

DEAD MEN IN WINTER

Arin-Goliaths.

*Commonly known to as 'nesting wraiths,' these lost souls
are a strange breed, even amongst the rank and file of the damned.
They are a plurality of spirits, all anchored around a single essence.*

One is many, many is one.

*Their personalities are absorbed each in turn, but fractured
and disjointed to the point that each spirit believes it is the same entity.*

They are rare in the waking world.

Not unheard of, but rare – rarer still to be more than a pest.

*Often you'll find them hiding under cities or encamped
in ruins where civilizations once stood.*

*Over time, they siphon energy off from the world,
consume any souls that enter their territory.*

*Over time, they grow. Slowly but steadily,
they will grow. It is their nature.*

*Even after they grow in strength for years, they are never
much of a threat. Expulse them one at a time.*

Banish them, purge them, condemn them. One at a time.

In the end, the core will remain – and then you banish it too.

*How... unfortunate... that the one that named itself Daringol
found more power than just what was natural to the land.
It drank and drank from a well of wild magic unfettered, effectively
giving it centuries of strength in a scant handful of years.*

And... this one had minions.

*Two pit-hounds, purged by my student and returned to the Abyss.
Another, a true-blood demon, a sentient beast that could have only
come from the Lower Plane of Elemental Ice.*

That thing – that creature by the name of Makolichi – that thing?

Oh I've no doubt that the first

Battle of Coldstone's Summit wounded it severely.

JOSHUA E. B. SMITH

My student almost gave as good as he got.

Akaran almost destroyed him.

Akaran almost beat him on his own.

Almost.

I watched him fall to that beast.

Now if I could only find where he went

after he died...

~Paladin-Commander Steelhom

I. HEATWAVE

Mirah-Anne had died and gone to the Abyss.

All about were fields of lava and insufferable heat. Souls wailed in the distance as an all-consuming cloud of pure darkness descended upon her. The only thing she could do was watch in abject horror and scream silently in her mind. There wasn't any escape, there was no place to go. She was trapped, hopeless, and knew it was only a matter of time before her very essence was crushed beneath the heel of the demonic legions soon to come.

In the midst of this, there was one man; her personal tormentor. His hair was a dark chocolate brown with streaks of gray through it. He was easily forty-five years old – a rough forty-five, at that. He had haunting white eyes with no iris to be seen at all. She would have thought him blind if he didn't seem to be able to see everything perfectly clearly. He bore a scar on his lips, which appeared to be ever-turned to a frown.

He had sized her up the moment he had come into her room, and the apprentice alchemist felt like a bug before him. The events of the last few hours had her in shock still. Demons had descended on Toniki, her home, leaving bodies and ruin in their wake. Two hounds almost as tall as fawns and as wide as boars had ravaged everyone they could catch, while a skeletal monstrosity in a shell made of frozen black brine destroyed homes and eviscerated almost everyone that tried to help.

A handful of lost souls came behind them, creatures of inky fog and countless tentacles that flung themselves into any corpse that they could find. Each body shook and buckled as the lost souls took them over, claiming new homes. She had seen fallen friends launch

themselves into the air with haunting cries as the wraiths twisted and tore at their essences from the inside out.

As she sat there under this man's unwavering gaze, he held a book in his hand; a journal left behind by the man that had been sent days before to try to protect them. Once the carnage outside had been organized and brought under his control, the journal had been the very first thing he had demanded to see. She had watched him read it and had watched his face darken with every single page until he reached the end of it.

That's when the inquiry, and her personal torture, began.

"So then. Allow me to make sure I understand what happened here," Sir Steelhom intoned. "Stop me if I seem to have gotten any of this wrong."

Mariah cleared her throat and looked up at the Paladin-Commander and nervously swallowed. "Ye... yes... sir..." she stammered. It would have been funny, if he wasn't towering over her. They both sat in the Rutting Goat with the fireplace burning brightly behind them and a flagon of foul ale burning into her stomach.

It wasn't really the Abyss, and he wasn't really a demon, but *damn* did it feel like it.

"This village has been suffering a winter that has had no end in the last four years. The bulk of the people here have long moved away. The ones left are either too stupid to know that they should or too poor to be able to. There's no more than twenty, maybe thirty of the Queen's citizens left here?"

"Yes... yes sir, that's correct. Though I'd not call them stupid..."

"I would," he snapped. "Those two pit-hounds my protege left smoldering outside have been hunting anyone that left the city walls and they ate a patrol from the local garrison. You don't know how many they've killed, in total, other than 'a lot.' They've been supported by that foul demon in that brine-and-ice shell. Makolichi, you said?"

Her only response was a hesitant nod.

"To join those three monsters you apparently have a cadre of wraiths that have manifested as floating masses of tentacles, arms, faces, and a black fog. Oh, and they *love* to take over bodies and animate them for their own use. Animals, specifically, but they don't seem to be too picky."

Since the first nod worked, she gave him a second one.

Steelhom clenched his jaw and continued to stare at her. "Akaran also discovered some kind of obscura - a masking spell - that has kept

the work of some local wizard a secret, and it's allowed the Abyssians to operate here freely without running afoul of the Order's attention. Is that correct?"

"That's what he said... um, sir. Don't think he ever called it an 'obscura,' though..."

"He should have. So. He also declared that whatever's left of that fountain out by the shrine is tapped into a font of wild magic. He used that magic to keep himself alive and it's in a very large part of why he was able to last so long against this... Makolichi... and the dogs."

The alchemist's apprentice swallowed another gulp of the rancid ale and tried not to gag on it. Little desperate thoughts of *Please work please work please knock me out*, echoed in the back of her mind. "That's what he said. I don't know. I'm no mage."

"But this village, as small as it is, seems to be full of them. Your mentor is not just an alchemist but is also a former druid in service to the Goddess of Nature – and she lied to him about her magical aptitude in violation of Queen's Law. There's the wizard, Usaic, that Akaran surmised was behind this wretched mess. My student believes he is an outcast of the Granalchi Academy with a focus on elemental-ice spellwork, isn't that right?"

"Ye... yes, sir."

"You've had a Civan spy living here for years; Rmaci, isn't that her name? Oh, and *she* ran off, leaving assorted headaches behind? That Illiya-blessed blade being one of them?"

She nodded slowly. "I can't speak for the weapon, but yeah, the bitch left more headaches than happiness. Can blame a lot of people on her."

"You've had bodies up and moving around outside *but* your people opted against calling up on the Order to come put them down. Let me not forget the medic from the garrison that lied until he was blue in the face about being able to use magic of his own, magic my student attributed to the Goddess of Purity."

Mariah tried to hide another meek little tremble of fear into her mug. The dogs had scared her. The wraiths had frightened her. That damn goat was more disgusting than horrifying. The pale-skinned elemental that he hadn't brought up yet was powerful but not really scary. That monster in the frozen suit of armor? Makolichi was **terrifying**.

This guy?

This fire-breathing monster from the furthest reaches of all of the

most unholy would be enough to give any of those Abyssian nightmares a dozen times over and she didn't blame them one bit. "Yes, sir, yes to all of those."

"Is it safe for me to assume that he has already asked the lot of you how you all could be so blessedly stupid?"

"I believe he said 'fisking idiots,' sir."

"At least I don't have to repeat it then. Good to know he did that much right."

She cringed and refused to meet his burning stare. "He saved my life..."

That didn't impress him. Not even remotely. "Ah yes, the lives he 'saved.' Let's count them down. Vestranis, the blacksmith. One of the hounds took him. Tornias, the medic; the other hound, by your accounts. The Civan spy – who helped run this very inn, alongside her husband – accounted for not just the stablemaster Mowiat, but also Ronlin, your town elder, and probably Yothargi, her husband. There was also that orphan... what was his name?"

"Julianos, sir. Tornias sent him to the graveyard and Makolichi went there and -"

"Ah yes. Julianos. A child."

Running her hands through her blonde hair, the girl blinked back tears at the full list of the dead. "The hounds killed Surchi too, when they attacked. I... I don't think Akaran had ever met her..."

Neither of them knew (or ever would know) that Yothargi had provided the killing blow to Ronlin. He had been egged on and set up by his lovely traitor of a wife, Rmaci, but he had the last bit of blood on his hands. Not that it saved him from when she drained the blood from his heart after the fact...

With a small pause, he looked back at the journal and flipped a few pages away from the end of it. "Oh. And one more. It seems there's another creature that manifested as a young girl with pale eyes and brown hair, 'skin as soft as ivory,' he wrote, who had a 'chill to her touch but one not unpleasant.' He claims she has a significant level of magical ability and assuredly is *not* at all human. He seemed to think that she is in no way Abyss-touched although *completely* a creature not of this world."

"Yes. She called herself Eos'eno. I've never seen her, ever, not until after he arrived here in Toniki."

"I assume that she is also the creature that absconded with him after the battle was over?"

When the last attack came, there wasn't much warning. The dogs had come first and had made it towards the edge of the village where the Shrine to the Order of Light stood. The mana-font that Akaran had discovered was out in front of it; the dogs seemingly had wanted it. Or they had wanted the exorcist that had been vexing them; since he had been sleeping inside the shrine, it could have gone either way.

The fight was bloody from the very start. The hounds tore apart everyone that came near the shrine with ecstatic glee. Akaran put up a great showing against both of the dogs before Makolichi intervened. He had used every trick in his book to batter down the hounds and the demon at the same time while other people joined the pile of corpses.

Then the corpses started to animate themselves with the help of Daringol. When the wraith intervened, everything went south. There wasn't time to expect them; let alone time to deal with them.

Hirshma had entered the fray at one point, and eventually Eos'eno did too. The three of them were able to kill both hounds and badly wound Makolichi. When the corpses entered the fight, they had offered enough of a distraction to let the demon in ice mortally wound Akaran with a spear of frozen brine that cut through his stomach and out his back.

Steelhom unexpectedly arrived at the end and salvaged the battle (and savaged the monsters). He put down the animated corpses and forced Makolichi to flee. Before he could reach his student though, Eos'eno had shoved him away and vanished with him in a sudden cloud of pure snow and perfectly clear crystal.

That was just a few hours ago, just after the crack of dawn. It was now mid-day.

It felt like it had happened more than a year ago.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

Trying to ignore the screaming butterflies in her stomach that should have kept her from opening her mouth, the blonde asked the one thing that had been nagging at her since the interrogation had. "Why are you here? Why are you asking me all these questions? Why not my miss?"

"Your miss? The town alchemist? The woman that – again – admittedly intentionally mislead my student, refused to cooperate with an inquisition, withheld pertinent knowledge of the disaster as it stands, and apparently is able to control aspects of nature magic?"

It was impossible to refute any of that. "Yes, that's Hirshma. I wish I

could say otherwise.”

“Oh I bet you do.”

“But... there are others...?”

Steelhom shrugged his shoulders. “I saw that you carried out the execution of two of the risen bodies. I saw your face when that elemental-kin absconded with my student. If you like him that much then I assume you can be trusted.”

“I don't like him. I can barely stand him.”

“Then you are still doing better than most. Not just most of the people in your village, but... most, as a whole. You also accounted for a sizable portion of his journal entries; if *he* likes you that much, one of two things has occurred.”

Mariah's eyes widened. “He did? I was?”

“Either he has become infatuated with you and seeks to bed you, or he believes he can trust you.” He paused and looked her up and down with a raised eyebrow – and she immediately blushed a shade of bright crimson. “I will assume the latter.”

It took a minute for that to sink in, and her blush flickered to cheeks full of rosy-red rage. “HEY! Now you wait a damn minute - !”

Ignoring her outburst, the paladin pushed on. “Now, this leads me to my next question, and girl, please do allow me to *stress* that I *need* a very helpful answer.”

Oh shit.

“Where did that creature take Akaran? What in the name of the Heavens did he *do* that you aren't telling me?”



There were few ways to transport someone from one point or another by magic. All of them took a great deal of effort and no small level of discomfort. Throughout most of the Kingdoms, the wizards of the Granalchi Academy had a near-monopoly on the ability. They were expensive and their aim, at times, truly left a lot to be desired.

They shoved your body fully into the ether, in a magical pocket that they forced to come into being between worlds. A second wizard would pop open the bubble from somewhere else to drop you back into reality safely. Or if time was at a premium, the bubble could be configured in a way to allow for it to re-open on its own; though it was a decidedly more expensive (and risky) option.

Disorienting, disturbing, and occasionally terrifying, it worked. Most people surmised that the only reason that the Granalchi hadn't used that magic (and their other tricks) to take over the world was only

because they didn't want to be burdened with the paperwork (and nausea from traveling through that many portals) world domination would entail.

It was a small comfort to those with an innate distrust of magic.

What Eos'eno did, on the other hand, was something else entirely.

The exorcist saw things as they traveled. He had glimpses of mountains of nothing more than ice and frozen lakes that were crystal clear through and through. There were spires built upon spires of crystals in colors he never thought possible. Blues, greens, even soft purple and gold. He didn't think he could be impressed by anything else after those brief flashes.

He was wrong. Wonderfully wrong.

When he saw the creatures that inhabited the fascinating landscape he could barely comprehend it. He watched as mammoths the size of castles trundled through the snow-covered landscape. Floating masses of icy shards spun about in the sky, dancing with each other in ways that defied all manner of the Laws of Normality. His ability to hold onto his sanity nearly left him entirely when he saw a mountain began to take steps of its own on legs of flowing quicksilver.

Akaran caught sight of the girl that had his hand in a death grip. Her hair billowed everywhere around her. She was lit up with a pale white glow that was just short of heavenly. Crystals ebbed and flowed over and under her skin. Icicles sprouted up and down her arms and chest. Her clothes vanished as her very body shed the humanity that barely contained it. She was filled with such joy that it was nearly blinding.

Briefly, very briefly, he thought he saw the face of a woman the size of an island look up at them from beneath a frozen sea. The universe and all of time everlasting was reflected in those eternal eyes. She blinked, once, as Her mouth began to form into a *[Who?]*

There was no way he should have seen Her.

He really wasn't meant to.

He'd have to answer for it later.

The most important (or if not *the* most important) thing that he felt wasn't the soothing chill or the comfortable feeling of the snow on his back as Eos laid him down on the ground. It was pain. Nothing but raw, searing, horrific pain. He could almost still see the spear of ice that Makolichi had thrown as clearly as if it was right in front of him.

They fought in the middle of the courtyard outside of the shrine at Toniki. The two hounds were dead and in smoking heaps nearby. The demon, encased in his shell of toxic, brine-like ice, disgorged a shard of

ice as long as Akaran's sword from his arm. The shard shot through the air like it had been fired from a cannon.

It hit him in his stomach and ripped itself through the other side.

There was no reason that he should have been drawing breath right now and he knew it.

That was another issue – there was no air here to breathe. Try as he might, nothing filled his lungs when he gasped or struggled to inhale. His body didn't care, or at least, didn't seem to. His chest burned from the toxic mass in his gut but it didn't feel like it was being deprived of air. In fact, if it wasn't for the pain, he wouldn't have felt that anything was wrong at all.

“No die, won't die. Can't die. Ice preserves, cold secures. Life and time changes but ice is slow and sure. Rest and be at ease, Guardian of Winters. You've no fears no worries here,” she quietly crooned.

Reeling from pain, he looked up at her and saw her for what she was. Golden caramel hair danced of its own accord across her shoulders and down her back. A web of soft white crystals covered her naked body from head to toe, each one glinting with a sheen from the extra-planar sun that hung somewhere above. Her eyes were larger than a human's, with no iris to be seen – just a pale blue that spilled light freely.

Her true beauty was a far cry from the waifish girl in a ratty patchwork cloak she had first appeared as on that first fateful night in Toniki. Not that she wasn't pretty then, but now... now it was obvious that her form was the work of a Goddess, and not some mere human mother. There was more to it though, a hint that Istalla hadn't simply pulled her from the elemental plane and sent her to the mortal world.

There also a gash in her side that he could almost see through to the other side. Makolichi had swung his claws at her and ripped a chunk of flesh the size of Akaran's head out of her ribs. She didn't bleed red – but she *did* bleed, and bled silvery slush freely from the hole. It was impossible to tell if it was a mortal wound on her, but if it had been on him?

The damage was so extensive, he would have been dead.

As it stood, he was convinced he already was.

“Won't die. Won't let you die. Ice preserves, cold secures. Do you hear, do you understand? Be at peace, rest and hold your head low. Mother's home will protect you. It is what ice is to do.”

It was debatable as to if her soothing words helped. When his trembling hands found the hole that the demon had left behind, that

question was quickly answered. "Hurts," he croaked, specks of blood spitting out between his lips. "Hurts so much. Let me... let me see the Goddess..."

"No! Mother will not see you. Mother should *not* see you," Eos chastised. "She may be quite annoyed if She finds you, living among Her children. Ice will preserve and protect you but Mother may choose to leave you preserved longer than either of us wish."

Her warning went unheeded. "Not... yours. Mine. Niasmis..."

"Niasmis will not be welcome to enter the home of Istalla without an invitation. For invitation, Mother must first know you are here. Guardian of Winters must not have listened. Mother should not know you are here. Thus, She will not issue an invitation to Niasmis. Thus, you will not see your Lady. Not today."

Painfully, he pushed himself up and looked down at the ruined mass that made up his stomach and tried not to throw up (not that he could, even if he had wanted) from the sight of it. *In shock, must be shock, must be dying, must be seeing things...*

Eos'eno sighed and the beautiful crystals that covered her skin seemed to flatten down like the ears of an irritated cat. "In shock? No. Seeing things? You see me, you see the glory of the realm of Istalla. You need not try to speak. I hear your thoughts as plain as day, Guardian."

"Hurts! Hurts so much please let me go please stop calling me that please...!"

"Does not hurt. No pain here. Pain in your head nothing more nothing else. Rest easy."

Akaran shook his head rapidly and pulled the wound open again. Makolichi and the dogs had attacked before he could so much as to slip a tunic on, let alone any armor. If he had had some on, it might have made a difference. Then again, with the size of the hole left behind? Probably not. "No, please... it hurts, hurts so much."

"There should be no hurt and no pain, not here, not while here. Magic of Istalla will heal your wound. Guardian of Winters will be healed. Rest and be patient, be calm. Ice preserves, cold secures." Her tone was that of a mother scolding and comforting a whining child. Any other time, he would've felt insulted.

"You don't understand, please!" He steeled himself for the worst and plunged two fingers into his stomach. She grabbed at his hand but he fought her off, and miraculously, it didn't hurt at all when he did. Not until his fingers found what he was searching for and pulled it free. The black crystal shard turned from a piece of solid ice to a squirming mass

of shadows and tentacles the moment that it hit the 'air.'

Eos'eno hissed sharply and batted the living piece of corruption out of his hand. When it hit the ground it sizzled and boiled in the snow. For a brief moment, it billowed to life and swelled up. That particular display came to an end when a dozen-dozen pieces of pure crystal erupted in the air itself and lanced through it in every direction imaginable.

Any sort of calm demeanor that the elemental-kin possessed vanished on the spot. "Brine's blood. Yes, Brine's blood, I see. Hurt it must. It seeks to grow in here the corruption seeks to..."

Groaning in pain, he dropped his head back down against the side of the snowy hill she had set him on and closed his eye. "It hurts Goddess it hurts can't feel Her to pull strength to purge..."

"Purge. Yes, a purge shall do," Eos whispered. Without giving his comfort a moment's thought, she pushed her hand – her entire right hand and almost halfway way to her elbow – into his wound. Akaran screamed. There was no mistaking it; he *screamed*.

A pulse of total cold poured into his every fiber, his every vein, his every bone. It hurt worse than the bloody tunnel that Makolichi had left in his wake, though at the same time, it felt wonderful. All thoughts of pain turned to sudden revulsion as he felt a *thing* get forced into his stomach and up his throat.

Nausea replaced pain as his reeling mind realized what was coming up – and that lead his body to help her magic do its work. His back arched and his chest heaved and he vomited blood and something horrible all over his lap. He felt the scrambling tentacles push themselves up out of his throat and felt the toxic bile slide over his teeth and between his lips.

A cloud of Daringol's essence rolled out of his mouth and down his goatee. It tumbled down his body and lurched into the snow beside him. He had time to make out a face twisted in joy and terror in the middle of the shifting black mass for a moment before the inherent magic of Tundrala gave the wraith's spawn the same treatment it had given the shard of Makolichi's corruption.

The moment that it was gone the pain in his body ceased. The cold feeling of misery faded as she slipped her bloody hand out of his gut, leaving him feeling nothing more than just... simple relief. "There. The purge. Guardian, do you feel better? Does it hurt so still?"

Weakly, he shook his head.

Then as he watched, his stomach began to mend with streamers of

silver ice. Skin turned blue and white as it sealed the wound. A chill erupted deep inside his soul as her magic pulled flesh and bone back into shape. It defied understanding, even familiar as he was with medicinal spellwork. Even with what little he knew, there was no doubt that this was above and beyond *anything* mere mortals could manage.

“Good. But not so.”

“Not... not so?” the exorcist croaked.

“Not so,” she reaffirmed. She pushed herself away and stood up, looking at something far in the distance across the rolling snowy hills, and back towards where she had seen the walking mountain minutes before. “Now She'll know. Mother will be displeased. Mother will be most displeased. The taint of the Lower will catch the eye of the *episturine*. Their eyes will be Her eyes. Her eyes will be most annoyed. With you. With me.”

Akaran sat up, slowly, but it didn't hurt as he did. “*Episturine?*”

If a creature of ice and snow could sigh, Eos'eno surely gave it her best effort. “Humans. Think you know all. Know so very little of the things all about your world. The *episturine* watch the River of Souls from your world and the Waters of Eternity from the High Mount. They ensure there is no corruption no darkness of any kind no souls not of Tundrala that pass into this realm. They will sense the pollution that the other left behind in you. They will then see you. They will be displeased. Displeased like Mother.”

“River of Souls... Waters of Eternity?” That was when he looked – *really looked* – and realized that no, he hadn't been seeing things.

“Where am I? Where did you take me?”

“A place once safe. A place not safe anymore.” With what could only be described as a frustrated huff that made the small canyon they were in flex in response, Eos'eno took his hand in hers and gave him a foul look (like any of this was *his* fault). “We leave. Work to be done. Work you need to do.”

Any other questions died on his lips as the plane seemingly collapsed all around them.

With that, they left for the mortal realm and the work she was desperate to have him do.



Sir Steelhom had replaced Mariah with Hirshma, Moulborke, Romazalin and Peoran – the last four citizens of the village that mattered much to anyone. There was a bar wench in the background that had called herself Ipteria between mugs of ale – and she was so

drunk that nobody listened to a thing she mumbled. Talaoc was somewhere out in the village doing who knows what.

The paladin was not in any way impressed by the remaining village elders. Romazalin owned the largest farm on the mountain, and while all she grew was wheat, potatoes, and cabbage, it made her important. Or at least, it had before the winter set in and devastated her crops. Her fiancée had been murdered by the Civan spy days prior – Mowiat had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Moulborke and Peora were the only two that hadn't lost anyone near and dear to them in the last few days. The pudgy woodsman and lanky trapper (respectively) hadn't made it through unscathed in the recent memory; one lost a brother and the other lost a livelihood. Moulborke hadn't stopped drinking since his brother went missing (although after seeing what happened in the village with the goat, he'd recently decided to try sobriety with the hope he'd live longer and hopefully avoid the Abyss). Peoran simply sulked in his cabin, cold and alone, with no courage to risk harvesting nature's scarce bounty in the woodlands.

Hirshma, on the other hand? Her brother, her position, and the trust the village had in her? And now, as it was discovered, her former lover is the same wizard everyone blamed for this mess of epic proportions?

She'd lost it all.

She was also easily the most outspoken of the lot. "So. While that stupid boy you sent here has been getting battered and broken, you've been what? Camped outside the walls? Watching him? Letting more of us die? To what end?"

"I did not know people were dying. I did not sense that magic was being used. I could not sense the Abyss. I assumed he was simply taking his sweet time and delaying returning home."

"You couldn't tell? Aren't you some kind of battlemage? Some sort of instructor at the Grand Temple?" Hirshma growled, a red flush creeping up her chest and across her cheeks.

Steelhom shook his head. "There was no aura to be felt of anything. There still isn't. Even a few scant feet away from that mana-font, there's nothing in the air to give clue to the disturbance."

Tiredly hanging her head and staring at her fingers, Romazalin tried to choke back tears. "You could've saved my Mowiat. You were there, right out there, you could've... You just call it a *disturbance*?!"

"Vestranis too," Peoran added. "And Surchi, when the dogs first

charged in. And the others.”

“And I would like to know why that is, for certain,” the paladin-commander replied, a deep apology next on his lips. “I am so sorry, so very sorry, so much ill befell you while I waited for word from my student.”

Hirshma kept her burning gaze locked on his face. “You're *sorry*? What good is your *sorry*? You've yet to say why you were sitting out there instead of being in the walls providing aid!”

He couldn't argue the validity of her question. “Every neophyte is sent on a mission to determine if their skills are suitable to serve the Order, upon graduation from the Temple. They are sent supervised, though they do not know it. If they fail, their... mistakes... are corrected.”

“So you really were just watching, letting people die,” she snapped.

“Watching, yes. People dying? Madam, there was no taint in the ether. Now I understand why. He discovered a masking spell. One so strong... this is as infuriating to me as it must be to you.”

Way off to the side, Ipteria belched. “Doubt it!”

Giving her a glare out of the side of his eye, his response was as cold as Hirshma's displeasure. “Doubt what you will. Had I known I would have come inside much earlier. I give my word about that.”

Hirshma kept her own glare fixated on him. “Your word don't matter much to us.”

“I don't care. I may be too late to save your dead, and may be too late to save him, but once I realized that he was being overwhelmed...”

“Oh. You 'realized' it. What a wonder,” Moulborke grunted. “What clued you in?”

Steelhom picked up a small sack sitting behind him and dumped the contents out on the table with a sickening thud. All of them blanched and pushed away from it. The woodsman looked like he was going to vomit. “This.”

It was hard for any of them to say if the head had been decaying out in the wild or if it naturally looked that ugly. It had a slightly angular skull with an elongated trio of jaws that parted open and shut like a flower's wilting petals. It had neither eyes nor ears; just slits for where a nose should be.

“In the name of Kora what is *that?!*” the alchemist all-but shouted.

Curling his lip, the paladin looked down at the festering mass and gave a calm, measured reply. “This is the head of a *shiriak* demon. A lesser creature. More pest than demon. A scavenger. Drawn to

battlefields, scenes of slaughter, and places where magic runs rampant.”

“Such as here,” Peoran grunted. “So you found a magic-hunting goblin.”

“A goblin? You've no such luck. Goblins, at the *very* least, do not smell this foul. This thing shouldn't be anywhere near this place. Not without far stronger magic being used than what I can feel. I intended to drag the head back in here and feed it to Akaran for not finding it before it found me – then I felt his magic at work once I stepped inside your walls.”

“Oh so you came here to scold the boy. Not to protect us, but to scold your student,” Hirshma grumbled.

Steelhom put his hand on top of the head and forced divine magic into it. They all jumped back when it caught fire and burned to white ash in a matter of heartbeats. All of them except for Ipteria, who cheered and crowed for him to do it again. “At first, yes. Then to intervene on the Goddesses' behalf when I realized the strength of his magic – and to discover how a neophyte could command so much of it.”

“Well so now you know,” Moulborke half-growled half-snarled. “You get accosted by a demon so you come barging in expecting to lord over everyone. You really are the man that trained the exorcist, aren't you?”

Before Steelhom could respond, Hirshma cut them both off. “So. You're here. What exactly is it you plan on doing next?”

“I leave. I have little doubt that the elemental-kin will take my student to where the masking spell is being generated. I read his journal; he seems to think it's located at... Teboria Lake, isn't that right? In some invisible floating tower? Even if he isn't there, destroying that spell is my immediate priority. Once it's gone, the Sisters will discover it and send more assets to bear on this infestation.”

“An *infestation*? Isn't that a wonderfully calm phrase to use,” Hirshma said, a look of disgust on her face. “Nice to know you consider our losses nothing more than an inconvenience, just rats in the barn.”

The paladin slapped his hand on the table. “*I* consider this a disaster. *I* consider your people dying to be an inexcusable result of inaction from everyone involved. Myself included. *I* will bear this guilt for as long as *I* live because *I* could have stopped it before *you* lost anyone else. And now *I've* lost my 'boy' as you call him, my student, my charge, my task, my *friend*. He's likely dead and buried under a mountain of snow right now because *I* didn't intervene when *I* could have. Would you like to doubt my resolve further or are we quite good

without all of this fiscing *bullshit*?”

“I can see where he got his mouth, too!” Ipteria giggled.

“Would you shut up already?” Peoran snarled back at her.

She just laughed.

“Now I will tell you what you are going to do,” he spat, glowering at all four of them. “I understand he gave you orders to leave. I am rescinding them. If there are *shiriak* present, it is hard to guess what else is roaming the woods. I'll not have more of you dying on my watch and at least now the hounds are dead. I'll place enough wards to keep any more wraiths from popping in and I can assure you that *mine* are stronger than *his*. Or are you going to argue the point with me like he described in his journal – at length and in detail – like you did with him?”

That was far from the response any of them expected. They sat in silence until Moulborke spoke up. “So what do you want us to do instead? If we can't leave... what do we do?”

“Burn, then bury your dead,” he answered.

“And don't join them.”