

On a Night Out

Lisandra stumbled through the undergrowth, cursing her long dress which was currently being torn to shreds by the thorny bushes. She was cold, she was wet. The October rains had lessened to a mere drizzle now, but her clothes were soaked through, and the cold full moon shining in the sky above provided no warmth or comfort. She desperately hoped she'd wrapped up the precious package in her hand well enough, and that the parchment would still be legible when she eventually found some kind of shelter.

It was a long night ahead though: she'd escaped the tower at midnight, when the elders had begun the monthly ritual, and run as fast as she could to the safety of the forest, where no one could see her. Now she just had to follow the edge of the trees for a few miles before she could circle out and find a small village where her skills would hopefully keep her fed and sheltered long enough to save enough money for a place on a caravan to Oralía.

It was certainly a risky plan, but anything was better than staying in that mouldy tower where her ancient professors looked down on her as though she were a tool or pretty picture that had gotten it into its head that it was worth more than simple decoration. She knew the boys didn't have to face the same level of scrutiny: they could get drunk in the evenings and get away with little more than a gentle telling-off. No, she had to be perfect, and even then everyone felt she didn't belong there. As the first woman to get into the academy for over fifteen years, she hated giving up like this, but she just couldn't take any more. She had to go.

Besides, her time in the academy had been far from wasted: she'd learnt the basics of magic well enough, and with the texts she'd stolen, she would be able to improve further in the coming months. It was time for her to make her own way in the world now, and despite the weather, and her ruined clothes, Lisandra was excited more than anything. Things were finally going to change.

She continued stumbling across the branches, tripping on roots and hopping over ditches. She was shaken from her thoughts when a cold wind swept through her, drenching her with another round of freezing rain. She paused for a moment, trying to work out where she was. She couldn't see the edge of the forest - it seemed in her distraction she'd gone further in than she'd intended. She decided to retrace her footsteps for a bit, after all, she couldn't have gone that far off course.

Five more minutes, and Lisandra had to admit to herself that she was hopelessly lost. In the rainy, cold dark, she couldn't recognise anything around her, and she didn't even know what direction she'd been heading any more. She wracked her brains trying to think of a solution before she froze to death.

But her blood ran even colder when she caught a very faint giggling echoing around her. Glancing around frantically, she tried to find the source of the noise, but it seemed to be all around her. She hugged her package close to her chest, and tried to focus. Marshalling her thoughts, she focused on the magical energies around her. Her fear made it difficult, but she managed to locate a small crack in reality nearby, through which chaotic energies were flowing - perfect for her needs. Screwing her eyes shut, she drew out the strands of energy around herself in a circle, and with great concentration, willed it to manifest into a bright flame.

The circle of fire that suddenly appeared around her provided welcome warmth, but its light revealed a less welcome sight: surrounding her on all sides were small figures wielding cruel-looking weapons, and even crueller expressions on their faces. From the pickled specimen kept in a giant jar in Professor Kalbor's study, Lisandra recognised the creatures as goblins - a blight upon human civilisation in great numbers, and a significant danger to travellers in smaller numbers. They

had been creeping up all around her, and now had her surrounded. They seemed wary of the flame around her, and kept their distance, but Lisandra was not going to be able to maintain it for long. Growing increasingly panicked, she desperately tried to think of a way out of this situation, all the while trying to keep the flame alive. The goblins were speaking in their own tongue, and didn't look like they would be willing to communicate in any language Lisandra knew. She knew she could try and blast them away with her magic, but doing so would remove the fire currently protecting her, and unleashing a wild blast of magic was exactly what she had spent years training not to do – it could be suicide if she tried.

Suddenly the goblins around her stopped their chattering, and looked towards a gap in the trees. Lisandra turned to face that direction as well, desperately trying to stop the flames from dying out. From the darkness emerged an elderly looking goblin. One of their eyes was missing, and tattoos covered most of their exposed skin. The rest was covered up by a mishmash of armour pieces, rusty and dented all over. This must have been some kind of leader, she imagined. The scarred lips of the creature parted as their tongue flickered out, tasting the cold, damp air. Suddenly they cried out, pointing at Lisandra, who, surprised, lost concentration, and the flames flickered out.

Truly panicking now, she desperately tried to concentrate, but the goblins were on her in an instant, pinning her to the floor, and tying rough ropes around her limbs. The package of scrolls she'd been carrying fell to the floor, one edge torn, exposing the precious writing to the elements. Lisandra screamed, sobbing in terror as leering faces surrounded her on all sides, poking her with their fingers or searching her for any other valuables.

Just then, the long howl of a wolf echoed through the forest, and the goblins went silent, forgetting all about Lisandra. Tears streaming down her dirty face, she struggled to free her hands from the rope that now bound them, but the goblins weren't paying any attention now. Another howl came, closer this time, and Lisandra thought she saw a large shape flitting about in the shadows. The goblins, their eyes better suited to the dark, must have noticed too, as they gripped their weapons and drew closer together, muttering and trembling. The leader goblin shouted something, seemingly trying to keep them together, but one broke off from the group, fleeing into the trees. Moments later, a terrible scream sounded from the gap they had gone through, followed by a wet, tearing sound. Lisandra gulped, trying to stop herself from throwing up at the sound of the wet squelches.

The goblins were as terrified as her now, it seemed. They bundled together, pushing and shoving to not be at the edge, as their leader tried to keep them under control. Lisandra heard gasps as all the goblins turned to look at a spot she couldn't see. She heard the rustling of the undergrowth, and a clicking noise, as the goblins shrieked and yammered.

She found out what they had seen, when she saw next to her, earth being thrown up as something dug its way to the surface. A pale, bony hand emerged, and gripped onto a nearby root, as it pulled itself up. The hand was followed by a skeletal arm, and eventually the cracked cranium emerged from the earth as well. Lisandra had only ever heard of necromancy – it was strictly forbidden in all its forms by the academy, and she scrambled away in the dirt from the skeleton emerging from the ground before her.

More corpses were dragging themselves up from the ground all around the little group, surrounding them completely. They dragged corroded swords and spears, and held broken shields. Shambling towards the goblins and Lisandra, their eyes were empty, and leaves and clumps of earth fell from them as they marched forwards. The one nearest to Lisandra reached her, and walked past without any acknowledgement, making only for the goblins. She stared in terror, as some of the braver goblins ran forward desperately, whether to attack or attempt to flee, it was unclear. They were cut down mercilessly by the skeletal warriors with swift, efficient strokes of their ancient swords. The

goblins' leader shouted out something, and waved their weapon, the others gripped theirs, knees trembling.

When the skeletons reached the goblins, she heard the clash of weapons and the wet slices of blades cutting flesh. Some of the goblins managed to lodge weapons into the undead, breaking bone, or cutting off limbs. But the skeletons kept coming, fighting through any "injuries" they received, while swinging back, untiring. As the screams of the dying goblins and the sound of wet squelches slowly faded, Lisandra heard the leader – seemingly the last goblin standing – yell and jabber wildly before he was cut off by a sword to the neck.

Lisandra watched as the skeleton, half its skull smashed in, slowly withdrew the blade from the goblin, and stepped away as the goblin fell to the floor, eyes rolled upwards, blood pouring from their mouth.

Trampling over the corpses, the skeletons organised themselves into a neat regiment a few feet from Lisandra, staring blankly forwards. She wasn't even trying to escape her bonds any more, stunned by the rapid brutality she had just witnessed. Then from the shadows in front of her came a giant, snow-white wolf, padding along the forest floor without a sound. The only interruption to its pristine coat was the gore dripping from its jaws. Its eyes, full of intelligence, looked at Lisandra, who gulped, wondering if this was going to be the last thing she ever saw.

But just then, a slender hand emerged from the shadows, stroking the wolf's head, who sat down obediently, tongue wagging. The shadows parted to reveal the most beautiful woman Lisandra had ever seen, stepping forwards as though her feet were floating an inch or two above the ground rather than on it. She was tall and slim, wearing loose, flowing clothes more suitable for a Summer ball than the Autumn forest, but it was her face that Lisandra was truly entranced by.

Her skin was extraordinarily pale, and perfectly smooth, her elaborately-done up hair framed her face perfectly, and her huge eyes, focused on Lisandra alone, glistened magically in the moonlight. Long fingers still trailing on the wolf's pelt, the figure stepped further forwards, flicking her hand towards the skeletons, who immediately started marching off into the forest. She opened her plump lips very slightly as though whispering something Lisandra couldn't hear, but she felt the ropes on her hands and feet fall off. Never in her years of study had she seen magic so graceful – it was always possible to feel the currents of magical energy as they were used, even when by her oldest professors, but here she hadn't felt a thing.

As Lisandra regained her composure somewhat, the strange figure beckoned her to follow her without a word, and in a flash, had turned and started walking away. Lisandra struggled to form coherent thoughts in her head – more than anything she wanted those wondrous eyes on her again, and a large part of her wanted to rush blindly after this beautiful stranger who had saved her. But part of her felt something deeply wrong was happening here – worse than the goblins, worse than the academy. Necromancy was a dark art forbidden by all the civilisations of the world, and nothing good ever came of it. Or at least so she had been taught – she had just been saved from certain death after all. And anyway, that wolf was still sitting there, staring at her as its master slowly edged further and further away. Presumably if she tried to run, she would meet the same fate as the goblin in its stomach.

Deciding she had little choice, she stood up, trying to make her dress look as respectable as possible given it was covered in mud and torn all over. She picked up the bundle of scrolls she'd taken from the academy, and tried to brush off the dirt, and save as much as she could. Then she paused – what could these dusty volumes really teach her in comparison to this wonderful stranger? Wasn't it better to discard her past entirely as she followed her into a brand new life? Taking one last look at

the parchments, she tossed them away into the undergrowth, and without a glance back, strode to catch up, a smile beginning to form on her face.