

This new day in the temple was intriguingly calm. Everyone went about their business, the servants were, as always, disconcertingly efficient. What had to be done was done, yet an oppressive aura weighed on people's minds. A light icy rain had begun to fall before dawn and danced according to the whims of the wind. The members of the makeshift company were scattered, enjoying a moment of calm after their perilous adventures, and before the next ones.

After the morning prayers, a storm began to rumble and forced the priestesses to take shelter. The courtyard emptied, and Oscar, alone in the cloister, felt an unbearable weight on his shoulders.

— Am I responsible for their fate? he whispered. They chose to help me, yes, but none can tell what we will have to face. This might be too much for us to handle. They could have refused. They stayed because they feel concerned. They cannot ignore what is happening. Alhuia seems better suited to lead us, she knows a lot more than she shared.

Overwhelmed by doubts and apprehension, he decided to clear his mind. He returned to the temple and eventually reached the kitchens.

— Would you look at that ? We have a visitor, girls !

— Here's a surprise !

The two elderly women smiled as they wiped their hands on their raw linen aprons. They invited Oscar to have a piece of yesterday's pie and to sit by the fire.

— No one comes to see you here ? he asked.

— Oh yes, it happens from time to time, huh ?

— Sure, the priestesses fly by, steal a piece of fruit or chat for a few minutes. Ultimately, it is the matriarch that we see the most.

Other servants arrived, surprised by the call of the first. They greeted their guest with the same distinction as the healers.

— So Judith spends some time with you, the young man continued.

— To give you an idea, by tonight, the rest of the pie will be gone, and she will have something to do with it, if you know what I mean.

— She likes to eat, can tell you that, admitted a barely adult woman. But she also comes to find out if we like it here.

— Is that the case ?

They agreed unanimously. A little later, Elise arrived in turn. The small group shared a warm moment away from their troubles.

Tiara kept examining Sadora who was becoming more and more patient and cooperative. Sometimes they would talk about something else, about their lives before, which surprised them both. The rest of the time, the druid spent it in a small laboratory set up with resources from the underground dome. Sadora, for her part, remained in front of the fireplace and sharpened her blades while humming some folklore songs from her lands.

Aëlyss and Yatika were relaxing in the natural pools of the underground hot spring. This large cave was a cozy cocoon that allowed one to regenerate quickly and peacefully.

- You were born in Kuradalar, that's obvious, said Aëlyss. Which island are you from ?
- From Maharatagi, the main island. I lived in Varnasi as...
- As a slave, I saw scars on your wrists and ankles.
- Ah... I did not hid them well enough then.
- Are you ashamed of these ?
- Well, yes ! It is hideous, and for some reason even magic hasn't been able to make them disappear. I would give a lot to get rid of it for good.
- You would make a mistake.
- Excuse me ?
- If your past is still painful, you should be facing it everyday, not trying to hide it away from your mind. Memories will rush back over and over again, until you accept and learn from what happened. It was important for you to live what you went through.
- I doubt it.
- You would not be here if not for your struggles.
- Maybe... I would rather sleep at peace though.

They were silent for a long moment. Aëlyss dived before climbing up onto a ledge to clean her white hair. Yatika remained seated and cast furtive looks at her. She glanced at her wet pale skin, glittering under the candle flames. The young woman's eyes followed the curves of the elf's thighs and hips, her waist, her arms delicately hiding her round breasts. She ended up staring at her face, her pink lips and her otherworldly white eyes. It didn't take longer for the Scholar elf to notice it.

- What do you want to ask me so much ?
- Wha... Umm, you seem to know the Dry Islands.
- Knowing is a bit too much. We can say that they are not totally foreign to me.
- You went there ?
- Not on land. I fought pirates many times, back when they raided my country. They used to strike hard and fast. They pillaged our greenhouse-villages.
- What is that ?
- The climate in Mihuryss is harsh, however, the soil is surprisingly rich. Cities focused on blacksmithing and magic, villages dealt with agriculture. Often the greenhouses were so large and numerous that they outnumbered the number of homes. We also dug dark cellars for the production of certain mushrooms and other things... There were magnificent things in my house, I assure you. I would never have destroyed all of this.

She suddenly seemed overcome with fatigue and sorrow as she thought of her native land. Yatika realized all the things her new companions had experienced, and what she could learn from them. Not wishing to end the discussion on this unpleasant note, the tanned young woman added :

- So, you fought against the pirates and that led you to Kuradalar.
- Yes. We first pursued them to an isolated enclave on the high seas. Despite significant losses, we were able to defeat them and push the survivors back into the Islands. With Laaria's help, a new squadron was raised to hunt down the

survivors and destroy their dockside lairs. It was a great success, for a time. I suspect they had major support from the Caliph at that time. This is probably still the case today. Because of this, they can always protect their resources and recover from defeat quickly.

— When I was there, rumors were circulating about this outrageous alliance. You are certainly right, Kuradalar can attack the continent without going to war.

— Smart, human.

— Yre's goodness ! Yatika suddenly exclaimed. The expedition, the alliance between elves and Laaria. You're talking about the Lonesome Hunt, right ?

— Exactly.

— What a surprise ! I've read stories about it. They are not all in your favor, unfortunately. The authors took a lot of liberties.

— Do you keep this kind of document here ?

— No, it was years ago. My m...former master had a large library. Slaves don't usually know how to read, but his wife was keen to teach me. She liked it when I read stories to her.

— Surprising.

— The "Hunt" took place during the reign of Ashir-Maz-Tulzan, in seven hundred...

— Seven hundred and seventy of our Age. One hundred and forty-three years ago.

— Oh...

— You wonder how old I am.

— This is inappropriate, I shouldn't...

— Don't be embarrassed every time you want to ask or say something. I am one hundred and ninety-three years old.

— Very well, Princess.

Aëlyss jumped out of the water and grabbed a small amphora of medicinal oil. She massaged herself for a long time, chasing away the pain still lingering in her body. Yatika watched her out of the corner of her eye. She had many scars, not to mention the runes that bruised her back. However, the young woman found in her a supernatural charm, beyond the legendary beauty of the elves. Something about her was irresistible and she found it difficult to look away.

— Almost two centuries, and barely truly lived half of it, grumbled the Scholar.

— I beg your pardon ?

— Ah, excuse me, I was thinking out loud. The creature that trapped me and ravaged my country robbed me of seventy-three years of my life. Without my mastery of magic, I would probably still be trapped in the mirror.

Yatika remained silent. The elf realized the extravagance of what she was saying and smiled. She wrapped herself in a long towel and came back to sit on the edge of the pool.

— The monster who tricked me and my blood trapped me in a mirror of some sort. I also suspect it of having usurped my identity.

— Hence the rumors about you.

— Indeed. This thing came from Dehest. After hearing Alhuia's astonishing speech, I believe I can safely say that this is one of those unknown entities. I do

not know if she still lives, if she still walks around Mirh. When I came out of the mirror, I saw nothing around me except ruins, snow and... ashes.

She shivered. When she met Yatika's intense gaze, she walked away nimbly and added only a few trembling words before taking her leave. The tanned woman heard the elf's words echo in her mind. The princess had awakened from one nightmare only to plunge into another, perhaps even worse. All this had to stop, so that no one else had to suffer from Dehest's attacks, its malevolence and its black magic.

The sun set without having shown itself all day. The clouds thickened further and predicted several days of rain. Sheltered in the courtyard, the horses stamped and whinnied at each other. Oscar and Priscilla came to calm them down. Then, they heard the gallop of a nearby troop. They barely had time to warn the others when an armed column appeared at the edge of the woods. Their relief was immediate when they saw the scaled armors under green and gold tabards of Agalkaïr's soldiers, the second largest Sylfan city. Judith welcomed them. The officer at the head of the convoy jumped from his saddle. His stern expression faded as he bowed to the assembly. He whistled and waved a hand in the air, ordering his men to patrol around the temple.

— Good to see you, Matriarch.

— Likewise, my friend. What are the news ? added the dean, with a somber look.

— You were right, I'm afraid, as crazy as it seems to me.

— What's the matter ? Sadora intervened.

— Gray elves made a breakthrough upstream of the river. I cannot say how they achieved such a prowess. To go so far behind the front without alerting anyone until now, it is witchcraft. They're coming straight at you.

— What ? shouted Yatika. How many are they ?

— We killed twenty-five warriors. The next second, more arrived from all sides and almost surrounded us.

— Tell us how many, insisted Oscar.

— A battalion, almost. There are at least two hundred and fifty of them, but if they covered their rear, reinforcements could arrive at any moment.

— How much time do we have ? Priscilla asked.

— A few hours, they will arrive on the other bank, which will force them to make a detour via the bridge. If fighting is necessary, this would be the ideal place to contain them.

— We are sorely short of time, whispered the dean. Lieutenant, can your men be ready to escort the priestesses to safety ?

— Of course, my Lady. We remain at your disposal.

Despite the distress that struck the healers and servants, they were quickly ready to leave. Fear was visible in their eyes. Some prayed, others sobbed. Judith watched them mass in the courtyard as a section of horsemen formed to guide them out of the ravine. Less than two hours later, the procession sneaked through

the forest and disappeared into the night. Nonetheless, a group of women in white robes decided to stay and support the matriarch and her allies. Judith didn't insist, nor did the elves. Lieutenant Azal remained at the temple with twenty skilled fighters.

The next two hours were terribly long. The horsemen stood guard along the bank despite the bitter cold and drizzle. Oscar remained in front of the cloister door, flanked by Sadora. They spoke little, and scanned the darkness in search of the slightest suspicious movement. The wait was unbearable. Aëlyss joined them carrying bowls of soup. She stayed, without saying a single word. The elf wondered if the enemy was not already there, watching them from the woods on the north bank, or the top of the cliff.

— Do you really think they passed without a fight ? Sadora finally asked.

— I fear they did encounter resistance, and yet, it was not enough to stop them, Oscar admitted in a sinister tone. This is what worries me.

— The front is very far from here Aëlyss added.

— Indeed, but if they bypassed the Princely Alliance from the south, they were able to reach Mareno and follow the northern border with the Parulean Kingdom. No one would wait for them there. An army would be caught, but not small groups.

— This path would have taken them days !

— Two weeks of forced march, at least.

— That means they began walking when I got here the first time, Oscar whispered.

— What a fucking mess I stepped into this time, Sadora growled.

— I am telling you this again, you do not have to stay here. Even if you agreed earlier. No one took an oath.

— We know, lad. That's not the question. Whether we stay here or run away, Dehest will come upon us one day.

— We might as well face it and pray for the best, said Aëlyss.

— Baed alhkara ! thundered a patrolman.

— What was that ? Oscar asked.

— He says there is movement in the woods, the Scholar stammered.

A silhouette crept out of the shadows, walked to the bank and stopped. The elven horsemen were on the lookout, watching all directions, anticipating a trap. The stranger raised a weapon which reflected the light of the torches. Then, dozens of warriors came out of the forest and lined up in close ranks.

On the steps, the matriarch and the priestesses began an incantation. A luminous sphere appeared in the courtyard and rose twenty feet above the old tree. It projected a golden light which radiated to the north shore, revealing the feared identity of the intruders : the Gray elves were there. They came to life as one and set off towards the bridge. The elves rushed to cut them off.

— I'm going with them, said Oscar, jumping on his saddle.

- What are you going to do ? asked Aëlyss. The elves are competent.
- They never fought Gray ones, I did. We need to strike them hard before they reveal their plan.
- In that case, I go with you, to protect you.
- Let us barricade the temple and fortify the cloister, Priscilla said.

Oscar and Aëlyss reached the bridge shortly before their opponents. Agalkair's soldiers fired a first volley of arrows, felling more than ten creatures. The others continued to progress without blinking. Instead of protecting themselves, they pushed their pace. A second salvo caused the front lines to collapse. Oscar observed the scene with an attentive eye and noticed the subterfuge.

- They sacrifice themselves to protect something ! he screamed. It is coming !

Suddenly, the shield bearers parted. A band of never seen before Gray ones appeared. For elven looking creatures, these shown orcish traits : tall, strong musculature, war paints, few protections and two weapons. They charges immediately, in terrifying silence. The archers fell back, letting swordsmen handling the situation.

The shock was astonishingly brutal. The elves were driven back by the first furious assaults of the corrupted orcs, however, they suffered few losses. It was an outstanding clash. The elves stepped back a few feet under the furious assaults, however, they suffered almost no losses.

They eventually contained the flow of creatures and regained ground. However, the rest of the evil troop took the opportunity to continue their journey towards the temple. The scholar elf and Oscar blocked their progression, supported by the archers back on their mounts. They had exchanged their long bows for smaller models adapted to horseback, short distances shots.

As arrows ran on the Gray ones, the two fighters on foot played skill to stop the creatures' progression. They had barely defeated their adversaries when a second wave marched on the cobblestones of the bridge. The Gray ones came out of the forest in sinister and mute troops, masking their true numbers and potential traps.

The defense reformed, the young man and the princess alongside the wounded lieutenant at the front. Once again, arrows felled many creatures, forming a carpet of black metal and livid flesh that the survivors trampled under their boots. The flow of dark warriors only stopped when there were too many of them already invading the bridge. Overwhelmed, the elven defenders perished in great numbers.

- We have to go, Sadora rasped.
- They are holding on, let's instead ensure their retreat if that changes. Let us be ready to fight back their pursuers when they return to us. It is necessary that...

Ripples broke the calm surface of the river. The splashes shimmered under the magical rays of the golden orb. Suddenly, a pack of putrescent creatures climbed onto the grass, uttering long wails. Thirty rotten bodies came to life and stood up on their wasted legs. They headed towards the temple under the frightened gaze of its inhabitants.

— These are no Gray elves, growled Priscilla.

— For Yre's sake, whispered Alhuia. This is necromancy. These are dead people. A dark being reanimated their empty husks.

The teeming mass stretched skeletal arms forward as they approached the doors. Their path was suddenly cut off, however, when the watchers and a few priestesses projected a pale veil in front of the entrance. The dead trampled each other as they tried to breach through. They began to strike the veil which vibrated under their irregular blows.

In front of the bridge, the elves were weakening. Oscar held three enemies at bay by using the piles of carcasses to his advantage. Aëlyss relentlessly struck with precision. She delayed the use of magic, as she knew the runes would cause her terrible pain and weaken her quickly. She still stood on her saddle and ordered her horse to kick the creatures. Finally, she managed to get rid of her attackers and scouted the battlefield. With a furtive glance back, she discerned the horde of monsters at the doors of the cloister. Seized with horror, she screamed :

— Oscar ! The temple is under attack !

He broke free from his enemies. Realizing the peril of the situation, he joined the lieutenant to organize a retreat. At that moment, the Gray ones redoubled their efforts to prevent them from running back. The defenders fell one after the other, there were only twelve left under the orders of the tried officer. A third wave was already forming on the north shore. This would signify their death if they did not manage to return to the temple.

— We must destroy the bridge ! shouted the lieutenant. Can you do this ?

— Protect me, said the princess, dismounting.

She sheathed back her weapon and dropped to one knee. The hour had come, time to unleash magic at the heavy price of pain and exhaustion. She stretched her hands forward, immediately feeling uneasiness in her mind. She focused harder, ignoring the chaos and imminent death around her.

Alongside the defenders, Oscar fought like a beast to push the Gray ones back. The Scholar began an incantation between her clenched jaws, trying to endure the burn that spread in her flesh. A shrill sound almost made her lose track and itching took hold of her arms. The longer the spell dragged on, the more she felt like passing out. She swayed, sweat dripping from her forehead. Nausea disrupted the flow of her words. She sensed magic abandoning her and a tear ran down her cheek.

The young man caught her just as she was about to collapse. He knelt down and leaned her against him.

— I've got you, finish what you started, he growled.

— Thank you. Get ready to run.

Suddenly, Sadora appeared and killed the creatures who attacked her companions. She struck with unusual vigor while uttering insults. Priscilla launched her steed through the enemies ranks, her weapon striking those who had not been thrown to the ground.

The stone pillar vibrated and cracked. Fragments fell into the water. Aëlyss moaned, clenching her hands around what seemed to be an invisible rope. She pulled once, and the blocks dislodged an inch. With a painful effort, she pulled again, tearing away most of the structure with a dull rumble. More stones fell and the bridge wobbled dangerously. The colorless elf sagged, sighing. Oscar immediately picked her up and put an arm around her waist as he headed towards the temple. He was about to call his allies for the retreat.

Sadora had been isolated from the rest of the defenders and was retreating further and further towards the river. Her opponents unconsciously threw themselves at her, without avoiding blows. They crashed heavily into the grass, pushing the mortal further and further away. Before she knew it, her leg sank into the shallow water. A hand grabbed her knee, then another and they began to drag her down. Priscilla intervened in time to get her out of this mess and they left with the rest of the group. They were lagging behind, however, and the dark warriors increased their pace to stay on their heels.

The elves fired their last arrows to facilitate the escape of the two women. Finally, the bridge fell on its side with a heavy crash, carrying away several dozen Gray ones. The most important thing, however, was the impossibility for more troops to cross. One more step towards victory, but the night was not over and the undead were still at the doors. The four companions charged the nightmarish horde, slashing everything that came their way. Quickly, the dead turned from the weakening veil to face their attackers.

These creatures were slow and disorganized, but the Gray ones that the elves could not hold back were fast approaching to strike them in the back. To heighten the terror, a second horde of walking corpses emerged from the water and advanced towards them. This time, there were almost a hundred of them. Panicked, the group ran away around the cloister's wall.

— Yatika is waiting for us on the west wall. Come ! Priscilla thundered, leading the way.

Then, they witnessed the death of the last elves as they fought off the Gray ones. The protector, seeing her companions arrive, handed them the ladder by which they had exited earlier. Priscilla stayed down while Oscar brought the Scholar elf up. The young man climbed up in turn, then Sadora. Last, the noblewoman rushed forward while the dead closed their hands on her. The ladder broke.

The tattooed warrior barely caught her, but the blood staining their hands made their grip slippery. Before anyone could intervene, Priscilla collapsed in the middle of the horde, screaming in terror. Oscar's blood boiled and he jumped. He slashed with the full extent of his arms, cutting the limp creatures in two, severing the arms and heads, breaking the bones. The ferocity of his assault gave the priestesses just enough time to act. They launched luminous projectiles which stunned the monsters. The young man made the short ladder for his friend, then climbed the facade with Sadora's help.

They returned to the courtyard when a young woman uttered a shrill cry. The door to the courtyard opened ajar and gesticulating arms appeared. The veil was finally torn and the attackers rushed into the breach, bellowing. Yatika leapt and brought down her scimitar on the dead. Suddenly, a flock of crows swooped down on them and tore their cadaverous faces to pieces. The attack, however, only succeeded in distracting a certain number of them. The carcasses piled up, preventing the defenders from closing the door. Furthermore, the hinges screeched as they were dislodged from the walls. Tiara staggered as the creatures managed to catch and devour several birds that were struggling in vain.

— You're going to regret this, she grumbled as she moved forward.

—The door is going to give way ! Oscar said.

— Let them come, screamed the redhead. Move back !

She stood facing the entrance while her companions gave up defense. Suddenly seized with uncontrollable rage, the druid roared and reared up. The doors broke open as she slammed both fists into the ground. The slabs heaved, the ground rolled like a wave and furious roots pierced the surface. Like a cavalry charge, they crashed into the horde rushing in the courtyard. The dead were pushed back, torn to pieces, thrown into the air before ending up buried in the crevices. When the plants plunged back into the ground, they revealed an amalgam of plowed soil, broken weapons and bloody flesh. The door thus freed, the group hastened to close and barricade the passage.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't last long. Besides, another cry of distress rose above the chaos. On the roof of the cloister stood the last Gray ones. The undead had piled up in front of the west wall forming a teeming ramp for their evil acolytes. The livid warriors jumped into the courtyard. Some collapsed under the weight of their own armor and broke their legs. The majority, however, escaped unscathed and rushed towards the priestesses.

Alhuïa threatened them with a stunning scream and unsheathed her blade in a crystalline hiss. She revealed all her fighting skills, defeating three opponents in the blink of an eye. Yatika and Priscilla came to support her, as did Kynae. Elise brought a crate of potions and took care of Aëlyss. She made her drink some mixtures which eased her pain and gave her enough strength to stand up.

In turn, the companions came to take a sip of a beverage which made them more

alert. The fatigue and pain dissipated slightly. The apothecary offered the druid a sticky paste which inhibited the tremors resulting from her incantation. The endurance of the defenders was severely tested. The Gray elves continued to jump into the courtyard as more undead began to knock on the rickety barricade.

The White Princess took it upon herself to protect the priestesses while they returned to the temple. Sadora, Priscilla and Oscar fought tirelessly. The first held the passageway while the other two contained the advance of the creatures in the center of the courtyard. This was without taking into account the horde of walking carcasses which were massing out of sight. They overcame the makeshift barricade, permanently tearing the doors from the wall. The first dead were carried away by their entrance and were buried under the following ones. In a few seconds, they invaded half the courtyard.

– To the temple ! Priscilla screamed.

– We can contain them in front of the steps ! replied Sadora.

The fighters withdrew. Judith broke the spell of the luminous sphere. Her voice was accompanied by a powerful wave that struck the creatures. They backed away groaning and some fell limply. The dean repeated the operation, once again shaking the horde. Alongside Yatika, Elise joined her, another crate in her hands. She took out small vials which she threw in the faces of the attackers. The liquid began to eat away at their flesh. Although they did not react to pain, most suddenly collapsed. The young woman used all of her projectiles while the matriarch pushed them back with her powerful voice.

Yatika felt fear squeezing her heart, witnessing the horrifying pack just a few steps away from the old woman. Suddenly, the tree in the center of the courtyard creaked, shaking its long branches. It rumbled, sounding like a threat to the intruders and began to lash them with its flexible boughs. Its colossal strength was enough to split fragile skulls and lacerate soft flesh. Tiara maintained her spell long enough to tear dozens of undead apart. Without the orb's light, the courtyard had turned into a nightmarish scene.

The priestesses carried torches while the watchers brought heavy jugs of lamp oil. With a sweeping gesture, the Scholar made them levitate and projected them to either side of the cloister. Oscar and Alhuïa threw the torches into the glistening puddles which burst into flames with a heavy roar, setting fire to several of their enemies. The light bounced back, casting frenzied shadows in all directions. Priscilla and Sadora joined Yatika down the steps just as the matriarch weakened. Kynae worked to provide care for the dean with a few more healers. Judith was livid and drenched in sweat after the phenomenal effort she had exerted.

The defenders used everything they had but the flood of undead continued to pour into the courtyard. The druid let go of her spell, also exhausted. Elise had no potions left, only offering water to quench the intense thirst of her companions. The creatures took over the first three steps. Soon after, they were standing on

the fifth. Despite the defenders extraordinary efforts, they fell back again.

As the situation escalated, Judith stood up and grabbed her rosary. She returned to the steps, supported by the watchers, and raised her hands to the sky. A blast swept the stairs, dislodging some of the tiles. The carcasses were pushed back abruptly and uttered irregular wailing. The old woman coughed and staggered. Still, she prepared to strike again. A movement ran through the evil tide. Yatika was the only one to notice it. Her blood ran cold and her breath died between her lips. The young woman screamed as she rushed toward the dean. A Gray elf hidden among the carcasses appeared, a spear in hand. The dean raised her arms a second time, repeating the incantation. Yatika and her opponent struck at the same time.

The creature collapsed, her throat cut clean, ending up buried under the mindless horde. The young woman jumped back to avoid the grip of the dead, and was about to return to the hall when her gaze landed on the wooden shaft that pierced the matriarch's chest. In shock, the watchers remained silent and accompanied Judith's fall on the cold tiles. Yatika's eyes were clouded with tears without the slightest word able to leave her throat. She staggered, feeling her heart break. All the priestesses imitated her. Even the fire's aura seemed to weaken as the dean's light left her body.

Then the first cries of despair and tears rang out. Ready to give in, Yatika fell to her knees in front of the door and stared at the trail of blood left behind Judith's lifeless body as the watchers dragged her in. At that moment, Brightshine emitted a golden light. A subtle whistle reached the ears of its owner. Yatika pulled the spearhead from its sheath and felt a powerful energy rushing into her arm.

Turning around, she looked at the horde about to reforming ranks. She grabbed the glowing relic with both hands and, desperate, tears blinding her, she struck from left to right with all her strength. A huge blade of light materialized and sliced through the creatures. The carcasses smoked and rolled to the ground, some suddenly burst into flames. The young woman attacked again, massacring her opponents with astonishing ease. The short spearhead was now a blinding sword two thirteen feet long and light as a feather. A sound echoed in the night, similar to a distant ceremonial chant and the blade sparkled even more brightly. The protector slammed her weapon down, releasing an invisible blast. The dead were shattered and the Gray ones were violently crushed against the cloister walls. This final assault had completely emptied the courtyard. The mournful groan of the carcasses had finally stopped tormenting the defenders.

No victory however. The priestesses, Kynae and Yatika mourned with heavy tears the sudden death of the matriarch, Judith Belerfortz. Alhuia still held her in her arms. She rocked her, singing a song muffled by the tremors of her voice. Sadora and Priscilla stood guard under the ruined courtyard arch. Disturbing noises reached them from the darkness, suggesting the imminence of a new assault. Oscar lighted fires with broken furniture. Smoke rose in heavy serpentine

columns, hiding the rare stars that pierced the veil of clouds. Tiara and Aëlyss remained still and silent, trying to conserve the little magical strength they had. Elise hastily prepared a few mixtures, cruelly lacking the time to do better.

— Goodbye, Mother, Alhuïa whispered. May Yre the merciful welcome you into her garden of light. Say hello to Selene for me, I miss her more than ever. Yatika shuddered as she heard the elf's last words. Their eyes met but neither had the courage to speak first.

Giving up her place to her protégé, Priscilla rushed to the kitchen and collected bags of flour which she dumped on the blood-covered steps, soaking the mess and avoiding a potential fatal slip. Too nervous to wait idly any longer, Sadora and Oscar improvised a barricade with debris. This would only give them a minimal advantage over the first enemies who tried to pass, but in such a critical situation, it could change the course of things.

Aëlyss returned to the hall out of breath. She had been upstairs for several minutes. Her face betrayed bad news, however, no one was surprised. She invited her companions to join her at the windows. Alhuïa and Kynae remained on the steps. The group looked around until they discovered what was going on. Enveloped by a discreet purple aura, Gray elves lined up on the north shore. Their imperturbable silence was still terrifying. There were nearly fifty of them, but others regularly came out of the woods.

— The bridge is destroyed, murmured the Scholar elf. What are they still doing here ?

— They're waiting for something, Oscar added.

— Or someone, said the noblewoman.

— If they attack us, that will be the end.

— I'm not going to make it easy for them, Sadora growled.

— We must send the priestesses away.

— They're not going anywhere. Not after the death of their mother.

— Without help, they wouldn't go far, replied the druid.

Then the Gray ones set off. The first line entered the water and disappeared below the surface. Time seemed to freeze as nothing and no one moved for a few minutes. However, the worst happened. From the ten creatures that entered the river, six made it to the other side. Water dripped from their armor as they stomped forward. Then it was the turn of the second line, and the third. Each time, a few disappeared, dragged away by the current, or stuck under the surface. The adventurers ran back to the courtyard and drew their weapons. Sadora grabbed a shield.

— Magic is leaving me, I fear, Tiara muttered.

— Do what you can, Aëlyss retorted. I will protect you.

— Friend, Priscilla added. If this prophecy is true, you are the only one here who should remain alive. Don't expose yourself to danger and let us watch over you.

— I will not watch you die without putting up a fight.

Kynae and Alhuia finally joined them, shortly before the footsteps of the Gray elves resounded in the night. They had reorganized themselves near the river and were now reaching the courtyard.

The barricade only stopped a handful of dark warriors before it was destroyed. Driven by the force of despair, the defenders managed to hold back their opponents in the first half of the court. Tiara would simply immobilize them by grabbing their legs in fragile roots or creating small crevices. Aelyss brought down the tiles of the cloister on their heads and Alhuia unfurled light veils to repel attacks aimed at her companions. Kynae unfortunately was hit in the side and retreated. After several long minutes, however, the evil ranks dwindled.

The adventurers moved aside to separate their enemies. They split into three groups. Then, the scholar elf noticed that a new troop was about to join the fight. Despite the torment inflicted by the runes, she lifted the last jars of oil and threw them at the court entrance. Then, as the creatures stepped into the glistening puddle, she dragged a piece of flaming wood across the pavement. The reinforcements were engulfed in flames. They collapsed without emitting the slightest sound or any gesture of panic.

Although relieved at her prowess, the pale elf shuddered at the creatures impassiveness. Unfortunately, just as their victory seemed close, a buzz rose above the plain. They had barely defeated the last Gray elves when a horde of corpses was already spreading across the courtyard.

— I'm counting on you to stay alive, whispered the druid to Aelyss.

Then, the little red-haired elf took a step forward, her fists clenched so tightly that they shook. When she spread her arms, the Scholar had the impression of seeing magic with her own eyes, as it became so intense. Tiara's voice rose, but no one recognized her. Before the clash even resumed, she struck the ground with her heel. Crevasses opened under the feet of the undead. Plants grabbed their legs and pulled them into the bowels of the world. The paving stones flew, the central tree fell heavily, the cloister cracked and collapsed. Tiara suddenly fainted in the arms of the pale elf. She took her back inside. Yatika recited a formula that illuminated her fingers with a soft golden glow. She placed her hands on the elf's temples and waited.

Kynae succumbed to her injuries despite the care provided by the priestesses. They were overcome with fatigue and grief. Their spells were weakening and healing the fighters became difficult. Elise lacked fundamental resources. The mages could no longer use their spells and the warriors were exhausted. Alhuia, with great difficulty closed a cut on Oscar's forehead. She too was using her last magical abilities. Aelyss filled a basin with water and washed her face. Her alabaster skin was tarnished with blood and dirt. They were all scary to see.

More undead invaded the ruins in front of the temple. Priscilla and Sadora

jumped and closed the doors. They blocked them, though no one tried to force entrance. Returning upstairs, the company observed what was happening outside through the narrow windows.

– What are they doing ? questioned the apothecary.

– They collect the dead.

– Only Gray ones.

– Why do they line them up ?

Completely ignoring their enemies, the warriors in black armor cleared the courtyard. They threw undead corpse into the fire, spreading a nauseating and suffocating odor, while the bodies of their acolytes were placed in lines in front of the steps.

– How many do you think there are left ? Oscar asked.

– Enough to kill us all, Tiara muttered.

A piercing howl echoed from the darkness. The sound was so unbearable that all defenders put their hands on their ears and moved away from the windows. Then, a strange silhouette appeared under the broken arch. The creature was so tall that it bent down to enter the courtyard. It was clad in a dress of abysmal blackness that seemed to absorb the flames' light. Its face shown an unusually wide smile and what looked like a face mask hid its eyes. Its slender and strangely long arms ended in bony, clawed hands. The creature's gaping mouth opened and it chattered its teeth rhythmically. The sound seemed to call out to the Gray elves who left the ruins.

– Is this the monster you were talking about ? Yatika asked, turning to Sadora

– The huntress ? No.

– It must be one of the evil entities that Alhuïa was talking about, whispered the noblewoman.

The repulsive entity slowly advanced towards the lined bodies and spread its arms. Its thick black nails stretched and became supple filaments. They found their way to the lined up corpses and clung to them like snakes biting their prey. Immediately, the dead Gray ones were seized with violent spasms. Their hands closed and opened as they arched, digging in the earth with their boots. They didn't make any more sound than usual though. The monster however, emitted a hiss of satisfaction, turning its head in the exact direction of the window where the group was peeking out.

– By Yre, murmured Yatika. It's necromancy again ! This thing takes pleasure in defiling this holy place before us. Something has to be done.

– What do you want to do ? the druid grumbled. Kill a second time the dozens of fighters who litter the plain ?

– It is endless, Aëlyss concluded.

Oscar was looking everywhere for Alhuïa. She came to him anyway, her expression even darker than before. As she was about to speak, Yatika appeared in the hall. Showing a melancholy smile, she invited the two young people to follow her. They returned to the matriarch's chambers in silence.

- My child, do you remember the statue in front of which I led you ?
- I do. It was a knight.
- A Vancilian prince. Osirion of Malm.
- Never heard of him.
- That does not surprise me. His family was forgotten, rejected two thousand years ago. His fault was so terrible in the eyes of his peers that they preferred to hide his existence.
- What fault ?
- He fell head over heels in love with the wrong woman. You see, Osirion was a man with a bright future, meticulously mapped out by alliances, agreements and plots. He would never have deviated from this path if he had not met an elf servant working in his domain. Love prevailed.

Oscar and Yatika exchanged a worried look as their throats closed. Alhuia sighed and wiped the tear that ran down her cheek. She sat down in an armchair and placed her weapon on the dean's desk.

- Things took a sinister turn and they had to flee. Many people pursued them throughout the world. They were trapped on the border of the ancient orc territory. The legends are imprecise on this point, but it is said that Osirion received help from beyond the Immaterial, in order to protect his lover, Nalacar, and their unborn child. Was it intentional ? How did this happen ? No one knows, but somehow, the beleaguered mortal was granted incomparable power and managed to defeat his opponents. Unfortunately, the story did not end there, and deaths continued to pile up. Osirion realized too late that the gift he had obtained came with a terrible cost. Something took root in the orc lands and Dehest came to be. The creatures we call now Gray elves invaded the lands and decimated orcs. They spread like a disease and colonized a huge territory.
- This man has brought an invincible enemy to Mirh, Yatika added.
- He was certainly deceived at some point. He has a debt to pay. His time was running out, so he relied on ruse. Osirion hid a fragment of his new power in his sword and entrusted it to Nalacar. Before disappearing, he confided his last wishes to her, which became the prophecy that concerns you, Oscar. My child, your ancestors, in their madness, opened the door to darkness. They rang the death knell of this world. You have the opportunity to put an end to this dire fate.
- This story does not change anything. I will do what I can, Oscar replied.
- This is... I have faith in you, in both of you.
- Alhuia, the tanned woman stammered. What are you still hiding ?
- Nothing, I have one last thing to tell you. This was the story as it was reconstructed by the elves over thousands of years. Now, hear what only I know.

The Gray ones stood up. However, their behavior had changed. They were now

part of the undead ranks. The gigantic creature sneered, clinking the talismans hanging from its headdress. It took a deep breath and shouted :

— We know you are there, Jadida ! Time flies so quickly, we cannot wait to see you again ! Join me, save your mortal allies from a disastrous fate !

Inside, the adventurers shuddered. The priestesses prayed for Kynae and Judith. They also did it for themselves and their protectors. The latter, on the other hand, no longer knew what to do.

— Is there a Jadida among the priestesses ? Aëlyss asked.

— Yatika must know, replied the druid.

— The entities that rule Dehest come from an inaccessible place. The Immaterial separates them from us. Osirion accidentally opened a passage through the force of his will. By turning to the unknown with such fervor, his call was able to reach lands that should have no connection with ours. These creatures needed our consent to incarnate among mortals. It was their only way to get to Mirh. The reason is still unknown to me. Alsaahir, the lord of this cursed family, established himself in the center of the corrupt territory while his five Followers, Aïstihdar, Mutahawil, Majnun, Hajar-Ramluin and Jadida, spread across Mirh. Each of the Followers possesses formidable powers which they share with Alsaahir who himself holds unparalleled capabilities. They are the ones who cover Mirh with the veil of darkness that we all know. Every event involving black magic is directly linked to their appearance two thousand years ago.

— How to recognize these creatures ?

— In their mortal appearance, it will be difficult. To incarnate on Mirh, Alsaahir and his kin took possession of hosts, humans or elves. They could not circumvent this rule of the Immaterial. That said, over years of adaptation, some of them managed to change hosts or adopt a form closer to their true nature, for a time.

— I think I am ready to hear the answer to the only question I have.

— I agree, whispered Alhuïa. You want to know who I am. This is the reason for which I know all of these details. Alhuïa never existed. My name is Nalacar Sil'Naet Ra. I am here since the beginning of the end. I am your ancestor.

— I... It cannot be, the man stammered. How did you survived ten elven lives ?

— Alhuïa... Yatika sobbed. Why ?

— I am Jadida's host. She is the Follower of Immortality and Invincibility. She lives inside me and you have to kill her if you want to survive this night.

— You stayed hidden for so long, I might not recognize you, my sister ! thundered Aïstihdar. You cannot escape, and your henchmen are not able to oppose me ! Surrender, we have to see our Master !

A pack of undead invades the courtyard, ready to attack the temple. Their numbers ensured the defeat of the defenders. None would see daybreak, they knew that now.

—What is this madness ? Yatika shouted. Why are you saying these awful things ?
— Jadida offers almost impenetrable protection to the Followers and their master. Furthermore, she entrusts a similar power to me, her Host. Ironically, the prophecy is about you, Oscar.

The elf revealed her shoulder and a black swirling mark appeared. Yatika buried her face in her hands. A tear rolled on Oscar's cheek.

— Without her, the others will be vulnerable.

— Will she fight back ?

— No. For a reason that she keeps to herself, Jadida rejected her people. She discovered something that made her want to give us a chance. For my part, I saw my entire lineage born, live and die. I saw those who flourished in joy and those who embraced a dark destiny. I have changed my name and my life many times. I fought alongside Selene, I saw cities, kings and queens collapse. During this time, I hid the sword of my beloved Osirion, gathered the treasures I stacked in the vault beneath our feet and ordered the temple to be built on top before returning, a century later, to watch over the key while waiting for its heir. I love you, you know that very well, not as a child. I wished I could stay with you, you two in particular, but as long as I live, Mirh is lost.

— If I can kill Jadida despite her immortality, why can't I do the same for the others ?

— Because she is willing to let you do so. Her consent bypasses her own power. She knows this is the only way. She has to go first. And in the end, she would have to be killed, no matter what. By depriving the Followers from this advantage, your allies would be able to wound them, even though you would remain the only one capable of killing them. For the first time of their endless life, these creatures would feel weakness. The power contained in the sword attracted them in this part of the world, but they are unaware of the sword itself.

Yatika jumped into the elf's arms. Her embrace brought a sob from Nalacar. Oscar felt his hands shake as he grabbed the sword.

— I won't let you do it ! the young woman shouted, glaring at him. And you will not sacrifice yourself ! You can not do that ! Not to me, I need you! Everyone dies, Judith, Kynae, and now you ? It cannot be... Please Alhuia, do something. Find a solution, but don't give up this fight. Do not abandon me...

Yatika slipped to the ground, crying her eyes out. Nalacar knelt beside her and held her head against her, stroking her hair.

— I am not giving up, on the contrary. We must do this, to banish evil, that is my role. I passed on to you everything I had and everything I knew. If I asked you to come, Yatika, it is so you don't blame Oscar. He will need you by his side. He will need you to fight.

Oscar closed his mind and drew his sword. The candlelight flickered and the room shook. A rumble rose from the depths of the Immaterial, followed by a mournful wail. Outside, the creature let out a heartbreaking howl.

— Be quick, Nalacar concluded, sitting down again. I have been slow enough as it is. Finish it.

They looked at each other, tears veiling their eyes. Oscar struck swiftly.

Everything turned dark. The second after, he was in a cold circular room. Polished dark stone covered floor, walls and ceiling alike. The sword was quiet in this place and Oscar did not feel its powerful hold on his mind. From a nearby hallway, a young girl appeared, her steps echoing under the high arches.

— So it is time... she sighed.

— Where am I ? Are you Jadida ?

— You must be Oscar. You will get used to this place, trust me. It would be difficult to explain what it is to you now though. And, yes, I am Jadida.

— Does she have to die ?

— She was pretty clear about it, did she not ? I tried to find another solution, but I am responsible for my kin's immortality. As it is my will, I can negate the effect of my power on myself, but that's it.

— I have so many questions...

— And no time to waste, mortal. Answers will come in time. You have to stay focused. This sword is the only thing holding back the end of your world. Be wise when you use it. Remember that the prophecy is not guarding you from death. Find allies, never charge mindlessly. You can prevail. My time is nearing its end, that is something so unfamiliar to me. I'm... I think I am afraid of dying now.

She giggled, hardly masking the tears rolling on her lashes. Oscar noticed her shivers. He reaffirmed his grip on the sword and exhaled heavily.

— I am not a child, she continued. Do not feel guilty about what you have to do. This is the form I took when Alsaahir created me, nothing more.

— Why are you betraying him ?

— I disagree with his quest. That is all you can understand now.

— You sound like Aluhia. I mean, Nalacar.

— We influenced each other very much over time, that is true. Speaking in riddles was a trait we shared even before meeting though.

They chuckled before remaining quiet for a bit. The ineluctable end of this moment weighed on both of them. Then, Jadida sat on the cold floor and invited Oscar to come closer.

— It is time, the night is not yet over for you and your friends.

Oscar placed the tip of the sword against the girl's chest. He looked away when the blade pierced her body and appeared on the other side. A dark veil clouded the room and before he could stand up, he was back in the matriarch's office. Jadida was gone, the sword began to scream again. He sheathed it back just in time to catch Nalacar falling from her chair.

— So it is done, she whispered. Yatika, you are stronger than you think. Oscar, I... I love you from all my heart.

Aïstihdar staggered. Several undead collapsed while their mistress was breathing hard. Her frozen smile was troubled by a palpable incomprehension. Finally regaining her senses, she ordered her troops to charge while stepping back. She suddenly saw a white figure on the temple roof.

— Hear my sentence ! shouted Yatika, brandishing Brightshine. I am Yre's might within this Sanctuary ! Your reign is coming to an end, for Light cannot remain veiled forever !

As she spoke, her voiced changed, as if she was supported by a choir repeating her words. Distant chants filled the air and the relic began to glow.

— Her Light is a boon for her devotee, and a fire for the faithless ! Yatika continued. Those denying the Goddess' Justice will suffer my wrath !

Brightshine emitted a blinding flash and a long blade appeared. The young woman's gaze landed on the immobile Follower. She struck with all her might. The wave that formed split the air and burned the creature, sending golden particles into the air. Many undead turned to ashes. When the glow dissipated, the Puppeteer was gone. All that remained was the teeming mass of her minions, ready to devour the living. The final assault began.

The main hall was a chaos of blades, blood and screams. The priestesses had taken refuge upstairs. The defenders protected them and formed carcass piles by relentlessly bringing down their weapons. Oscar was animated by a surprising fury which worried even his allies. Elise stayed with the healers, paralyzed with terror.

Helpless against the horde, the druid climbed to the second level and slipped through a window. She jumped onto the rickety roof of what remained of the cloister and rolled across the grass. She dodged the Gray ones who were massing on the plain and returned to the river just in time before collapsing from fatigue. Squatting between the water lilies, she placed a tiny talisman on the water. The redhead sang, waving her hands to the rhythm. Ripples formed around her and disrupted the current. Foam appeared as the eddies intensified. The plants were uprooted abruptly when a whirlpool appeared. Tiara's soul left this world, carried away by the currents of magic that floated within her.

Her eyes turned white. Slowly she got up, and the furious water did the same. A swirling ring of liquid rose above her as she returned to shore. The closest Gray elves turned and walked to meet her. Tiara simply turned her gaze towards them and liquid spears shot out, piercing their armor. They collapsed one after the other as she continued towards the ruins. With a slow gesture, she pointed to the temple door and the ring unfolded in a phenomenal wave. The creatures could

not resist. They were torn from the ground and carried away in the torments of the liquid mass before crashing on the steps. Water rushed into the hall, and Tiara revealed a sinister smile.

The flood that poured into the great hall swept away the creatures. Like a giant snake, it slithered at full speed, hit the walls, rose to the ceiling before crashing suddenly. The defenders tried to escape by climbing the steps but Priscilla and Sadora were carried away. Oscar and Aëlyss tried to catch them. Despite the door being open, the water was not flowing out. It filled the space quickly, being only a few feet from the ceiling.

The invisible force that tormented them could have crushed them many times, yet something prevented it. Yatika suddenly understood and threw herself away when the wave tried to grab her. She returned to the kitchens and took the second staircase to find the window through which the druid had escaped. She found her immediately, kneeling in the grass, protected by a waving ring. As she approached, a liquid spear flew towards her chest before changing trajectory at the last second, impaling a Gray elf instead.

The facade of the temple cracked. The young woman cursed and jumped inside the circle. The ring twisted to let her pass. The protector crouched down and took the elf's face in her hands.

— It's over, Tiara. Your power is too dangerous, you will kill us all.

— Help me...

The voice came from the translucent ring. It was that of the druid.

— Help me... Help me...

Yatika plunged her mind into the Immaterial. Tiara was no longer in her body. Something was trying to take hold of it. She intervened and suffered a formidable attack from the unknown entity. Holding on, she screamed :

— Let her go !

— Never... the creature articulated. She has no right to deny us this.

— Release her immediately !

— She is alone...

— You are wrong. Tiara, you are no longer alone !

The waters trembled and flowed towards the river. Tiara opened her eyes and saw Yatika in front of her, head down, her hands still cupping her face. A golden light filtered under her tunic and ran to her fingers.

— You are no longer alone...

Tiara heard the young woman whispers. She slowly pushed her hands away, and the protector woke up too.

— I'm back, human.

— What happened ?

— Thank you.

— I did what I had too.

— Thank you for... whatever.

The sun broke through the clouds an hour after dawn. Its rays illuminated the ruins of the cloister and the ravaged plain. The smoke still rose in menacing rolls. The bodies were scattered over several leagues, up to the collapsed bridge. Some wore the green armor of the Agalkaïr elves. The river, troubled with mud and blood, had resumed its calm course. The living had won a victory against Dehest. They all felt like it came with a terrible price. Oscar and Yatika gathered the rest of the survivors to tell them Nalacar's last words.

They had survived these few dark hours. A handful of minutes in the night, during which they had all come close to death. Mirh's salute was still out of reach, invisible, hidden behind the menacing borders of Dehest. The road remained guarded by four unknown Followers and their much-feared master.

— She said I was not ready to hear the whole truth, Oscar murmured. She told me this many times, and she was right.

— She is counting on us now, on you, sighed Yatika. We will do our best to help you.

— We will see about that later, Elise intervened. Come and rest, we all need it badly.

They gathered in the shelter of the temple and remained silent for a long time. They exchanged a few weary glances, remembering each other's exploits during this night of torment.

This new late autumn day marked a turning point in their lives. The time for futile wandering and inaction was over. The board had been in place for too long, and the opponent was several moves ahead.