

Monster's Vengeance

The world comes back into startling focus with a smoky axe cleaving her gut.

The air is a writhing, living thing, waves of ash and gray wind desecrating the corpses littered about the broken caravan she and her party were supposed to protect. Dry earth falls loosely from her chest as she forces herself onto her hands and knees from her back, to cough out anything that may have lodged itself in her lungs while she was knocked out. She dry heaves for five minutes, on the ground like a dog, while the burning wood of the wagons pops less and less, champagne losing its bubbles.

With dirty, itching hands and robes stained brown, she pushes herself up, off her wrists, off her knees, standing tall. The stiffness in her knuckles and back is starting to get annoying. Feeling a cough starting to itch her throat, she swipes her pointer and middle fingers across her neck, an indigo glow catching in the corner of her eye as she heals any potential damage done to her windpipe and bronchioles from the smoke. Who knows how long she was knocked out for this time.

Popping her fingers at every joint and reaching up to the now pink sky to stretch her back, she finally takes in the wreckage dealt to her surroundings.

She can already feel that there aren't any living beings in about a kilometer radius, and although she hopes that means her party left and lived (despite that meaning they ditched her), she already knows where she'll find their corpses.

Their noble knight, Farona, the most likely to have fallen first, lies on the ground with their arms spread wide, a hole left where a dagger or a sword must have pierced through their armor. Judging by the size of the hole, she's going to believe it was a dagger. Crouching down to Farona's body, she pats around until she finds the pouch containing their money, but more

importantly, the ring they were given by their fiance. She slides it into one of the many pockets of her thick vest, and from another pulls out her knife. Raising the flat of the golden blade to her lips, she murmurs one of the first prayers she ever learned as a disciple of the Salted Depths.

“Let the magma in my heart and the ocean in my veins cleanse this blade,” she whispers before pressing a soft kiss to it, and ignoring the flash of blue as the blessing takes to the knife, slides off the gauntlet on Faron’s left hand with a practiced ease. Raising their calloused hand, she holds it high, by the pinkie, and severs the small finger with a quick, hard slash, watching the rest of the hand fall back to the ground lifelessly. The pinkie slides into the same pocket as their ring.

She repeats the process around the charred ruins, finding a party member, collecting an item precious to them, and taking their pinkie, keeping them organized in separate pockets so she can remember whose finger belongs to what item. For her bard, Peter, she takes a worn paper with fading notes; the first song he ever learned. For Spell the wizard, a leather bracelet lined with herbivore teeth; G’Rohp the ranger, a small glass orb, enchanted to display a tadpole swimming in lazy loops; Jerrinor the rogue, a lucky rabbit’s foot he says used to be his brother’s; and for Emdur the monk, a necklace of granite beads.

For some of them, it’s harder to remove the pinky finger, but hair or a whisker won’t do, so she cuts the small furred digits off of Spell and Jerrinor, and she takes some of the webbing between G’Rohp’s fingers too.

Standing up and calmly stepping away from the last corpse she needed to loot (and she hates how that sounds, that she’s taking from them, but she can’t deny at this point that she is, in essence, searching them for valuables to take), she turns her eyes towards an enclave of broken branches, scratched and bloodied bark, upturned dirt, and to tie it up in a nice bow, the faintest

trace of footprints and wheel-tracks in the resting ash. She steps towards it, swiping up her discarded staff from the ground.

It's time for her to hunt.

In two days, she is standing before a small fortress of cracked stone and rotting wood. Her guess is the robbers came from a small, dying township, one that the local lord has forgotten about and the king has never heard of. They needed the supplies from the caravan to feed the starving villagers, or something like that. Sweet.

Too bad they left her alive.

(No one ever thinks to kill the cleric.)

It's dark, and a relatively normal summer night. Crickets rub their legs, their creaking in time with the wind shaking the young oaks. Only the brightest of the stars are visible, covered with clouds and drifting smoke, but the wind is salty and crisp, mist turning to dewdrops on leaf-tips and wild grass, and the light of Apo above shines, greater than any other star in this night sky. Tonight, her god is with her.

From what she remembers before she was taken out, they were attacked by about twenty thieves. She found ten downed at the ruins of the wagons, and another two dead on her travels, so there should be eight for her, not counting any guards that may have stayed behind. She's going to go in with a safe guess of around fifteen potential combatants.

A guard comes to block her entrance, to question who she is, why she's here, and she gets it. Really, she does. Her hair, a low-sitting crown of braids, has come loose and tangled, what should be a mousy brown is now greasy like mud. Her holy clothes, once vibrant with green waters and liquid fire, drag in the dirt, sagging under the weight of grime and blood, and there is

hardly a part of her skin not covered in dust and ash. The guard probably regrets stepping so close to her, she knows how filthy she must smell.

However much she may understand, she is *not* sympathetic. She gives the poor man a grin, recognizing the scorch marks and rust on his chainmail. She slams her staff into his chest, can hear his sternum shatter into a million little fragments, listens to his breath catch in the moment before he screams, and with a whispered spell, she heals to hurt;

“Breathe.”

He inhales, and inhales, and inhales, his lungs inflate until they collapse, and he collapses with them, choking on the air he can't breathe. His chainmail rattles, he tries to scream, his eyes struggle to chase her boot as she stomps on his windpipe and-

He dies, one last gasp escaping his bleeding lips. She steps over his corpse with vindictive glee. Sweeping past him, scarves loose, robes flowing, she feels the power of the deep sea and burning earth churning in her bones, and when she steps through the village gates, her blood *sings*.

As she stampedes past his corpse, she spies a horrified child, frozen in shock, and behind him, a little girl she assumes to be his sister is shaking in the knees, her doll-eyes gaping and her fingers clenched around his ragged jacket. They see her looking, and she feels their pulse quicken like frightened mice, but she turns away and continues further into the village. She isn't here for them.

Her next stop is the local tavern, where she imagines the thieves must be celebrating their successful heist, providing their townsmen with grains and coal and spices and minerals, things to sell and food to eat. On the way, across the dirt road they call their main street, she encounters

three more guards; haggard but proud, they have provided, and they wish to bask in the smiles of the people they've helped.

The first goes down with a swing to the head, his skull growing inwards until it crushes his brain. The second is too shocked at the death of his companion, and she slaps him with a splash of mystic blue; his mouth, nose, ears, and eyes become sealed with a thick layer of skin. The third charges her in a fit of rage, or loyalty, or pride, with a scream and a rust-heavy sword held high above his head, and she dashes into his guard, cutting his carotid artery in a blinding flash of gold with surgical precision. Her breath is heavy, but this is nothing compared to the hundreds of kilometers she's trekked with her party.

Four down. Eleven to go.

When she enters the pub, caked in all sorts of filth, she fakes a limp, tumbling to the ground on the unswept wooden floor, as if she were so weak to have sea-legs on flat land.

"Help!" she yells, voice high and cracking, thick with desperation she doesn't feel. Fear casts drapes over the warm lamps and loud people, and she can hear the universe stop in the split second before she stages a tragedy. A silence, alight like lightning in her rouge eyes, consumes the building, and she can see how this will play out, she holds their hearts in her arms. For a moment, she is a hostage to the burning fires deep beneath the surface, to the crystals lining bubbling vents, to the salt and the heat and the pressure, to the origins of life itself. She is a captive to the whims of her god, and nothing ever thrills her quite so much as the instance of divinity she feels before a slaughter.

A woman, with soft eyes and a smile-wrinkled face comes up to her, concern obvious in each of her heavy steps before she kneels at her side. Her hands hover anxiously, checking for injuries.

“Oh dear, what’s wrong? Did someone attack you? Are you okay?” Her words flutter, like the fluffed feathers of a startled owl. Her chest is covered by a plate of leather armor.

She raises her hands to the woman’s face, shaking with excitement, and with a quivering voice, she says, “The village is under attack.”

The woman’s skull is flooded with blood, her face turns red while her body turns blue, she gasps at the acute pain of her pressured brain, and she falls to the ground with a heavy thud, seizing violently. From there, she acts fast.

She strikes up from the floor like a snake, her dagger finds a home in a stranger’s eye socket, buried to the hilt. A wide sweep of her staff catches the fastest reacting thief in his back, and his body drops like lead as his spine grows inwards and crushes his nerves. She rolls beneath a sword aimed recklessly towards her hips, as if that would do anything, retrieves her knife bloodied like a fire, and uses it to sever the femoral artery of her attacker. He falls too, screaming as he bleeds out.

Seven more.

The rest of the tavern has finally realized what is happening, and the civilians are running into the streets, likely to find the other four corpses she has left behind. Meanwhile, the remaining soldiers have surrounded her with whatever weapons they have on them. There’s only five of them, so it looks like she overestimated their defenses. Good, that means she can get out of here faster.

In the center of a loose circle, she finds all sorts of sharp and blunt objects pointed at her. They seem to have reached a standstill, the guards unsure what to do, what *she* will do. Any logical person would surrender at this point, outnumbered and alone.

She is not a person anymore.

A deep breath, dagger in one hand and staff in the other, she rushes the only soldier with a spear, and is delighted to see the spark of recognition in his eye, to smell the fear of his sweat. These men are untrained, self-taught, self-disciplined, and she hooks her staff under one of his arms easily, pulling him towards her with the spear now pointed at his comrades. She swings her leg high, snapping the wooden staff in half, shifts all of her weight into her elbow, slides into his guard, and ruptures his spleen with a sharp jab. The pain sends him down before the bleeding does.

Four.

She faints a slash at the man to her left, aiming low, he follows with his sword like a dog on a lead, and she slams the head of her staff into his nose, breaking it and causing blinding tears to burst in his eyes. With him sufficiently distracted, she turns to the combatant behind her on instinct, and sees a blade coming down on her fast; with no time to block, she tackles him, sending the blade flying from his hands, alongside her staff. A quick punch to his windpipe stuns him, and a quick stab to his throat drowns him in his own blood.

Three.

Another soldier comes swinging with a hammer to the side of her head, and she drops completely onto the bleeding corpse to avoid the blow. She rolls off him and sees the weight of the woman's hammer pull her forward, her arm outstretched overhead, then with a slash her tendons are disconnected, the weapon falling to the ground with a weighty tremble; the woman screams in pain, she grasps the hammer firmly, the thief's tibia protrudes from her calf in a single well-aimed blow, and she falls down too, another swing to her skull kills the woman.

Two.

Then there are the crying man and the coward. Breath heavy and blood sprayed across her face, she retrieves her discarded knife and staff from the ground as she rises, hunched, staggering to her full height, and both of her remaining opponents do nothing. The coward, because his fear is a tangible thing, a harness, leash, and muzzle. The crying man, because he cannot see her through his pain. In this moment, she makes a decision: if the coward is too afraid to fight, he will be too afraid to listen to her.

She walks towards him slowly, giving him the chance to die with a fight, to die for something, but he just stands there, an old mace held tight to his chest, eyes tracking her. She wonders if Apo has bound his limbs to curse him or bless her. His death is simple and quiet, the flesh in his airways growing too much, a cancer blocking access to his lungs. The fear never leaves his eyes.

One.

The once clean floors are now hemorrhaging blood from the people of the village, their bodies scattered across the ground, a map of her violence. It's quiet once again, aside from the whimpering of the crying man, who may not be able to see his dead companions, but who can understand that the silence means they probably aren't alive. She walks up to him calmly, and when he can make out her boots, he looks up from the curled ball of his body.

"Hello," she begins, voice at its normal deep candor. He flinches at the noise, reaching for a weapon nearby, maybe even an empty flagon to throw her way. A quick tap to each of his limbs with her staff stops his scampering.

"I temporarily numbed your nerves, so you won't be able to move while I talk to you, but you also won't be able to feel your limbs. I'm not a kind person, and if you do not listen to me, I will hurt you, then everyone else that lives here. Understood?" She's unfortunately had to do this

talk a number of times, specifically whenever her party decides they want to adventure in a land they've never been to, where no one has heard of them. So far, she's figured out this is the best way to start the conversation

“Go to hell,” he says, and she should have expected that. It's how they always respond at first.

With a sigh, she allows feeling back into his chest, only to shatter both of his collarbones with harsh strikes from the head of her staff. He howls, upper body flopping and flailing, but ultimately getting nowhere without the use of his arms. She sighs, waiting for him to quiet down so she can get her speech over with. Finally, he simmers down to soft whines.

“Let's try again,” she says. “I will speak, and you will listen. Otherwise, I will injure you and everyone else in this village, and you will spend the rest of your lives broken and in pain. Understood?”

This time he nods.

“Good. Now here's what you're going to do for me. Spread the word about what happened here. Tell everyone who passes through here, everyone you steal from, everyone you speak to, to stay away from the Red Speedwell party, and if they see this,” she throws down her broach onto his chest, a simple scarlet flower, “they should run for their fucking lives. Tell them if they see a priestess of the Salted Depths, they will have minutes to make their goodbyes before she kills them. Got it?”

His heavy breathing catches as she reveals her allegiance.

“You're one of those psycho cult bitches? Makes sense,” he laughs painfully, and she waits for it to get out of his system. “I get it, you fucking monster.”

“Mhm,” she hums, before savagely jabbing her staff just above his sternum, realigning and healing his shattered collarbones. He groans, pain still sharp. With that done, she turns her back on him, and makes to leave the tavern. Her hand is pushing against the door when he calls out to her.

“Wait,” he says, “what’s your name?”

She pauses for a moment in thought before responding. “To you and anyone else you tell, I am Monster.”

She steps through the door into the wet night.