

Nerea



Pagina Aeterna

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(Chpt: I-III)-(Excerpt)

The sun shone above the tan and red tableau of the rocky sandstone valleys and wide wheat-brown savanna plains.

The lands tapestry broken by green spots of forested outcrops or pooled oases splitting off from river concourses.

Geometric breaks of flat roofed houses some tanned stone, others appearing almost shaped into being from the stone itself, others encompassing entire hills, the only notion of a hidden structure a chimney or projecting facade. Plantations of walled compounds with peaking green fields, enclosed to delineate the boundaries of one property to another. Forming a patchwork around weaving paths or the more developed of them connected to roads.

A solid cut ran through it all. Mhisun's Path, cobbled finding itself heightened to look across this vista, while bending around a cliff edge.

On this path a mixed a flow of foot-traffic, packs of camels and horses, the multitude of fellow travelers various along the stone set concourse.

A cart trundled along. A white canopy stretched over to keep the worst of the days heat off.

Nerea sat close to the carts rear edge. Clad in the black robes and broad hood of her faith, a thin black gossamer veil with accented thread of silver cast down to her shoulders . Yet donned in all, she remained unperturbed by the heat. Long since setting off she cast a small enchantment that left her skin feeling the boon of a miraculous invisible breeze that was only complemented by the one now received from the overlook they were crossing.

One of the fellow riders a woman who had the dress of some distinction, a dark blue dress with accents of black velvet about the cuffs and shoulders, and a young boy, donning a white and red threaded tunic and black trousers in tow, whom made constant glances about or was always at some restless shifting, only to receive a disapproving tut for all his fidgeting, while she had been in a constant state of fanning, but now took the breezes arriving respite with a soft sigh and undoing of her veil.

The only other passenger took no notice. Fast asleep, with his head laid on a pack and cloak bundled against the carts craftily refashioned cushion bench.

The driver sat under a wind brimmed hat conducting the horse team along, what was assumed to be his adolescent son or some close relation sitting beside.

She had not inquired much upon any of them other than observing now.

‘All in all inoffensive company, the better that no one pays the other any mind’ Nerea thought.

It was not common for her to feel the need for such isolation and indifference , but when the request for fetching some completed manuscripts from the monastery in Hefris had been overheard she volunteered. A brief venture out of the temple complex and the wider city at large was a welcome distraction.

It was her home for almost a decades span, but being of the northern hills and pastures made for the cities press to become overwhelming after enough time.

She moved from her thoughts to reflexively go to one of her hidden satchels and pulled out a small bit of dried meat. Split off a piece to chew and offered the rest to the horned fallow-red and white owl Aqili, who stayed steadily perched on the carts beam by her shoulder. It was snatched and consumed immediately, a soft chirp of thanks responded to with a ruffling of Aqili’s chest down.

She knew Mhisuns great roads path well enough and turned to see Easmits great walled facade looming to what would be facing Northwest from their route

up from the south. For a former provincial it never ceased to invoke some feeling of minor awe. She felt a fond pang of recollection at the rare handful of trips her family had taken for some attempt to make a particularly good seasons harvest sale.

It was a blur almost, the flash of all the interaction. Hen-pecked by her mother to stay within the bazaar camp behind the stall they established. Bribed into that corralling with a peach from the assortment on sale and occupied by and elder cousin or sibling to stay out of the then wider sprawl unbeknownst to her. At most after advanced a little in age they were let to wander after assisting in the days flurry of business had settled, a few coppers allowed to buy this treat or trinket. She was lost in that memory for a moment the wonder at all the strange things on offer so much unfamiliarity and new territory until..

A shift in her thoughts came at that. Her departing home for induction into the temple. The stern members of The Order of Grasil, explaining her new-found duties. The details barely understood through the confusion and heartbreak of being spirited away from home. No amount of supposed distinction in service to the gods or Madea itself was enough to stop the tears.

Something they in their duties had seen often enough and made little attempt to console, rather explaining that such feelings would pass when one realized

what opportunities from typical agrarian life were being offered.

Now some part of her considered it home. Even if it was by proxy. No longer vaguely familiar with only it's mere bazaar plaza and market squares.

She fetched out her water-skin from amongst her satchel and the bound books under her charge. A quick refreshing swig and it was stuffed back. Having fallen into her thoughts. The wall had approached swiftly in that time, she realized shortly they were to join the press at the many gates.

On the approach smaller makeshift cities sprawled.

Tents were splayed and arrayed on the flat space a good distance from the great walls looming cliffs and face. Patrols of guards and inspectors marshaled order into queued columns at the gates and ensured the travelers tents kept their arranged berth from the capitals defenses.

Clusters woven into or separated in collective palisades, the most isolated of the mix Reedlanders, Southerners, druids and nomads, with streaming banners and herd pens.

Caravanserais, travelers local and foreign, all in various states of waiting, arriving, departing. Some were merely hawking food or wares to passerby, as the crowded markets and bazaar were deemed to them a hassle avoided for the more potentially pliable arrivals weary from travels or eager to spend a few spare coppers or silvers before finding more interesting fares or affairs within the walls.

In short time the driver pulled the cart out of the flowing traffic.

“No further! I know well enough not to get caught in that mess.” he called back to his passengers

the boy attendant clambering down and briskly making to lower the cart's gate and prop a sturdy stool in the dirt as a way of disembarking stair.

Nerea made to collect her things. The resting man roused and made to gather himself in kind, while clearing sleep from his eyes. The woman made to leave as well, while the boy was keen to finally make good on his restless yearning. He made a quick dash beyond his guardians reach to almost leap from the cart.

A jump. a fall. a cry.

The mother stepping down, “Please, always about, I swear you wish to roll yourself into the Myr camps.”

Nerea stepped down behind

she felt a wince at that, such dismissal, in the face of minor mishaps

‘Myr camp, yes, they are troubled, such is the path of life’

the mother had moved to dust the boy off and console his whimpering, Nerea affected herself to a formal lay-persons deference and proceeded over

“Moon’s Blessings, I am Nerea good lady, it seems the boys impatience has taught him a minor lesson.” Nerea greeted

holding his faces pout in a soft gaze, but adding a hint of elders sternness.

standing to greet her and keeping the boy close, the mother returned “Moon’s Blessings, I am Coljea Theabm my impish..” a smirk and ruffle of his short locks “boy is Biqar, A minor consequence, yes, your attention is gracious in light of his restless mischief.”

‘A boy knows himself no better than you know the hardships of those “Myrs”’ the “Lady” Coljea was of some nobility, while Nerea had no care or head for politics, ignoring or lecturing those of station was not a choice for those of faith servant to make lightly

‘This is for him, before anyone else’ Nerea knelt down to meet the boy at his level. “There is a time for independence and a time for obedience. There are those that have suffered greater falls.” making a motion to point towards the distant tents.

The exiles and banished, patched and rough-spun tents, moth eaten silk robes , hands tracing across hilts, leery calls for transitory bedfellows, clinking coins and acrid hazy smoke.

“but yours is a small lesson to learn” she finished and motioned for the boy to show the scrape, sniffing he rolled up his pant-leg to the knee

It was a small thing, red and angry with a trickle of blood.

‘An easy mend’ she thought, not that her practice was healing, but what she knew of such works would suffice, with such aberrative forces however, nothing was sure..

She hovered her hands over the wound, focusing on it, in her minds eye she pictured it closing, needle and thread in it’s course making it’s silent gentle weave

the words of calling to the aether spoken in ancient Nidifan “Iknsaga... Iljad...”

while in herself focusing on a diffuse pinpoint of light, a spark of will magnifying like a flame dancing in the quick gust of bellows.

She felt her hands warm, and light around them seemed to bend.

In an instant the flesh knitted and the bloods trickle dried.

The boys face lightened in the effects immediacy.

“but remember this and let it guide you” she said to him, giving his hair a light run of the hand, while looking to the mother “I am sure she will remind you”

“Moons Grace, he will good healer, you have my thanks” she nudged the boy coaxing a soft and nervous “Moons Blessings, good healer”

Nerea produced a penny coin, “Now, this is a personal gift to see that true, should your mother allow you a small trifle in keeping to her words.”

The mother nodded in assent, the boy took it gingerly and Nerea stood.

“Oraeon keep you, and a safe journey home.” she exchanged with Coljea and took her leave of them. They making for a gate to the north and Nerea south.

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Nerea headed for her own trial of sorts, she pressed into the queues throng. Drawing her robes in and nestling her staff close to her right side. Aqili swooped in to perch at the staffs crescent top.

Men of the city militia kept carts rolling along the cobbled road to the gates main pass. Checking over the goods or passengers, calling out for the next on the side pedestrians paths to present any carried packs or goods. A constant prying, jostling, and shouting to be heard and organize.

Captains kept a watchful eye from erected scaffolds, directing as needed those at their work, or calling out for a word with those needing closer inspection. The true head of wardens was the towering figure of a Paladin of “Grasil’s Order” in well kept steel and silver, great helm glistening in the beating sun, and the grey and black streaked vestments and tabard of his order. A large two-handed great-sword peeking

from his back. Nerea felt his gaze, it cut not only through mortal guises as well as aetherial, he was practiced in arts and gifts of such sensing she felt it, and knew their kind well enough. She felt the charm laden pendant about her neck warm and hum in it's similarly detected recognition.

As she approached, two guards were already at the ready to escort her before him.

A voice rumbled from the helm "What purpose does the priestess of Kusha fulfill in returning?" She held her composure, always they unnerved her, knowing and feeling the strength of the wards and latent power invested in them. "I return from Hefris, Nerea Siqqif, Priestess of the Black Moons Daughters, I bring records requested from the monastery of Ahera there." she took the two tomes from her satchel and offered them in deference.

The inquisitor made no move, silent estimation, moments later "You may proceed then, see yourself to your duties, Oraeon guide you, the judgment of the son keep you on your path" rumbled from within the shadowed visor

Tucking the tomes away, she returned in kind "Moons Blessings" and made to enter the gates causeway. The presence of the Paladins influence ebbing and her tension the same with distance. Aqili cooed and

she met him with a glance, the golden eyes flickering, she turned back to keep her eyes ahead and assured him “Nothing to fear.” her thoughts closing the sentiment ‘hopefully never needs be..’

The tunnel loomed, and travelers in all garb and status flowed through. Guards and maintainers mixed in or dwelt idly at stations carved and recessed into the causeway walls.

It was enveloping, wide enough for four carts abreast on it’s roadway and the parallel walking paths kept foot traffic well away, the walk being enough for six men abreast. It echoed with the sound of cart wheels, the mumble of carried conversations. All along the tunnel lanterns cast warm light from the vaulting ceiling. It was a walk of some minutes time, passing through it’s long corridor. From light behind, to finally light ahead. Just before that shining exit she prepared herself, a cast to muffle her hearing, another to guise her face in shadow beneath her veil, the last a check on maintaining the cantrip of staving off the heat.

She covered the last distance among fellow travelers and broke out into the light.

“Yeasnan Pearls, Marrirejean Emeralds, Oxelian Quartz stones or fashioned as you desire!”

“Fine Nentiri styles in silk and fur, garb and gown for these cold evenings!”

“Mending, grade, barter and pawn, say your need and see it be!”

“Fresh roasted lamb, boar, bison!

“Greenery and vegetables, Orchards bearings apple, plum, olive, peach!”

“Game! Freshly whole, a cut for your table?!”

A roar of present discussion, and hawking,

“Make way for the kings peace, see to your purses and keep his sanctity!”

“Find your ease at the Red Lanterns finest hall, Madame Elsings pillow house delights, drink, and desire!”

“The most captivating portraits and castings, captured by Evrice Imanti, Avante’s Bend, know him by the red stag on silver in Plaza Mjaria’s Garden!”

closer and quieter,

“It was nothing, a skirmish in the East, Bec-hi has been contested for tenfold moons passing’s..”

“Oh, Oraeon’s bounty, three heads sired in as many weeks, a litter to be sure.”

“Yes, an evening sailing the delta, pleasant enough, father is considering the dowry, mother questions his nobility.”

It was a familiar din, never losing it’s overwhelming crescendo. The Great Exchange.

From the rise of the tunnels exit, a plaza and grid of tree and ornamental gardens, small common arbors for gathering, cart and rider roads, and grassy terraces stretched below a small grade of stairwells and roadway ramps to the cities flat plane.

Tents, palisades, pavilions in a panoply of color against the tan cliff walls, where jutted a geometry of structured stone, carved or shaped to residential and commercial facades, spiral stairwells ascended up the faces or ladders and rope bridges, terraces here for lawns and gardens cutting the clear tan lines with outcroppings of greenery, constant motion or idle ease found along them. Or garden roofs where parties entertained and struck business. Curtained balconies,

banners of temple faith or business swaying in the eastward whispering breeze.

The smells of food and exotics enticed at every corner over the subtle drift of Natma reed incense from the temple complex on high and further into the cities recess.

This was only one southerly avenue, separate entrances flowed with just the same continuity, North and South separated in valley avenues or cutting between standing mesas that were riddled from the base with the same cut and cast of mannish stone geometry, stairs, and ladders.

Nerea kept her pace through the winding streets, plazas, and crowds.

“Atollan Isles in a bottle, “Rare” Fieran Honeygold, Sisitia’s boldest vintages from Northern Cotrines!”

“Such strange portents, hush, we both know of dreams, burn something and seek to a ward, what quarter was Kiran?”

“Beasts, common and exotic, pygmy drakes, hawks and falcons, mice for offering, find mares and stallions in our residence for barter further on!”

“See to another drink then barkeep, if you want tales of the north and Valus peaks, I will needs fix my seat and sobriety”

Passing further and again, layered houses and storefronts along boulevards of shaped stone. Under archways and into cliff-face dug caverns of shared residential and commercial fronts.

“Would that he were such the eagle he thinks himself, the beak assuredly peeks!”

“Wards, charms, and charges household or permitted outfitting for far-wanderers, Silver Oasis, Bariq’s Quarter, know us by the cherry arbor and Red Argasill on display!”

Her thoughts drifted from casual paces navigating meanderings a moment at that, she had the days light still, she could stop for a moments breath, and then delay to Saxeta’s craftery in the Oasis. She felt something stir and settle in her at the thought, quickly redrafting the path in her mind.

Shortly she arrived at the beginning of the next district, Hand’s Rest. Opening from the clustered busy streets or tent camps, into terraced plazas and gardens, minor manor-homes with walled

compounds along gridded avenues. Looking off into the dizzying cliff-side precipice that cast downward a good mile and a half to the valley bayed sea and stretching forward and off another five.

All walks gathered or passed, about their affairs, some idling or reading among the gardens, couples walking arm in arm. A bards busking drifting over hedges and outcrops of planter running forests sectioning terraces and balconies looking into the cities valley bay or lower outcrops.

Easmit, the crown seat of Madaea, her second home, a city of inestimable space and age. She walked to lean against the smoothed breast-high edge of the plaza terrace balcony. The eastern sea wind gusting along the channel of the long valley, pushing back against her hooded veil, shifting her raven hair, rustling the palms, ferns, and ornamentals of the gardens greenery. A faint hint of salt and spray on the air. Facing west to the faint horizon of the sea glimpsed from the between, a narrow gap in the Northern and Southern walls of the city that wove back and forth in layers down to the sea basin.

Towers, terraces, gardens, plazas, homes, groves, cistern and canal falls pouring run-off into the valley sea below.

The largest landmark on the Northern cliff-face, The Kings Great Palace, a solid jutting rectangular shape of white stone and marble, patched across it's southern reaching bulk that stretched with green terraces and gardens. A mouth at the end cascading a channeled waterfall through it's structure into a light catching effervescent display.

South across from it, Nerea's residence, The Skys Vault. Home to the quadrined faith's temple, Oraeon, Kiran, Kusha, and Grasil. A haze of smoke drifted from it's valley recess on the Southern face. The sweet and heavy musked perfume of incensed Natma Reeds, Hydara and Benun flowers mixing to drift on the wind over the city.

Often she found herself pulled to such contemplative visting

It was this cosmopolitan vividness that made her feel it a home strangely, despite the cluster and cacophony at times.

The quiet hill and country of her youth, found her idle in nature or helpmate to household tasks. Her siblings and her got on well for a time.., but among twelve there was little lack for company and more so of privacy. Something she found in nature there or now here among the tumult of the capitals ebb and flow, it's found anonymity.

The Spring Festival Or Harvest End when paper lanterns drifted lazily from twilight ceremonies, and Great Bats with barded riders releasing nets of flower petals to flurry over the boulevards. Cacophony it was then, the Red Lantern District seemingly spilling out with it's vice and drink, laborers and nobles alike carousing and many a wedding, or feast put on by parochial patrons.

Or by night the torches and lanterns casting warm pools across the hollows and bluffs as night birds made their chorus, in recent years with her temple practices she had been on duties then, warding, banishment, last rites, or more mundane mishaps of magical implements.

The side of this place that gave her pause,

Her talent that brought her here

She couldn't forget what brought about that carriage ride

Fangs bared in deaths smile

a primordial terror

stalking among herd pastures

her heart was in her throat

utterance impaired

hair on neck and forearm standing

cracking lance

the carcass,

was smoking and charred

She had not cast it since upon a living thing, only in practice as the temple looked to accentuate her gifted evocation. Otherwise ritual and channeling, spirits lost in aether or magics aberrations and awries as guardsmen required aide against smugglers leavings or gangs. Such scoundred types kept a berth and respect to even the temple and it's laypeople, and assuredly The Order who found them prey the same.

She sighed pulling away from such recollections and the balconies vista, a minor pang in her stomach followed, her last meal being the dormitories fast breaking before duties. She made to sit at a nearby stone bench, a low white flowered hedge backing, and a Reedish willow tree draped in sage relief.

From her satchels many pockets and folds, a pear, small wedge of Erytian Sharp, and honey bread.

She sat nibbling and tossing up bits of dried meat for Aqili to swoop and fetch.

A good time passed like this in the quiet of the garden breeze and birdsong.

Then,

a touch of something in the air, her mind felt pulled, to a familiar aura.

‘Nerry?’

a soft whisper into her thoughts.

She knew it well.

‘Itsy!’

‘You are out from duties?’

The feeling became a warmth, pleasant and invited.

a snickering reply ‘No, it is you that is my duty, Eda sends’

A pang in her stomach

‘Eda?’

‘It’s been only a moons passing since we spoke?’

The serious and cold tone returned, what she knew of Itsasne outside of the lighter face she shared with her,

‘A dream, dark and laden, she called me to her and, well.. she was shaken.. she has reason to seek you as well and speak with us alike’

Nerea felt nervous at this, now a touch queasy at the lunch she had taken. This was something serious and out of the norm

Itsasne interrupted resolutely

‘Hey, calm, to me, we will walk together’

Nerea felt her resolve simmer

‘I will, but I was going to visit Saxeta, maybe he will have something?’

Itsasne seemed to glimmer with prescient calm assent

‘Yes, a good place to tarry to, Eda will need a ward or something with more resolve, whatever was manifest shattered hers entirely..’

the cold shock of that admission found Nerea tossing her scraps into the brush, and collecting herself briskly out of the garden and towards her sense of Itsasne, Aqili swooping after overhead.

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Nerea was surprised when she finally caught sight of Itsasne from a few streets distance.

She was mounted upon a smaller black mare, with the reins of a dappled pony tied to her own mount opposite a small lightly patronized alley-side eatery, few passersby on the quiet tree lined street.

Nerea questioned her sense of Itsasne nervously from afar

‘I thought we were walking?’

Itsasne teased

‘I thought the same, but I was told to head to the stables, freshly these darlings were waiting’ she ran a hand along the horses mane ‘as well a decent purse of a few gold pieces and a healthy portion of silver’

Nerea did not feel a mirrored enthusiasm, in reflection over their conversation before

‘That makes this all the more serious’

Itsasne held her calm playful composure

‘Before things become so sober we have time to dally and see to preparations, if things become something outsized’

Nerea had closed the distance and went to mount, she stopped immediately after a first flailing failed attempt, she gave Itsasne a sheepish pleading look. As a provincial horse-riding was not something comfortable or common to her.

Itsasne concealed a teasing smirk

“Place your foot, I will see you true.”

Nerea wedged her foot in the stirrup again, propelling herself upward. Invisible hands made to hold her along her side and she found herself in the saddle a bit more gracefully.

She adjusted to side-saddle and felt a bit more assured, Itsasne handing her the quickly unbound reins.

Aqili flew in to perch on the rear crown of her saddle seat.

a satisfied huff and Nerea turned “Thank you.”

“Of course.” a gentle smile returned, “Let’s be off” a soft snap of the reins as she wheeled her mount back towards the Oasis and Temples direction “time to arrange, but the light of day burns still.”

For Itsasne it was a second nature, when her and Nerea first met she had spoken of adjacent nobility, land-holders, rights, and “cadet branches” of her lineal tree, it made no matter to Nerea, her head was not for or bothered by such distinctions, those in finery had some unmistakable status and were given the conduct expected... or.. best avoided through years learned experience.

Nerea spurred her mount to follow in kind, and pulled ahead to match Itsasne in her steady set paced trot.

She had the look of such bearing too, a paler olive-tinted complexion, a slight frame, something less typical of the non-cosmopolitan Delta-folk, a well fallen mane of chestnut hair streaked with shocks of grey or pure white that framed a sharp jawline and cheekbones to complement. Up-turned nose, thin lips, Nerea had asked her if she shared kin-blood with Elven-folk. Something Itsasne had seemed to find playfully naive, but had made light of in flattery, pushing her hair aside and showing the rounded tips of her ears. Even going as far as to jokingly mimic elephant calls while displaying. They

laughed together, receiving puzzled looks from others of their dormitory

She had an eccentric streak of that, amending even her appearance, in braiding a stray banding or two of hair with thread of silver or gold, or tying some collected feather at end. An affectation Nerea had come to mimic at times.

It was that playful ease that formed and held their bond, so outside of what Nereas impression had expected of someone who had such regal appearances.

In the time reflecting they had weaved a path in punctuated silence of rhythmic hoof-shod cobble clatter, winding through the quiet side streets of the inverted rounding cliff-side. They crossed out of close ivy and morning glory walled streets into an open plaza, tree lined pavilions, and grassy terraced fields. Idle walkers and loungers all about. Fellow riders passed them and offered “Moon’s Blessings” in courtesy.

They both replied in kind.

Itsasne used the break in the silence.

“I have tried to keep a light bearing in all of this, but you are not yourself Nerry. It is something out of the norm, all of this, but the unease you radiate I could almost find tangible in it’s barrier.”

Nerea was a bit mixed on how to return

“Well.. I cannot deny that, even this morning as head-lady Iwyn gave us our duties, I found something I relished in leaving to fetch these tomes” she patted her laden satchel “I think leaving the cities press relieved that some, it’s not often we have such a chance.. I.. do you think it all a circumstance of this?”

Itsasne shifted to speak into her mind

‘You have been listening the same as I then?’

Nerea recalled the din of The Exchange

‘Yes people are idle, but things are occurring in the periphery’

‘What of the fighting and... the north, beyond The Valus Peaks, Moon’s Grace.., Nidifa?’

A brief reflection on Itsasnes part

‘There is not much to tell of Intendant Hejirika’s campaign, stalled in siege as has been, neither side commits as the minor intendants reinforce, and free-companies marshal from Febini’

‘Isos and Matri, even Rarit see the nomads and druids unsettled, but nothing of consequence’

‘In all cases rituals and mourning for the pitiable lost, however not the cause for such a thing as this. Or maybe related? I have yet to see and ask further for myself.’

‘Always a head and mind for these things’ Nerea admired to herself

In the time they had crossed to the edge of Hand’s Rest, and were approaching the divide to The Black Gate’s causeway. The terrace parks had become denser with cypress lined hedges and forests of Stone Pine, Common Beech, and Fir trees.

Small columned black stone prayer chapels sat dotted across the forest floor, lanterns leading along dirt paths, and bronze roundel and radiant thin barred icons sat reflecting the flames of their altar fires. Thin mists of incense drifting from their open-aired interiors.

The high cliff-side to the South was at it’s upper edge hollowed to a great column lined recessed gallery seen from the trees lined plane below it. Occasionally a dark shadow would pass over, A Great Bat barded in service of The Order, the faint sound of wings on

the air, departing, arriving, or merely crossing the city. Lower on the cliff side gallery facades led to the mourning halls and necropolis of Oraeon and Kiran tunneled into the caverns and galleries deep within the bluffs of The Sky's Vault.

The Black Gate and it's mesa split opposite The White Gate loomed above the trees in the now evening turning sun, waiting to be crossed into the district of Silver Oasis. The facade of the Order patrolling citadel that governed it sat upon the mesa in grey stone dividing, further at a distance towards the northern valley sea the thin white horizon cut of Ahera's Beacon, guiding lighthouse for Temple docks and steerage for Mhisun's Wharf, it's bonfire burned and danced.

Itsasne continued further

'To speak more to Eda's disturbance, it is maybe as you asked? A foul southerly wind, some cursed harbinger bourne upon it?'

'You will here her tell it, and maybe you can judge something? For what she has spoken to me, it sounds of a queerer origin.'

Nerea was unsure of that in herself

‘If I am honest I know more of the capital and small country around, and some of the whisperings in my journeys, otherwise I am not as worldly as you Itsy’

she could not suppress a nervous laugh of humility aloud

Itsasne faintly bristled to speak aloud in assertion

“Don’t chastise and belittle yourself Nerry, there is space to become so, and as well there is a wisdom of the common ear.”

Nerea could not protest, it was sage, a way in which Itsasne often aided her.

“Thank you..”, “in saying it, I have heard of dreams foul or portent laden, none of mine own, but I do not know if they are enough to have caused such swift change of circumstance as our own.”

Itsasne wore something of a satisfied smile

“Then I guess it is something we will both have to come to see.”

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Muffled shouts and rushed steps tore Nerea from her briefly found rest.

“Break the camp!”

“Harness the Bats! Make ready!”

She rolled blearily from her bedroll, Itsasne was already to her feet and highlit by the camp fires light, peering out from the tents flap.

She did not turn away, but departed quickly

A whisper reached Nerea’s mind ‘Grab what you need, leave the rest’

Sleeps dreariness left her with a spike of her hearts thumping, she collected her satchel together and had her staff propped, shrugged on her robes and was out the flap deftly. Adjusting herself hurriedly squinting out the tent flap into the bright casting of the watch fires. The camps stone curved alcove was a flurry of action. Madagin, Itsasne and Eda stood by the central bonfire, a handful of the former’s company of men arrayed near the inky darkness of the camps lit edge. Others were about the camp breaking.

The companies Bat riders at the rear of the camp were about getting their beasts saddled. Vaeran and Dithan worked in practiced hurry, Jaenalla at the harness straps while Sigwyr made ready in his companions seat.

Nerea rushed to the fireside, before she could utter a word to Eda in question she felt a familiar aberration and in an instant Sahevan apparated amongst them.

Shared to all of them

‘There’s no time.’

Eda made a shift to fetch something from her robes, she produced a leather bound flask and quickly un-corked it and took a swill, handed it to Itsasne who mimicked her without question. Nerea felt apprehension as Itsasne passed it to her.

Benun Tea as it was called, she had been under it’s influence twice before through temples training. The essence of the diminutive of the twin flowers, calling and strengthening the will of the caster who drank it.

Eda’s voice reached into her

‘I know.. we will need it for what comes, drink.’

Nerea took her heed, steeling herself for the pungent tinctures bite.

The effect was immediate as it touched her stomach.

A flutter and burn down her esophagus. Her head swam and a flush began to cross her skin, her hands quivered as she returned it to Eda.

Sahevan called for a short spear to be tossed to him and Eda having tucked the concoction away, held a hand towards the bonfire and it flared, throwing

it's light beyond the camps circle and bringing into shadowy relief the high grass and mangroves down the slope from their rise.

Silence fell over the camp, the Orders arms-men stopped mid packing, the others at the edge took steps away from the now advanced light against edge of nights displaced curtain

Outside a ring of spindly limbs squirmed and jostled , hisses whispered in discomfort, reaction to the flash and cast of the fire-lights new ring, glittering clustered eyes reflected coldly the shifting flames.

Great spiders, a horde of them. The Benun Tea had taken it's full effect, Nereas skin crawled, her queasiness from the concoction and newfound shock mixed to make her feel the world falling away. She planted her staffs metal shod end into the sand and gravel and held her weight against it. Itsasne was at her side her un-wand-laden hands grasp betraying tremors of her own.

'Stay with me, no matter what happens' she reassured, the touch carried an aetherial spark, that took away the edge of Nerea's fear

she replied,

'I will, but I don...'

The silence broke with a shout cutting

through the minutes held shock, followed by the unmistakable deafening bellow of the Great Bats.

They wheeled collectively,

Madagins mottled great-sword whispered to bear from his back-sheath,

Sigwyr was rolling from his high-backed saddle seat, the blurred black bulk of a great spider locked with him in a tumbled roll off the Bats shoulder. The glint of a javelin head peeking through the many-limbed horrors thorax.

In an instant there was a blur of action.

The ridge-line backing the camp began to teem with limbs and cold eyes. Leaping to cling to the bats. Jaenalla ran to heft a repeating crossbow, working it's action in loud thunks, the bolts cracking into the multitudes of carapaces rushing down and forward.

Dithan was rushing to his brothers aid, plunging a short spear into the beast. Vaeran spurred his bat into the air, gusting wing beats booming and tossing the tents from their stakes and sending the camp blazes guttering and shadows dancing. Spiders falling away across the camp as they ascended.

Sahevan apparated away in the opposite direction towards the camp edge, there a retreating combat had begun, one of the arms-men having stumbled to be swarmed in the on-rush, shouting with near inhuman utterances of fear as a team of beasts made to drag him off into the brush, others thrusting wildly in warning and swaying torches to ward them back as the encircling spiders rushed in from the reed grass line.

While Madagin braced against the gales and rushed forward further into the camp. His meteor blade ringing as he cleaved into beasts along his path, sending limbs skyward or cleaving their hulks near in-twain.

Itsasne pulled Nerea away from the tumbling rain of spiders, Eda was already sending bolts of flame sizzling into fallen the beasts, they ignited in shrieking sizzling bonfires, withering and curling, filling the air with acrid smells of burning hair and flesh.

Itsasne released her hold of Nerea and leveled her wand to cast lancets of white bolts arcing into the fray.

Nerea was left frozen. Watching the whirl of combat ensue.

Goosebumps and small hairs prickling

The sickening feeling of the Benun Tea's
hazy charged action

Cast back inside of herself

Glinting fangs

Hackles standing

The smell of char transferring thick on the tongue

Mixing with a coppery taste of flush underlying

A whisper behind her startled her into
action, whirling around to see splayed mandibles and
horrors limbs reaching.

Everything whirled inside of her

A flash of feathers and her owl swooped in,
claws raking the beasts eyes, it reeled in surprise.

Instinct flashed in her,

head-lady Iwyn's practice
calls echoing in mind

"Focus and Cast!"

"Focus and Cast!"

"Focus and Cas..."

Her arm raised almost outside
of her will and fingers made there guiding point

Crack/*Hiss*

The bolt lashed in a brilliant instant, filling
the air with sweet ozone and char.

The spider slumped backward in swirling smoke, its form ruptured into unrecognizable ruin.

More of them clung to the cliff-side or were creeping down to join.

She kept her focus and let bolts fly, unconscious of anything else but the work of singing wrath as the cracks of bluish lighting darted from her fingers.

The wall became a piling of smoking half-curved carapaces. Limbs and segments blasting away, she ignored wet splashes of steaming blood raining about her as she made work of them. Her vision tunneled to one lance after the next on any movement spied.

She was pulled bodily by the slack of her robes from behind, she screamed, batting her assailant with her arm while making to strike with her staff.

She felt fingers dig into her arm, recognition came in a split second. She felt her eyes well with tears, but Itsasne wasted no time in consoling and drug her backwards to the camp center.

The chaos had developed in short time.

The arms-men had drawn up to lock shields in a circle about the bonfire, minus two of their company. Jaenalla had retreated to stand with them, filling the crossbows tray and sending bolts just as quickly wherever needed.

Sahevan was locked in a graceful momentum of martial and magic skill at the camp edge.

Blinking to and fro, hurling a retrieved short-spear in javelineers posture at one moment, to twin blades singing a de-limbing song as he went from one beast to another. A lance of cast energy for added measure, raking more distant assailants.

Itsasne sent white bolts from her free hand in a flurry of support, while Eda cast endless fire-bolts into camp at the cascade descending from the ridge-line, where Madagin was held engaged sweeping his glittering blade into crowds of spiders.

Dithan and Sigwyr had brought their Bat to calm, and mounted their saddles. Dithan directed the beast to great raking swipes clearing crowds just the same.

A wavering sharp whistle came from the darkness above, wing beats followed by a bassier whistle of displaced air. Twin boulders came hurtling towards the camp edge. Sahevan disappeared from their path and they crashed, shaking the earth, a chorus of thick carapaces crunching under their wrecked path. Trees cracked and thundered to the earth in the darkness beyond moments after.

The wing beats faded before returning, Vaeran brought the bat in to a skidding landing near the camp edge. Crushing more of them underfoot, while the whirl of powerful air sent them tumbling.

Their company shielded themselves from up-thrown sand and stone, before Vaeran shouted.

“Now! Mount or find your deaths here!”

No moment was lost, Nerea found her will in the promise of retreating to safety, resuming casting fury with the rest into a retreating advance. The remaining arms-men clambered into the passengers alcove of Vaerans Bat, Jaenalla taking her companions seat while awkwardly maneuvering to fire her last bolts in defense. Eda paused from casting bolts to make a supernatural leap into the saddles open litter. A few further fire bolts following from her new vantage as the spiders continued to marshal. Vaeran spurred the beast back into ascent.

Dithan reined his beast to break from combat, bringing it's mass low to allow Madagin to throw himself aboard, the beast then made great rumbling strides to offer it's shoulder to Itsasne and Nerea. Itsasne broke from her focused channeling assault to wrap her arms around Nerea, startling her and interrupting mid-cast sending one of her bolts off target and arcing into a cliff-face. She felt the world swim and blur away as air whistled past her ears, they landed in a heap seconds after in the saddle litter of Dithans bat.

She felt her stomach sink as the bat was brought skyward, her and Itsasne collecting themselves and hurriedly disentangling to crawl into the passenger alcove of the saddle. The woven wicker canopy sinking into darkness and whistling

wind. Sahevan apperted at the threshold, steadying himself with a grasped hand loop.

It was some moments of silence in the dark as wing beats boomed and the wind whistled past.

Eda's voice entered into Nerea's thoughts, her sense of the others reaching collectively as well,

‘That was no common encounter, the great spiders hunt, but they do not have such boldness against numbers.. even the bats’

Sahevan interjected

‘Something or someone is the culprit, no mistake, we have made ourselves present, the harrying will not end lightly it seems’

Eda assented while, inserting to remind

‘That much is clear, but even my kinfolk among the Reedlanders are unlikely to possess the ability to spur on such aggression’

Madagin came in

‘I felt nothing maleficent in the air, we are dealing with some engine of subtle crafty malice’

Eda seemed lost for any further assertions

‘We have only to mourn the lost and carry on then, maybe it is best we delay to a city and divine what we can, or mayhaps lure our pursuer into a less favorable scenario’

‘In either way we are absent a share of our provisions and outfitting as well, if only briefly we should amend that and continue on, I will see to a ritual in aiding the beasts stamina in seeing us to Isos.’

She felt them retreat, Itsasne remained, a nudge on her arm and the glimmer of a bottle proffered, Hydrara Tea, the counter to the tincture, or leavening the after-effects at least.

Nerea drank the honeyed concoction and felt herself break into a cold sweat. The flush breaking, and her mind becoming heavy.

‘Thank you, I’m sorry I have not faced anythi..’

Itsasne cut against her apology

‘We are alive, by Moon’s grace, you found your resolve well enough. I was shaking the same, but let’s rest before whatever we are to find in Isos now it seems’

Nerea felt tears well again, but held herself to calm composure ‘Yes, somehow we are..’. She laid her head back against the saddle canopy, listening to the wing beats and found sleep again moments later.

