

The Harper's End

Teyela ushered the latest wave of new arrivals into the Great Hall. 'We're short on space but we can fit you at the end of the hall. Follow me.' She led them down beyond the rows of tables to the open space reserved for dancing. 'You can make yourselves comfortable here. I oversee the kitchens, so you'll see me during mealtimes. If you have any questions, let me know and I'll do my best to help.'

She caught the large round eyes of two children hugging their mother's skirts. Teyela bent down, smiled, and waved her fingers at them. They regarded her curiously, returned a smile and simply laughed. Teyela loved children. They were always so bright and full of energy - like bees on a bright summer's day

Adamas's gauntleted hand fell gently on her shoulder. 'Thank you Teyela.' His voice rumbled deeply like a distant grey storm. 'You know why you're here, as do I. That's not a problem if everyone pulls their weight and some more. Shaeon hasn't fallen before and I intend to keep it that way. It's going to take blood, sweat and tears. When you're ready, come find me at the courtyard.' Adamas took his leave, his long-measured strides as steady as a beating drum.

Teyela turned and hurried after Adamas. 'Are the rumours true?'

Adamas did not break stride. 'They're rumours.'

'Easy for you to say, but you're not the one they come to with all their questions,' she replied. 'You're not the one that has to comfort them when they're scared. You're not the one that has to listen to the children burst into tears because they can sense the fear. And before you brush me off, I'll tell you something. There are a lot of old hands which are noticeably absent. I'd have thought they'd be here at a time like this. You're clearly undermanned and -'

Adamas stopped and leaned in close. 'Keep those thoughts to yourself, especially around the refugees. They look to us for guidance and we must be strong, otherwise we are all going to die here. Understand?'

Teyela swallowed under Adamas's unblinking gaze. He was never one to mince words, but this was blunt, even by *his* standards. Teyela finally nodded.

'Good. We're going to need you in the days ahead. You know why?'

Teyela managed a weak knowing smile.

Adamas straightened up. 'You're no longer performing.'

'Yes, I've been getting that a lot. The band's busy.'

Adamas shook his head and grinned. 'You're all we need.' It was like seeing sun rays slipping their way through the storm clouds for a brief moment. He gave her a departing nod.

Teyela returned to her duties. She used to help prepare food and manage the stores, but now she oversaw the new arrivals assigned to the kitchens. It also meant she no longer directly served food to everyone in Shaeon - which were a highlight of her day. Most of the new kitchen hands knew their roles now, which freed Teyela to float between tables to offer a friendly face and an encouraging word to Shaeonites both new and old. It also gave her time to think about what Adamas had said.

Later that night, when she was satisfied that the dinner service was running smoothly, she ducked out to her old room which had become an improvised storage room. Despite their hiatus, Teyela diligently maintained her prized possession like any soldier with their weapon. It was rather bulky to carry, making her entrance into the Great Hall was far from subtle.

As soon as she entered, Duncan's head raised itself above the rest. His ear-to-ear grin and mischievous blue eyes, twinkling like sunlight off a lake's surface, was unmistakable. His hand banged against the table. Even though he now played the drums of war, his timing remained impeccable. His startled neighbours moved away to eat their food in peace.

Teyela recognised Duncan's thumping as the beat to the *Dancing Maiden* with personal flairs added in. Several more familiar faces looked up and grinned as they saw what she carried. They joined Duncan in hammering their fists against the tables.

Teyela quickened her step as more curious heads turned towards her. The beating grew louder and its rhythm now unmistakable. Teyela set down her most cherished possession at the back of the hall and undid its covers. There was an excited buzz from those closest to her as she revealed her lap harp. She settled in and her hands naturally went to their rest position. It felt like every eyeball in the hall was watching her. Those at the back stood on the benches and tables. Her heart skipped a beat as the room fell awfully silent. She had never performed on her own before. Teyela pulled at her stifling clothes and adjusted her harp's position. Duncan whistled loudly - the very same whistle he used to quiet an audience before a performance.

Teyela closed her eyes. Her hands moved with a life of their own. The harp's bright notes echoed of the stone walls throughout the hall. Her hands ran across the length of her harp, like two children playing hide and seek in the meadows. Her fingers danced across the strings like two young lovers. The song was an old regional favourite. When she closed her eyes, she could almost see the maiden, silhouetted by her campfire, twirling gracefully as she waited for her partner. Teyela's hands stilled as she plucked the final note and waited for it to fade away. Thunderous applause erupted throughout the hall. Teyela opened her eyes and felt several tears of pure joy roll down her cheeks.

Barrels were rolled out from the cellars and there was merriment to be had for all. Children played late into the evening, well past their bedtime, while young teens mingled awkwardly. Young men and women danced to the music that Teyela provided before stealing away into the night. Those who had put their more reckless years behind them, reminisced over wine and ale. Duncan was positively enamoured with one of the new arrivals from earlier that day. At one point, Teyela even caught Adamas's approving nod. If she had known what was to come, she would have taken more time to savour the night.

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Fatalities were low the first week but was tough on the occupants of the frontier fortress. Teyela did what she could to calm others as Shaeon's fortifications were put to the test. More non-combatants were crammed into the hall as the outer structures were assaulted. She played soft lullabies to help the children sleep. It was futile as the hall shook from the latest barrage, but the music helped calm them. The eyes of the men and women who defended the walls, steeled with each passing day. Teyela played tunes on her harp during mealtimes to try and distract them for however briefly from what awaited them outside. Some grinned while others tapped their feet.

When Teyela played, she pictured the green fields, the shade of the willows beside the riverbank, the predawn light filtering through the fogbanks in the valleys, the silhouette of Shaeon against the evening twilight and the star constellations. Most of all, she pictured the people. The farmers in the fields, the children playing by the riverbanks, Duncan turning any

mundane object into his drum, Adamas on his nightly patrol around the walls, and the unforgettable faces of her audience from her first solo performance. As long as she could see it in her mind's eye, her fingers knew exactly where to go.

The real bloodshed began in earnest in the second week. Despite being at the centre of the keep, the sounds of battle carried to the Great Hall itself. Teyela played her harp to drown out the noise as fear crept into the eyes of those around her. However, she couldn't distract them from the stream of wounded that entered the hall. It was not long until the injured had to be placed both below and on top of the tables to accommodate as many as they could.

The battered defenders returned in fewer numbers with less confidence day by day, but their conviction never wavered. Teyela played her harp, however briefly, as often as she could to lift everyone's spirits. She couldn't deny that the siege was gradually taking its own toll on her. Her mind was dull, like the grey stone around her. She was no longer able to smell the wildflowers, run her hands through the tall grass or hear the people sing. The colour and clarity had faded to drab charcoal drawings. Nonetheless, there was an occasional head or two that swayed to the tune of her melodies.

The situation was critical by the third week. The wounded fought their way past their carers to man the defences. Only those who were comatose or unconscious remained. It was only at Adamas's insistence that Teyela stayed inside. That same night, Adamas had gently woken her when she had drifted off to sleep while tending the wounded.

'Duncan's gone.' Adamas limped away without another word.

Teyela couldn't believe it. She couldn't imagine Shaeon without Duncan. It was like tearing out Shaeon's very foundations. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to grieve. Her harp's song that night was a gentle ballad as she mourned Duncan's passing. She fought to remember him as he had lived; an unchecked vigour that shone brightly that brought colour into the world. Only when she played her final note did she release her tears of sorrow.

The siege fell into a stalemate not long afterwards. Against all odds, Adamas had managed to hold out against the relentless assault. Any offensive against Shaeon grew ever more costly as the remaining defenders, no matter how green they were a month earlier, were now as tough as any seasoned veteran. However, there were no signs of help from outside, nor when it might arrive to relieve the exhausted defenders.

Teyela no longer gave words of encouragement anymore. They sounded hollow to others, and to herself. Her harp no longer elicited a reaction from the remaining men and women. She simply played for the children, and when they were asleep, for herself. Too many of them had become orphans. She no longer bothered sleeping in her cot; she would rather rise from her seat than from the ground at every other hour to attend her wards. The other occupants of the Great Hall were the dying, elderly and sick. All of them were despondent with blank stares, barely eating and occasionally napping.

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During one of the more uneventful nights, Teyela was mindlessly strumming her harp in the middle of the night. She rested her cheek against her harp's neck and closed her eyes.

Teyela.

She struggled to lift her heavy eyelids to see something lying on the ground nearby. She thought someone had spilt a large tray of wine as pools of red spread. Her vision came into focus - and she vomited up the meagre contents of her stomach.

It was Adamas - what remained of him. The lower half of his bloodied body was gone, while his left arm was missing from its socket. His right arm remained intact with a short sword in hand. He used his elbow to drag himself closer, leaving a trail of red.

'Teyela,' he said, coughing up blood onto the ground. 'The children.'

Teyela fought to remain calm and suppress the icy hands clawing at her insides. She shouted at the top of her lungs for help. How no one had spotted him before now confounded her. 'Yes, the children are fine.' She knelt beside him. 'You can relax - they're safe and sound - right over there.'

Teyela turned Adamas gently onto his back, revealing the acrid smell of burnt flesh and exposed bone.

'Look at me!' shouted Adamas in a thunderous roar.

Teyela followed his command.

'You take this - and kill,' he hissed, thrusting his sword into her hands.

A cold chill ran up Teyela's spine.

'The *children*.' Adamas's hand seized the front of Teyela's apron, lifting himself closer to her. His breath quickened to short, sharp rasps. 'Kill - the children - kill the children.'

Teyela held her breath and shook her head. Adamas was in no crazed state of delirium, but completely lucid and rational as ever.

Adamas drew in a long breath. A single tear rolled down his face. 'I'm sorry.' The light departed his eyes.

Teyela remained frozen for several moments before her body spasmed in a mixture of revulsion and horror. The sword fell from her hands and she stumbled back into her chair, wiping her bloodied hands against her skirt.

Shrieks of panic erupted at the far end of the hall. Her chest tightened. Was this it? Had they finally broken through? Teyela turned to see a creature made from pure nightmares standing at the threshold to the Great Hall. It seized an unfortunate soul - and tore them in half. The *thing* let out a terrifying inhuman shriek. It was a scream of absolute primal anger, promising nothing but pain, agony and death. It delivered its merciless wrath upon the defenceless, the helpless and the innocent with sadistic satisfaction.

Teyela's numb senses barely felt the small hands clutching at her. She couldn't save them. She couldn't save any of them - not from *this*. She hugged them close to hide their eyes and cover their ears. There was no help, not for any of them. The gods had forsaken them. How else could this avatar of death incarnate come to be?

Adamas was right.

This was the end for her - the end for all of them - of Shaeon.

The creature sang a deafening song of pure despair, with *people* as its instrument. If this was the end, perhaps she could play her harp one last time. Teyela closed her eyes and focussed, but nothing came to her. She couldn't see it - she couldn't see *anything*. Where was it? Where had it gone?

The fields of glass - glaze - glaives - graves?

No!

The bright streams of - blood.

The sound of people singing their - deaths.

NO!

She couldn't see Shaeon, nor Duncan's face. When her mind turned to Adamas, she saw his final remains. Images of the creature rending the injured asunder in their cots had already seared themselves into the forefront of her mind.

Her hands remained paralysed over her harp strings. She tried to focus on the time she played that song. What was its name? Everyone had been there. How could she forget it? She knew it was there - somewhere - she just had to remember it.

Teyela opened her mouth to sing it. What escaped her lips was a different song - the creature's song.