



THE
OCTAGON'S
EIGHT



MAIRON OAKLEY

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READING SAMPLE

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Introduction



I had never seen the sea. It was not unusual for my kind, but rarely did this matter. There are seas of a sort where I come from; vast stretches of water, fathoms deep and as black as ink, walled in by stone. Any knowledge I had gleaned from the tales of others did nothing to prepare me for the sight of it, that real sea. I remember a great sense of both awe and terror. It came about that I had to rapidly learn everything there was to know about it. This is because I had to cross it.

Every year, the city of Hanging Hold throws an event that briefly quadruples its population with an influx of the morbidly curious. The ‘Hold’ part of the city name describes the prison. The ‘Hanging’ part describes the fact that the prison itself is clutching precariously to a towering cliff, its bare feet dipping into a cold and unforgiving sea. The prison is home to those that have been deemed too dangerous for the average local guardhouse. The danger could be due to

magic, or trickery, or politics, or, as it was in my case, general assumption. Ain'nath do not get the courtesy of trials or second chances upon the Surface; we are dangerous because it has been decided outright and there are tales and legends to support it.

The event that drew in the masses was officially called 'The Crossing' and unofficially 'The Drowning'. The latter described the tragic outcome of every year and onlookers often hoped that this would happen whilst the 'Crew' was still in view to the non-magical eye. It seems that there is nothing more fun than to watch your enemies forced onto something that floats and sent off out to sea to see how long they can survive.

We survived until we were out of eyesight, even to the nobles in the towers of the city. We also survived long enough to have our story spun into several versions on the tongues of bards and in the manuscripts of writers. I could not write back then, nor read in my own tongue or any other, but I can now, and I refuse to let those years of learning go to waste without marking down what I took those lessons to scribe. There is no version of the tale that I am quite happy with, whether it is due to omission or ornamentation. Here I write my version with two wishes; the first that the world can finally hear the truth, and the second, that once the truth has parted from my head, I can finally rest, the nightmares banished, and the pains laid to sleep.

I take up this pen, as I would a sword, to end them.

CHAPTER 1

The Portal



Sometimes two stories are told and time erases all clues as to which was the truth. The Ain'nath are a proud people, as those forced through hardship to survive often are. We believe that we chose to live as we do in the caverns and tunnels of the world, carving out an unforgiving existence from the rock as rumours and legends of our barbarity trickled to the Surface like deep water streams. All the world opposed us, scorning our power and customs, and their belief that we were forced Below was just another of their jealous lies.

The Warden-Mothers mark moonless nights despite never seeing them. We know a lot more about the Surface than our enemies think, and that is what makes us so successful. A night without a moon blinds the weak eyes of those used to a guiding light and is an advantage to the predators of the dark. I followed lines of simple pictograms as they crossed the banded rock overhead. They ran alongside veins of silver and white, knife carved lines turned black by lack of

illumination. The meanings were probably crude even if I could not interpret them and I smiled despite the suffering to come.

“Bite down on this or you will bite off your tongue.”

There was laughter and then something hard was placed against my upturned lips. I dutifully opened my mouth and gripped whatever it was between sharp teeth. The cold touch of it felt like bone. A flurry of excitement quivered over my limbs. I was ready. Of those that surrounded me, it was difficult to pinpoint who was speaking.

“There is always honour in pain when it is suffered for our Lady!”

Orange light flickered over the ceiling of the tunnel, lengthening the shadows on the rock. The warmth of the brand brushed against my face, and I bit down harder, eyes rolling back into my skull. The fire that had birthed the heat of the metal crackled with magic and a beat was struck on skin drums by practised hands. I had beat those instruments before and smelt the acrid scent of burning flesh as another had lain before us, teeth clenched, excitement tangible. The beat quickened and mouths breathed words.

“We serve Mel’acenath, we bleed for Mel’acenath, we burn for Mel’acenath!”

A shadow passed over my face as the arm of my superior moved into position. The chanting slipped to the back of my mind as the pain rushed to the forefront. A rough hand pushed the back of my head into the dirt and hot metal pressed against my skin and seared into the flesh of my face. I could taste my own blood on my tongue. Dark fingers dug into my braided hair before withdrawing. My eyelids flickered. The drumming stopped.

As soon as the iron was removed, I sat up, hands going to my cheeks. The piece of bone that fell from my mouth was marked by my teeth and blood.

“Don’t touch it. Feels good, yes?”

I could barely see as the room seemed to be filled with sweeping shadows but yes, it felt very good. It felt right. It felt like honour. Rough hands rubbed some kind of powder into the fresh burn, and I held myself rigid.

“You are a Scout now, Dirian. Others will be able to see that so act accordingly.”

The pain had subsided enough for me to recognise my superior’s voice. I dipped my head in obedience. Drada was low ranking for a woman, but her authority was to be respected. She would not think twice before having you flayed by the Mother-Wardens. My sisters would probably even enjoy it.

“I serve the Lady in any rank.” I masked my remaining pain with gruff sincerity. Only when her back was turned did I feel the brand on my face, fingers tracing the three vertical lines that ran from forehead to chin. It did feel good.



“Blindfold him!”

“I have broken no rule! My honour has not wav-”

My plea was met with a sharp sigh. “And gag him too so that he does not bore us.”

Rough fabric was pushed into my mouth and pulled around my eyes so that I could neither see nor speak. Several years had passed since I received my mark, and this time when I bit down it was not bone, but cloth that tasted like the dregs of a potion or the afterburn of a spell. I fell slack in their arms and allowed them to lead me. I had recognised a few of them as Mother-Wardens in training; they served their superiors in the Temple and carried out mundane tasks. It had not been my place to study their motions, only to respect them. I knew not to fight.

My head hit something, and I bit the cloth in my mouth to avoid making a sound. My bare feet met with rocks and water and then polished stone. I slipped as I was roughly forced forward, legs sliding over mud slick slabs. I could smell acrid incense on the air.

“Kneel, for you are in the Lady’s House.”

The motion stopped and the hands grasping my shoulders withdrew. I knelt and felt grooves in the smooth stone beneath my knees. Perhaps they were decorative. More likely they were for channelling blood, and I was to be killed imminently. I waited for the blade against my throat but instead heard footsteps. Someone approached me and the other Ain’nath withdrew with a rustling of robes.

“Dirian, Dirian, I have not seen you for a very long time.”

Slender fingers peeled back the blindfold, but before even seeing her, I recognised the voice of my eldest sister. I swallowed and went to bow my head, but her hands held my face upturned to hers. Any familial kindness between us had long been eroded by the gulf between our respective ranks.

“Do not begin to think that you are special, brother,” she laughed, light but sharp, “for we have brought a group of you here today; for a purpose.”

Things began to make sense and I narrowed my eyes. Was this it? Was this why I had been training? The aftertaste of the cloth in my mouth was making me feel nauseous. I wondered if it had indeed been drugged. Already my muscles were feeling slack and my thoughts hazy.

“Have the mage prepare the portal.” My sister, High Mother Warden of Mel’acenath, raised her arms and faced the centre of the room. The Temple chamber hummed with magic and my nausea swelled. The channels in the floor marked out a jagged beetle motif that spanned the room, barbed legs and spiked horns reaching for the walls. The air felt thick and oppressive, and I remained kneeling, uncertain

of how to play my part. I had not been permitted in this place before and I could not help but explore its details with my eyes. The dark rock was much less roughly hewn here than in most of the town and the chamber larger than those in most dwellings. The Temple was the pulsing centre of our home, a heart of magic and reverence. We worshipped no god as the Surface elves did, but honoured our warrior Queen and protector Mel'acenath, and Her word was Law. She had been the one to draw the sorcery of the depths from the rock and bend it to her will and it had become the Mother Magic; power from the deep earth itself. Through her power she did not weaken or age. I did not even know how many centuries had passed since her creation of our people.

One of the younger Ain'nath women moved forward, carrying something that gleamed in the greenish light. It seemed heavy from the way she supported it. I glanced to my side to make out the positions of my fellow scouts, recognising all of them and feeling something akin to relief. The Lady asked great challenges of us, but to walk with them together was a blessing. A single Ain'nath alone in the dark was walking on a knife-edge whilst a group could run unhindered. We were arranged in a fan, our bare knees pressed upon conjunctions in the beetle's shape. We were connected as one by the Nat; the beetle that had lost its wings to live below ground, as we had lost our pale skin and coloured hair. We were like the beetle; tough, beautiful, strong when together, unrelenting.

"You will walk as one Banished and appear as a Deserter and Unwanted by your kin. Those of the Surface disrespect the Ain'nath, and their distrust will be your constant companion. To feign disobedience will win you favour," my sister continued, her ash-streaked face raised to the room.

The woman set down her heavy bundle and drew a knife from her belt. With her other hand she took my braid and

pinched it between thumb and forefinger, pressing the pale hairs together. I focused a moment on her face and saw that her eyelashes were flecked with flakes of glittering mica. The blade moved quickly, and as my braid fell away and with it something broke inside me. For a moment I felt demoted to the position of a Surface Elf slave, relieved of their long hair and their pride. A coldness sat in my stomach and a shadow crept over my heart. I had little time to mourn before the High Mother Warden continued.

“You will bear the sign of the Beetle and you will carry its weight so that you cannot forget it. The Surface will test you, but it cannot take away your beloved burden.”

The woman in front of me did not meet my eyes but unwrapped a pair of golden wrist cuffs from a cloth of moth gossamer. She gestured to my arms, and I held out my hands so that she may place the cuffs about my wrists. They locked into place with no sound but with the hum of hidden sorcery, and about them there was no mark as to show a clasp or closing. I eyed them with fascination, turning my wrists about to search for any indentation.

“At your throat you will carry Her Eyes so that she may look upon the Surface and learn of its Weakness.”

The woman lifted a golden collar from its nest of silk, and I felt the warm metal meet with my skin as she placed it about my neck. Again, the sorcery pulsed against my flesh before dissipating. I allowed a curious touch to my throat and felt a change in texture there, as if something glass-like was imbedded.

“Those are Her eyes,” the girl whispered reverently, “Her eyes of red. Jewels cut from the deep. An honour. Such an honour.”

There was an uncomfortable tightness about the collar, and I licked my lips, pushing back the fear that pressed against my senses. I knew now that I was destined to leave Cavern

and its familiar comfort. I also knew that to travel by portal was to play dice with death. The Ferazhim warped magical effects to its own unpredictable whim and portals could end up flaying both body and mind.

“The gag was infused with Sleepstalk; do not be concerned by its effects. The Portal can throw you about and it is better that you do not resist.” Her words were cautious and rehearsed.

I nodded slowly as the cloth was removed from my mouth and allowed myself to be lead behind the other scouts. A foot hit against my own to my rear and I turned my head, meeting the eyes of one of my closest companions, Fahrdim. He was a little younger than I was, and the panic in his expression caused a tightness in my throat. I cared for him as one should a close ally. I knew he would have my back and I had sworn oaths to have his. I would protect him upon the Surface and deal out such pain upon any that would choose to cause him to suffer.

My steps were weary now, my movements as though through water and my thoughts through fog. Unknown hands checked my weapons, my pack, my clothing. I imagined for a moment that my sister touched my face, tracing the brand, but perhaps it was only a hope and not a reality.

The others stepped into the Portal before me, Fahrdim lurching forward in panic, their forms eclipsed by a swirl of light that sucked them in. I heard no sound from their mouths as they fell away, only the hiss of warring magic and Ferazhim. A hand pressed into the small of my back, clutching a moment at my cloak before releasing me to my fate. The Portal swallowed me, and all candles were pinched out.

I did not know how much time passed whilst I flew between worlds.

“...I will attempt to scry once more...”

the rush of robes, the whispering of breath over stone

“...the Eyes...lost in some back eddy...”

*breaths, whispers, coldness to the bone, magic; hot and wild and foul
to the senses*

“...it matters not...Ain’nath soldiers are easy to come by...
and these were to be destroyed on their return...”

I was nowhere but the voices were in the Temple. Had I
truly entered the Portal at all?

“...it is a shame to destroy them. Much was given to train
them. Such resources are not so plentiful.”

“Just because he is your brother, does not mean he has any
value.”

...a strike...a hiss...my sister’s voice raised in anger...

CHAPTER 2

The Surface



The blood pooled on the grass until it reached the sand. There it ceased its outward journey and soaked into the grains. There was silver light on the water nearby and in my eyes as they flickered open. I rolled onto my back to inspect the silvery orb that hung from the cave ceiling. The room had to be enormous; I could not even make out the shapes in the rock above me. Perhaps the Portal had failed, and I had been flung elsewhere in Cavern.

As my awareness returned, I managed to turn back onto my stomach, head low. Stealth was most important now, as was locating my kin. The air was stifling, as if I was breathing in too much and too quickly. My lungs ached at each breath. I wondered if it was the effect of the Sleepstalk wearing off. I gritted my teeth and then clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth, calling the other Ain'nath. For some reason the silver orb above me had winked out and only a faint glow remained. It was as if a curtain had been drawn over its light.

“Announce your positions,” I swapped from signalling to Cavern-speak, “I am alive but injured.” I touched the pool of blood beside me.

There was no reply and I attempted to crouch. The ground beneath me was strange; a kind of long-bladed lichen. Beyond it was a stretch of sand, dipping into water. Further than that is when things began to get a little too strange. The landscape just kept on stretching out rather than either reaching a wall or fading into darkness. I had never seen such a distance and as the orb above me returned to its full brightness, the world about me was revealed in all its terror. I stood up in shock and everything spun. I felt ridiculous as I raised my arms to steady myself. Above me, the dark expanse glittered with patches of pinpoint light, between them a hazy mist that moved in the way that something large did; smooth and slow and unstoppable. I retched and more blood soaked my lips.

“So that is the Sun,” I scoffed, wiping away the blood, “truly not as terrifying as it has been described.”

I unsheathed one of my swords, the design curved and vicious. I pointed the blade at the orb.

“They said you would melt my skin and set flames in my eyes but instead you glow like a bunch of Phoss . You just grow too high to be harvested.”

I laughed and coughed up more blood. I had the Surface to explore and my kin to find. I sheathed the sword, smeared my own blood across my face and grinned.



I pause a moment in my narration to make something a little clearer. Those that know me now did not know me then. I look back upon that version of myself with no little disdain, but do not think I have altered that version in the slightest.

I have neither augmented my bloodlust nor diminished my civility. Think what you will on such a stereotype, but I was all of that. I merely wish to write in a way that you can get to know me as I was then, as I was during, and as I am now. The proof of the change is important both to me and to others of my kin who seek the sunlight. By my narrative, let them walk a path slightly less fraught and filled with death than mine.



Surface water seemed the same as that of Cavern, but I was still suspicious. I set the pot down on the fire and began skinning the *thing*. There had been so many creatures in my studies of the Surface that all the small ones had melded into one. I had named them with my own names and that would have to do. I had nobody to torture for information yet. I envisaged the situation; a bound Elf at my feet, already missing an ear, whimpering in pain.

“What is this?” I demanded in my imagination, terrified eyes watching me hold up my supper. I laughed; it had been far too long since interrogating someone. I was still smiling as the vision faded from my mind.

As the meat boiled, I opened a leather pouch and emptied its contents into the pot. The scent of fire lichen was comfortingly familiar. I had been careful with it, knowing it was limited, but today had been difficult and my skin tingled with sunburn. I needed something from home to ease the irritation that was building inside me. Days had passed and I had met the true Sun, and had experienced all its ferocity. It had made my eyes water and burn and my skin crack and peel. I had found comfort in a place of tall vegetation, where its rays were limited and where the world did not fall away in such dizzying distances. The ground was cool and damp

and there were mushrooms almost similar to those I knew. Experimentation had made me tense and careful but at least a few were edible even if not delicious.

I had not found my fellow Ain'nath. I had painted signs in powdered Phoss on the bark of what I knew were trees so that the marks would glow upon the onset of darkness. I had widened the circle of my search each night, returning to one of my several camps each morning, empty handed and empty hearted. During the day I slept, hidden from view and from that terrible light. I set traps and hunted for food, putting my learned knowledge to the test. I made note of what I found in both wonder and determination but most of all in obedience, for it was the Lady that set me to my task, and it was for Her that I toiled.

I practised my Elvish and Common to the birds and the beasts and made note of their habits and tracks. I mimicked their calls and sought out their dens and nests, adding eggs to my gathered meals.

But most importantly of all, I practised devotion. At each campsite I set up a ring of stones and upon the ground between them, I shed blood and pressed my crimson fingers to my collar so that I might feel Her Eyes. I muttered fervent promises and goals in reverence and felt the familiar fear prickle at the back of my neck as I imagined her watching. I had found my shorn braid in the folds of my shirt and when at prayer I would press it to my sun-cracked lips and tell my Lady that I was still a warrior, a soldier at Her command. I reminded Her that my lack of long hair was but a disguise and that I wore Her Will about my neck, heavy and welcomingly uncomfortable. I told Her that I took comfort in the pain of the sun for it was with Mel'acenath's power that She crafted Cavern for Her people and each moment upon the Surface I thanked Her for Her providence. My suffering and loneliness filled me with a renewed determination each night

and I awaited Her further trials.

With the skin of beasts I crafted my armour; for to walk amongst my enemies I knew I had to dress like them. I darkened the leather with pastes from my homeland and drew no emblem nor decoration for my devotion was secret and dangerous and not to be revealed in anything but my perseverance. I hid most of my Ain'nath garb close by the location of the now dissipated Portal, for I was loathe to part with it and I awaited the appointed day when I could re-dress in the clothing of my own people and return with my gathered information, and with my brothers. I kept my swords and bow since they were smooth to my touch and moulded to my hand. The rope I carried was woven moth-silk, as was the cloak about my shoulders. I had yet to find a Surface material that matched its lightness and strength. The beetles here were small and fearful yet I took care to not break their burrows or disturb their comings and goings. They were still children of Mel'acenath and worthy of respect.

Once a long enough span of time had passed, I began to fear that my fellow scouts had been lost to the Portal's cruel whims and I changed my behaviour. No longer did I widen my search for my own but pressed out to find my enemy. I had come across Men already but had made no effort to pursue them. It was unwise to work alone and my search for my kin had remained a greater importance. Most of all I missed the quips and jibes of my companion, Fahrdim, and his comforting shadow at my back.

I crouched beneath the ferns, eyes on the gap in the riverside plants. I had seen deer drink there, but more importantly, I had seen a human woman collect water. I had followed her trail in the mud until I could smell smoke, and at that I had turned back, not ready to face unknown numbers outside the forest.

She came again, dipping a bowl into the water, evening light in her hair. What colours revealed themselves in sunlight! Her clothes were of rich tones that my own language did not even have words for. Her hair was a deep brown and her eyes so blue. Her skin fascinated me in the sunlight, for I had only seen the skin of Elves and Men by fire and phosphorescence and the glow of magic. And my skin too, and my hair! Sometimes the strands were the colour of the sky, sometimes the water. There were so many colours in my flesh; purple and grey and blue. But the green! The Surface was so very green. It hurt me to look at it; great swaths of it in so many shades.

“Who’s there?” The woman’s voice brought an abrupt end to my wonder and my body moved as if controlled by an outside force. My blade shone in the orange light and her hot blood ran over my hand as I held her neck and slit her throat. I watched as those eyes became a lesser blue and the lids flickered for the last time.

I felt a stab of anger at having been discovered by such a creature. She hardly had the intelligence and stealth of a Ain’nath, no, she was a lowly human and only fit for slavery. Why was she dressed in such colours and at ease when I, her superior, was hiding in the darkness? The humans had warped Mel’acenath’s deeds and spoke of the Ain’nath being banished. What blasphemy! It was the Surface Elves and Men who had been forced to suffer beneath the cruel sun and Mel’acenath’s people who were given the sanctuary of Cavern!

I would go over her possessions and dispose of the body. There would be no dedication or ritual. Mel’acenath cared not for human blood. She only took joy in the spilling of that of her own; a show of loyalty.



I must pause again although I am loathe to break the pace of my tale. There was little that held me back from taking a life then and the contrast of the blood in my memory with the tea that I now pour to give life to my limbs as I write is quite compelling. I still own the sword that took the life of that woman. It hangs above the fire with its brother, crossed and upon a plaque. I don't let it tarnish, accumulate dust or for the blade to dull. There are still some things I cannot let go of despite time and want; a sword must remain sharp lest it fail you when you must have use of it.

CHAPTER 3

The Raid



In time I moved my camp closer to the human settlement. Instead of studying the passage of the forest animals, I marked those of the inhabitants of the houses beyond the trees. I took care to neither eat nor make offerings to the Lady near where I slept, and I surrounded my bed with traps and alarms. Each night I battled with my trepidation to skirt closer and in the darkness I watched and waited.

The town lay up against a lake and was surrounded on all other sides by a stone wall, both broad and tall enough to provide a significant obstacle to my curiosity. I knew the marching patterns of the guards that patrolled its length and also the steady leaving and returning of the boats that frequented the harbour. There was a marked uncertainty that hung in the air, as if the townsfolk were already at siege. I had expected more chinks in the armour of the place; a drunken guard, a brief skirmish, a mistake in patrol routes. Instead it held itself like a beast at bay and the reek of fear

clung to its stones.

Eventually my curiosity held a blade to the throat of my timidity and, held hostage, my body complied. I used a new moon to reach the foot of the wall as the Mother-Wardens would have suggested. With confidence my bare feet found hold in cracks worn by wind and rain. I had climbed many a slick cave wall and this was almost too easy. Three measured breaths and I was up upon the ramparts, the low wind catching my now mid-length tangles of dirt-streaked hair. A sound to my left and I had a single sword in my hand, but with relief I noticed the bird drop down into the ivy that had climbed the wall as surely as I had. A thin mist had crept up about the town and I could taste dampness in the night air. I sheathed the sword again against its twin at my back and steadied my breathing, hands held before me in the sign of the Beetle, willing its stealth and secrecy into my being.

“Let Mel’acnath guide me, let Her arms support me, let Her ferocity light the fire within me, let Her will steel mine and like Her words, let my weapons cut through all that would oppose me.” My lips were still cracked from the sun and I could taste blood on them as I whispered well-worn words, but with them I felt invigorated and a renewed purpose drove me over the wall and into the street beyond.

A street at night is rarely completely empty. My teachings returned to me, the voices of my elders still fresh in my mind. I felt a pang of regret for leaving Cavern. The night I was experiencing now was not the same as the darkness of being Below. I had yet to completely feel at home with the wideness of the sky and the distance of the horizon. Sometimes, when fever or exhaustion or wound had diminished my energy, I would feel a great wave of nausea at the thought of it all; a world without boundaries, stretching away before me.

My feet barely made a sound against the cobbles, and I followed the steep path of the street down towards what I

knew was the lake, lapping somewhere out in the darkness beyond the sloping rooftops.

My mind ran amok with the idea of stolen goods, gems and gold and weaponry. I wondered whether I could test a door and remain undiscovered? Could I scale a wall and peer unnoticed into a bedroom? My practicality returned and I harshly chastised myself; I was here to gain information and nothing more, however much my blades bayed for blood. Yet as I moved as a shadow between wall and tree and palisade, none of my senses caught even the slightest suggestion of another living being. Disappointed I wondered whether to backtrack and to write the night off as a waste of my efforts.

It was in that moment of uncertainty that chaos erupted. The first I became aware that something was about to happen was with the familiar whoosh of arrows through the air. I looked up to see the sky filled with light. A thousand pinpoints pricked the clouds and scattered upon thatch and wood. The fire at the end of the arrows must have been magically enhanced; I could smell the stench of sorcery and see a myriad of bursts of green as the flames hit and engulfed anything flammable. Somewhere down beside the lake a bell began to toll, frantic and desperate. As neither attacker nor town resident I was briefly frozen, my blood already roaring with adrenaline and the need to draw blood myself.

I knew then that I had been foolish. I had not read the signs as carefully as I should have. The quiet streets and locked doors had been a portent that I had not interpreted. The town had been expecting attack and I had been far too preoccupied with my own nefarious intents to see it! I cursed in Cavern-speak beneath my breath and tracked the wall back towards my entry point. It was a fool's errand to enter a battlefield without an ally and I knew not to trespass further. My night was better spent under the cover of trees and in the light of my own fire, not that of a burning town

however joyful its downfall.

My own footsteps were suddenly punctuated by hoofbeats upon the cobbles. With practised hands I drew both swords, turning on one foot, the other poised to launch myself into attack. I knew now I was discovered as the horse bore down on me and I put any energy to spare into a battle cry. In that moment I was able to see my attacker, backlit by flame. He was clearly elven, his helm silver and pointed, his armour a crisscross of intricate pieces. I was armed well but armoured poorly in comparison, my leathers worn with rough living and use. My voice echoed about the street as a second horse followed the first.

“What has the earth spat out here?” The voice that replied was heavily accented and I saw a smile on the lips of my enemy as he spoke.

My mind was slow to translate the High elven but my limbs quick to draw out a slashing arc against the horse’s breastplate. Metal rang on metal and the animal reared. I had drawn blood somewhere; I could smell it.

“You would think a town like this would run with rats... but truly this is something worse,” a second voice joined the first and with a quick glance I noted the two were in similar garb. There had been a jovial tone to the elvish and with it my anger rose like bile in my throat.

“Sun-dweller, Surface-elf scum!” My words were spat out in bitterness, my knuckles pale on the handles of my swords. “Die on my blades and let your cursed blood feed the stone!”

I was buying time and I hoped they would not read my intent. A single Ain’nath on foot was no match for two mounted elves. The narrow street gained me a little advantage, but the blaze of the fire illuminated everything enough to negate any advantage gained from my superior vision. My curses died in the smoky air and the city was filled with the sounds of battle.

“We’ll gut this tunnel-vermin as easily as we shall gut this city,” the first elf spoke as he dismounted, and I could see now that the leg of his mount ran with bright blood. The reins fell from his gauntleted hands and he drew a longsword with surprising grace. I had lost all element of surprise and had no plan to hand. Ain’nath do not fight alone. We do not raid alone. Alone we are weak. The thoughts were insidious, and I could not shake them.

I could hear the hooves of the second horse behind me and I turned just in time to avoid the first arrow. My arms rose to meet the blade of the dismounted attacker and the force of the blow shuddered through my bones. My knees met the cobbles as I judged the passage of the second arrow from behind, dropping so that it flew above me. At this moment my view was straight up, and the sky swam with sparks.

“I had forgotten how fast these things could move,” he was speaking in Common now; he wanted me to understand, “and how vicious their little blades are. Watch them, they are probably poisoned.”

I had long run out of venom to adorn my swords I thought wryly, bracing against the next blow and attempting to kick his legs from beneath him. I loosed a dagger from a strap at my side and sent it towards the archer. From the breathy sound that followed, I knew it had found its mark.

“Run, elfling,” I hissed, my breath short, “you will need balm for that venom lest it burn you to a pretty husk!”

The pause betrayed his consideration of my threat. A flash of magic burst forth from my first attacker and my view was entirely eclipsed by light. The painful brightness of it stabbed into my eyes and I clutched at my head, swords forgotten. They had been playing! The betrayal of it all screamed through my skull as a companion to the pain. I had not readied myself for magic when only a bow and blade had come into play. In desperation I cast my own

feeble retaliation, my skill lying in sword and not sorcery and perhaps, somewhere behind the brightness, I heard laughter. A moment later an arrow hit me in the back of the shoulder and I was thrown forward onto the cobbles, vision still useless from the light.

“Can you see us, little Ain’nath?”

There was blood on my lip where I had bitten it and I struggled to regain my feet, eyes wide and desperately trying to see. I held my hands out in front of me, grasping at anything.

“It appears not.”

Something heavy collided with my skull and I lost consciousness to the crackling of flame and the cackle of laughter.



Even now I still think of the one thousand different ways this could have played out. I have spent countless hours on the ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’. I can still feel that pommel against my head and taste my own blood in my mouth. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t terrified. I had never met a Surface elf in combat above ground and I had never even had to entertain the repercussions of capture. I had slain beasts that had threatened my people in Cavern. I had chased down wayward slaves and returned them to their masters. I had fought my own brothers to grow stronger and had help punish those that wandered from Mel’acenath’s path. Yet in all these cases I had not been alone. I had been coordinating with clicks and gestures, my brothers at my back and myself at theirs’. We had moved as a team and as one we had felled our foes. I was alone when I fell in that human city, many thousands of miles from home.

YOU KNOW WHEN YOU ENTER THE OCTAGON BECAUSE IT TELLS YOU

Every year the city of Hanging Hold hosts an event.

Eight prisoners condemned to death are sent out to sea - none are expected to return but if they do, they win their freedom.

The dark-elf Dirian has grown up Below, the brand on his face testament to his place as a scout and skills as a warrior. Now he finds himself on a mission gone wrong, abandoned in a foreign Surface world and forced on an adventure bound to end in his demise.

Follow Dirian and his companions of varying enthusiasm as they set sail and face the harsh forces of nature, impossible creatures and magical wonders all to unlock the mysteries of the Octagon and escape with their lives in this perilous tale of discovery.

Mairon Oakley is an author, independent fashion designer and cosplayer from London currently living on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. He has a master's degree in petroleum geophysics and has sailed the North Sea, chased storms across the Atlantic, explored caves and ridden across New Zealand fields. Today he lives a calmer life and writes stories full of adventure inspired by high fantasy, classic literary journeys and his own experiences.



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