

The Warlock

A Tale of Dunes & Dusk

He shifted in the seat of his saddle, the dromedary grunting its displeasure. His collar weighed more heavily today, and rolling his shoulders failed to alleviate any of the burden. Countless days spent roaming the wastelands had eroded his resolve and left him feeling hollow, but atop this hill he finally spotted his quarry. Through the gloom he could just make out the tail of the caravan slithering across the dunes. Another few days and he'd catch them.

The beast bellowed as spurs were driven into its flanks.

"Captain! Lone rider, moving fast. We'll have company by dinner." She jumped down from the wagon and rubbed her eyes. "Courier, maybe?" Her question lingered in the still air.

At length, he turned from the horizon and shook his head slightly.

"You're sure?"

"Rarely, Captain, but this time I am. One rider."

He pulled at his mustache.

"Catch up to the guild master and apprise him of an encounter later. Then tell Jori to start searching for defensive features and to circle the wagons." Seeing the worry on her face, he added "Lissa - just a precaution".

Her mind kept pace with her feet, racing ahead. The captain's face hadn't betrayed anything, nor his voice. Nonetheless, a feeling of unease gnawed at her. If it were a band of ten figures she wouldn't be troubled at all; the Three Spears had sixteen mercenaries guarding another twenty-odd traders, guildsmen, and assorted wanderers. Anything short of a war-band wouldn't dare harass them.

But a lone rider? Nobody traveled by themselves.

She reached the cluster of guildsmen without any issue. The caravan would only move as fast as its slowest members, and these carts were laden, the traders themselves ambling along. The head guildsman noticed her approach.

"Good to see you again, Lissa. I'm afraid I've told you everything I know, though. We'll need to wait until we reach Garrat and speak with the Guildmaster there," he said with a warm smile.

"Apologies, sir, but I'm speaking to you now as a mercenary of the Three Spears. Captain has spotted a lone rider, and we assume they intend to contact us. We'll be taking up defensive positions as soon as we find a suitable area."

Despite the dark undercurrent of her thoughts, Lissa delivered the message with the calm and confident aura of a trained soldier. The Guildmaster craned his neck, as if to look upon the source of the news himself, and then nodded. Lissa nodded back in recognition and sprinted off once more, moving further up the caravan to find her next target.

Jori was, by official title, Sergeant of their squad, and right-hand man to the captain. He detested the title, and became agitated if anyone hailed him by it. He was simply Jori. Lissa had never asked what happened, but she knew something ruinous had befallen the previous company that both Jori and their captain served in. The Three Spears was relatively new, with barely a squad of members. Whether his new troops called him by name or title, the sergeant was usually found at the front of the caravan.

“Jori!” she called, upon approach.

He was a wiry man with equally wiry, red hair, and angled eyes that betrayed his ancestry from somewhere in the northwest of Eventide. He gave a halfhearted wave and stopped, turning to face Lissa.

“Catch your breath,” he said.

“Lone rider spotted. Captain is ordering you to find us defensive ground and circle up to meet them.”

The sergeant raised one eyebrow.

“For a lone rider? All right, probably just a precaution.”

Lissa smiled. There was a history hidden in his words. She followed her sergeant to where their mounts were being led, on foot, by another soldier. Jori saddled one as he talked.

“It’s too early in the trip for trouble,” he said, although she wasn’t sure if he was talking to her, himself, or the camel. “Lissa, since we’ll be hunkering down for a spell, will you find Egg and tell him we’ll prepare a meal soon?”

Once again she nodded her assent and raced to find the next member. There was a shout as Jori drove his mount forward, and he galloped ahead of the caravan. Egg was, unfortunately for Lissa, back toward the end of the caravan. She found him talking with another mercenary as they marched.

“Apologies for interrupting, Egg, but news from Captain and Sarge.” She drove the butt of her spear into the sandy soil and leaned on it. It was carved from the leg bone of some beast, and she had etched beautiful filigree into it. “We’re going to be stopping early as a precaution. Lone rider spotted to the west. Anyway, Jori wants you to prep food when we do.” The interrupted mercenaries exchanged knowing glances.

“Ill omens,” Egg muttered. “We were just talking about the old man. Should have left him back in the hills.”

She knew exactly to whom Egg referred to. That gnawing sensation returned, and she caught herself stealing a glance toward the middle of the column where the old man last was. Her hand was slick on the spear.

“Quit talking like that, Egg. You of all should know better than to feed us poison.” The squat man glared back at her. “Captain catch you sowing fear like that and he’ll beat the devil out of you.”

Egg's dark, bald face broke out into wrinkles as he laughed in that way of his; a cackle. The strange fit of laughter receded as she walked away.

The caravan had slowed and formed a semi-circle amongst some boulders, presumably because they had finally spotted him. A sound tactic in most cases. A runnel of sweat coursed its way down to his shoulders. After thirty years he'd grown accustomed to most of the annoyances that accompanied wearing his collar, but the near-constant tickle of sweat beads forming and escaping from underneath the metal still irked him. He urged his mount back down from the vantage point; he'd spent long enough up there for the caravan to have noticed. It was time.

"Here they come."

The captain's words sent a murmur throughout the score of caravaners, breaking the feigned nonchalance. Traders sat or tended to their goods, and Egg had started a small cookfire in the middle of their encampment. Lissa watched them all with a stoic mask. It was the details that mattered. The furtive glances, the fidgeting, the nervous laughter; they were on edge.

Her eyes wandered to the group of non-traders that had signed on for passage. It wasn't unusual for wastelanders to join caravans; there was safety in numbers, after all. One in particular, however, held her attention. He was a gray-bearded man, old, and wore a large headpiece of wrapped fabric and concealed himself in a coat of tattered cloth. Lissa thought he was kind, and had a warm demeanor, but she had to agree that there was something *off* about him, too. He mostly kept to himself. Something in her stirred, and she approached.

"Hi. I'm Lissa."

"Hello Lissa. Are you sure the captain won't scold you for talking with me?"

"No, Captain doesn't mind," she said.

"Ah, that is good to hear. I've noticed, however, that others in the group have seemed to avoid talking with me. Perhaps for the best." There was something in his voice, but she couldn't quite place it.

"Well, the others aren't as interested in talking with folks as me. That's the best part of this job, well, besides the coin. Getting to know people, and learn." She sat down beside him.

"Wisdom. It is rare to see these days. What do you make of this sudden stop?"

"Just a precaution. There's a lone rider that's been spotted following us. We assume they mean to make contact."

"I see." He looked to the west, and his gaze became distant. She felt the hair on her neck rise. There was a shift in the air, almost imperceptible.

“I hadn’t mentioned where they were spotted.”

He shook his head slightly, and refocused his eyes on hers.

“Apologies, my mind wanders more often these days. From which direction do they approach?”

“The west.” She paused. “I should make my rounds. It was good talking with you...”

“Anders. Forgive my rudeness. My name is Anders.”

There was some commotion among the caravan, and Lissa jogged back into position. The mercenaries of Three Spears were stationed in strategic locations as a general defensive formation, using the wagons and boulders as barricades should they be attacked. She was about to ask another soldier what they saw when, in unison, the entire caravan flinched as if struck. An invisible pressure descended upon them. She gritted her teeth and felt her ears pop. She looked skyward thinking it was a freak storm, but the twilight canopy was placid. Lowering her gaze she saw, outlined against the horizon, the lone rider. It took another couple of seconds for her to connect the two events.

“Impossible,” she whispered to herself.

The lone figure, she could see him as a man at this distance, leisurely approached atop his camelid. There were too many details to absorb at once. In one hand he openly carried a magnificent sword. Steel! Robes of emerald swayed with his movements, the fabric catching the dull light with a sheen. Most striking of all, however, was the large disc of pure gold that hugged his neck and, even to someone as ignorant as her, marked him as one from legends.

“KNEEL.”

It was a command supremely manifested. The pressure redoubled on the caravaners who collectively groaned and fell to their knees. Lissa had a hard time breathing.

“I am the Thirteenth Warlock of God-Empress of Rhi Lan.” He had dismounted, now, and strode toward the kneeling two-score. His voice was unnaturally loud; it boomed in her ears and seemed to make the earth tremble.

“I am but an instrument of Her will, and by proxy, you are in the presence of Her.”

Lissa was straining. Sweat rolled down her forehead. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the pressure lifted. She gasped, as did others.

“Do not be afraid. The God-Empress looks kindly upon her people, even those who dwell outside her walls.”

His voice was calm, strong. Imperious. Despite the warlock’s words, she felt the serpent of fear writhing through her guts. She had heard the stories.

“I seek one, and one alone, among you. Rise. You cannot escape Her divine will.”

There was a pregnant pause, as members of the caravan gave brief looks around. The silence was unbearable, and threatened to crush them all again. Then there was movement. Lissa snapped her attention to where Anders was kneeling. He rose.

“Thirteenth, I greet you.” The elderly man stood straight and spoke without concern. “Again.”

Anders slowly unwrapped his turban, revealing not a length of hair, but two horns jutting from the top of his forehead, as if a man were crossed with a goat. Lissa heard the murmurs and gasps from the caravan.

“Heretic! By the will of the God-Empress, I carry out my solemn duty. I sentence you to death.” The Thirteenth was a stone’s throw away from the wagons at this point. He leveled his sword at Anders and spoke again, but more quietly. “I beg of thee: submit. Do not chain their fates to yours.”

Lissa’s eyes darted back and forth between the two figures. She felt like a prop on a playwright’s stage. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

“Thirteenth, tell me something. Do you know the Fourth? I do. I can take you to her.”

Nobody moved. Anders’ words were some kind of daggers flung against the warlock, and even though there was not a physical tell, Lissa was sure they landed. Anders continued.

“If there is to be violence between us, it is because you chose so. Not I.”

There was a sensation in Lissa’s guts, the kind she felt whenever she jumped from a high place. She lurched forward, involuntarily, as some force pulled the air around them. The pressure returned, this time as a headache that made her want to vomit. The very air seemed to scream.

“RUN!”

It was Anders, shouting at them to flee. He did something, then, and Lissa felt the nauseating power emanating from the warlock recede. Everyone fled for their lives, scuttling away in every direction from the dueling sorcerers. She sprinted toward a large boulder, putting it between her and the impending conflagration. She saw the other mercenaries running, all sense of reason having fled alongside them. Something in her, then, overrode the animal panic. Was it shame? She grabbed the boulder as she passed it, using her arm to dampen the mad dash, and spun around.

The Thirteenth hovered three feet off the ground, his robes flapping as if he were in the midst of a gale. Sinuous ropes of black fire churned around him. Lissa watched, in horror, as they melded, gathered in strength, and then roared. A black hydra of fire smashed into the old man. She could feel the unnatural flame’s hunger, its need. It didn’t burn, it *devoured*. The scene unfolding before her was not one of subtlety, or grace, or ego. There would not be a dance or duel. This was an execution.

It wasn’t shame, she realized, although that may have played a small part. It was duty. Someone needed to witness this; someone needed to witness Anders. She conjured an image of the old man’s face, with warmth and kindness, as she watched his funeral pyre. There had been some resistance, at first, but the gouts of flame poured and poured onto the space he once

occupied. Then they collapsed inward as something gave. There wasn't a scream - just the muffled roar of the midnight flame. They devoured everything, those flames - why not a dying man's screams, too?

Lissa peered from behind her boulder, suddenly regretting the decision to witness. The Thirteenth landed, softly, at the edge of the crater that had once been his enemy. He looked remarkably serene for having just opened and closed the gates of hell. He knelt, and for many moments remained in a position of repose. Was he meditating? Praying? Perhaps, even now, he communed with the God-Empress herself! Lissa could no longer identify her emotions; she felt like lightning danced along her nerves.

At long last he rose, and using the toe of his boot, began sifting through the ash. This wasn't idle behavior. The warlock quested for something. He reached down and plucked a handful of the gray dust, the chunk in his hand further disintegrating as he clenched his fist. Satisfied, he straightened once more and scanned his surroundings. Lissa slinked out of view again. She heard a whistle, and moments later the sound of a camel being driven at great speed.

He could feel the eyes of one of the caravan's mercenaries among the boulders, but that was no matter. He relaxed the heightened perception. If he had felt hollow before, he felt wringed out now. His chest heaved and sweat drenched his robes and underclothes. Emotions threatened to burst forth at any given moment. He suffocated them, as he always did, with prayer. He recited the litany of his God-Empress over and over until the words felt foreign and meaningless. Warm ash escaped his fist, the prison of fingers that held the only thing to survive the flames of chaos. His vile treasure, the prize he would dutifully return with and present to his God-Empress. Proof of his undying loyalty.

He whistled to summon his mount. With a choked sigh, he opened his fist and let the rest of the ash fall to the earth. The heretic's ossolith sat in the palm of his hand, an ugly drab stone of reddish brown. His camel approached, grunting, and the warlock retrieved a container for the stone and sealed it away. He felt nauseated as he climbed into the saddle.

One fewer sorcerer in the world. Another cancer excised by his hand. Each justification felt more flimsy than the last. A parade of excuses to accompany the hound as it brought back the master's kill.

He adjusted the crushing weight of his collar and urged his beast home.