

THE DANCER
By breaded hamster

"Oh beloved, oh blessed Sakra. I plead with you to deny this wicked beast that twists all in your domain."

It was an old mantra, and some of the words had been swapped out, but it functioned in keeping his mind focused. He repeated it over and over in his thoughts, and there was an aching expectation deep within him, like if he believed hard enough, that all things lost this day would return. It would never happen, not even the greatest sages from the oldest kingdoms could fulfill such a wish.

"Oh beloved, oh blessed Sakra. I plea-"

And then a stinging came to cut the next mantra short. He bit his lip til blood trickled from the edges of his mouth. His wiry, black beard soaked it up, and it mixed with the dust trapped within. The world had punished him further, another lash for sins so vile that he could almost taste the hells waiting for him.

The winds had blown sand into his wound, the salty ocean air licked his exposed tissues. He looked down at his wrist, the hand was still missing, still severed roughly and leaking in defiance of the tourniquet. His brown gambeson was soaked in more blood, most not even his. He was splattered in the essence of men he called family and friends, and he alone felt the weight of their passing. No one else shared it, for all of this nightmare was his doing.

His life in the village was to be an old, reliable tool on a shelf collecting dust. They respected him, and they were grateful for the past service of a retired soldier, but he grew a restlessness that couldn't be ignored. During the day, he gave advice to the Earl and played the part of the statue beside him. But the night was his, he would sneak out to drink and gamble and fight laborers, all just to taste the fruits that time and fate had carried off.

Those years were a blur, a juvenile dance with little thought. But then a moment came that snapped him awake, more like the whisper of a lover than the harsh crowing of the morning fowl. A hunter came to the Earls house, and he was stiff before the simple throne as he described an odd encounter. He was renowned for being trustworthy, never one to spin tall tales.

"I've never seen anything like it, I hope I never see it again, saints willing. It was in the cove down the coast, the small one that the Anders boy got hurt in some years back. Some

weird thing was curled up on itself in the center."

"Get to the point." The Earl said, bluntly.

"It's a monster sir, looks like a person, but it's too big, and its hair was long enough to be its bedding. It hissed like a polecat and I ran outta there."

The Earl and his advisors debated what to make of it, the village holyman speculated it to be a demon that slipped through the ether to sow havoc and promiscuity. The old veteran didn't care what it was, it was a strange thing regardless, and that reputation granted him permission to act.

He dug his old chainmail out of his humble hut, alongside a shortsword that was oiled and pristine. A party of eager young men followed him to that cove, and with spears in hand they listened to this veteran like he was a fabled sorcerer from the sunken isles. With his experience, his wisdom, they had surprised the creature before it could even fight back, and they did terrible things in believing themselves just.

In the here and now, that old veteran found himself kneeling on the beach, maimed, watching the sunrise, and waiting for a final meeting of beasts. It would come for him, and he could not fight it, he wouldn't even try. It had arrived days after their kill, the huntsman had found it in the northern pines, and some village boys had found the huntsman after. He was skinned and strung up to the branches by his own hamstrings, just like the wild game he had once pursued.

At the time, the veteran had been fermenting in the little details of that long eared creature. The eyes black as onyx squinting in fear, the mouth opening to bite and miss, and that sack of tangled hair it had shielded with its body. He remembered how cunning he felt for exploiting that weakness, and then he remembered after it died. It wasn't just some long, knotted weave. There was a tiny, limp hand sticking out of it. He once again saw by all those he had trampled over in the killing fields of his past. He turned to leave, then the younger men swarmed the bodies to take trophies. They were jackals, laughing and curious.

There was no satisfaction, not like in the earliest triumphs of his bloody career. One of the Earls' men knocked on his door, he delivered news of a monster that had killed the huntsman and disappeared several others. He felt small at the revelation, and he didn't know if he could be firm in the face of what was to

come. They had flocked to him, once again pleading for him to destroy whatever threatened their lives. It was to be his final crusade, and there would be a settling of things.

Thirty good men had gathered the next morning, they were to march and meet whatever was killing their kin. There weren't enough spears, so some had pitchforks, and there was little armor among these rows of tense and eager faces. With minimal lecture, the veteran led them to the valley pass. It was the only reliable entrance to the village, and there they found it in the middle of the road.

The elf was before them. It was still, slender, and poised like gravity was a mere suggestion. It bore the features of man and woman, but it lacked the components of either between its naked legs. A porcelain face rested beneath a ridged spiral of flesh on its forehead, and some were reluctant to look in fear of being hexed. For a few harsh seconds, it stared them down from a distance. Being three heads taller than any of them, they had understood the terror that comes with being hens before a fox. Then it peeled its lips back to make a wide, fanged, grimace. Like a line of tiny daggers, it was filled with more contempt and cruelty than any simple beast could have. A hate derived from intelligence was before them, and it was not of man.

Three men leveled their crossbows, the bolts flew straight only to miss their mark. It avoided them with a twirl, as if a partner in a dance. In its graceful motions, it had scratched something into the very air. Its claws carved blazing wounds of strange, cascading symbols, and it twirled more in expanding their length. The three bowmen were hastily eaten to nothing, they couldn't even scream as fire roared with such heat as to quickly make blackened bones of them.

The rest broke discipline, trampling over the ashes in a frenzied dash, they stampeded towards the elf. They were maddened with the prospect of whatever dark magic it might inflict upon their loved ones. As they came, they died. More and more symbols were carved into the air with gusto and precision. These young men were flayed to the bone by great winds, or their lungs were filled with water till bursting open. The elf was a conductor, and its orchestra was the very happenings of this world bent to a vengeful will.

The veteran found himself on the ground, his hand severed by a

rock propelled to incredible speeds. All he could do in that moment of shock was listen and watch as the last struggled. Some had gotten close enough, but the creature twisted its forms around their weapons to pluck open veins and arteries. As they fumbled to the ground, it pounced on them for more graceless killings. Limbs were twisted to severance, eyes were snatched from skulls. The veteran ran, once looking back to see that androgynous beast feasting upon a man skewered on his own pike. As he fled, the howls of the dying grew fainter, and the smell of those that soiled themselves was gone.

He had stopped at this beach, then knelt in the sand as the blood drained from his face. He was a pale ghost bound in chainmail and graying hair, and his demonic warden was now here to reclaim him. It approached in the corner of his vision, there was no rush as its long mane flapped in the wind, like smoke trailing a lean inferno. Looking up, he laughed weakly, and spoke words the elf scarcely understood.

"That's what it was. I killed your woman, and I killed your chi-"

A flick of a powerful wrist silenced him, silenced words the elf knew was mockery. His body slumped over, and the head was scarcely attached with only a few strings of meat. Blood spurted out of the neck hole, only to slide off the elf's legs like water running off the smoothest of marble. It soaked into the sand, leaving this raging dancer spotless.

They were all dead, and more were soon to join them. In all his centuries of being, he had never felt so heavy as he did now.

"*Why are they gone?*" He asked nobody.

He looked down at the dead human, the eyes were half open as if just falling asleep.

"*Why have you all made such a waste of yourselves? Why should your darlings live when mine are lost to me?*"

This carrion would be taken by the earth, the crabs and the gulls would soon fight over it. It was the way of all things, his people knew this even before they began keeping oral histories. It would return to the elements it came from, same as the others, and same as his two lost loves. Knowing this did not soothe, and it would not save the small, fleeting things to cross his path. This shepherd of the trees had been given permission, and he had freedom in believing himself just.

