

CHAPTER 1

Something Dark at Work

IT WAS A CRISP autumn day. Oranges, yellows, and reds burned on the foliage as they departed their limbs like children leaving home for good. They sailed on the breeze from as high up as the eye could see, falling from the towering timbers like little specks of snowflakes drifting in carefree spirals. Some landed on rope bridges and rooftops, hardly making it halfway through their hopeful descent to the earth. Others gathered on porches and windowsills. Those that made it down landed on grassy knolls and dirt paths. Some stuck their claim on wooden crates and sat on barrels while others landed in fountains and streams, turning themselves into tiny vessels that journeyed on the gloomy glass surface of the water.

It was the time of day when people lit their lanterns and hearth fires, knowing that the quiet darkness of night would soon fall. The windowpanes glowed with golden light as the black crosses of their framework divided them and fractured the light's glow. Some forest folk finished their chores outside, in front of their homes; yard work, feeding animals, and such.

Those who finished their workday flocked to the tavern, lads and lasses alike. Some skipped in groups and jested with each other, others strolled confidently by themselves, dressed proper for an evening of celebration. Ellia tried to appreciate the blissful ignorance of Amori Village as though she may never see it this way again. None of them knew about the lokithor and only a few of them knew of Aithein's summons. She saw Loff'ta waddling up the steps of the tavern before disappearing through the swinging doors and into the bustle.

The innkeeper appeared from within and opened the tavern's windows. She latched the entrance doors as wide as they would go, flooding the village with a festive melody that started with a gentle harp and violin, perfectly in balance. As it progressed, flutes and fiddles accompanied the melody into a more upbeat tempo,

helping it soar to new heights. By the time it climaxed, the wonderful notes from a concertina drove the chorus as the beat of the frame drums transformed the song into a valiant anthem of triumph. The patrons and bards sang wildly together, harmonizing their pride along with their heritage.

Traders packed up their wares in the village square and gathered their belongings for the long trek back to whence they came. A couple Amori boys helped repair the broken wheel of a mule-drawn cart for an old Caliphian man. The man had a long white beard and the robes of an alchemist. A tiny cap covered his bald crown. The back of his cart was filled with crates of potions and herbs.

“Thank ya, lads!” he said. “I be payin’ ya back with me wares!”

One of them waived the old man off. “Nonsense!”

“Just get home safe, Noldo,” the other Amori replied. “Same time next week will be our reward.”

“Too kind,” the old man replied. “Too kind ye are.”

Loff’ta reappeared from the crowd within the tavern, holding a mug of spiced ale and a bowl of pickled eggs, cabbage, and wild carrots. He gave a sloppy bow to the ladies that passed by. The wooden planks of the porch creaked as Loff’ta made his way through the crowd and found a seat. He plopped into a rocking chair and kicked his boots up on a side table. He bit into a mouthful of boiled egg. Crumbs of its yolk tumbled down the vines of his beard. He washed it down with a big swig of ale and basked in the glory of satisfaction.

Ellia spied Loff’ta from across the village square, but he had an eye for noticing things, and so raised his mug to her. She grinned and shook her head, then waved back. Good ole Loff’ta. Hopefully he was near completion on Aithein’s set of armor.

The ever-present golden haze of the forest seemed thin this evening, like the day after a rain, when the chilly air chases away the moist cloud cover. Ellia stared up at the ceiling of the forest, wondering if she were seeing things. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she swore there was a powder blue light trying to break through the misty haze she’d known all her life.

The orbs of aether, the tiny life forms that glowed and clustered in the stillness of the forest and maintained its health, seemed scarce this day, concernedly so. The morning had started off normal enough, but now it felt like the eve of a holiday, as though the entire world anticipated the fabled arrival of a storied character. It was an exciting but somehow ominous feeling that burnished the surroundings.

The wintry air frosted Ellia's nostrils and bit the walls of her lungs. It seemed that Dusktide could hardly wait to declare its arrival as the first whole month of harvest season. A shiver caused her to cross her arms and tuck her hands between her biceps and ribs.

"Oy!" Loff'ta called from the tavern's deck. "Wha're ye wait'n for, Ellia, the sky to turn blue?" He choked on the delight at his occult joke. "Come 'ave a drink!"

Ellia wasn't amused by the mockery. She moseyed over to the tavern and ascended the steps.

Loff'ta pulled aside a chair for her. "Ere ye go, lass. How 'bout somethin' to warm that belly o' yours?"

"What have you got in mind?" Ellia asked.

"Ha! The bloody best!" Loff'ta winked at her and leaned in. "The music might be soon to stop, but right now it be a'roaring, an' I aim to a'soaring!" He bared his teeth. "Or maybe even a'whoring!" A wheezy chuckle showed how proud he was of that one, but off of Ellia's unentertained stare, his smile disappeared and he cleared his throat. "D'issan!"

A plump but pretty waitress flirted with a few patrons on the other side of the deck as she took their orders. A bonnet corralled her rosy hair.

"Come on, woman!" Loff'ta yelled. "What're ye waitin' for, the world to end?"

"If I were so lucky!" D'issan answered. "At least then I wouldn't have answer your every beckon!"

"Those buggers'll ne'er love ye much as I," Loff'ta said. "Best not bite the hand that feeds ye, now, lest ye want it to bite back!"

D'issan smiled. "Maybe I do."

Loff'ta's lips scrunched together. "That's the woman I adore." He causally went back to eating his food, picking out a purple wild carrot and offering it to Ellia. "That one'll be as sweet as candy, lass."

Ellia popped the carrot into her mouth and was pleasantly surprised. For all the yapping Loff'ta does, he seemed to know what he was talking about.

D'issan tried to keep a straight face. Say one thing about Loff'ta, it's that he's sincere. He might be churlish but it's what makes him lovable. She looked at the patrons and smiled. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. I'll be right back."

The patrons threw their hands up and groaned.

"Where ya goin', sweetheart?" one asked.

D'issan smiled seductively. "To feed the hand that bites me." She walked over to Loff'ta and sat on his lap. "Well, your mug's not empty and neither is your bowl. Wish I could say the same about your head. Why do you want?"

"I din't call ye over for me, my beauty," Loff'ta replied. "I called ye over for her." He pointed to Ellia.

"A younger woman, is it?" D'issan asked. "Shouldn't be surprised."

"Only in age, my lovely," Loff'ta replied. He goosed her thigh affectionately.

D'issan smirked. "How are ya, Ellia?"

"Well enough, I suppose," she replied.

"Fetch'er a mug o' egg'n'grog, will ye?" Loff'ta ordered. "Make it the best ye e'er done! She needs it, oy, does she e'er! Ha!"

"I think I can whip up something special," D'issan said.

"That's me girl," Loff'ta replied. He slapped her tush as she walked away. He turned to Ellia. "When will ye make some feller as happy as me, sweetheart? Your looks be deceiving but I know you."

THE BOYS TOOK A brief respite from running. Everyone was out of breath except Aithein.

Caelwyn took out a small bottle filled with green liquid. "It seems you were built for this, Aithein."

"Xas," Neilath added. "You should be the one to carry Baelwyn."

Baelwyn giggled as he used Neilath's sheathed swords for stirrups, his arms wrapped around Neilath's neck for a piggyback ride.

Aithein marveled at the potion. "What is that, Caelwyn?"

"This?" He uncorked the bottle and took a swig. "Stamina potion. Woo, that's strong! Gah!" His eyes scrunched up and he stuck his tongue out between gritted teeth, grimacing.

"Through pride we deceive ourselves, eh?" Taelire jested. He bent over with his hands on his knees, struggling to compose himself. "Give it here."

Caelwyn handed him the bottle. Taelire took a swig and damn near threw up. "Ugh, what is that made of?"

Caelwyn laughed, but Taelire could feel the effects immediately. His body woke up and felt vibrant, excited to work. He stood tall as his breath and heart rate steadied. He felt as strong as an ox and as nimble as a hare. The stamina potion was one of the best things he'd ever put in his body.

Taelire offered it to Neilath, who was skeptical to say the least. "It was pride that changed angels into devils, wasn't it, Neilath?" He flashed a wicked grin.

Neilath looked at the chartreuse colored liquid sloshing around in the bottle. He reluctantly took it.

"Xas. Devils," he said sarcastically. "Because the heavenly prison we escaped was so angelic. Nothing but divinity." He took a bitter swig and unflinchingly swallowed the liquid in an incensed manner. He looked everyone in the eye and camouflaged the potions effects on him, but he undoubtedly felt better than he could ever remember. He cracked his neck to loosen up and asked Baelwyn if he was ready. "*Phuul dos kr'athin?*"

“Xas!” Baelwyn replied. “Go horsey!” He tried to spur Neilath with his heels.

“Lead the way, Aithein,” Neilath said. “We’ll all have sets of scale armor by day’s end.”

D'ISSAN STIRRED THE FROTHY mixture of eggs, milk, and sugar in a steel pot

that she held over an open flame. She added vanilla, cinnamon, and clove.

“That should about do it,” she said to herself as she took the pot off the stove and set it on the counter. She eyed a private reserve of dusty crystal bottles filled with russet colored liquids. What to choose, brandy or rum? She saw one of the bottles filled with a blackish liquid. “Perfect!”

She grabbed the bottle, unscrewed its cap, and eyeballed the amount of black rum that she poured into the pot. She took a swig for herself. “By the damned, that’s good!”

Next, she sprinkled nutmeg into the pot’s contents and stirred them one last time before emptying them into a silver tankard. She scooped a dollop of meringue onto the surface and then shaved chocolate curls on top of it. Her fingers wiggled in delight around the tankard and hurried out of the cookery.

Ellia watched D’issan pop out of the tavern and onto the porch with her special delivery.

Loff’ta turned off of Ellia’s wide eyes and stared in bewilderment at the egg’n’grog. “Oy! That be a drink to make King Korren green with envy!”

He stuck out his finger to dip it into the meringue, but D’issan slapped it away.

“Keep your sausage fingers to yourself, old man!” she said.

Loff’ta put his hands up to show he was unarmed. “Don’t go casting a kitten, now!”

“This was made for Ellia,” D’issan replied. She presented the drink to her.
“Here you go, darling.”

Everyone nearby watched intently as Ellia took the first sip. The creamy richness flooded her taste buds and warmed her with delight. The spiced rum gave it just the right amount of bite as it smoothly slid into her tummy. Ellia looked up at everyone. She could feel the dollop of meringue on her nose and the milk mustache on her lip. There were no words for how good it tasted. She shook her head in humble praise. She couldn’t hold back her smile.

“I’ll have one if you please,” a patron said.

“Me too, please,” his friend added.

A third patron felt left out. “I want one too!”

“Wait your turn, ye cellar smelling bastard!” Loff’ta yelled back. He turned to D’issan. “Look what ye did, sweetie. One drink made ye renown. Make mine before theirs, my dear. And don’t be giving me no coffin varnish neither.”

“Fine,” D’issan replied. “But I’m charging you extra, chubby.”

“Ha!” Loff’ta responded with a confident grin. “That be a just tax then, for I be twice the man!”

“That you are, love,” D’issan said. “That you are.”

She turned to the other customers, told them that it would take time, and then strolled back into the tavern.

Loff’ta turned back to silent Ellia. “You’ve gone quiet on me. Wha’ happened? Egg’n’grog bite your tongue?”

Ellia gave a polite smile.

Loff’ta leaned back and let out a sigh.

“Take it all in, lass,” he said. “We’ve been through a lot, but nut’in like this. Sump’tin ain’t right with that faelen tree. It ‘appened so gradually that no one noticed. ’Taint no excuse. We should’ve known.”

Some forest folk, merry from their spirits, took to the lawn in front of the tavern and danced with each other.

Loff’ta smiled. “Cute kids. The lad’s a dead hooper though.”

“Loff’ta!” Ellia smacked his arm.

Loff'ta grimaced. "What? He be dancin' like he's got two left feet!"

Ellia ignored him and watched the adorable couple spin round and round in each other's embrace. They passed through the Great Barrier long after Amori Village was established. Their sovereignty in the realm of Caliphweald had not been threatened thus far. They were so innocent, so tender. They reminded her of Aithein. Damn, how she missed him. She wondered what he was doing, if the Bannitlarn Brothers had encountered more lokithors. She wondered if he was still alive. Her stomach churned. It'd been days since they left.

Ellia watched the handsome Amori gentleman cradle the young woman's wholesome face. She couldn't help but hope that the couple would return to the Shade soon and avoid the looming disaster. She knew there would be no such luck for her and Aithein. He was destined to stay through the worst. Whether it was luck or fate, it didn't matter. Ellia would not leave him. She made that promise to Olwyn in her dying moment. That beautiful, strong Nordic woman's experience taught Ellia that no one is safe from the fires of war, from the laws of nature, or from the hands of misfortune. No, Ellia would risk mortality if it meant staying by Aithein's side. She would not flee to the Shade as long as he was still alive in the swards of Caliphweald.

Loff'ta interrupted her thoughts. "I've got to tell ye sump'tin on a more serious note, lass. I ain't the dullest blade on the mount, understand?"

Ellia nodded. She could see the muscles flexing through the skin of his clenched jaw.

"Good," Loff'ta added. He crossed his arms tightly over his chest. "Neither are ye. Now I know we got different beliefs, you and I, but we both be wantin' the same thing. Freedom."

Ellia fiddled with the jewelry on her wrist. "Just come out with it, already. You know you can trust me."

Loff'ta gave her a hard stare, as though his life depended on it. His eyes darted around his surroundings, seeing danger in every little nook. His gaze narrowed at the nearby revelers to make sure no one was paying him any mind. Once he deemed it safe, he licked his lips and leaned in. "This whole time I've been toiling away in secret, my apprentices too."

An empty feeling crept into Ellia's stomach. "Doing what?"

The breath fell heavily through Loff'ta's nose, noticeably trembling amidst the din of voices. "Ye ever heard of a faelen tree rounding up weapons?"

Ellia sucked at the corner of her mouth through pursed lips. She knew the answer. Why was it so damn hard for her to admit that she was wrong, that they all were? Why were they so foolish to forget the past or to think that it was different aeon and it could never happen again? Her saliva welled between the tip of her tongue and the front of her teeth. She caught herself frequently swallowing under Loff'ta's scrutiny. He was right, and so she lowered her stare to the floor and shook her head.

"Of course not," Loff'ta replied. "There be sump'tin dark at work here. An' it's finally come for us."

Ellia leered at him. "What did you do, Loff'ta?"

Loff'ta looked around again. His words were barely spoken above his breath, through the side of his mouth. "I decided I ain't takin' no more. For every blade they rounded up, I done made three."

Ellia's mouth fell open and her breath stopped. She covered her parted lips with her fingers.

"Shhhh," Loff'ta whispered, wearing a fake grin. "Don't attract attention."

Ellia lowered her hand to her chest and exhaled. "What will you do?"

"Not me," he responded, pointing at her. "What will ye do? I drew my line in the sand. From my cold dead fingers, that be the only way anyone's takin' 'em!"

He took a defiant swig of ale. "I'll never dig my own grave with the tip of a blade at my back. Not ever! I'll die on me feet first. Maker knows it! And I best not be tested, else someone ain't seeing tomorrow."

Ellia's thoughts were fuzzy. No matter how hard she focused, nothing came to her. She pressed her tongue against the dry roof of her mouth and swallowed. "What do you want me to do?"

Loff'ta faked a narrow smile and raised his mug to someone that passed him by in the crowd. Once the chap stepped out of earshot, the cordial expression faded

from Loff'ta's face like a sun fading below a horizon. He leaned in again towards Ellia. "Bring to me the ones ye trust. If ye don't know 'em, find 'em."

The situation in whole was a nightmare. It would've been entertaining were it not real. Ellia chugged the rest of her egg'n'grog and slammed the mug down. "And how do you suppose I do that, Loff'ta?" she sneered. "By asking around?"

"Don't take that tone with me," Loff'ta replied. "We're the ones we've been waitin' for. If not us then who? If not now then when?"

Ellia sulked. "It's not fair. We're good people."

"Expectin' the world to be fair because you're good is like expecting a lokithor not to attack ye because ye don't eat birds or lizards. Life ain't fair, sweetheart. It's diverse. That's the beauty of it. That be the source of our power. Were it fair, every'tin would be predestined, and we'd 'ave nut'in to do about it. Unfairness makes the game of life worth playin'."

Ellia stared at the young couple. They swayed gracefully with each other like willows at the edge of a lakeshore on a summer day, so peaceful, so serene. Ellia felt happy for them. Their lives were perfect. They would have a fairytale ending. Maybe Loff'ta was right. If life were fair she'd have nothing to strive for.

It sounded like the flap of a sail from a boat that drifted on a lonely lake. The flutter wasn't startling. It may have gone unnoticed had it not been such a foreign sound. No one saw it coming.

Ellia leaned back, her elbow resting on the arm of the chair and her cheek resting in the palm of her hand. She basked lazily in the brisk evening, completely unaware of what she saw.

It happened so fast that the first one was gone before Ellia even realized what it was. From her perspective, the roof of the porch obscured everything above the dancing couple's heads.

The lover's kiss ended.

The young man was snatched up so fast that it looked like he vanished.

Ellia blinked hard to make sure her eyes weren't playing tricks on her. Her posture perked. Everyone froze, stunned by silence.

The young woman screamed with horrific helplessness. The person she loved most was torn from her arms.

The sound could only be described as the shredding of canvas, accompanied by the snap of rubber.

The folk on the tavern's porch beheld dark rain pattering down on the Amori woman. She cowered in terror and raised her hands up to shelter her face. The dark rain splattered all over her, like a bucket of red paint. A disheveled mess of stone thudded onto the ground next to the Amori girl and tumbled to her feet.

Her lover's decapitated head rolled to a stop and faced up at her, still blinking, watching her from a different world, a cruel one, a wasted one, where the distance between her and her dreams was infinite. His pale eyes drifted lifelessly into the plummet of tragedy. His throat was ripped to frayed shreds, bearing severed veins, sinews, and the broken shards of his spine.

The blinding death knell of a fairy illuminated in the treetops, accompanied by a painful screech, and the severed head collapsed into faelen dust.

The Amori woman collapsed to her knees. Her posture stooped and her face winced. She tried to scream but nothing came out. Confusion swept over her face as fast as her tears streamed down it. Her chin trembled as she stared back and forth from the dust to her bloody hands, shaking with terror and heartbreak. She lifted her head and her dull, wet eyes met with Ellia's. Strands of her hair stuck to the blood on her face as her empty stare pierced into Ellia's soul, asking why she did nothing, why she hadn't even moved yet. Before Ellia could say anything, the young woman that was the target of Ellia's envy only moments ago, now a terrified, heartbroken little girl, was snatched up to the unknown everlasting heavens.

Ellia sprang to her feet and ran to the edge of the porch. She looked up in time to see the lokithor's serpentine tail slithering back and forth like the black flag of a pirate ship. It disappeared into the mix of haze and forest with the girl pinned in the grasp of its talons, its powerful dragon wings flapping methodically.

The girl didn't fight to squirm loose. The sight of her lover being destroyed took everything out of her including her will to survive. She gave no cries for help, no resistance, or even so much as a whimper.

After the lokithor faded from sight, there were no visible anomalies in the foliage. It was almost like the lovers were never dancing on the tavern's front lawn. Almost.

The pile of dust lay on the earth, caked in dark spatters of blood that stained the blades of grass and dirt. A second drizzle of black-hued rain pelted the ground and coated it with a fresh layer. Ellia looked up through the trees from where it came. All was silent, but she knew what was up there. She knew there would be no fairytale ending.

"I can't bloody warp!" someone screamed.

Hysteria swept through the village like a plague as the forest folk realized their Shadean abilities were no longer with them. Some hopped the porch rails and fled towards their homes, some ran to other hiding places, while others ran inside the tavern.

Earsplitting shrieks from the predators echoed throughout the village.

"More of 'em are coming!"

Lokithors swooped down upon the fleeing, helpless Amori like hawks on field mice. The ground shook as one landed right in front of the tavern steps. Its wings spread and it shot a sideways look at everyone on the porch, paralyzing them with fear.

Loff'ta slowly reached towards his waste belt and unbuttoned a tiny vertical satchel that was attached to it. He wove his fingers through the flap until he felt the cold steel handles of his babies. If a man makes blades for a living, it's generally best not to make him fear for his life.

The lokithor did not know its enemy, or potential meal, and so it had no idea what Loff'ta was doing. It watched intently, like a dog waiting for a biscuit, as he pulled out his pride and joy, the best throwing knives he'd ever forged, slowly positioning his stout, drumstick legs into a fighting stance.

The lokithor gaped its beak and puffed the reptilian wattles on its neck as it inhaled. Its sharp hackles erected in challenge as it dared the Amori to fight. It let loose the shrill, demonic vibrato. Its head shook while its long forked tongue flapped

from the gust of sound that breached the air. A foul stench of rot wafted towards the porch.

Loff'ta lunged forward, his balancing arm and front leg moving in sync with his throwing arm cocked. He leaned his shoulder in and flung the knife right into the lokithor's mouth. The blade stuck into the back of its throat and the monstrous beast stumbled backward, choking on cold steel. It gained its balance, trying to shake the knife loose, but to no avail.

"Ye want more, devil?" Loff'ta asked sadistically. "I've got your fill!"

He wound up and threw the next blade as hard as he could.

The knife stabbed the lokithor right in its yellow, reptilian eye.

The beast flailed in pain, its long neck wagging towards the heavens as it gasped for relief. No such luck. The abomination fell to its side and lay still, waiting for help, or death, whichever came first.

Loff'ta turned to the other Amori. "Ain't nothing roaming this world or the next that can't be killed. Now, ye done made fools of yourselves by surrendering your arms. But ye a second chance to redeem yourselves has cometh. Those interested in surviving the night will find swords in me hidden armory. There be a case of books blocking the door to a staircase. If I don't make it, find 'em. Use 'em."

CHAPTER 2

Seldom What They Deserve

“**H**OW DO WE GET to Loff'ta's unarmed?” someone asked. “We can't bloody warp!”

Noam, a youthful but eager Amori boy, was too naïve to know better. “There are bows and arrows in the trader's shop. We can give support while we make trips to arm ourselves.”

“We can't risk our lives!” Another voice said. “We don't know how many of them there are!”

The Amori were courageous, but they were extremely cautious when it came to risking the whole tribe for any endeavor. Like penguins that crowd around a body of water till one of them falls in, to make sure there are no predators below the surface, the Amori squabbled over who they should send to get bows and arrows from the shop.

Noam volunteered himself. “I'll go.”

A brawny lad named Siigos stepped forward. “I'll go with you. I'm useful with a bow.”

“They need distractions,” Loff'ta said. “Everyone must do his part.”

“Fire,” Ellia said.

Loff'ta tilted his head in curiosity. “What?”

“They don't like it,” Ellia responded. “Least that's what the old tales say.”

“Ha! Let us burn the demon fowl then!” Loff'ta roared.

The Amori scurried inside the tavern, breaking down whatever furniture they could to use as tinder. They formed supply lines and lit torches in the fireplace, then passed them out amongst each other systematically. The lines diverged at the foot of the tavern's steps, where the Amori tossed the lit wood on the ground until they formed sizable bonfires.

A calloused hand grabbed Ellia's and yanked her towards the tavern.

"Don't let go, lass," Loff'ta shouted through the din of voices. He shoved people out of his way. "D'issan! D'issan!" He turned to Ellia. "I ain't leavin' here without her! D'issan!"

"O'er here, love!" D'issan answered.

"Thank the Maker!" Loff'ta said as he embraced her. "We be sleeping hens to stay put. Ain't there somewhere safe to hide these tenderfoots, where they'll at least keep outta the way?"

"Xas," D'issan replied. "We have cubbyholes in the attic and cellar that we use for storage. We could clear some of 'em out quick like."

"Everyone listen up!" Loff'ta shouted. "Time ain't on our side so I'll only say it once. Those who be unable or unwilling to fight, follow D'issan and help her make refuge. Bring all the food and drink ye can. Those who remain best not be cowards and best 'ave a weapon in hand. If ye be seen wandering around like a fool while others be fighting, I'll kill ye meself." He looked around. No one had anything else to say. "Right. The time's come. Get to it!"

Not one second was wasted while the Amori stripped the tavern of its resources. The kitchen was the first target. Noam found a long boning knife and a gourmet meat cleaver. "Siigos!" he called. "Over here!"

Siigos was delighted. "Good find, mate!"

Noam took the boning knife and Siigos grabbed the cleaver. Together, they made their way to the porch.

After the obvious blunt objects and cookware were taken, the Amori that readied for battle were utilizing everything from rolling pins to bottles and cutting boards. The rest took crates of meat, bowls of fruits and vegetables, and baskets brimming with loaves of bread.

They made makeshift barricades over the windows and anywhere else that a lokithor could pry its way through, but it gave little comfort to anyone. The lokithors would have to be eradicated. They could not coexist with the Amori, so every object that kept the lokithors outside also trapped the Amori inside. They couldn't stay here. It was not a storm that would pass through. It was not some children's tale

where dawn would arrive and daylight would bring salvation. There was no one coming to save them. The situation was bleak and everyone knew it.

D'issan leaned in and kissed Loff'ta. "This village doesn't need a hero and it already has its idiot. Don't you go doing something stupid."

"Ha! Everything I do be stupid, darling," he replied. "'Twas the path to your heart!"

D'issan eyes warmed over and she tenderly pinched his cheek. "I love you." Loff'ta blushed. "Don't soften me up now, love. There's killin' that needs doin'!"

She straightened his collar. "I know, my little strudel."

"Er... I um, yea." Loff'ta, stupefied, looked around at the other hardened Amori. A few grins pointed back at him.

"Find us in the cellar or the attic if it gets quiet," D'issan said. "Shade protect you. All of you." She turned to the others. "Let's go people!"

The first group of Amori followed D'issan to the cellar with their arms full.

Loff'ta turned to Ellia. "All right, lass. I think ye better go with D'issan, no?"

Ellia frowned. "Have you forgotten so soon?"

Loff'ta flashed a devious grin. "Never. The brave don't need asking. Just being polite is all."

Ellia grabbed a torch and led Loff'ta out onto the porch. Amori Village lay buried in the dark of night. Noam and Siigos followed, but kept their silence. The forest was unusually quiet and still. They had successfully built enough fires to ward off the lokithors around the front of the tavern. They had begun to build a trail of fires towards the shop so that Noam and Siigos would have protection en route, but it was far from done and they were running out of resources to burn.

Ellia stared into the encircling abyss. "If I call them, they will come. But if they come, they'll be as dangerous as the lokithors. Without the faelen magic, they could infect us all."

"Can they be cured with the faelen magic gone?" Loff'ta asked.

"I've heard stories of Caliphians bringing remedies to the forest, witches even, in search of their loved ones, some successful at first," Ellia replied. "But they

are never rid of the disease. They lose control of it during certain periods of the lunar cycle, and Caliphians know them by the wake of bloodshed and broken lives they leave behind. As far as I know, once someone becomes a kal'daka, he is condemned to die as one. Only then does he know peace."

Loff'ta was fidgety. His heartbeat raced. "If they outlive the lokithors, can you drive them away in peace?"

"I can," Ellia responded. "But what if I don't live that long?"

Loff'ta wanted to say something positive, that Ellia would be fine and that he wouldn't let anything happen to her, but the truth was that he couldn't muster the words. It was a realistic question and he didn't know if either of them would make it through the night.

"It don't seem right to replace one kind of evil with another," Loff'ta said. "But one be from this world and the other be from the next. There only be so many kal'daka in the forest. Maybe it's time to use the lokithors to cleanse it of them. If only we knew where the lokithors came from or if there'll even be an end to 'em."

Ellia stared across the village and up at all the houses in the trees. So many of them had their lamps lit inside. All those Amori weren't at the tavern and had no idea what had transpired over the last hour. She hated important decisions, but she hated them because she was good at making them. "We ought not to call upon beasts of the field unless we can warn the others. It's bad enough as it is."

"Unless we run out of options," Loff'ta added.

"Right." Ellia's voice grew quiet. "Do you think Aithein is still alive?"

"No doubt," Loff'ta said. "Do you think the faelen tree is still alive?"

Ellia flinched. "It befalls a terrible fate."

Glass shattered just beyond their field of visibility. A bedlam of discordant shrieks mixed with a fierce sizzling noise ensued, provoking a feral alertness from everyone.

Loff'ta lifted his torch. "What the bloody hell was that?"

Siigos' eyebrows were as raised as his eyes were wide. "Sounds like someone's frying a bucket of pig fat!"

"With the pig still alive!" Loff'ta added.

An Amori boy approached Loff'ta. "We've got to get fires lit round back and below the windows."

Others agreed and mobilized themselves.

Loff'ta nodded. "Careful, lad. Ain't no second chances here."

The boy contemplated the gravity of the situation. He slowly turned and led a few volunteers back inside to gather wood.

There were only a handful of Amori left on the porch to defend the entrance. They shuddered at the echoing screams in the distance. They stood helplessly while their kin met untimely, horrendous demises.

"We can't delay any longer," Noam said.

Loff'ta grunted with dismay, but couldn't disagree. "We need more fire."

"Don't worry, old man. We'll be fine," Siigos said jestingly. "After all, fate doesn't invite crabby old blacksmiths to save the world. It needs its heroes to be handsome."

"The only thing heroes be is dead," Loff'ta replied. "Unhappy be the people who need heroes."

"We are those people, Loff'ta," Noam responded. "But those bows will make us all heroes in the end."

Ellia frowned as she thought of Aithein covered in lokithor blood. "Not everyone thrown to the lokithors comes back a hero, Noam."

"But no one becomes a hero by doing nothing," Noam replied. "Are you ready, Siigos?"

The amber glow from the fires illuminated the features of Siigos' face and cast shadows over the other half of it. He bravely nodded. "Xas. Let's move."

Loff'ta handed the boys torches. "Take these just in case."

The boys accepted the torches, gave Ellia and the other nearby Amori hugs, and then quietly crept down the stairs. Loff'ta accompanied them as far as the dead lokithor to retrieve his throwing knives. They looked at the gruesome animal.

Loff'ta approached it cautiously lest it still be alive. "Siigos, wedge that cleaver in there in case it closes its jaws when I pull out me knife."

Siigos pried the jaws open with his cleaver. "At least it loses its beak before you lose your hand."

"Ha!" Loff'ta shook his head. He reached in quick and ripped the knife out. There was no reaction from the lokithor. Loff'ta let out an easy sigh and smiled, then carelessly ripped the knife out of its eye.

The beast shrieked. Loff'ta stumbled back and tripped onto his arse. As the lokithor clamped down it severed its own beak off on the edges of the cleaver. It writhed around faintly before laying still again, its head sagging limp.

Loff'ta's face turned pale. "By the damned. Wha' was that about?"

They all looked up to the shadowy heavens and then back at each other.

"Best be hurrying now," Noam said.

Loff'ta gave a jittery nod. "Good luck." He scurried to his feet and ran back to the tavern. Once he made it to the porch, he watched the boys pass beyond the fire's glow and into the blackness of night. There were no last words, for they meant to succeed.

Noam and Siigos felt their bodies trembling as they sprinted through the village. The crackling flames from the torches nearly burned their faces when the wind taunted the fire, but it was the only thing that gave them comfort in the eerie, deserted square. Dark shadows haunted them in every windowsill, around every corner, behind every fixture, and each step required a summons of courage. Step by step, they made it to the trader's shop. Lamps were lit and the door was open, but the boutique was deserted.

"Lock it behind you," Noam said.

Siigos bolted the door. From inside the shop, the windows looked like they were made of obsidian glass.

"Here, hold this." He handed Noam the torch, placed the cleaver on the counter, and then hopped to the other side. The bows were high up on the wall.

Noam's eyes fell up a footstool. "Siigos. Use that."

Siigos dragged the footstool beneath the bow rack and climbed it. He slung as many bows over his shoulder as he could. "This should do it for now."

“Get some quivers,” Noam said.

Siigos climbed down and placed all the bows on the counter. He grabbed a quiver and ran to a barrel of arrows. He stuffed the quiver with them and then slung it over his shoulder. “Apparently the best deals are achieved amidst chaos, eh?”

Noam frowned. “Hurry up. They wait for us.”

“Throw those torches outside,” Siigos replied. “I need you to carry some quivers and be able to nock an arrow or two.”

Noam unlocked the latch and cracked the door open just enough to toss the torches outside.

As he was shutting the door behind him, a monolithic object plunged into the frame and shattered the surrounding walls in an explosion of dust and splinters. The door smashed into his head and brushed him to the floor while landing on top of him.

A colossal weight crushed his body from the chest down. A tremendous surge of pressure pierced the back of his eyes while hot, copper-tasting fluid flooded his mouth. The room went dark and silent.

“Noam!” Siigos screamed. He picked up a bow and nocked an arrow. The lokithor stood on top of the door that crushed Noam and snapped its jaws around in the dusty light, seeking flesh.

Say one thing about the Amori, it’s that they are love, and love is as tough as hell. Do not mistake the appearance of children, for they remain closest to the source of the pain that drove them into existence. Adults have drifted away from that source with each passing year, soon to forget that which propelled them into this life and the fires from which they were born. The Amori remain burned by such memories and from this Siigos was not spared. He drew the bowstring and let it release with all the rage of the Divine Ego.

The arrow soared into the lokithor and struck its throat. The monster collapsed violently and flailed around on top of the door that pinned down Noam’s lifeless body. Siigos nocked another arrow and fired again. The arrow lodged into the lokithor’s breast, just beneath its wing. It rolled off the door and its tail whipped

the torches up from the ground. They flung around in a tempest of embers, scattering about the shop. The dry wood and tapestries were set ablaze.

Siigos hopped the counter and flipped the door off of Noam's broken body. The injuries were grave. Dark maroon blood trickled from his ears, his eyes, and his mouth. His hands and face were bloated from the vicious reallocation of fluids he suffered.

Heartbreak stung Siigos' eyes with tears. The words fell off of the precipice of his mouth. "Noam," he stammered. He knelt down and placed a hand on the limp body. The body began to disintegrate into dust. "Back to the Shade, my friend. Back to the Shade."

Before long, Noam's corpse was dust blowing in the wind and the walls of the shop were up in flames. There was no time to mourn. Siigos made a break to grab as many bows and quivers as he could, but before he could load up he heard the frightening thud of more lokithors landing outside the front of the shop. He quickly hopped the counter for cover and spun around.

The monsters shrieked and hissed through the burning cracks of the shop, piercing their heads through openings in an effort to knock the walls down. Siigos knocked an arrow and let it fly. He shot at the lokithors with rapidity. It seemed as though the whole flock was attracted to him. They descended from all directions of the black heavens, soaring to the entrance like packs of wolves descending upon wounded fowl. The beams at the front of the shop started to wither and snap.

Some of the burning chunks collapsed onto the lokithors, and though the environment served as a temporary ally, Siigos knew the fire was like a mercenary that would turn on him as sure the swing of a pendulum.

"Help!" he screamed. He fearlessly barraged the beasts with arrows and his aim was true. The three that he killed formed a blockade with their corpses. It kept the others out but it trapped him in.

The smoke scratched his throat. He knelt low and tried to cough it away. He grew dizzy and light-headed. His ears rang and his vision narrowed into a cloudy tunnel.

A feeling of reckoning crept over him, and he knew. He knew where he went wrong just as everyone eventually does. The mistakes that had been made were irreversible. Funny how that works, he thought. We all know what the right thing to do is only when we are confronted by the consequences of ignoring it. His eyes welled with tears and his voice quaked as he prayed. "Yah," he gasped. "Please, Yah, don't let them eat me. I'll come home, I'll do anything!"

Loff'ta, Ellia, and the other three Amori on the tavern's porch watched the shop on the other side of the square go up in flames.

Rewiu, a stout Amori boy wielding an ax, grew increasingly fidgety as they heard the shrieks and the flight patterns of the lokithors swooping down upon the trader's shop. "They're all going after 'em!"

"Now be the time," Loff'ta said. "The only chance those boys have is us. The only chance we have is them. Who be coming?"

"I am," Ellia replied.

Zikwiu, his appearance a mixture between scholarly and aristocratic, waived his fire poker like a conducting rod. His face was oval, his eyes hazel, and his hair wavy like the mane of a dog. It fell to the middle of his brow. The gold embroidery on his black coat glinted in the firelight against the contrast of his red scarf and the ruffles of lace on his white shirt. "You'll be glad to know I can wield this as effectively as a low-end staff."

Tsyde stepped forward. His cheeks were bony and his body was gaunt, but he was tall and his voice was deep. "We're all coming with you, Loff'ta. Lead the way."

Loff'ta looked to Rewiu. "Rew?" Rewiu gave a nod. "Good." Loff'ta turned to one of the last Amori inside. "Seal this entrance behind us."

"When will you be back?" someone asked.

Loff'ta couldn't find the right lie. "The greatest adventurers ne'er return."

The remaining Amori watched Loff'ta lead Ellia and their other comrades down the steps and past the bonfires until the outlines of their figures merged with the shadows.

As they snuck through the darkness, Loff'ta was surprisingly difficult to keep up with. By some damnation he was unnaturally fast. They snuck around the outskirts of the village square. The screams that came from Siigos fighting the lokithors haunted every area of it.

The burning trader's shop emitted a brilliant aura that coated everything with a soft glow. It glinted off of the cobblestones and windowpanes, and turned even the tiniest grooves into shadowy chasms. An apocalyptic world reflected in the bright irises of the Amori as they stared into the inferno.

The group snuck ever so quietly around the square, but they could not turn from the chaos of thundering flames that dueled with the wind. Lokithors crowed at the shop's entrance and clawed at the corpses of their kin that blocked the path to the savory morsel inside. A massive crack of timber exploded. The shop's support beams caved in, raining a storm of hot embers and ash everywhere.

A chilling wail came from the shop. The lokithors flounced on their hind legs like dogs waiting for a scrap of meat. A crash came through the window. Siigos tumbled onto the ground in a sheet of broken glass and splinters. He sprung to his feet wielding the cleaver and the boning knife. He charged at the nearest lokithor and hacked away at it, screaming as loud as he could.

The element of surprise can turn even the dastardliest of people into fearless champions. Siigos was far from such. His prowess was magnified by his desperation.

The lokithor fell on its back and squirmed like a fish being flayed alive.

"We can save him!" Tsyde urged. "If we go now, we can save him!"

"If we fail, the whole village is lost," Loff'ta replied. "We need weapons!"

Tsyde shook anxiously. "We can't just let him sacrifice himself, Loff'ta!"

Loff'ta pulled Tsyde by the collar, shoved him into a shadowy nook, and smacked him across the face. "He already did! Ain't no sense in us doing the same, fool!"

A bloodcurdling look washed over Rewiu's face. "Look what they've done to him."

The group turned to see the Lokithors tearing Siigos apart. His intestines and innards were ripped out like an unraveled ball of yarn. Blood sprayed everywhere as his limbs were separated.

His fairy exploded in a death knell, stunning the lokithors as his body turned to dust. The energy of his soul swirled back to the Shade.

Loff'ta scowled. "We need those blades."

The lokithors were all alerted at the same time as they cocked their heads to face the Amori.

Ellia's eyes bulged. "They see us."

Loff'ta felt weak in the legs but the only movement in his rigid posture was a bead of sweat trickling down his brow. It ran unnoticed from the edge of his eye down the side of his cheekbone. His nostrils flared and the words were spoken barely above a raspy breath.

"Run, Ellia. Get to me house."

Ellia hesitated.

"Go!" he demanded. "Invoke the beasts of the forest."

Ellia scampered into the darkness.

Loff'ta was terrified as he accepted the challenge, staring down the lokithors, but he knew the others needed a hero. He loosed bitter chuckle at the irony of trying to sneak by the creatures for the greater good while they devoured his friend. Perhaps the best way to meet one's fate is to attempt to avoid it. "Monsters be needed here."

D'issan looked at the other Amori trembling uncontrollably at the sound of the chaotic din, all huddled together between crates and casks in the storage chambers of the tavern's basement. The musty air was stale and heavy.

"Our greatest strength always comes from our deepest hardship," she said. "Keep your silence. If need be, fight for one another unto death."

"Where are you going?" someone called.

D'issan turned. "To check on the rest."

Loff'ta, Rewiu, Tsyde, and Zikwiu spread out as they encircled the lokithors. Their makeshift weapons made it difficult to summon confidence, but sometimes the greatest confidence comes by staring death in the face and refusing to be taken.

Zikwiu's eyes burned bright, lost somewhere between good and evil, but there was no question on which side his heart stood as he faced the first lokithor down. "You piss-poor excuse of a creation. You wasted parasite of history's bowels. Have you forgotten my art so soon?"

He raised his fire poker to the sky. "*Nizzre!*"

Lightning flashed through the upper foliage. The lokithors shrieked back at him.

"Fools!" he screamed. "Have you forgotten who makes the rules? *Nizzre! Wacy'e ghil!*"

The heavens exploded brighter than the burning fires. Lightning struck down and channeled its electricity into Zikwiu's fire poker.

"*Flamgra mina!*" he ordered, and unleashed a spell of chain lightning that spread itself through all of the lokithors. The electricity scorched them like skewered meat over an open flame, and just as quickly, Zikwiu used his spiritual magnetism to return that energy to his mana pool. His fire poker remained charged for the next attack.

Loff'ta, Tsyde, and Rewiu wasted no time in descending upon the stunned beasts. Loff'ta's aim was true. He rushed in a pattern of avoidance, slinging his throwing knives into the vitals of the creatures. Tsyde and Rewiu stormed the flailing animals and stabbed them with their kitchen knives, hacking them apart in their moment of vulnerability.

Once the fray was over, they approached the pile of soot that was Siigos.

Rewiu took the boning knife and Tsyde picked up the cleaver.

Zikwiu remained still as the wind scattered the ashes of his friends on ground beside him. He wiped a hot tear from the corner of his eye. "Back to the dust, brothers. Back we all go."

Their victory was short lived. In the distance, the dragon-like blustering bravado of what sounded like a great migration, or invasion, echoed through the trees as though the whole forest was a cave.

A harrowing feeling sunk itself into Loff'ta's gut. "By the damned, there's more."

Rewiu's unblinking eyes stared upwards. "A bloody flock of 'em."

"Play the damned song, Ellia," Loff'ta muttered like a prayer. "Invite the cursed already."

Tsyde pointed at the mess. "Let's move 'fore we get dead!"

Loff'ta glared at him. He reckoned Tsyde would already have gone back to the dust had it not been for him. Tsyde didn't see it that way though. Tsyde saw Loff'ta's delay as the reason they lost two brothers. Had they not been selfish cowards, they'd have two more warriors to fight by their side.

Siigos and Noam never would've let the others fend for themselves. They were the selfless ones. They were the ones that deserved to be alive right now, not the other way around. But unfortunately life doesn't work that way, and people seldom get what they deserve.