch others to her cause – and so it is no surprise that you would suggest it. Allow that, and many more would be under your guise.” He sneered at Lea’nissa. Then his expression altered, as a thought crossed his mind. “Are you certain the demons will attack you?”

“Of course!”

“And other creatures born of foul magics. They would treat you as an enemy also, I expect?”

Lea’Nissa nodded.

Rutherford seemed to make up his mind, and threw up his hands as if to announce some mighty, earth-shattering proclamation. “Very well! Have your test if ye will, Vargard. We shall pit her against the veenoth.”

There was a gasp amongst those gathered. Brovik, too, was taken aback. “Why would you do such a thing?!”

Rutherford’s face turned into an expression of mock pain. “If she is as useful as she says she is, she would be able to dispatch the thing easily. And if it attacks her, then we know it will not count her as an ally.”

“You mean me to fight something?” Lea’Nissa asked. “If it is a creature of dark magic, then I will confront it!”

“There! You see, she even agrees. It is settled then. Come, then, to The Pit!”

There was an excited babble suddenly about the place as the audience unseated themselves and began to filter out of the room. The guards around Lea’Nissa turned, and started to march her from the hall. “Now?!” she objected. “But I have not slept. And what of my staff! I need my staff, please! Let me have it...”

She was taken from the hall, her cries receding, unheeded, along with her. Rutherford looked on after her a while with an evil smile curled on his lips before he too made his way to The Pit. He was going to enjoy this.

In the babble and upheaval, few of those around her paid much attention to the atia’s cries of protest. One set of old, gristle ears heard them loud and clear, though, and the grizzled dwarf to whom they belonged intended to do something about them.

“You can’t let them do this!” Brovik exclaimed desperately at Vargard.

But they both knew that Vargard, for all his authority over the militia outside, had no such power within the keep where Rutherford, and his privately paid guard, were in command.

“I am sorry,” Vargard said, laying a big hand on Brovik’s shoulder. “Her life is in the hands of the Fates, now. You should gather the other who travelled with her – that Ounish woman. I think she would want to see this. And do it swiftly. I do not think Rutherford will tarry long over this.”

“He is a bastard!” Brovik swore through gritted teeth, and turned from Vargard to find Iiana’ quarters, helplessness and bitterness welling within him.

“That he is,” Vargard mouthed to himself, and made his way to The Pit.

The Thing in the Pit

Lea’Nissa had seen The Pit before. The square area onto which the cells led out on was now being cleared of furniture; most of it bundled up a narrow stairway that led up to the walkway above. The noble-folk who had been at the court now stood around the balcony, all chattering excitedly among themselves. Barely an hour had passed since her ‘trial’ in the main hall, and she had spent most of that back in her cell.

She sat quietly on the rough mattress which was laid on the floor, cross legged. She knew not what or who this veenoth was. She had not heard of its type among the demons she had learnt of, so could not prepare herself for the conflict to come. She tried to console herself with the thought that if these savages were able to capture it, it could not be vastly

powerful. Yet, her staff was lost. For all she knew, it could still be lying by the gate, snapped in two by a careless footfall. She felt naked without it. She needed something to channel her powers.

She steadied herself, watching the proceedings.

The floor outside of her cell was being swept clean of the straw which covered it, and doing so revealed a heavy-looking metal panel embedded within. The tables and chairs the guards had been sat on had been cleared away, leaving the square area – which she was sure was the arena she would have to do battle in – completely bare of furnishings.

All too soon, she heard Rutherford's hateful voice proclaiming some needlessly pompous and elaborate statements, and her cell door was opened by two of Rutherford's guards. She stepped out, slowly, into the sight of the baying crowds. In stark contrast to their subdued, quiet observation of her earlier, they now talked excitedly amongst themselves, crying out excitedly and waving and pointing at her, laughing and jeering. They did not fear her any longer, and now they were eager to see blood. Every one of them sickened her, and she drove them for her thoughts. She would not even allow herself to look upwards to see if there was anyone she recognized there, Brovik, Iiana, even Vargard who, even though she had barely spoken to her, had tried to help her. She set her sights on the trap door in the center of the chamber.

Bolts that had held it secure to the floor had been unfastened, and thick rope had been tied to the metal rug affixed to it. The rope had been lashed around a beam within the ceiling, and was being held by a team of Rutherford's personal guards, who stood ready to pull it open. The guards who had opened her cell had now retreated up the stairway, closing a sturdy, thick wooden door behind them.

"Have you anything to say before you confront the thing in the pit?" Rutherford asked her, loudly.

But she ignored him, knowing that there was nothing she could say that would alter anything now. Even if she were to die at the hands of this thing, she would not give these people the pleasure of seeing her plead for her life.

Having received no reply, Rutherford gave the command to lift the trapdoor.

Noises. Up there. Where? There? Summoned. Yes. Feeding time. At last. Feeding time.

The trapdoor slowly opened with a groan that growled deep and echoed against the bare stone around them, until it stood upright and then, suddenly, crashed backwards, clattering against the stone behind and ringing out like a terrible death knell. Eventually the dull ringing stopped, and from the blackness within the pit, something stirred.

The sound came first. A loud, prolonged whine like that of an un-oiled hinge, but one that actually felt suffering while it was in use.

Next, a gigantic hand snaked out of the pit, with fingers ending in sharpened bone. The hand, a foot across, was attached to a long, spindly arm which was so gaunt the bones beneath the faded, translucent skin were clearly visible. Then came another hand, a shoulder, equally gaunt, and then the face of the thing.

Lea’Nissa stumbled backwards, her body pinned against the bars of one of the cells, as she beheld the elongated head, hairless, disfigured and warped, teeth chattering continuously within its lipless mouth, a puss-filled hole where its nose should be, and shrunken, yellow eyes gazing at her from within its skull-like features.

It stood up from the pit, its naked form standing seven feet high. It would have been taller if not for the hunched back, through which bone protruded through the pale skin, which caused veenoth to stand on all fours, supporting itself on its overly long, frighteningly thin arms and legs.

Veenoth regarded her as she beheld its form.

Small. Tasty. Devour.

The excited babble that had filled the chamber had died down to a deathly silence as the veenoth emerged from its dark lair. The thing towered above Lea’Nissa, tittering madly to itself. If there was any ounce of humanity in any of those gathered; any pity or remorse for the fate they had cruelly inflicted upon her, then they kept it silently and cowardly to themselves.

The fist thundered into the man’s head, breaking his nose, smashing teeth, and sending all sense flying from him in an instant. Just as he fell, Firebeard plucked the keys from the guards grasp.

“Sorry. Don’t know my own strength sometimes.”

It went for her, the thing leering at her with a horrifying whine for a second before attempting to snatch at her with its claws. She yelled out as it grabbed at her and barely managed to evade the clumsy movement, darting out of the way. Her heart pounded in her chest and her breaths came in panicked, ragged gasps. It chuckled softly to itself as it turned itself to her again.

Focus! She chided herself. *Concentrate!*

It went for her again, this time with a hideous hiss as it came. She raised her palm before her and spoke the words of magic.

A blinding flash emanated from her palm, filling the chamber for an instant. The crowds gathered gasped in shock, rearing away from the sight and covering their eyes with their hands. The veenoth itself fell backwards, tipping onto its hump and then rolling to one side. It covered its face with its hands and hissed viciously.

“There!” Vargard was saying to Rutherford. “You see! It attacks her! And she has the power to repel it.”

“It could still be a trick!” snapped the other in reply. “Her witch-lights still pain the eyes!”

“Pain the eyes? By the Fates, even if they left me blind for life I would use them if they destroyed the demons outside our walls!”

“She has not won yet. Be silent!”

The veenoth recovered. It was trembling now, and eyed the atia with hate-filled eyes. It trembled with fury as it leaped for her.

Lea’Nissa caught sight of Vargard yelling at Rutherford and gesturing toward her earnestly. He was pleading her case. Perhaps Rutherford would yet listen. And then it had pounced at her; its thin legs propelling it forwards. She twirled away, its claws scraping against the spot where she had just been stood, bone raking against metal. Yet it still managed to swipe at her again, managing to backhand her as she moved away. She was sent sprawling forwards, landing with a thump on the hard floor. She span around in time to see it turning towards her and raised her palm out again, crying the words of magic out desperately as she tried to damage or kill the thing. The flash came once again, brighter than before. The veenoth once again fell back, its limbs flailing, as it hit the cell doors with a loud clang. Her banishment spell was disabling it, but nothing more. Had she her staff, she would be able to channel the magic into a more powerful beam, but without it, she realized, she could not beat it.

The veenoth’s spindly limbs shook, both in rage and with shock, at something that had caused it discomfort – that had hurt it. For an instant, it did not wish to face the light again, instead turning its hideous head upward toward the noises above. One of Rutherford’s guard, either being incredibly brave or very foolish, poked at the veenoth with his pike, urging the creature away in the hope that it would turn its attention elsewhere. This action only antagonized the creature, however, who gripped at the pike and caught hold, pulling hard. The man fatally tried to maintain the grip on his weapon and tried to wrench it back. He hopelessly underestimated the strength of the demon as the man was brought over the balcony with it. He fell head-first, screaming as he did, into The Pit. The veenoth did not even allow him to strike the hard floor beneath to enable him a quick, painless death, as it plucked him from the air as easily as one might catch an apple and gripped him in its talons, twisting, and breaking his back.

Iiana did not fully understand the gravity of the situation from Brovik’s hurried and garbled explanation until she entered the chamber, held upright by both Brovik and Tirrius as her head still swam. Her senses struggled to return to her, her vision kept going blurry, she felt sick. Tirrius had voiced his objections of her moving at all, but she would hear none of it, and he seemed to recognize that despite the time that had past from when they were together, her independence and indeed stubbornness had not subsided at all. They pushed their way to the front of those gathered on the balconies overlooking The Pit, beholding the site of the vulnerable atia, struggling for her life against a gigantic monstrous thing. “Vraxux’s¹ Cloak!” Tirrius exclaimed. As they watched, Lea’Nissa scrambled to her feet, backing away from it as it tossed the body of a man away as if it weighed nothing. It stood and stalked her, closing for the kill. “Stop this!” Iiana shouted. A young, portly man who was stood nearby, flanked by Vargard on one side and two guards on the other glanced at her. “What are you doing here?! You would do well to remain quiet!”

¹ Vraxux is the Ounish (and atian) god of Endings. He is associated closely with death.

“She is a friend of this woman, and deserves to see it.” Vargard said.

“You would allow this?” Iiana hissed at the man.

“It is what is required! She is a witch! You are a guest and you should not speak so to your host!”

Iiana spat, realizing far sooner than Lea’Nissa that words would get nowhere with this man. Instinctively she wanted to reach for her dagger, but realized that it was no longer there, flung instead at Symon on the outskirts of Farsell. Whether she would have used it on the pompous idiot, she pondered later, she wasn’t sure. As it was, with no dagger to hand, she did the only thing she felt she could.

Gripping the hilt of Brovik’s sword, she brought the blade free from the scabbard. The surprised Brovik could only give out a yell of protest as she swiftly unhooked her arm from around Tirrius’ shoulder and vaulted over the banister and down into The Pit, with the alarmed cries of Tirrius, Brovik, and the others following in her ears.

It was a long fall that would have broken her legs if she did not know how to land. She did so in a roll, falling forwards and emerging in a crouch, Brovik’s blade still clutched in her hand.

The landing may have been successful, but the sudden violent motion caused her head to spin erratically. She had to steady herself, losing valuable time in being lost to a blurring montage and the sounds of shouts and cries from overhead.

“Iiana!”

It was Lea’Nissa’s cry that jolted her senses back to normal. *She must be in trouble*, Iiana thought; *recover your wits!*

She shook her head, looking up. The cry Lea’Nissa had shouted was a warning! The veenoth was on her, and she brought the sword up purely on reflex. The blade struck with the creature’s boney claws, preventing the swipe from connecting. The sharpened steel did little to phase the beast, though, and it rallied and struck again. Iiana struggled to her feet, again the blade connected, saving her life from a swipe that would have cut her face off. Yet even as she did, she staggered, unable to keep her balanced in her weakened state. It went for the kill, intending to impale her on its talons, but its strike was deflected from the side.

Another figure now confronted the Veenoth. It was Tirrius, who had leapt down after Iiana, holding his sword high, protecting Iiana as she recovered once again.

“This is not right!” Rutherford bellowed. The nobles around The Pit had resumed their excited babble now that more sport was being made of the spectacle before them – this was actually now a contest!

“Get those people out of there!” he bellowed to his guard.

They were his personal retinue, highly paid and well armed, but still, perhaps, not well motivated enough to go within The Pit with the veenoth. They shuffled among themselves uneasily.

“Enough!” Brovik gritted his teeth in frustration. “These people will die for naught!”

“Why should you care? They are foreign folk. We need them not here in Magador.”

“They are my friends! You are a fiend! A murderer!”

“You speak out to *me*? I am the keeper of Zanth!”

“You are a coward!”

“Arrest him!” he yelled to his guard, pointing a quivering, fat finger at Brovik. This was an order more to their liking. There were eight of them, and Brovik stood alone, and unarmed. The gaggle of noblemen nearby herded themselves away from the scene, cramming into the other three sides of the balcony as they watched both conflicts unfold with wide-eyed, joyous interest.

Within the pit the veenoth circled, regarding its three visitors with curiosity and menace. Lea’Nissa and the others were not totally unaware of the commotion that was happening above them, but the monstrosity held their attention. It swept a clawed hand at Tirrius, cackling to itself madly, with thick drool hanging from its chin as it regarded the meal to come. Tirrius avoided the strike, once again his blade clattering with the claws on the thing’s hand. At that moment, Iiana flanked it and drove her blade deep into the things side. She let out a cry of triumph as the sword sunk deep into veenoth’s flank, piercing its thin, sickly skin. No blood poured forth from the wound, and Iiana was flung away as the veenoth whirled around on her, knocking her aside with its bulk, sending her sprawling. Her head span horribly, but she saw with disbelief he Veenoth seemed completely unharmed by the sword jutting from its side.

Brovik, so long a steadfast, loyal servant of Magador, of Zanth, who had served in the Magadorian army for most of his life, did the most rebellious thing he had ever done. He had fought fiercely and risked his life, and seen many of his friends die in the defense of the city. He was not about to let this selfish, sniveling excuse for a man tell him what to do! His rage boiled over, unchecked, and his fist lashed out, connecting with the chin of Rutherfud.

The blow caught Rutherfud off guard, making him topple unsteadily on his feet. He stumbled, fell towards the banister over the pit, and went head-first over it.

With a yelp and a scream, Rutherfud’s body plummeted into the pit like an overstuffed sack of grain. He had neither the guile nor grace of Tirrius or Iiana, and landed hard and loud, the impact of which could be heard by everyone in the room despite the noise that was echoing within. Unfortunately for Rutherfud, it was also heard by the veenoth, whom turned in his direction and cackled madly.

No one attempted to help the unfortunate man. Not even the other nobles, to whom he gave beneficial trade agreements, and who had hidden within the sanctity of the keep with him. Not even his paid, personal guard, whose only duty had been to ensure the safety of the keep – an easy job considering the keep lay in the centre of the city, away from the battles raging upon the outer walls. None of these people aided Rutherfud as Veenoth leant down and bit out his throat.

A relatively merciful and quick death, it could have been said, compared to some in the past which Rutherfud had witness occur at the hands of the veenoth.

Chaos was breaking out on the balconies. Rutherfud’s guard lost all cohesion as their paymaster and their commander was slain. What discipline they had swiftly began to dissipate as Vargard saw most of them look around hurriedly as if searching for instruction or an escape route. It was at this moment he took his chance.

“Men loyal to Rutherford!” he proclaimed, his voice bellowing clear despite the din and chaos in the chamber. “Rally to me! Help strike down the demon! Join with us, lest we all be killed within these walls!”

Heeding his words, the former Rutherford guard now stepped forwards to battle the Veenoth. Mercenaries or no, they knew Vargard had the right of it.

Long pikes were jabbed at the monster in the pit, piercing its hide and making it shriek out in a horrifying, gibbering wail. It lashed out at the pikes, snapping the hafts and sending splinters flying.

The distraction allowed Tirrius to strike at the demon once again, slashing at the things torso. His blade cut, but had no effect. He stepped back, bewildered.

“We cannot stop it!” Lea’Nissa called out desperately. “I need my staff!”

“And ye shall have it!” The cry came from above, their eyes falling upon a stocky, red-haired figure, which held aloft the simple staff which held such power. “Catch!”

Firebeard the dwarf tossed it into the pit, and Lea’Nissa deftly snatched it from the air and held it firm, facing the veenoth.

It sneered at her, a low whine escaping its lips, as if sensing the power the atia possessed. It then reared up and charged her, but Lea’Nissa was already chanting, and didn’t even flinch as it bore down upon her.

She called out the last syllable of her spell just as it reached her, its claw slashing down. Light filled the chamber. Iiana recognized the spell and felt the warm, comforting feeling which emanated from it. The effects were candidly apparent upon the veenoth; the thing screamed as it reeled backwards, collapsing in agony on the bloody floor. Iiana continued to chant, standing over the thing as it writhed upon the floor, its limbs jerking and convulsing. The whines which came from its throat became whimpers as the juddering of its limbs subsided, until it became slowly still and quiet.

It was all over in a few seconds. Lea’Nissa stood over the demon’s body, her victory over the thing in the pit accomplished. Then she collapsed, her dress becoming crimson where the demon had slashed across her body.

The End

The hushed silence which descended over the hall lasted but an instant, and was dispelled by the door to The Pitt being flung open. In strode Brovik, Firebeard and Vargard.

Brovik was by Lea’Nissa’s side as quickly as he could, ripping part of his shirt away and fastening a makeshift bandage over the wound.

“She’s cut across the shoulder,” he panted, his fingers swiftly becoming red. “She needs a healer.”

Vargard glanced over at Tirrius, who was steadying Iiana as she regained her balance.

“Tirrius, go out to the hospital. We need help.”

Tirrius glanced at Iiana – a concerned look crossed his features. “I’ll be fine,” she said kindly, “Go.”

He nodded. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said, but stopped a moment as he turned to leave. “My lord Vargard. You have the city now. Rutherford is dead, and the night is fast approaching.”

“Yes, later,” Vargard said. “If the atia dies, we are all doomed anyway.”

Hushed, concerned whispers murmured through the balconies; Rutherford's cronies made way for Tirrius as he hurriedly made his way from the chamber.

Iiana knelt by Lea'Nissa, who smiled weakly up at her. Her breathing was shallow, her face was pale. Brovik held his hands to the wound. There was desperation and sorrow etched on his face, she saw.

"Can you not heal yourself?" Iiana asked.

Lea'Nissa shook her head.

She missed Brass, then. Longed for him to be there, with his healing magics, his potions, his wit and his friendship. She suddenly felt very selfish.

"What can we do for ye, lass?" Firebeard asked.

"Water. Rest. A bed." She winced up.

"Water?" The dwarf spoke up to the balconies above. "One of ye must be carrying water! Throw me a skin!"

"Ah...here! Here!" a fat merchant, now all too eager to help, detached his skin from his belt and threw it down. Firebeard deftly caught it and knelt, gently offering it to Lea'Nissa's lips.

As this happened, Vargard gently ushered Iiana away. "You are a woman of Oun. Known to Tirrius, I understand?"

She nodded. "Yes. We knew – *know* each other, yes."

"He is one of the best men I've had the fortune to fight alongside. From what I know of you, you are at least his equal."

"At least," she couldn't help the wry smile that played on her lips.

He remained serious. "I need help to defend my city. Whatever your reasons for coming here, you are here with us now. I want to know if I can count on you."

She stiffened a little. The stringent, militaristic society of her homeland had never sat well with her, and she'd always felt ill-at-ease with those who expected her to obey. Here was a man who wanted just that. Yet, she saw in his face a passion she'd not seen in Oun; a desperate desire to defend the home he feared he might soon lose.

She realized she'd not considered fighting once she got within the walls of Zanthé, and how realised how foolish that had been. Her thoughts had been on reuniting with Tirrius. Beyond that, she had forsaken much.

She nodded.

His shoulders dropped in relief, and a smile broke on his face. "Good! Good! I need a warrior – a leader. When you are well again, I would have you help evacuate the city into the keep. We must keep the people safe. If Brovik is right, their tunnel could see the city overrun swiftly. This bastion will be the only safe place then."

"I think I am well now, General. My head is clearing all the more every second."

It was true – her vision regained clarity and the spinning she encountered was fading by the instant.

She remembered her dream. She started to believe it hadn't been one.

A soldier burst through the ranks of people then, his face wide with panic, his uniform torn. "They're in the walls!"

"What?"

"General Vargard! The things have broken in. They're swarming the streets!"

"In daylight?"

"General, it's dusk has fallen!"

Already? The events of the trail and within the windowless The Pitt had made all sense of time evaporate.

“They’re through,” Brovik spat. “They must have finished their tunnel. I told you to tell Rutherford earlier!”

“He would not have listened!” Vargard shot back. He turned his attention to the soldier who stood panting before him. “We must get everyone inside the keep. Gather all the survivors you can-”

“It is hopeless,” the man broke, his voice wavering. “They are everywhere. We are being slaughtered!”

Tirrius is out there! Iiana realized with a shudder.

“Get me to the top of the keep,” said a quiet voice. They turned to Lea’Nissa. “Get me and my staff there.”

“You are too badly hurt. It is a long climb.” Brovik said.

“Get me there,” she repeated. “It is the only way.”

“Let her go,” interjected one of the noblemen – anonymously, from the back of the crowd above them. “If she can help us, then let her.”

Vargard cast a poisonous look over to the group of them. Yet there was truth in the words.

“If you are sure,” he said to her.

She nodded. “I am.”

“Brovik, get her to the top of the keep.” He said, Brovik already taking the slight form of Lea’Nissa up into his arms. Firebeard stood with them, the strange, magical staff once more held in his giant hands.

“If it pleases you, sir!” came a call from above. One of Rutherford’s guard addressed Vargard. “I would grant my sword to the cause. I have grown weary of guarding fat merchants.”

“Aye!” Agreed another. A murmur of approval rippled through the guards.

“Very well,” Vargard announced. “You men, accompany these two to the top of the keep. I will try to secure the gatehouse. Iiana, you... Iiana? Where in blazes has she gone?!”

Iiana burst through the keep’s stairway, fighting against the influx of people who were pouring in from outside. Having no idea of the layout of the building, she simply followed where they came from, their haunted, terrified faces passing her in her haste. Two floors up, she made it to the gatehouse; a large, tall room with gigantic thick pillars supporting a vaulted ceiling. She barely noticed any of it. The chamber was filled with panicked people, fleeing to the keep in their efforts to escape the outside. The noise in the chamber was deafening, and she was threatened to be swept away into the building again as the crowd pressed in. Thankfully, her lithe form and grace enabled her to slip through the crowd towards the gateway, which hung open. She felt a hand grip her shoulder and turned to see the face of a Magadorian soldier.

“The city is overrun! Take refuge in the keep my lady!”

“Has Tirrius of Oun come this way?” she demanded, ignoring his plea entirely.

“Aye, he went before the alarm was sounded. He did not...”

“Give me your sword.”

He stared for her for just a moment. “He is lost...”

She snatched the man's collar up in her fists as people pushed passed them, her teeth bared and golden mane flowing free. "I will find him. Give me your sword."
He gulped. "Yes, m'lady," said the soldier, unsheathing his blade.
Her hand slid welcoming over the hilt. "In which direction is the hospital?"
"To the east, the big building. It used to be a temple to..."
She turned from him, darting through the gateway and the babble of people and into the darkening city beyond.

Vargard and his entourage emerged into the chamber moments later, having fought through the wave of people coming down the stairs at them. Brovik held Lea'Nissa tightly to him, protecting her frame from the pressing of the mob.
"Keep going!" Vargard told them, "I will hold them here."
Brovik and Firebeard with Lea'Nissa mounded the stairs which wound to the top of the keep, many floors above, while Vargard headed for the doors. The people entering the keep were thinning out. A young woman bumped into him in her haste, and looked up at him with wide eyes and a blood streaked face. "They are here! They are in the city!" She wailed. "My family..."
He took hold of her shoulders. "Go into the keep. We will hold them." He gazed at her. Her face was wild and full of sorrow, yet his voice calmed her enough for her to listen, and she nodded, moving past him.
A dozen soldiers were there, all looking fearful and close to panic. "We hold them here," he hold them, looking at each in turn. He drew his blade. "If we fall, everyone falls."
"Yes general!" they answered, grim looks darkening their features. This was the last stand of the city of Zanthé.

A terrible screech invaded from outside, and the first of the terrible creatures came into view; bounding down from a nearby rooftop. The shadow was humanoid, but twisted and wrong. It moved with erratic, but inhumanly swift movements. In the growing dusk, it could move unhindered, and approached the gateway swiftly.
"Close the gates! Bar them! Let nothing get through!"
"Wait! Wait!"

The cry came from outside. A man broke from cover, sprinting to the keep in a bid for safety. The shadow reached him first, catching him and tearing him up; terrible claws flailing at the screaming man until, seconds later, he fell silent.
"Close them!"

His men burst into action; the sight they had just witnessed momentarily stunning them. They heaved at the giant wooden doors, pushing them closed as the shadow neared, with others approaching. The doors shut with a low rumble just as the thing outside approached.

Iiana made swift progress through the streets, wasting no time in heading eastwards. She saw a spire through the houses and went in its direction, moving swiftly but cautiously. All around her she could hear the sounds of fighting; screams from men and women alike were carried on the night air, and Iiana passed several mutilated bodies in the street as the tar'tchii set about their terrible work.

She spared them quick glances, fearing that one of them may be Tirrius, before moving on, hurriedly turning a corner to find one of the tar'tchii right before her.

The thing had only moments before slain its most recent victim – a small child, who lay in a bloody heap at its feet.

It regarded her with a barely audible hiss, before rearing up slowly and bounding upon her.

If it had expected another easy kill, it would have been disappointed. Iiana did not run nor flinch as it leapt, but rolled under it, reading the things careless movement, and brought her new sword up in a wide arc as she did. It caught the demon in the flank, causing it to hiss out in pain and anger.

She regained her footing, turning to see her opponent crash into the wall of the nearest building. The building had already sustained significant damage, and the force of the thing crashing into it proved the last impact it could sustain. The large blocks of stone crashed down on top of the creature; instantly burying it under the rubble.

Iiana took a second to catch her breath; forcing her racing heart to calm. As she did so, she glanced back to the keep, and saw strange shadows dancing over the walls. It took another moment for her to realise the shadows were moving up the ramparts of the building; the tar'tchii were climbing the walls!

The things outside tore at the gates, their talons scratching and tearing at the wood. Unlike the gates of the outer wall, which could be protected from above from the towers and walkway, the gates to the keep not only lacked this benefit, but were also largely ornamental; placed by human carpenters when the city was settled by humans. Because of this, the claws soon began to tear through the timbers, revealing small gashes which were becoming larger and larger with each passing second.

“Keep them out!” ordered Vargard, his voice filling the chamber. He held a spear in his hands; one plucked from the ornamental arms adorning the walls, and thrust it through one of the tears in the wood. His teeth set in a fierce grin as he heard a screech from outside.

The soldiers of Magador gathered about him, following his actions. Others were there too; the personal guard of Rutherford had joined them, resolving to atone for their past inactivity.

“Better to die here than with this pompous fools below!” one of them had announced. Would it be enough? The gate was disintegrating before their eyes. And soon more gaps were appearing in the woodwork than there were men to guard them.

Hurry, Lea’Nissa. Whatever you’re going to do, do it fast!

Firebeard emerged panting onto the battlements on the roof of the keep. Below, the city stretched out into the darkness of the night. Fires burned on the streets below, and the sounds of struggle, fighting and suffering drifted upwards like ghosts in the wind.

Brovik followed moments later, Lea’Nissa in his arms. She was growing weaker with each passing moment, her face ashen in the dim light of the torches scattered around. The members of Rutherford’s guard – a dozen strong, filtered out onto the square roof behind them.

“What now? What do you need?” Brovik asked her.

“My staff,” she said, “and time. I need time. Please, take me to the edge.”

Brovik did so. Her slight weight did not bother him; the strength of his arms had not faded yet, and the climb up the keep had barely winded him.

No sooner had he reached the parapet than a shadow leapt from beyond it, springing up before them like a nightmare taking form.

“Velmar’s Helm!” cursed Firebeard, eyes wide.

It hissed at them, the inhuman sound sending a chill down even Brovik’s spine.

“Set me down,” Lea’Nissa said quietly.

Brovik made to do so when the thing attacked, bounding forwards with its talons raised. Had Firebeard not been there, it would have killed both human and atia, yet it only met with a fell swoop of a hand axe, drawn forth from the dwarf’s belt, which crashed down on it from the side. The thing shuddered and lay still.

“My staff,” Lea’Nissa gasped, barely able to stand on her own. “Quickly, please.”

Firebeard handed it over without hesitation. His ears pricked and another of the demons emerged over the walls.

“How much time do you need?” asked Brovik.

“A few moments. Please, time.”

The thing charged at them. Brovik drew steel and roared a battlecry. Firebeard joined him, their voices raised in unison as Lea’Nissa began to chant behind them.

The hospital had been overrun.

Iiana’s heart sank as she saw it. The windows of the old temple – to a god now ignored by the people of Magador – were broken, its stonework scarred with claw marks, its insides dark and showing no signs of life.

Did he make it this far? She wondered. Perhaps he found it like this and moved on?

With no way of knowing, she had to look inside. She noticed things were getting quieter, with the screeches and clashes of battle now mostly coming from behind her – from the keep. She stole a look back at it. She could see the structure illuminated in the fires of the city, its granite walls reflecting the light. The tar’tchii were focusing their attacks there – where the survivors of the city were hiding out. She saw them clamber up the sides of the building like a swarm of spiders.

A noise within the hospital made her snap her attentions back to it. There was a scratching within, faint and rhythmic. Steeling herself she approached the door.

It had been ripped to shreds; the wooden doors now in tatters on the hinges, with the bulk of them laying as splinters on the floor. Beyond, the doorway led into a main hall, where service would have taken place, but it looked like this was where the injured had been tended to.

Bodies were everywhere. In the wane light she could see figures on the floor, all in disarray as they’d been slain fleeing from something.

Her heart leapt into her mouth as she spotted a uniform of Oun on one of those lain strewn on the floor, but the man was too short and stocky to be Tirrius.

The noise persisted. It was coming from the back of the main chamber; a scratching, like bone on stone... there! She could see it. One of the tar’tchii, detached from the main pack. It had taken interest in something in the far corner – enough interest not to notice her.

She could have escaped because of that. But escape to where? The city was overrun and the keep under siege. She grimly realized that if she were to leave, her only option would be to try to slip away from the city altogether, ensuring her survival but condemning her

to a lifetime of sorrow and regret, or she wander the streets in a vain attempt to find Tirrius, which was likely to only result in her being killed.

The tar'tchii was after something. But what?

She approached, slow and quiet. She knew not how keen these creatures' senses were, and struggled to keep her breathing soft and quiet because of the beating of her heart. Can it hear that, she pondered, and resolved that she'd just have to hope that it couldn't.

It was dark in the back of the hospital. She could barely discern its form from that of the surrounding dimness. It hissed in the gloom – an angry, frustrated hiss. Once more, it dragged its talons down the side of the wall.

She was almost on it – mere feet away – about to strike and cast down the fell beast, when another hiss came from her left, sending a chill through her to her bones. Another tar'tchii looked down at her, from up near a broken window near the apex of the chamber. Its form was saluted against the crimson glow of the city outside. There was something different about it, like it had too many limbs.

The new interloper had spoiled her surprise. The first tar'tchii span around as the second hissed, rearing up as he saw her. She backed off, her sword held up, ready for it to pounce. This one didn't, though, but sank low, melting into the shadows of the dim place. She gasped, backing off further as she lost track of it.

She was so preoccupied by the one she had lost that she momentarily forgot about the one lurking above her. It came at her swiftly; she only became aware of it at the last second as her battle-honed reflexes saved her life, rolling low and quick. It swept down at her, its claws missing her by inches, and then swept back up again into the rafters.

It had wings, she realized.

She backed to the doorway, regretting her decision to enter this place. A low snarl from behind her stopped her dead, and she whirled around to see another at the doorway.

Another, or the one she'd lost sight of?

It didn't move, neither hiding nor attacking, merely crouching, and blocking her path.

“Haaa!” she challenged, raising her sword again. It hissed low, backing away slightly.

The flying one swooped down again, swift and silent. She could barely see it, the blackness of its body melding with the building, its wings making no sound as it glided through the air. The only clue she got was its talons raking across the wood of the rafters as it left them, and the sound made her roll again, darting aside as it dove at her, and then back up again.

The one at the door hissed once more. She heard the other do likewise. They were speaking to one another.

She challenged the one at the door again, and it reared up and slashed at her. The attacks were wild and obviously going to fall short. It was warding her back. It was trapping her in here, for the other to hunt!

“Fight me, damn you!” she grit her teeth, lunging at the flightless demon. It leapt back, avoiding her thrust, but snarled and hurried into the doorway, blocking her way and enabling the other to hunt her.

“Fine!”

She'd play their game. She turned her back on the door guardian, looking into the rafters, her eyes searching the darkness for her assailant but finding nothing but gloom and shadow.

That was until torchlight suddenly flared from the corner of the chamber. The event shocked Iana as much as it did the tar'tchii, as her gasp of surprise joined their screeches. A soldier of Oun stood, with torch in one hand, blade in the other, with the small, scratched, stone door cracked open behind him.

“Tirrius!”

“Behind you!” he called to her.

Just in time, she caught sight of the door guardian leaping at her; with a new player joining in, it seemed that the rules of the game had changed.

She yelled out, bringing her sword around as she turned. It cut, deep, but the thing bundled into her, sending her sprawling head over heels with the impact.

It was dead, but it as they fell it landed atop her. The feel of its rough skin made her shudder with revulsion, and the smell of the thing – the smell of burnt flesh – assaulted her nostrils. She heaved the thing off her, crawling out from under it, resisting the urge to gag.

Tirrius joined her in the center of the room. They stood back to back, each with weapons ready, each scanning the rafters above.

“We should make a break for it,” she said.

“We cannot. When the attack began, I managed to hide many of the injured behind the door yonder. If we leave, it will slay them all.”

She had half a mind to suggest leaving anyway. She would have reasoned the people hiding would likely die whether they stayed or not. She would have had them both flee the city, slipping far away in the darkness, to live a life elsewhere together.

But she realised his devotion to duty still ran strong. Hers never had, and had faded even more so in the time she'd spent in the wilds. That time had made her look upon things differently. Tirrius still put other people first. Had she become selfish, or merely more practical?

They formed a protective circle around Lea'Nissa, her chanting becoming more powerful and pronounced as it continued. Despite her blood-loss, she now stood up straight and strong, the staff held firmly aloft in her small hand.

The tar'tchii advanced from all sides, swarming up the sides of the keep, clambering onto the roof. They seemed to sense the power of the mage, and that she held the greatest threat. Some of the beasts made erratic lunges at her, which enabled her guardians to hit them in the flank and injure or dispatch them. Others were more cautious, striking at the men who guarded her. Two of Rutherford's old guard had been brought down, but the large pikes some of them wielded kept the demons at bay.

“How much longer?” Firebeared gasped, his chest heaving. There came no reply from the atia, lost in her spell, the chanting reaching a crescendo.

Then came the glow, emanating from the staff. The creatures staggered back, fearful of it. It grew, becoming brighter. One of them shrieked, bowling over one of the guards and launching itself at her, claws ready to rend her delicate frame.

“No!” Brovik shouted.

Then there was a flash, the spell completed, the light enveloping everything. The creatures hissed as everything was consumed in a blinding whiteness which dazzled Brovik and made him fall back, filling him with an inappropriate feeling of wellness and warmth.

The creatures hissed in pain, their cries loud and tormented, sounding out in the night air. Mere instants later the light subsided, the warmth fled, the creatures were gone.

Lea’Nissa sank to her knees. To Brovik’s surprise, she was sobbing.

“I am too weak,” she said, her head hanging. “It is not enough.”

True enough, he realised, the creatures on the roof were slain, but the city was still full of the sounds of death.

“We are all doomed.” Said the mage.

“No. You can try again!” urged Brovik. “You have power...”

She shook her head, looking at him. “It is spent.” She moved her hand to her bloody shoulder. “I am too weak.”

“Excuse me,” a small voice said. They all turned in surprise. A small figure stood in the doorway. “I think I can help.”

The sound of the tar’tchii perishing on the top of the keep sounded out across the city like a fog horn on a quiet ocean. Their cries drifted into the hospital and reached the ears of Tirrius and Valeris, and their winged assailant hear it also.

It reacted to the sound with a hideous shriek, bounding across the rafters and swooping out of the door on its leathery, tattered wings.

Iiana and Tirrius pursued it outside, watching as it bore itself upwards above the rooftops, towards the top of the great keep.

“Are you sure?” Lea’Nissa asked. “It could be...”

“I am sure.” Brass answered. “I could have run. I decided to say. Its time I did something useful.”

A sad smile broke her lips. “She would be very proud.”

“I hope she will be.”

“Come,” she said, raising to her feet. She stepped towards the edge of the battlements, Brass joining her as she began to chant once again.

Those around stood dumbfounded, quietly watching as the two strangers stood together. Lea’Nissa’s chant became louder, just as before, her staff raised above her, the city below. She glanced down. The tar’tchii were swarming below, scrambling up the walls toward them. She carried on unabated, her staff beginning to glow once more, and her voice ringing out over the city.

By chance, Firebeard spotted a movement in the darkness of the night, something that shouldn’t be there.

“Your spear!” he demanded of one of the guards nearby, snatching it from the man before the other had time to react or protest.

Firebeard hastily levelled it in the direction of Iiana.

“What are you doing, man?” demanded Brovik, thinking his friend gone mad.

Firebeard launched the spear with all his might. The weapon passed over Lea’Nissa’s head by mere feet, soaring out over the city. It struck something nigh invisible in the night; a thing which let out an ear-piercing screech and plummeted from the sky.

Iiana watched from below, her head arched up to see the slight figure, bright and brilliant, chant her spell.

“It’s happening!” Tirrius gasped.

“I don’t see how she can make it reach...” Iiana began. Then there was a little movement. A small figure stepped up onto the rampart by Lea’Nissa, as her voice rose higher, reaching its peak.

Then all there was was light.

The explosion washed all over the city, the brightness searing all black and dark from the walls. It penetrated the windows, the broken rooves. It shone through the alleys and illuminated the streets. It wiped through the tar’tchii, turning them to dust as they climbed the walls and scratched at the gate. The burning light offered them no solace as it burned down on them, bathing the city and all within. To the people who felt it, they were touched with warmth and comfort. The tar’tchii were burned to nothing.

The city faded into blackness again. The cries of suffering were gone. A stillness settled in the dark for the first time since the tar’tchii attacked.

Epilogue

They stood overlooking the city at the spot where Lea’Nissa had cast a spell which had ended the terrible siege. Four days on, the cost was still being counted. Almost half of the people in the city had been killed. Mass services were being held in open spaces in and around the city. The victory had come at such a cost that it did not feel like one at all, and the mourning that followed stifled any celebrations which might have taken place.

“And what of you, my lady?” Vargard asked.

Lea’Nissa stared out onto the rooftops, her gaze unfaltering. “I will stay a while. I wish to help your people rebuild their lives.”

Vargard tipped his hat. “Most kind of you. Especially since the welcome you received upon your arrival. We cannot thank you enough for-“

She raised a hand, turning to him. Her face was impassive. “That is also why I stay. To teach that it is better to listen first and understand, before judgement is made.”

“I understand. I hope your presence will be to the betterment of every person living here.” Her gaze drifted from Vargard to Iiana, who stood leaning against the battlements, her head hanging. “I will ensure that people do not forget what happened here. The sacrifices which were made, and by whom.”

A thin smile formed on Iiana’s lips, but she otherwise didn’t move. Tirrius curled an arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. She allowed it. It was a rare display of public affection between the two.

“Are you sure you won’t stay,” Vargard asked the two of them.

“My time is served, I think,” Tirrius smiled.

Vargard nodded. With the death of Rutherford, he’d taken the reins on running the city. It had been a role he’d taken on out of necessity, at first, since none of the surviving merchants in Rutherford’s company had shown any aptitude for the task. Now, a week on, he found himself becoming accustomed to it, and settled into the role well. The people knew him, they trusted him, and they listened to him.

“We will do it tomorrow, at dawn. A cart will be waiting for you outside the keep. Jump in the back, and it will take you far from the city.”

“What of the driver?”

“It belongs to a man who is moving with his family to Rustor. Says he’s lost all taste for this place. He says he’s never coming back here, and feels that he owes you both enough to not endanger you further.”

“Good,” Tirrius said, satisfied. “Thank you.”

They had to slip away. His men would not understand. *Always Oun, Ever Oun.*

Abandoning everything to live as a nomad in a foreign land for the sake of the love of another would mark him a traitor and brand him for death.

He and Iiana would now have that in common, and he’d share it with her willingly. She had lost much coming for him, and he would do what he could for her now.

“You need not thank us. Without you – any of you – this city would be dead, along with everyone in it.”

“And he who made it happen owed us the least.” Iiana said in a cold voice.

“We will see it remembered.” Lea’Nissa told him.

“He could have gone away. I don’t know why he stayed.”

“For you,” Lea’Nissa said evenly. “He loved you. He will want you to be happy now. He wanted you to be proud.”

Iiana smiled, but this time it was warmer. “I am.”

In the years which followed tales of a couple from Oun would spread across the lawless planes of Magador, and made things better where they went. The city of Zanthé had a statue erected in the entrance square, so that all who came to the city could see it and be reminded.

A plaque at its base read: “Brass, Savior of Zanthé. Yet not Stature nor Creed be Judged in these walls.”

It, along with the legend which grew of the events of the final night of the seige, did go some way to alleviate the misgivings people had of the demi-races of the world. And, it was a tall statue. Brass would have liked that the most, Iiana thought.