

# PROMISED THE NIGHT

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*DIE AREN*, THEY called her, not a name but a title. It was the way of their people and accepted as such.

Little Trickster, the fox coming out to play, tempting and conniving and too quick to catch most days.

Some days she was quicker than others, some days not.

This day, she stood in the glade with her brothers and sisters in arms, ensnared as they all were.

They wore cloaks around their bodies, hoods up around their heads, faces masked, hands gripped around the hilts of weapons sheathed at their hips. A line of soldiers, of assassins, waiting to be commanded by the Dark Justice of the Night.

She did not look at the man who bore the title of Elichisolos.

The man did not approve of her gaze.

*Embittered by it*, she thought.

But then, for a father to be outmatched by a child, and one so young...

She did not blame the man his pettiness.

Even as she could not condone it.

They were of the Night, and the Night knew no distinctions.

Only man and elf made the same.

“Five of you will go north to the great sand plains. We have been contracted for our skills to aid in the overthrowing of a nation. The Darkness has spoken to me and has called the journey just, and so we will answer the summons.”

She didn't dare ask who the claimant was, nor question why the Darkness would care about the northern desert dwellers.

Better to remain silent and subservient, for now.

Only a few more years and she would make her offering.

The day was coming when she would shed the clothes of her discipleship and stand in the Quiet Night and await the Judgment of the Dark to what place she would fill within the Dienobo.

That she longed for the day could not be hidden.

That her offering was something those around her feared, feared her skill and her potential and what she would become in the aftermath, was well-known as well.

“Oneir, Brich,” the Elichisolos’ second and third in command stepped forward at the call of their titles. “You will lead the expedition, move with my voice and name.”

A great honor.

One that meant her father would not be on the trip with them.

Another cause for her to pray she was chosen to go in his stead.

“Corsi. Remal.” The Elichi hesitated, turned his stare over the gathered assembly, his gaze sliding over her, trying to pretend she wasn’t there though his eyes kept returning. “Aren. You will attend your masters and aid in the completion of the mission. You will answer to them as though answering to me. You will not move without their command and you will not question their orders. This task will prove your devotion to the Darkness. Do not fail in the completing of it.”

In another land, the acolytes chosen would have answered with a word of obedience.

In the Woods, those chosen bowed their heads, and faded back into the shadows to prepare for the journey ahead.



**BEYOND THE BORDER** of Faoust and the trolls that called it home, past the raid-lands that the dwarves thought to conquer but had yet to succeed in the task, stood Quiofol, the Northern Waste.

No lakes or rivers to bathe in.

If there was vegetation, it was sparse and gangly and thrived only to die.

There were no woods beyond the mountains.

Sand, only sand and heat and the blazing Sun which fought against the advent of the Night, never yielded to the Darkness, not entirely, a battle it refused to lose.

The peoples of the sand called themselves: The Tribesmen of cQuic.

The Tribesmen of the Demon.

Fire worshippers.

That they lived in the deep heat of the north was no surprise to those who had heard tale of them. Vicious in their mannerisms, but then they had to be to live in such inhospitable climbs.

Demons.

It was not a name the people of the woods knew much about. The only thing known for certain of the term was that it was an insult and a warning. Cheats and thieves and murderers, worshipping a darkness that did not welcome those into the Night but sought to destroy all who wanted shelter within its cold embrace.

And yet Aren and her companions moved towards such a people without hesitation.

Even she had no hesitation in going towards the unknown lands.

It was what the Darkness required.

She adjusted the pack on her back, slipping up the steep slope through the mountains behind the elves in front of her. The rear had been undefended, and while none of her brethren expected attack behind them, better to be cautious than not.

It was one of the rules her father had drilled into them all, though, apparently, she was the only one to listen.

She blinked in the coming gloam of night, the sun sinking overhead behind the highest peaks of the mountains.

They would not call a rest yet.

No elf was afraid of the Dark or what animals came out in the light of the moon.

Though they had supplies with them, they would likely pause to hunt on the other side of the pass, not knowing what bounty the desert lands would provide once they reached the sands.

Small stops though, short.

Mostly unseen.

No one would know of their passage until it was too late to stop them, or they'd already returned to the woods they hailed from.

She reached into the small sack at her side and withdrew a piece of dried hareata. The nut bread was flavorful, but she disliked the texture of the seeds in it. Still, it had good proteins and would help sustain her until other food was available.

"There is a break in the path ahead."

"Good."

No more was said than that.

She resettled her pack on her shoulders, and they marched forward.