

The king's new soldiers

The dark enveloped all, as the shadows of the trees merged and intertwined with those casted by the nearby mountains and even the night itself. All of it coated by an unnatural stillness in the air, as the flora looked like it had frozen in time, unchanging through the centuries. And what little moonlight managed to sneak past the dark foliage, only offered a dim light. Just enough to fuel anyone's fear should they be foolish enough to enter.

The trunks of the trees, twisted and turned, threatened to come alive, tearing apart anything they would catch with their roots and vines. The caves and ravines of the mountains looked less so and more like ravenous mouths of enormous behemoths, filled with sharp teeth and ready to burst forth and devour. Every shadow hid a new threat or a dangerous monster, one too many glowing orbs or sunken eye sockets that watched, wandering and waiting. For some lost soul to feast on. For new orders to follow. For him to arrive.

Darkling Woods certainly earned its name, and gave him somewhere he could bid his time while he prepared the ground for his return. And yet, he should remain alert. His victory was near, and much had been done, a single artefact standing between him and his triumphant return. But alas, his minions were unable to complete the task at hand. Even with the leadership of that fool a former bishop had not been able to. His machinations had been useful... for now.

Regardless, something felt off. Something was in conflict with the malign power that had long claimed the woods, and that allowed him to wander freely. A twinkle and a glow caught his attention from the corner of his eye. It was something faint, fickle and easy to miss, but that nonetheless glistened under the moonlight, standing firm against the encroaching darkness.

As he approached the gleaming light, he felt it react to him. A constant and acute burning feeling. It bothered him, like very few things in Magvel did. But even if its strength had waned, there was currently one singular object that matched that description.

The grass and trees gave way to overgrown stone. A set of stone columns stood over a plinth surrounding an altar, even though the roof had long sunk. The remains of it, scattered around them, had long done so, cracked, worn-out and covered in dirt and flora. And in the centre of the ensemble was the artefact, a sizable orb, gleaming in white.

The stone was larger than he remembered, its smooth surface was polished to perfection, pristine and spotless. A rather stark contrast not only with the surroundings of the woodland, but with the stone ruin in which it rested. The darkling wood teemed with malice and evil, his influence having long gripped the area; even the stone was not able to stand his echoes, this ruin but a small example of larger ones that dotted the region.

"It is a tempting target. And the reasoning behind such a lure is sound." He thought to himself. Fools. To have the gall of using their last chance as mere bait... it infuriated him, and had his body been worthy, he would smash it to pieces in the blink of an eye. .

There was a brief flash of light, a blinding white that pierced through the landscape. He took a couple of steps back, trying not to stumble with his robe. Noises came from behind him. The faint clanking of light armour and the rustling of cloth. The crunching of grass and dirt beneath boots. The sound of steel being drawn.

- As expected, it did work!

Following the yelling voice had a high pitch and singsong tone, almost relishing at the trick working. He turned around, clenching his teeth instinctively at the sight of the ambush. He knew them, one way or the other. The green haired woman, clad in white and with a staff on her hand, who had long been a thorn on the side of his forces. The woman with the long blue hair that wielded a lance, royalty of one of the remaining countries if his vessel's memories served him right. And the princess of a fallen kingdom, clutching the sword in her hands, eyes full of sorrow and regret.

- Oh, Lyon...

That got a reaction out of his puppet. Stray and fleeting thoughts crossed his mind, faint thoughts about her, having long cherished and desired her. It was amusing to see the last vestiges of him try to break free, and it took him a single moment to subdue him yet again. His scowl became a smirk. It seemed that, given the current situation, his vessel was still useful. *“You will vanish only when I allow you to do so. Now you watch.”*

- You miserable fools, you will meet your end in this place.

- Lyon... - she found her resolve, glaring at him and gripping her sword with practice dexterity. - Give me strength!

Their bodies tensed, ready to attack at Eirika's signal, while his eyes blazed with power, one hand stretched towards the three attackers. Dark energy swirled and cracked around him, corrupting the very air that surrounded him. The stone cracked and the earth trembled, fragments of it levitating as they were overtaken by dark energy, turning them into a myriad of tiny dark spheres.

L'Arachel rose her staff, resonating with the stone and casting a bright light that pierced the darkness. It was blinding, enveloping the vessel and causing the spell to flicker off. It burned, just as all of the stones had back in the day. The burning was not bothering him anymore, but instead had become a ravenous blaze that ate him from the inside. A reminder that no matter how weak, his triumph was not ensured until all stones were shattered. The vessel grunted, staggering and having to reach for the altar for support.

And for the first time in a long while, he was overpowered by his vessel.

Lyon regained control, dispelling the traces of the spell with a wipe of his hand. The cracking malice faded like a breeze, releasing the stone and the dirt it had possessed. It fell to the ground like a brief hailstorm, leaving the wilderness in the same silence that usually reigned over it. The prince looked up, strained and hardly in control, but finally looked her in the eye.

- Eirika, do what you must.

- Lyon?! Lyon, is that you?

- Make haste!

The prince grunted, falling to his knees yet again, trying to remain as close as possible to the stone in the altar. Its glow was faint and quickly dimming, making the demon inside revolt and seep into his mind. As he had done many times before, each time leaving him weaker. And it would not be long when he retained full control.

The princess saw no longer the vessel of the demon king she had come to slain, but someone she thought lost long ago. The grip on her sword. Her steeled resolve. The objective of such a gamble. All of it faltered.

"Fool." The voice of the demon king thundered in his mind.

- L'Arachel, wait. - She reached for her friend's shoulder. - You're from Rausten. You hold the ancient magics. Can't you bring him back?

- Bring him back? - Asked L'Arachel, perplexed. - Eirika that... that cannot be done. The one that achieved such a miracle was Latona himself.

- You can't be serious! - Intervened Tana.

- But that's Lyon we are talking about!

- It's also the vessel of the demon king! The blood of all this war is in his hands!

The three women discussed back and forth, arguing about what to do with the former imperial prince. And from his position, the vessel watched and waited. The malice of the area was affecting the stone behind him, and soon would be nothing but a fancy relic of the past. Each moment that went by, that they wasted, the prince vanished and the vessel returned.

- Then at least let me be the one to end him.

Eirika started walking towards him. She had a small and sweet smile on her face, trying to offer some measure of comfort and reassurance. Whether it was for the vessel or herself, He did not know. The other two watched behind her, the lancer with a scowl and the holy woman with worry plastered on her face.

- Let's end this, Lyon...

- That's right, let's end this charade.

The vessel stood up, eyes blazing once more with dark power. The air cracked as the dark power swirled once again. Pebbles and stones rose, levitating, as the light of the sacred stone flickered out. Finally, unbound and unbothered, the vessel put his hand forth.

- Despair!

A swirling mist of violet and pebbles burst forth, quickly surrounding and swallowing the princess that had attempted to approach him. And as she was covered by the spell, a cracking sound filled the night. Her skin began to darken, taking a dark grey colour, and to smooth, becoming unnaturally so. Caught by surprise, the princess could only jerk back slightly, her mouth open in a silent word as her eyes went from her body to the vessel. She silently pleaded for it to stop, but the magic, ravenous, devoured her whole.

Her soft and fair skin hardened, stone spreading in all directions from wherever the mist made contact. Her pleading eyes dulled and paled, becoming blank orbs that stared into nothingness, as the expression in her face became a permanent one. A blend of surprise, realisation and horror. Her long and turquoise mane became still and grey, while her armour and clothes followed suit. The metal dulled and rusted, while the cloth grew heavy and rough, encasing her in a sarcophagus of sorts.

Flesh and bone, cloth and steel, it didn't matter in the slightest. All of it was swiftly transformed and petrified, making the woman merely part of the landscape. In due time, she would crumble and fall apart, becoming nothing but gravel and dust. And over it, his armies would march across the continent. As violently as it had started, the cracking died down, leaving behind a horrified silence that lasted just as short.

- EIRIKA!

- You monster!

He savoured everything. Their realisation at their situation, their simmering anger, and the fear they tried to mask. But regardless of how much they clenched their teeth or jumped on the offensive, they would meet the same end. The lancer leaped into action, trying to close the distance with Him, while the holy woman rose her staff in the air, a luminous circle appearing around her feet.

- Grovel at my feet!

The mist shot forward once again, a swirl of violet and tiny black pebbles hitting the two warriors. With a grunt and muffled voices, they froze in place, as if time had stopped for them. And meanwhile, the miasma swirled around the women, clinging to them and working its magic, filling the area yet again with the familiar cracking noise. It burst forth from inside of them, and the changes were quickly becoming apparent.

With their poses were set on stone, as their bodies traded warmth and life for a silent stillness, the wave of grey spreading everywhere and leaving only coldness in its wake. The vibrant colours of their outfits all faded into uniformity, while the light pieces of armour they wore -fitting for their roles in the battlefield- groaned under the magic's touch. Almost as if they screamed the agony of their wearers. They lost their sheen and they dulled, becoming carefully sculpted stone replicas of themselves.

And the two women were no different. Their fair skins darkened to lifeless grey, the softness hardening into rugged mineral. Eyes that became blank orbs, and muscles that hardened their precarious poses. No part was safe, the stone spreading without opposition, steady. However, their beauty was now to remain, forever young but still subject to time. The elements and the time itself would erode their forms, until they would become no different than the ruins they planned the ambush.

They would be forgotten, abandoned. And should anyone survive his coming victory and the following onslaught, maybe they would be taken as nothing but elaborate statuary. Some icon the manaketes had adored, at least before he took care of them. The miasma faded, and with it the cracking, leaving three immobile figures in the woods. The moonlight cast their shadows against the ground, a testament to their foolishness.

Once the spell fully faded, their fates were sealed. The statues let out a series of ominous cracks, as their own weight, horribly distributed in their poses, took them down. The statues, former royals, broke, the remains falling to the ground and into the grass and moss.

- No! - Lyon shouted - No, no, no!

He rushed forth, to inspect the damage of the statues. Maybe it was yet not too late and something could be done to their condition. Use the powers his body possessed to try to find some sort of remedy. *"The same thought that-"*

- That brought you to me in the first place.

"You! You did this!"

- He he he... no, charming prince, *WE* did. They were fools to begin with, attempting such an ambush. Sound reasoning, but sorely lacking. And now, they will pay for that.

Lyon could do nothing but watch through eyes that were not his anymore, as with a simple gesture two cracks appeared on the statue's arms, lengthening and widening as they circled around it. Each left a faint trail of dust behind, eroding the stone more and more, until the arms of the statue broke off. They fell to the ground with a thud, the moss and grass cushioning the fall. Never would he have thought a thud would bring him such relief.

Eirika's expression haunted him, the statue's blank eyes boring into him while the face remained contorted into one that condensed a range of emotions. A grimace of surprise. A silent shout of pain. A mask of sadness. *"Betrayal"* He thought.

The demon king had remained quiet and still, either lost in thought or gathering strength back; And the idea, the mere thought of leaving them, -of leaving Eirika- on the wilds was unacceptable. As he bore back into the statue's empty gaze, one of the previous thoughts came back. A faint and stray idea, but one that might just work.

"We'll take them."

No word was spoken, but he knew he had its attention.

- What makes you think I'll entertain the thought, whelp?

"Because they are royals. Embodiment not only of their national power, but also of the hopes of their peoples." He elaborated. *"Use them to crush all of it. They will prove far more valuable and powerful as puppets rather than gravel to crush."*

Silence once more, as the fiend looked at the broken statues. He felt the venomous glare he gave them, but the idea was far more tempting than first thought. To transform them into something that could be used to break not only weapons, but the mind. And to be discarded once they had completed their purpose.

- Hm. I seem to have disregarded human emotions far too quickly... He he he...

"What is your verdict?"

Not bothering to answer, the demon king instead cast a new spell. The violet miasma rose again, engulfing the broken statues as the cracking noise filled the silence. Pieces of stone rose at the demon king's command, reshaping the women into something else. Broken arms and legs were reattached to the bodies, the broken cracks vanishing as if nothing had ever happened. But their armour and clothes shattered into a myriad of tiny pieces, floating around them as they were rearranged.

Their fingers and toes lengthened and sharpened, becoming terrible claws that could slice and pierce the toughest of alloys. Their faces, paragons of beauty, pushed forward as they became monstrous snouts, bearing strong resemblance to those of lizards and reptiles. The two long

fangs that appeared under their upper lips merely cemented their new visages, as the stone that surrounded their heads shaped into crowns of long and curved horns.

With their bodies now in full display, revealing every intimate detail previously hidden, the spell focused on their backs. The magic sculpted the stone into large bat-like wings, from the base in their backs extending and forming gradually. Their wingspan would be more than enough to allow them to take flight, the spell repeating the process on top of their rears, dotting each with a reptilian tail that would ease things.

Finally, what little stone remained was shaped into three weapons for them to wield. A large sword for Eirika, a crude comparison to her previous blade. A curved talon-like lance for Tana. And a crooked and branch-like staff for L'Arachel, like a petrified branch from one of the nearby trees.

- Bow.

The three monsters obeyed at once, quickly fetching their weapons and crouching before their king. Their blank gazes looked forward, awaiting orders. The demon chuckled in satisfaction.

"You have my gratitude."

- You are quite the monster yourself, prince. - He turned to the gargoyles again. - We are leaving. Follow me.

No answer, unsurprising for a bunch of stone monsters, but they immediately stood up, ready to follow. However, as he led them to his hideout deep in the Darkling Woods, Lyon spoke again in their mind.

"What about the stone?"

- It is greatly weakened. And now it is lost. The time lost trying to find it will be crucial for me to complete my return.

"What if they find it?"

- It will be far too late.

The vessel of the demon king marched back to the Black Temple. The place where he had been slain millenia ago, and had his soul imprisoned, would be the place to witness his return. When he did so, the continent would cower in fear and despair, but until then, he had three new guardians to protect him.