

Dark Fantasy  
9647 words.

**The Jägerweiler Forest**

By

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“Don’t worry, it’s just a bit of rain.” Maurice leaned forward, his old frame creaking alongside the rickety wooden wheels that carried the wagon as his ringed fingers gently stroked a black cat that sat in his lap purring softly, his belled collar gently jingling with each bump in the road. He leaned his head back, keeping one eye on the road as he talked over his shoulder, “If it gets real bad, we’ll pull over and make camp, okay?” He turned with a soft smile stretched across his weathered face.

Luna peered out the back window at the three trailing wagons in the convoy, there were six in total, each being pulled by two large draft horses. Flanking each wagon rode two men on horses, each armed with one weapon or another. “I just don’t want anyone to get hurt you know? The last thing we need is for someone to fall and hurt their ankle.”

Maurice tilted his hat down, letting a small pool of water that had built up on the brim trickle to the dirt road below, “There’s nothing to worry about.” He said reassuringly as he leaned an arm back over his chair, he took off his glasses and gave them a wipe, “These two don’t need me to lead them when we’re in formation, they just follow the wagon ahead of us.”

Luna pulled herself away from the railing that bordered the small undercover section of the wagon.

“What you should be worried about is curing everyone’s hunger.” Maurice let out a chuckle that was met in turn with a growl from his stomach, “So, what’s on the menu tonight?”

Luna brushed her dreaded hair back and began tying it in a ponytail as she opened the front door and made her way into the middle of her caravan. Unlike the other caravans, Luna’s was designed with the specific role of providing food to each member of the convoy, an eatery on wheels. One side of the caravan was lined with a large cast iron stove with a flat top large enough for a boar to lay across. Its exhaust pipe stuck up through the roofing of

the wagon, leaving a thin plume of smoke in its wake. On the other side of the cart stretched a spacious bench adorned with an excessive amount of cupboard draws and doors, including one with a built-in chest of preserving stacked to the brim with various cuts of meat hunted throughout their trip. Along the wall above the workbench sat one of Luna's pride and joys, a spice collection that would leave even a King's chef staring in awe. "Well, that depends on how well this stove fire has been managed." She said as she bent down, opening up the chest of preserving. "I hate to interrupt your very busy work, but I am going to need some of your help Salem."

The cat in Maurice's lap stirred awake, lifting his head as he spoke, "Even more help?"

Luna continued to rummage through the chest, pulling out different cuts of meat and giving them a quick turnover in her hands. Inspecting the quality of each slice before tucking it back in and picking up another piece, "You have been sitting in his lap for the last hour, I think you will manage to help just a little bit."

The cat craned his neck to look towards the glass monitoring window on the stove and began to speak, "The fire is still going innit? I'd say, that's a job well done." Salem rose to his paws and gently hopped off Maurice's lap landing with a soft thud on the wooden seat. He bent down low, giving himself a big stretch before moving closer to the stove, "In fact, I'd even say, great work Salem you've earned yourself some warm cream, and perhaps, even a nap."

Luna rolled her eyes as the cat hopped up onto the benchtop next to the stove.

"So, what's on the menu tonight?" Salem purred as he sniffed the air, trying to guess the meal from the ingredients alone, "Potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, broth and...Bell peppers, my-my, aren't we feelin' fancy tonight." The cat sat up straight as

recipes flowed through his mind like a rushing river, “No meat?” he asked sourly.

Luna knelt back down in front of the chest of preserving, sifting through the various cuts they had either brought or hunted on their convoy, “Hmm, I was thinking fish, maybe?”

“Fish, a fine choice for ou’ chosen vegetables. And what fish do you ‘fink will pair well with our ova’ ingredients?” Salem hunched back down, his eyes locked on Luna as she glanced back and forth over her fish supply.

“Well, I am not really in the mood to cut everything up into little fancy pieces. It is too cold and I am getting hungry too.”

“So, that would mean you want somefin’ firm. Somefin’ that’ll ‘old together in the soup, Which is what I assume the vegetables are for?”

Luna nodded, “Yes, maybe Mackerel?” Luna looked back over her shoulder in hopes of approval over her choice.

Salem rose again and nodded with a purr, “Sounds delicious. And will you be filleting the fish today?”

Luna heaved down four good-sized mackerels onto the chopping board in front of Salem with a huff, “Do you think you can do them today? You are much better at it than I am.”

A sly grin spread across Salem’s whiskers, he knew he was much better at preparing fish than Luna, although it was hardly a fair comparison. Salem was unlike most magical familiars, he was instead one passed down from generation to generation, from one witch to another, and by now he was surely getting close to nine lifetimes worth of time on this mortal plane. Over the centuries he had honed his culinary crafts, often teaching his partnered witch how to prepare chef-quality meals, and Luna was his latest protégé. “I suppose I can do ‘em for ya,” Salem said as he sunk his claws into the mackerels, dragging one out to begin his filleting. “You’ll need to get the soup going in the next couple of minutes if we

want enough time to really let the flavours soak in.” Salem nodded towards the chopping board lying next to the small pile of vegetables that were sat on the benchtop, “I’ll be done with these shortly, five minutes.”

Luna nodded and turned to vegetables she had piled on the bench opposite the stove, taking up her kitchen cleaver and laying down her chopping board, she began to get to work.

Salem paused for a moment, “Remember, always be tasting.” He placed a claw on the spine of the first mackerel, “Now, let make somefin’ tasty.”

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“Alright squad, listen up.” The Captain called out over the rhythmic thumping of their steeds’ hooves as they pulled their small armoured fortress through the Luyarnhian forest. “There’s been several accounts been brought towards the church about a suspected aranea infestation.”

The newest member of Havoc squad, a muscley dark purple-skinned tiefling woman dressed in barbaric battle garb, shifted in her seat to face her Captain, “Aranea?”

The Captain nodded, “Freya, would you mind?”

A slender elf woman sitting next to her spoke up, her emerald eyes still focused on the razor edge of the dagger she was sharpening by lantern light, “Spider-like monstrosities.” She said as she flicked the long white strands of her out of her face, “From a distance they appear as you or I, they’re even said to mimic the voices of their victims. But when you approach, they reveal their true form and devour you.” The elf raised her eyes to the Captain, “That means they’re nesting somewhere that attracts travellers.”

The Captain nodded in agreement as he leaned forward in his seat, “An inn nearby. A group of travellers showed up at the

cathedral last night, pleading to the father to send help.” The Captain paused as he looked around at his chosen squad of the four finest warriors he could find within the boundaries of Luyarnha. “Iris and myself will lead the charge. Given that this is your first assignment,” The captain turned to Iris, carefully choosing his words to not dissuade the proud barbarian, “a smaller monstrosity would be a good measure of your skill.” The captain looked around at the squad, “That doesn’t mean this will be any easier than the last fight, size does not always necessitate power.”

The tiefling woman grinned widely as she flexed her bicep triumphantly, “It’s an honour to serve Havoc squad captain.”

A smile gripped at the corner of the Captain's cheeks, pulling the corner of his mouth up ever so slightly, “Good.” The Captain turned his attention to the remaining three members of the squad, “Freya, I want you on the rear. Make sure nothing gets the jump on us. And keep Gilmore alive please.”

“I’m quite capable of keeping myself alive, thank you very much.”

The elf smirked as she flicked her Dwarf companion a wink, “How about I just help you down off your horse?”

“I’ll remember that next time you want to use my travel hammock. Oh me back is sore, Gilmore just let me have a little nap in ye’ hammock.”

“Well, it is a very nice hammock. Far too spacious for you.” Freya gave Gilmore another wink as he gave a hearty laugh and reached for his rifle. He cradled the weapon in his hand carefully, giving it another once over, ensuring that the weapon wouldn’t jam in the midst of battle. “If we’re walking into an infestation, there’s going to be a bunch of ‘em. Me traps ain't gonna be that useful against a whole lot of ‘em cap’n.”

The captain’s eyes scanned the cart walls for the most effective tools they could use to immobilise multiple targets when he

spotted a series of modified blunderbusses Gilmore had made to help them pin down large monstrosities. “How about the net guns? Do they still work?”

“Do they still work? I made them, of course they still work.”

Gilmore waved his hands at the blunderbusses shelved above Iris’ head as if to tell her to hand them over. “If I bring both, and I hit my mark, that’ll immobilise two, maybe three if we’re lucky, I think the nets would hold but after that, it may be best to keep Berta close for this one.” The Dwarf patted the rifle in his lap.

“Even a single combatant can turn the tide of a fight, my friend.”

“Right, come on now las, pass ‘em over,” Gilmore said as he reached across the aisle to grab the blunderbusses.

The captain turned to the last renaming member, a male human who looked like he hadn’t seen a good night’s sleep in quite some time. His shaggy black hair bounced with each pothole the wagon encountered. “Reevas.”

“I bloody hate spiders, you know that.”

“Sorry, my friend. You’re on magic duty as always. If you feel anything life-threatening, you have my authority to use whatever spell you deem necessary to eliminate the threat.”

Reevas tugged at the deep blue fabric of his wide-brimmed hat in acknowledgement of his granted freedoms.

The captain raised his hand and held up a single finger, “One thing, if you’re going to cast a fireball, please give us a moment of warning.”

Reevas peered out the pigeon hole in the wagon’s back door at the pouring rain as it cascaded down from the skies, crashing into the wagon and surrounding forest as if it were trying desperately to get inside and destroy any warmth of humanity that remained.

“Might be a bit too wet for a fireball captain.”

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It wasn't but twenty minutes later Luna could feel her carriage coming to a gentle stop as she heard Maurice call out to his horses, "Hold up, hold up."

"A bit early to be stopping ain't it?" Salem purred out as he lazed on a shelf above the boiling soup, indulging in the fragrance of freshly simmering mackerel.

Luna wiped her hands clean with a small rag and tucked it into a pocket near her waist, "I'll go have a look." She made her way out the wooden wagon door, peering out into the darkness of the forest she was greeted by one of the few inns that dotted the outskirts of Luyarnha. "Why have we stopped?" She called out to Maurice, her eyes studying the flickering inn lights for a moment before meeting his gaze.

Maurice tilted his hat again, letting the rain trickle off before replying, "The boys thought it would be a good idea to restock the wine supply." Maurice swayed his vision back out to the twisting forest road that trickled off deeper into the Luyarnha woods and shrugged his shoulders, "Probably going to be the last place for a while. They shouldn't be too long."

Luna looked out to see a group of the men who had been riding alongside the convoy making their way towards the inn. She looked out alongside the convoy, spotting the remaining few, mostly the sons of the tribe, patrolling the parked convoy impatiently. She sighed as she made her way back to the wagon door, "Would you like a hot drink?"

Maurice nodded, still looking out the road ahead, "Would love one dear, Coffee please, need to stay alert in these parts."

"Black, two sugar?"

"Please."



Luna made her way back inside, grabbing a small clay cup and a mason jar full of coffee beans from faraway lands. She unlidded the jar with a satisfying pop, as the metal clasp released. She dipped her hand in the jar grabbing a small handful before resecuring the lid and placing it back on the shelf next to Salem. “Now where is the...”

“The pestle and morta’ are in the cupboard on the right, under the draw.” He lazily flicked a paw in the direction of the cupboard. As Luna bent down to retrieve the pestle and mortar Salem rolled over to study the large spice rack Luna had on the opposite wall of the wagon. Various mason jars of ranging sizes scattered the shelving, each filled with different spices, some of which were rarely found in Luyarnha. “Do you ‘ave any cinnamon left?”

Luna looked up to see Salem squinting across the wagon, trying to spot something on her spice rack, “Do you want your glasses?”

“Wha’, no. I don’t need ‘em. I can smell that you’ve got some, I just can’t...”

“Oh, you don’t need them? Then why are you squinting your eyes like you’re are looking into the sun, Mr. I don’t need my glasses?” Luna reached up to the shelf and pulled out the small, half-full mason jar of ground cinnamon from behind a jar of cloves and waved it at Salem before placing it down on the opposite countertop. She rolled her eyes as she went to the top drawer below Salem and slid it open with a soft clatter of knives and forks, “The glasses are to help you, you should use them, your eyes are not getting any better you know.” Luna reached into the draw and pulled out a small pair of spectacles far too small for an adult.

Salem stuck his tongue out at the glasses as he flicked his tail, smacking the glasses in Luna’s hand, “As I’ve been reminded. Have you ever tried to jump about with a pair of spectacles on?” he spun around dramatically, “They tilt all about and fall off. It’s

not worth the effort.” He said as he began to take to grooming his left paw.

“What if we have an artificer look at them?” Luna looked down at the small spectacles in her hand, catching the glint of lanternlight as she inspected the lenses, “Maybe they can make a pair that does not move?”

Salem rolled his eyes and pointed the paw he was grooming to the front door of the wagon, “You know, Maurice is still waiting for his coffee.”

Luna looked up from the glasses in her hand, “Hey, do not try to change the subject Mr.” She moved towards Salem and held the glasses out at muzzle height expectantly.

“I’m not trying to change the subject,” Salem plopped himself down in protest as he looked over his shoulder to the wagon door, “I am merely pointing out that you have a waiting customer.”

Luna placed the glasses on the cat and shifted them in place as she spoke, “Why did you want to know if we had cinnamon?”

Salem held still allowing the glasses to be placed upon him before turning to the other counter, hoping off the current side and gracefully leaping up to the other, “To put some on his coffee of course.” He purred as his tail curled up to his face, pushing the half-fallen-down glasses back up onto his muzzle.

Luna looked at Salem, confused by his confidence, “But he does not have cinnamon in his coffee.” Luna placed the pestle and mortar down on the countertop and poured the handful of roasted beans into it.

“Not normally, but I think he’ll appreciate it tonight.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would he appreciate putting cinnamon in his coffee tonight? Luna paused her pestle grinding, inspecting the consistency of the half-crunched beans.

“That is a fantastic question, my dear. Ask yourself, what is the purpose of the coffee for ol’ Maurice out there?” Salem paused as he sat watching Luna think, his tale swinging back and forth like a pendulum patiently waiting for her answer.

“To keep him awake?” Luna shrugged

“Correct.” Salem tilted his nose up to the air as he continued, “And what ‘appens when you eat sugar?”

“You get a little bit of an energy boost?”

“after that.”

“A little crash?”

“Another correct answer, you have been remembering our lessons well.” Salem rose to his feet and began to pad his way around the jar of cinnamon, keeping his eyes locked on it as if it were a mouse in disguise. “Now, by replacing the sugar with cinnamon, he will still get the bitter-sweet taste that his ol’ tongue still craves, while retaining that energy longer with less come down.” Salem hunched himself down and pounced forward, playfully grabbing at the jar of cinnamon, “It’s also known to be quite a good immunity booster.” He let go of the jar and rolled onto his back to look out the wagon window, his tail wrapping itself around the lid of the jar, twisting it open with a small *pop*, “and a cold night, such as tonight, I fink he will very much appreciate the cinnamon in his coffee.”

Luna nodded as she reached over and grabbed a healthy pinch of cinnamon to grind with the beans. It didn’t take long for Luna to grind the beans and cinnamon down into a fine enough powder. She filtered the combination into a thick glass decanter that had seen its fair use of coffee storage. She slipped on a cooking mitt and gently pushed the door of the wagon open, the decanter and cup in her hands, “Maurice, I have your coffee.” She called out as she bent down and poured the scolding hot liquid into the cup,

“Careful, it is very hot.” Luna said as she held out the cracked porcelain cup to him.

Maurice took the cup in trembling hands with a smile, “Thank you, my dear.” Maurice wrapped the mug in his fingers, cradling the cup as if it were his own personal bonfire, he puffed his cheeks and blew gently into the cup.

Luna stayed crouched as she stuck out her hand to stroke Salem's back as he rubbed his flank against her legs, his way of showing her he was pleased with her cooking. She stood up as she watched Maurice take his first sip.

Maurice licked his lips trying to put a finger on the new taste of his coffee, “Something different about this one, new beans?”

“Nope, same beans as always.” Salem purred as he made his way back to Maurice's side, curling up next to him for warmth.

Maurice stared deep into the black brew in his cup, “Well, it's gotta be a spice or something, it tastes different.” He took another sip, taking his time to swirl it around his mouth as if it were a fine wine.

“Cinamon.” Salem purred again, “Do you like it?”

Maurice took another mouthful and gulped it down before answering Salem, “I like it. You can leave the decanter out here, I think I'll have another cup.”

“I told you he'd appreciate it,” Salem said as he lowered his head, satisfied with his satisfied customer sipping away on his coffee, the steam fogging his glasses with each sip.

Luna reached down to give Salem a small scratch behind his ear as she scanned the forest for any signs of movement, her eyes lingering on the inn, its candlelight still dimly dancing in the rain, “Maurice, have you seen any of the men come out of the inn yet?”

Maurice paused for a moment, pursing his lips on the cup before taking a small sip, “I don't think I have.” He turned to meet Luna's stare, he could see that she was begging to grow concerned

that the men had not yet returned. “They’ve probably just decided to sneak a drink while they’re in there. There’s nothing to worry about, they’ll be back soon.”

Luna leant against the railing uneasily, her gaze shifting back to the inn, “Something feels weird.”

“What do you mean something feels weird?” Salem asked, concern lacing his words.

Luna’s eyes stayed strained on the Inn, trying to catch a single glimpse of life from inside, “The candles, they are all on in the main building.” She pointed a finger to the Inn’s middle building.

“Well yeah,” Salem rose to his feet and sauntered to the railing, hopping upon it in a single graceful bound, “That’s probably were they have the kitchen and dining hall, what’s strange about the lights being on there?”

Luna paused for a moment, studying the flickering lights from behind closed windows before turning to Salem, “I have not seen a single figure move in front of any of those lights the entire time we’ve been here.”

Salem stared for a moment, his eyes darting from one window, “Yeah, now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve seen any movement either.” Salem stuck his nose in the air, sniffing the forest air intensely. After a few deep sniffs, he jumped down from the bannister, onto the dirt road below, willingly letting the rain pound down on his jet-black coat, a sight that even Luna rarely saw.

“What is it?” Luna called out as she leaned over the railing, watching Salem sniff the air like a truffle pig on the hunt, “Salem, come back!” Luna turned hurriedly, squeezing past Maurice as she too hopped down onto the dirt road, which by now, was more a mixture of mud and stone.

“Hold up! Take this with you.”

Luna turned back to see Maurice holding out a lantern that had been hung on a nail next to the wagon door, "Thank you." She said as she stretched up, taking the lantern in one hand before turning around and chasing hurriedly after Salem, who by this point, had made his way twenty feet closer to the inn. His nose was pressed to the ground sniffing intently at a puddle. "Salem what is it!?"

Salem raised his head and turned to Luna, a paw pointing towards the inn, "I don't smell other humans."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I smell your tribe...But that's it...This other smell though..."

Salem turned back around letting his nose take in the lingering scent that would soon be washed away. "I can't put my nose on it."

Luna gave pause, in all her years with Salem's company she could count only a handful of times Salem was unable to identify a scent. Which meant whatever was causing the scent was something she had never had the displeasure of running into. Her eyes once again studied the individual windows of the hotel, hoping for her fears to be set at ease, to see a couple happily dancing stroll by the window or perhaps a barmaid serving trays of mead. But her hopes waned, gripping tighter around her throat with each growing second as the candles continued to flicker uninterrupted in their windows. "We need to check." She croaked out softly.

Salem's tail reared in defiance, "We most certainly do not."

Luna's eyebrows flickered in anger as she glared at Salem, "They are our family."

"Yes, dead ones." Salem turned on the spot, plopping down to sit beside a growing puddle that consumed half of the scraped-away path that led up to the inn.

Luna marched up to Salem, her hands balled firmly on her hips as she bent down to him, “You do not know that for certain.”

Salem gave the air a deep, long sniff before retching loudly, “Rotten!” He hissed as he retched again. He pointed a paw to the inn doors before retching a final time.

Luna stood up and took a deep breath, slowing down her breathing as she tried to prepare herself for whatever was behind the doors of the inn. Her hand slowly reached down as her fingers clumsily clambered over the latch of her satchel, making sure it was still on her hip. “Come on.”

Luna took the lead, cautiously making her way to the front door with Salem trailing behind. It only took a few moments before the pair were huddled under the inn’s awning with the “Welcome” sign dangling above them. The sign swung softly with the breeze, singing out a small metallic squeal as it rocked on its chain. The lights next to the main door were not candles as Luna thought, but lanterns, much like her own, although admittedly, nowhere near as nicely crafted. She stood in front of the inn door, her hand frozen, hovering above the iron ring handle. A small thump on her back made her jump as Salem made his way to her left shoulder. The pair looked at each other and took a deep breath in before Luna gripped the handle and pulled the door slowly open as it let out a low, guttural groan. Immediately the stench of mold caused Luna to wretch, nearly bringing up her breakfast. She clapped a hand over her mouth and forced the taste of bile back down, despite the inviting outside appearance, the bowels of the inn were dingily lit with dust littering the floors and walls. Scattered across the room Luna could spot small groups congregating around dishevelled tables slick with a layer of grime, their bodies rhythmically writhing as they spoke in harsh, muffled voices. Luna grimaced as she scanned the dimly lit room for her tribe before calling out one of their names, “Nelson, where are you?” There

was a brief moment of muffled voices, speaking in tongues that seemed foreign to Luna's ears before she heard Nelson's voice call from a table deeper inside. Her eyes scanned the tables closest to the Bar where she saw a hand wave her over before turning its back to her.

"I don't like this." Salem scrunched his nose as he gagged on the putrid scent of rotting wood around him, "It's not just the wood that I can smell rotting here." He hacked again as he hunkered down, making sure to keep balance on Luna's shoulder.

Luna made her way deeper into the depths of the inn, past tables of gaunt men and women, their eyes sunken horribly as if they had passed through the nine layers of hell. Luna stopped ten feet away from her Tribe, who all seemed huddled, their backs to the inn entrance, "Nelson!" she called out over the constant rumble of muffled chatter seemingly growing louder with each step forward. Nelson sat still his body leaning from side to side ever so slightly, "Nelson come on-" Luna flinched as she felt small, feline nails dig into her shoulder, "Ow, Salem!" she turned her head to glare at Salem who met her glare with a paw to her lips, hushing her as he nodded his head upwards to the dark rafters of the inn. Her heart sank as her knees slowly began to tremble involuntarily. In the shadows, hunched on the beams sat a few figures, their long, distorted limbs stretched out across multiple beams.

"Luna, over here!"

She heard Nelson's voice call out as the figure raised his arm again, waving it as he had hundreds of times before, only this time she could see with each flick of his wrist, a small bone extruded through the skin, tearing it a little more with each flail of the hand. Her heart froze as the figure spoke, calling her over to the table.

"Come on, I got you a glass of wine!"



Salem let out a small hiss as he hunched his shoulders, “That is not Nelson, we need to leave, now.”

*But it's his voice.* Luna stayed frozen in spot as the figure slowly jerked upwards to its feet, turning around to meet Luna's gaze.

“Luna! We need to go now!” Salem hissed out as a number of other figures at each table slowly jerked up and began turning towards the pair, their sunken eyes all trained on a fresh source of meat. “Luna!” Salem turned and bit her ear in an attempt to snap her out of the fear that entranced her.

The jolt of pain snapped Luna back to her senses as she began to back away from Nelson. Turning without looking to try and flee the inn, her shin crashed hard into a pulled-out stool that belonged to a now-standing woman. Luna tumbled to the floor, skidding across the neglected floorboards. Salem managed to land on his feet as he hissed loudly at the woman, swiping his claws at her legs as she shuffled forward, “Get up!” he growled as the woman lumbered ever closer.

Nelson lurched forward awkwardly as he tripped over the stool he had been sitting on, he crashed forward hard, his lower jaw smashing sickeningly into the wooden floorboards with a flinching crunch of bone. A few teeth scattered their way across the wooden boards like marbles, tumbling into the soles of Luna's sandals.

Luna's mouth opened in horror as Nelson reared his head, his jaw bone cracked and splintered as a large chunk protruded through his lower right cheek. His jaw dangled loosely as he clawed his fingernails into the floorboards, splitting them under the weight of his body as he pulled himself up. Luna tried scooting back, her feet slipping on spilt alcohol puddles as she grabbed a nearby table and dragged herself to her feet.

“Run!” Salem hissed loudly as he hopped onto Luna's back, taking a wild swing at another shambling figure who dared stumble towards her. His claws caught the figure's cheek, ripping three

small gashes across the length of their face, but the figure continued forward unflinching.

Nelson's limbs cracked and contorted as he began to move quicker, his movements erratic as the sounds of his popping, dislocated limbs filled the air. The muscle fibres holding his jaw hanging began to tear as a series of elongated, spider-like limbs forced their way out of his mouth, tearing apart Nelson's flesh as if it were parchment left in a storm. A horrible screech erupted from his throat as a upside-down face forced itself out of Nelson's unhinged jaw, its eyes more sunken than those of the fellow monstrosities surrounding Luna. "I must taste her!" It screeched as the nightmare lurched Nelson's body forward, puppeteering his hands in an attempt to grip her forearm.

Luna stepped back, thrusting Nelson's hands away as she pivoted and began to run. She could feel the beasts swiftly trying to surround her as their bodies contorted after her. Their limbs stretched to spider-like proportions of torn muscle and snapped bone.

"Duck!" Salem screeched as his tail pushed into the back of her head.

She did as the cat instructed, allowing one of the nightmarish creatures to leap over the top of her as he came tumbling from a bannister high above the front doorway. His body slammed hard into one of the many round wooden tables scattered around the ground floor. The table cracked and flipped with a loud bang as the drinks on the table, most of which looked as if they had been left out for weeks on end, splattered violently against the floor.

"Quickly, the door, the door!" Salem bellowed again as he buckled down on Luna's shoulders.

She could feel the tips of his claws pierce through the fabric of her clothes, pinching into her skin accidentally as he clung to her. But she knew the pain she felt now would only be a minor

inconvenience to whatever those creatures would do to her if they got their hands on her. Her legs began to pump faster than they had ever gone before, sending her into a full-blown sprint as she skidded to the door and yanked it open. She practically threw the door as she dashed outside into the pouring rain, the mud splashing up, saturating her legs as she ran for her life, “Get in the wagons! Get in the wagons!” She screamed frantically, her voice being drowned out by the heavy rain.

A few of those standing outside under the cover over their wagon awnings looked up and mumbled in confusion as Luna continued to run, screaming, towards them. It wasn't long however until the mumbles of confusion turned to screams of panic and fear as the chasing aranea burst forth from the many doors of the inn. There were more than Luna could have imagined as close to thirty aranea came streaming out, their eyes locked onto the buffet that lay dormant in front of their nest, a weary group of beetles caught napping atop a trap door spider's nest.

Screams rang out from the travellers as the woman and children scrambled to get into their wagons, desperately trying to lock and barricade the doors in a futile attempt to keep the aranea out.

As Luna made it to her wagon, Maurice reached down and pulled the young woman up before shuffling her inside, “Maurice you need to get in here!”

The old man glanced to the other carts, then to the charging aranea, who by now were only moments away from recovering their lost distance on Luna. “I need to help the others.” He said bleakly as he gripped the door, “I'm sorry for allowing the stop here.” Maurice paused for a single second before slamming the door closed.

Luna could feel him jump off the wagon as it rocked gently, “The shutters!” she yelped as she took in her last view of Maurice.

Salem jumped from her shoulder and dashed to a small crank by the door gripping it in his mouth, “H’lp ‘e” he mumbled as he pushed his weight into the crank, slowly beginning to turn it. With each mechanical click metal plating began to slide its way across the windows of the wagon, reinforcing the pair from the impending aranea. But it was too late as shrieks of terror and roars of pain bellowed out from beyond the wagon door, first was Maurice, as he called for the remaining few outside to get to safety. He had only made it fifteen feet away from the cart before an aranea tore into his flesh, his chest cavity a pinata filled with two goodie bags for the spider-like monstrosity.

Luna fell to the floor with a scream of panic the wagon rocked with a sickening thud from above. Before she could get to her feet and finish closing the shutters one of the windows burst inwards as an elongated and deformed arm of an aranea smashed through to the inside. The beast was half wearing a human skin suit as it bent its fingers in all directions, clumsily snapping the bones of its new gloves as it tried to grasp at Luna.

Luna screamed again as she backed into her bunk that lay horizontal across the back of the wagon, *those rings*, She thought as she snatched her kitchen cleaver off the benchtop. The blade shook violently in her unstable hands as she held it out in front of her, *those are his rings*.

Salem let go of the crank in his mouth, “Luna!” He hissed as he darted towards the decanter of coffee that Maurice must have put back on the edge of the countertop. He swiped at the glass container with his paw, toppling it and the remaining cups of scolding black inside splashing over the aranea’s bare arm.

The beast atop the wagon let out an angry snarl as it ripped its arm back through the destroyed window. The wagon rocked heavily from side to side as the roof timber creaked heavily under the beast. “Lu-Luna le-let me innnnn!” It called out, its voice

stressing on all the wrong syllables. It screeched out again as it slammed another human glove through the round window of the wagon door its arm this time curling back on itself as it fumbled frantically for its fractured fingers to clasp onto, "Leeet me innn!"

"It's goin' for the 'andle!" Salem hissed as he lunged forward again, trying to claw at the intruding arm of the aranea. The aranea darted his hand away from Salem before slamming it hard into the cat's side sending him hurtling into the nearby cabinet with a heavy smack. Salem's body smashed into the cabinet and crumpled to the floor unconsciously.

Luna sat, as her legs refused to lift her, instead accepting that this would be her final moments. Future dreams of creating a loving family of her own passing down her knowledge fled through her mind.

The hand scrambled for a moment before sliding up the wooden door and found the handle, "I, ju-just want s-o-ome teaaa," The voice called out as it pushed the handle down, unlocking the door with a click that echoed throughout the wagon. The hand slowly retreated back through the window like a snake slithering itself into the shadow of a cave before the door began creaking open, "Ju-just some Cin-na-mon and-" Flashes of lightning crackled outside as the deformed Maurice, stood in the freshly opened wagon door, "s-some fresh meat." The corners of Mauric's mouth ripped as the aranea contorted his face into a smile using its pedipalps which buried up through the inside of his throat. His chest cavity had been torn open and inside a black mass of carapace wriggled inside as it forced two limbs into the Maurices as if he were a pair of long-sleeved overalls. Maurice's corpse stumbled awkwardly through the door frame, slamming his shoulder into it as he swayed forward, each step accompanied by the snapping of a bone somewhere inside the aranea's skin suit.

Luna snapped out from her daze as a sound she could only describe as dozens of cannons erupting at once boomed from outside the wagon. The aranea paused for a moment, its head turning in sync with her own to see what had caused such a ruckus. It twitched momentarily before returning its attention back to Luna as it continued to lurch slowly towards her. Luna held her cooking cleaver out in front of her, her arms still visibly shaking as she tried to speak up, “St-stay back!”

The pedipalps retreated back into Maurice's throat as the skin of his lower jaw sagged loosely on the remaining jaw structure, and then he lunged forward at Luna, his arms outstretched as he tried to grab onto her shoulders. Luna shoved the knife forward but she was too slow as the aranea backhanded the blade like he had Salem, sending it smashing into the metal oven, snapping the blade in two. The aranea growled out again as it lurched forward, gripping Luna by the throat and slamming her back into her bunk. The beast squeezed as she thrashed beneath it, her legs frantically kicking in a pool void of any water. It lowered Maurice's head, letting its pedipalps push their way out his mouth once more. At first, the fiend inside only forced Maurice to smile, but soon it began to push his jaw with more force, violently tearing it apart and with a sickening snap of sinew and bone. The jaw, now completely unhinged, dangled awkwardly agape, revealing hidden inside Maurice's stretched-out cavities sat a small pale face, its eyes two black holes that bore into its skull.

*This is it. This is how it all ends.* Luna sat paralysed with fear, her arms dropping to her side as the knife in her hand clattered to the floor in absolute terror. She just sat, her eyes locked onto the two cavernous pits that bore themselves back into her soul. The shrieks of her tribe rang out around her as the thunder laughed with a malicious cackle. Boys, women, children, it didn't matter to

the starving beasts. They were but a mere buffet provided to them by The Radiant One, a wagon of sinners who refuse his teachings.

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“Aranea, up ahead! You see them, Captain?” The driver of Havoc Squad's wagon called back to William through the open front window of the wagon, a sense of deep urgency underlining his words.

William turned on his bench to peer out the front window, his eyes scanning the cresting road ahead, “I see them.” William turned back to his squad, who now, were sitting silent waiting for his orders. “Twenty seconds until contact. Make sure you're ready.” He took the remaining time to look at each of his squadmates before giving them a final reassuring nod, “May the Radiant One justify our wraith.” The cart skidded to a halt on the muddy trail as the driver slammed on the brake lever, causing the squad to stumble slightly before piling out the back wagon door, their boots sloshing the heavy puddles that lay scattered across the trail. The rain continued to pour, more heavily now as lightning stretched out across the sky, striking a tree off in the distant mountain range. Even in the poor visibility of the rain the squad could see the destruction of the aranea as body parts and feasting aranea sat, scattered across the forest floor. The wagons the travellers had used for safety had their walls and roofs smashed in and ripped apart like an unfortunate deer encountering a starving mountain lion. A handful of boys and women were left standing fending off the monstrosities, however, from the way they fought, they would not remain alive for much longer. “Eradicate the aranea, and check the wagons for survivors!” William bellowed out, rivalling the cracks of thunder as he drew the greatsword from his back sheath. A fine blade crafted by some of the church's finest blacksmiths, its blade blessed with holy symbols of the

Radiant one which ran down its spine, causing the blade to flicker with a golden glow as the warm shine erupted into holy flames.

William and Iris lead the charge in, both dashing towards a wall of three aranea. William moved in first, his armoured footsteps weightless upon the forest floor. To him, combat was nothing more than a well-choreographed dance. He dashed forward and thrust out his radiant blade, catching the first aranea clean through its sternum. The blade pierced the flesh and bone, skewering it like fresh meat over a fire. He sliced the blade elegantly out of the aranea with a backhanded swing, sending the body tumbling into the mud, a ball of broken bone and meat.

The second aranea howled as it leapt at William, stretching out its distorted limbs and pedipalps in hopes of grappling the Captain to the ground.

The Captain caught sight of the beast as it dove towards him, giving him enough time to pivot on his right heel, letting the beast sore past him as he delivered a clean upward diagonal slash through its back, cleanly cleaving the flesh and bone in two.

The third was handled by Iris as she roared out a barbarian war cry. Her muscles flexed and bulked as crackles of lightning coursed over her physique. She moved with the speed of a steam engine, and the force to match as she sent her war hammer sundering down upon the third aranea's trapezius muscles. The aranea's shoulder and collarbone were obliterated in the strike, sending the horror crumpling to the ground as it howled in pain, the only remedy of course was one more bone-crunching hammer blow to its skull, caving it in a single sickening *splat*.

The triangle of Freya, Gilmore and Reeves trailed behind Iris and the Captain, veering to the back three wagons where a pack of aranea clawed at the few remaining survivors. The largest of the pack reared its head back and sunk its arachnid fangs into a trembling boy's throat. Jets of blood spurted forth from the



wound covering the aranea in a slick layer of scarlet. The pack cheered in delight, their voices sounding like a warped record, the imitation of humanoid laughter, a mockery of pure glee. Gilmore was the first to strike of the trio, His blunderbuss roaring to life as it spat out a net of silver chain links, striking one of the aranea and pinning it to the ground. Three of Freya's daggers whistled over Gilmore's head as they found their mark, sinking deeply into another aranea's skull before dissolving back into the weave with a faint blue shimmer. The sky lit up behind Freya and Gilmore as dozens of purple wisps began to flicker into existence above the forest canopy. Below them, Reeves stood with his right arm outstretched to the moon as he muttered an incantation under his breath. He stirred his arm through the air, completing three full clockwise rotations before gripping at the night sky and plunging his hand down. The wisps, which by now had tripled in numbers, burst into balls of fury as they hurtled back down through the canopy like cannon fire, tearing apart the remaining three aranea that made up the pack.

“Iris, check the front wagon!” The Captain ordered as he made his way to the final cart being attacked by an aggressive aranea. It only took the Captain a few more seconds to reach the wagon with his blade drawn, the beast before him was distracted by whatever morsel he had found within the wagon, which now he could see, was still alive, albeit paralysed with fear. He didn't waste any more time than he needed to on the situation, when a foe gives you such an advantageous strike with no recourse, you take it without question.

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A blade burst through the aranea's chest, stopping inches away from Luna before hastily retreating with a single smooth flick, sending the aranea body toppling to the ground. "Are you alright?" called a figure standing in the doorway of the wagon, his golden eyes glowing deeply like two small lanterns.

"S-Salem!" Luna stuttered as she scrambled on the floor, pulling herself up to check on Salem as he still lay still on the wagon floor. "Salem! Salem get up!" Luna cried as she shook the cat's limp body picking him up and hugging him tightly. Luna spun around searching for any remains of the fish soup she had been cooking not that long ago, while most of the meal had been spilt in the scuffle with the aranea, she managed to find a small palm size chunk of mackerel lying in a small puddle of soup. She placed Salem gently down on the countertop and scooped the fish up, clapping it in both her hands while she muttered in an incantation in a foreign tongue.

William watched as a faint orange glow hummed from Luna's closed hands momentarily, before she grabbed the cat's mouth and forced it open, "Eat!" She scolded as she put the fish to his tiny open jaw. Salem lay still as he watched Luna tear a small piece of the fish off and gently push it into the cat's mouth, "Salem, please, you need to eat."

William stepped forward putting his hand on her shoulder as tears began to well up in Luna's eyes as she moved the cat's small mouth open and closed, forcing him to chew the small bit of mackerel inside. "I think he's-"

The Captain was cut off by the sudden small, laboured coughs coming from the cat as he swallowed the fish, licked his lips, and then opened his eyes.

"You prestidigitated that fish didn't you." He mumbled as he slowly rolled to his feet, shakily trying to stabilise himself into a sitting position.

Luna swooped forward, picking up Salem in a bear hug and burying him into her shoulder as she squeezed him tightly.

“Captain, that’s the last of them.”

The captain turned to see Freya and the rest of the squad huddled around her, the signs of battle splattered across their uniforms.

“Survivors?” The Captain asked as his golden eyes glanced back to Luna who was still hugging Salem tightly on the wagon floor.

Freya stepped aside, showing the small group of women and children gathered behind her, a grim expression tugging at her face, “This is all of them.” There were only four left, two women and children, a boy and a girl. Their faces white with fear as they shivered in the Luyarnhian rain.

William nodded solemnly before turning back to Luna, crouching down to be at her eye level before speaking, “Are you alright, can you walk?”

Luna looked up from Salem at William, his glowing eyes catching her off-guard. She had only read about his kind, those who are Celestial in nature. His voice was powerful yet calm, like a well-tuned steam engine fresh from an Artificers shop. The man pushed away the long wet golden strands of hair that stuck to his face before lowering his gloved hand to her.

“It’s alright, you’re safe now.” The man’s voice soothed Luna.

Luna took his hand and let him help her to her feet as she looked out the shattered window of the wagon. Out to the carnage that lay around her. She felt the bile rise and force its way onto a patch of mud outside the wagon. She cried out in grief at the broken bodies of her tribe that lay scattered around the road. The people she had spent her life with, those she had nursed back to health from sickness, those whose stomachs she filled every night with her meals, those who for so many years she helped raise like

her very own children, torn apart by a pack of foul beasts as if they were nothing more than large hunks of meat.

The Captain stared on, allowing Luna to grieve her loss at her own pace. A pang of guilt spread through him, *had we arrived earlier...* he felt a soft, reassuring grip on his shoulder as he watched the weeping witch.

“We did what we could. Give her some time.” Freya gave his shoulder another squeeze and let go as she too watched on as Luna cradled one of the child’s lifeless bodies, one final goodbye for his tender soul.

The Captain bowed his head for a moment and sighed, what was done was done, right now he still had the duty of bringing his squad home safely. “Gather everyone else, we leave soon.” He ordered Freya.

Freya nodded and turned to gather the rest of Havoc squad who had found themselves inspecting the now-abandoned inn.

The Captain waited a moment and stared up at the moon as the rain began to slowly fade into a drizzle. It hung in the sky high above Luyarnha, a golden pearl amongst a vast starry abyss, perhaps a sign of the Radiant one smiling down upon his squad's good deeds.

“Thank you.” Purred a voice from around the Captain’s ankles. Salem stood beside the Captain, his eyes sorrowfully following Luna as she lay down the young boy, closing his eyelids and laying his arms, palm up, by his sides.

The Captain watched on in silent intrigue as the woman before him, slowly shifted the bodies to be laying next to each other, giving each one a final goodbye before moving on to gather the next. He glanced down at the scruffy, jet-black cat by his feet, as it sat there licking his paws clean.

The cat halted its grooming, saying out loud, “A ritual. To send their spirits off to the afterlife safely.”

The Captain looked back to Luna, “I’ve never seen her people do this before.”

“You wouldn’t.”

The Captain looked down once more at Salem as he shook some of the rain from his fur, “Why’s that?”

“She is what the Quori call, a Grave Hearer.”

“So, she can hear the spirits?”

“Precisely.”

“I thought all Quori could commune with the spirits?”

“Like most abilities in life, Grave Hearer falls on a spectrum. Some Quori may commune with the occasional spirit, some may only ever hear whispers. But others, well, let’s just say, some nights they may find more tranquillity in the rumblings of a rowdy tavern than the deepest recesses of their own minds.”

“Does that mean she could hear...”

“Every last plead for life.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Death is but the beginning of a new journey. While their physical bodies may have shuffled off this mortal coil, their souls are now free to move on.” Salem began to groom his paws again, giving them a few licks before finishing, “They’ll be in a better place soon.”

It wasn’t long before the rest of Havoc squad returned to gather around Luna as she made the final preparation for the ritual at hand. By now, the rain had stopped almost entirely, and in place of the harsh winds that howled just hours before, the Radiant One lay gentle beams of moonlight down upon the forest.

Salem rest upon the top of his crumpled home, once a fine restaurant on wheels, reduced to a pile of rubble and rust, “It’s time.” He purred as he stood to his feet, watching Luna return back to the group.

“Thank you all for waiting,” Luna said as she looked around the members of Havoc squad, each curiously awaiting the beginning of the ritual. “Salem.” She said as she nodded at the cat, who at this leapt gracefully down to the dirt beside her, leading her back towards the large magic circle Luna had drawn into the mud. The pair stopped a few feet away from the circle's perimeter, pulling out a large Grimoire from a satchel on Luna's hip.

Salem sighed in sorrow as he looked at the fallen before him. All of which he had known since birth. He turned his head up slowly at Luna, “Let's send 'em off properly ey? Make sure they pass over nice and safe.”

Luna nodded and wiped a stray tear from her cheek as she stepped forward into the ring alone. She made her way carefully to the centre and began to read from the leather-bound Grimoire in a language foreign to the members of Havoc squad. The circle drawn into the mud below her feet began to glow a ghostly blue hue as Luna's chants increased in volume. She could feel their spirits unravelling themselves from their physical bodies as ghostly visages of each tribe member rose slowly from their corpse. “I am sorry,” Luna spoke out in her foreign tongue of Quori as she looked around at the spectres that encircled her. “But it is time for you to move on now.” The spectres bowed their heads to Luna, one by one taking their time to embrace her in a final goodbye hug. Then they turned and slowly made their way to the edge of the circle, dissipating into a fine mist as their ghostly forms past over the markings drawn into the mud. As each spirit evaporated into the weave their physical bodies burst into blue flames, quickly cremating their remains.

“She is done.” Salem purred as he sauntered back to the Captain.

William nodded at Salem before turning to command his squad, “Reevas, set the nest ablaze, Gilmore, alert the wagon for pickup.”

Both Reeves and Gilmore nodded as they went to their task, Reeves using a fire incantation to hurl a fireball into the decrepit inn while Gilmore reached for a small pistol on his belt, raised it to the sky and fired once, shooting out a golden flair into the sky.

The squad did not remain in those woods for much longer, they gathered what little goods were recoverable and loaded them into the wagon which they had arrived in. “We can take you back to Luyarnha,” William said to Luna as the final member of the team piled into the wagon.

Luna looked around the remains of her tribe, the broken wreckage of her family, savaged by the beasts of the night.

“Life is a cycle.” Salem spoke as he followed Luna’s gaze, “And sooner or later, a cycle, whether we like it or not, must begin anew.”

Luna took a final look at what remained of her tribe and picked up the bag full of loose spice jars and cooking utensils she had managed to pack while the rest of the squad had looked for any goods they could recover, and without another word stepped into the wagon and shut the door.

END