

Roots Run Deep

Raza of House Heartglade stared at the devastation before her, feeling the anger bubbling up inside like the churning waters of a kettle. Sedhidessiss the Braveheart, Dragon of the grove, was gone; slain, torn asunder, and consumed. Her clutch had been destroyed, the chaotic swirl of life-force that made up her nest devoured, the ground itself churned and rent. It was a gaping wound, a bleeding tear - upon the world, and upon the heart of Raza and her kin. Few of the Kutari who'd lived here had survived - most had been slain in the battle, standing side-by-side with the Winnowers and the Dragons. The Vreech had been implacable, an endless tide encroaching and gorging on magic, leaving a wake of destruction behind them.

Three days. For three days, she had come to this site, still bearing the wounds of that battle, on a daily pilgrimage to mourn. Three days, and this was the first time she'd felt something other than a deep, mind-numbingly profound loss. Her people had been, as a matter of course, even-keeled in attitude - long lives in tune with the rhythms of nature left them more prone to a stoic acceptance of the bad and a joyous appreciation of the good - but those days were behind them now. The distant ritual that had been designed to defeat the Vreech had failed - they'd received word shortly after the disastrous battle that had followed it earlier this morning - but it had exacted its toll nonetheless. The Orcs' longevity had been sacrificed to fuel the magic, and with it had gone their calm dispositions. Now, rage sang in her veins, an unfamiliar but surprisingly comforting feeling. It was as if everything had been distilled and compressed, a lifetime's worth of feelings packed into a tenth of the time, and these emotions, despite their overwhelming strength, made her feel more alive than she'd ever been in the decades prior.

So she stood on the hill overlooking the town of Andarin, a walking stormcloud stewing in her own hatred. She knew little of war or weapons, but as she stared at the torn-up ground, she swore she would make the Vreech pay for what they had done. A distant horn broke her seething reverie. She tilted her head, counting the blasts. One long, three short, one long, then a pause before it was repeated. A summons, a general town emergency. Whatever it was, it was trouble that the people of Andarin didn't deserve. Not now, not this soon. Raza broke into a run, hoping things weren't too dire, and praying the exertion would burn off some of her anxious energy.

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The town square was abuzz with activity when she got back. There was no immediate danger, but people moved in and out of buildings, gathering items and putting them into packs or on wagons. Fifth Scout Yuspa, the local Warden, was saddling his horse, tossing saddlebags over the stallion's flanks. Raza trotted over to him, breathing hard.

"Yuspa!" she called as the man gingerly swung into the saddle. His bandages had been changed, but even given priority for healing magics, he still moved like some of his wounds still lingered. Too few healers had survived the battle, and there were too many wounded. Even for

Wardens, healing was rationed. "What's going on?" "We just got orders from on high. Full evacuation, the whole Protectorate. We head to Littlefield to meet up with the others. Pack lightly, we travel for speed. We need to hurry if we're to make it." "NO!" The shout cut through the bustle of the square, and it wasn't until everyone turned to stare at her that Raza realized she had been the one that shouted. Yuspa gaped at her as her heartbeat pounded in her ears. The adrenaline rush pushed her forward, and she let it carry her along.

"I am not leaving!" she continued, pitching her voice to carry to the crowd. "Andarin is our home! House Heartglade has lived here for countless generations! The rest of you can flee like rats, but I will not be a coward! I will stay! I will fight!" She didn't know where the words were coming from, but they felt so right. Around her, others murmured their assent. A few continued their efforts, but several - mostly Kutari - set down their burdens, started to cluster around Raza. She even spotted Xurug, one of the elders of House Heartglade, looking at her thoughtfully and nodding.

Yuspa glowered at her for a moment, then gave an obviously frustrated shrug. "You know what? You do that, Raza." He shook his head, looking out at the crowd slowly gathering. "Have fun playing brave. We'll see how well that works out for you. I don't have time for this. I need to get to the outlying farms to let them know about the evacuation. Any of you come to your senses, I'll see you in Littlefield." He pulled on the reins savagely, turning his horse hard, and the two cantered off towards the rolling hills outside of Andarin.

Yuspa was barely out of earshot when the questions started coming. Raza had expected them, and had taken the few brief moments between her exchange with Yuspa and the inevitable requests to consider the issue herself. Multiple questions, all asked at once, but they all amounted to the same thing: what do we do now? She took a deep breath. She wasn't usually prone to rash behavior, but these were desperate times. In for a copper, in for a platinum. "We stay. We reclaim this land as ours, not as the domain of the Vreech! They may come back. Destroy buildings. Eat circles. But building and magic is not what Andarin is. Is not who we are! We will rebuild, and we will be all the better for it!"

"What of Dracaena?" a voice called out. The Dryad champion had fought the Vreech like a man possessed, but he fell, wounded, just after Sedhidessiss had died. Raza had helped drag him back to the healers, and while they'd treated his wounds, he'd not yet woken from the death-like slumber. They could not leave him uncared for, not after the long years of cooperation between their races. "We will find a safe place to hide Dracaena while he sleeps," Raza declared, a safe spot in the hills already coming to mind. "As the Winnowers have fought to protect us, we must now take up arms to protect them! House Heartglade goes to war!" A ragged cheer arose, and Raza marveled at the heady surge of emotions that washed over her. Perhaps...perhaps the ritual's cost wasn't so bad after all....