

The Cauldron.

With its stout woodwork, inviting fire, and well tendered meals, this inn was one of his favourites. Yet for a second night in a row Pen found himself without an audience to entertain.

"Quiet night again." he muttered to no one in particular, sitting on a table while plucking at his lute. Cinna, who was polishing the bartop, gave him a look.

"Yea'." she replied.

Her blunt company was pleasant after the months in the north. Cinna was a lovely figure of a Folee. Pen had tried to woo her once, but she had favoured Ruce over him. He couldn't blame her, better a priest than a vagabond. An ugly vagabond at that.

"Bad for business." he continued.

"Yea', third night a row. Want some soup, Pen?" Cinna offered kindly.

Something smashed into the inn door, knocking it ajar. Cinna and Pen leapt to their feet, Pen reaching for his knives. The door swung open, and a towering, armoured figure stumbled through before falling to its knees.

"Help." She gurgled softly and collapsed. The pair rushed towards the prone figure.

Cinna was faster, Pen followed, drawing a knife while advancing slowly. She gave him a look.

"Fainted. Harmless."

"Put her outside, it'll cause trouble."

Cinna scowled, shaking her head and lifting the armoured form. "Anyone comes here asking for help, gets help."

They rested her against the wall, removing the helmet to reveal a Human yet strangely Folee like face, rough edged and marked. If she had the dull grey skin and the tusks of Folee, she would have be gorgeous.

Cinna left her in Pen's care as she left the common room to rouse Ruce from his slumber. He came into the room at her side, tall, stocky and tired looking. His ribbon of red down one arm complimenting Cinna's.

"What is wrong with her?" He asked. Ruce's accent was different, older.

"She tired. Keeps falling asleep." said Cinna.

Ruce rumbled deeply in thought before moving towards the cauldron. He served up a bowl, placing the soup close enough for the human to smell it. In time she stirred, coughing and groaning. As she came to, she flinched away from them. Pen cleared his throat.

"You are safe, relax." he spoke in the common trade tongue.

"Where am I?" she asked, still on edge.

"An inn that you ran into." he continued in common, giving her a moment to let it sink in. "What is your name?"

She eyed the bowlful of soup hungrily before replying. "Emmalee the Proud."

"What happened to you?"

She looked aside. "We fought a necromancer and lost."

"Explain Necromancer to me." Ruce interrupted.

"A ghost, a noblewoman who dabbled in talking to the dead, raising th-."

"I know that, explain face."

As she did, Ruce and Cinna shared an increasingly worried look.

"You know her?"

"Yes, we beat her many seasons ago." Cinna answered her as Ruce walked into the adjacent room, Pen followed him.

"When me and Cinna come here, nearby crypt contained angry ghost. We beat her and crypt sank into marsh. Hoped it was enough." Ruce explained while he searched.

Pen switched back to the Folee tongue and asked, "Well, what are we going to do about it?"

Ruce smiled at that. "Same thing me and her did last time. Only this time, we have your knives to help?" He pulled out a gigantic mitten and a bronzed ladle.

Pen gasped. The glove was lovingly made but the ladle was holy. He didn't consider himself devout but he knew such things and raised a finger while nodding deeply at Ruce.

He laughed, "Come now, let us feed the good and drive out the evil."

They came back into the room, Ruce taking up the cauldron. Emmalee watched as he dipped the ladle and served. Her expression changed and she suddenly bowed deeply at him.

"Oh, you know?"

"I am a paladin of my people, priest. Human, Folee, Fae, Ratlings. Faith is always the same."

"Then you come with us, show the way, stop the Necromancer?"

“Yes and to redeem myself.”

The four of them stepped into the night, Cinna's incantation clearing the veil of darkness and Emmalee's purposeful strides leading them. She was tall but the three Folee kept her pace and the marshland quickly gave way to the ruined town.

They found the necromancer, arms thrown wide open over a lonely well, in a empty courtyard.

“Cassandra!” Emmalee howled her name in challenge. The necromancer cackled in reply, a dry and sinister sound.

“Back again? You brought such champions before, wretch. Who are they now?”

“You don't know us?” Cinna asked, surprise in her voice.

The ghost seemed confused. She hovered, trying to talk but stopping just as quickly. Then she turned back to Emmalee and flicked an arm towards the well.

“Your friends might have destroyed my minions, but they provided excellent fodder for this.”

A gigantic centipede skittered out of the well. Its form a fusion of bone and flesh. It moved with awful purpose towards Emmalee who readied herself.

Bone and shield clashed as the centipede snapped at her. Pen snuck behind the creature, as it focused wholly upon the paladin. He struck, knives flashing as he slashed away at exposed flesh. The creature quivered, lashing out at its attacker.

Emmalee battered it aside and Pen backed off. He heard her softly whispering a prayer.

As the creature reared up to attack, Cinna uttered a phrase of commandment, causing a torrent of water to strike the monstrosity, smashing it into a nearby building.

Emmalee charged the downed creature with an oath, her mace glowing an incandescent light. She slammed it into the centipedes midsection with a deafening thunderclap and the monster shattered from the blow.

“My masterpiece!” the ghost shrieked, ignoring the form creeping up on her.

Ruce swung the cauldron. It crashed into the spirit with a hollow clang, splitting the necromancer in half. He bowed piously as the remains faded into the wind with a mournful wail.

It was early dawn before the rites and prayer were done. They burned the monstrosity that was her former allies, the ghastly form breaking down and bringing them peace. Afterwards, they started back towards the inn at a quiet pace.

“Why didn't the necromancer recognise you?” Emmalee asked as the inn came into view.

"Maybe she forgets defeats?" Ruce replied.

"She'll be back, won't she?"

"Sadly so."

"Then I know my duty, I will find the crypt and build a church upon it."

Ruce gave her a friendly smile. "Maybe we can help. I'll show you where." He stepped to the side of the inn, pointing towards the outhouse and the marsh beyond. Pen studied the earth and the stones then groaned as he understood.

Emmalee turned to face the priest. "The inn. Its built on her crypt?"

"Mostly outhouse now, rest fell into marsh, bad land to build on."

She struggled not to laugh at the absurdity of it all. "Well, I know where to build now, if you would have me as your neighbour."

Ruce gave her a solemn nod. "Happy too, we survive together, we family now."