

# Black Petals

by Verna McKinnon

*Obsydia, the Bloodstone Queen, would sometimes seek amusement among mortals to relieve her boredom. The War of Light and Darkness raged on, and many conquests bowed before Obsydia. However, the recent battle with the Dwarven Wizard, Neelam, left Her angry and petulant. A cruel fate would be planned to eliminate the Mages of Light that so offended Her. But for now, the hunt for a weak soul enticed Obsydia to walk among the people, disguised as a witch, maiden or old woman. Even a dark queen needs an amusing game to pass the time.*

Obsydia listened to the ocean waves, breathing in night's scent at the black tower of Her birth. The dark god, Ahridum, created an opulent palace in the deserts of Skarros for His daughter to rule from a convenient base. The sweet solace of shadows here usually brought a soothing calm and security. But not even this haven gave Her comfort. The loss of sacrifices to that Wizard still annoyed Obsydia.

Shade, her chief handmaiden, bowed deeply. "My Queen, did you enjoy your walk?"

"Blissful, Shade. But the memory of that Wizard torments me. How fare your injuries?"

Shade's gray demon face winced, "My hand heals, but it is slow to recover from the wounds the little wizard girl dealt me. Her magic made me weep tears of blood."

"The source of a wizard's power springs from Light," Obsydia said. "Ours is the purity of chaos and darkness."

"The mages of this world can threaten our plans," Shade said. "They do have power that the mortals lack. If they give hope to others-"

"Magic in this world is a threat-one we must eradicate with speed, Shade. I want that wizard's soul in a jar so I may torture it. He dared to defy me-the daughter of a god! Only total genocide of all magical creatures in this world will satisfy me."

"I will rejoice in their extermination," Shade replied."

Solem's troops are marching west. My converts, Anjana and Ramon, are traveling north with their armies. They can wield the hand of war for a time. Right now, I desire a distraction," Obsydia sighed, lounging on a black velvet couch. "A small trifle to lighten my duties. Tussling with the mealy little dwarf spoiled my plans for the new demon army. Breeding pure devil seed is a fragile process. He spoiled it."

"I know, but at the next phase of the moons we may try again," Shade comforted her. "You are bored, and need a little recreation. A fresh heart to break a soul to ruin?" Shade grinned.

"You know me so well," Obsydia sighed, "I need to play."

Shade stroked her shadow hair and suggested, "Perhaps the Eye of Shadows will provide amusement?"

"A marvelous idea," Obsydia agreed. She entered the antechamber where the mirror loomed, and touched its mystical darkness. Obsydia raised her arms, her words invoking the power of the glass. "Mirror, mirror, dark eye of the world, show me a virgin's heart wrapped in love and youth so I may snag her heart with my venom and cruel truth."

Swirls of smoky ether brightened the mirror, seeking the object of Obsydia's desire. Many young maidens appeared, ripe with the flush of innocence. The secret whispers of their hearts mingled with the swift images that Obsydia gazed upon with excitement.

One in particular intrigued Obsydia. "Stop show me the maiden in the woods again, the plain dark one."

The mirror stilled and a scene opened to a great forest, far in the north, not yet conquered by Obsydia. A girl in a red cloak walked the wooded path, carrying a basket. Perhaps sixteen years old, dark straight hair streamed down her back, framing a face neither beautiful nor ugly, but plain, with light gray eyes void of life's wounds-but there was a longing-for a love that never looked at her.

"What is the human's name?" Shade inquired her gray face sharp with curiosity.

"Nirea," Obsydia replied softly, her fingers deftly touching the phantom glass of the mirror, "Nirea, your simple life is about to suffer my touch. Your innocence is delectable. I will taste the nectar of your soul as it writhes with the grief I plan for you."

Obsydia stepped into the mirror, passing through murky shadows to pursue her prey.

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Nirea dawdled as she gathered mushrooms in the woods. The afternoon shadows were long, and she knew she should go home soon. It was an excuse, of course to see the men practicing in the nearby field. Men, young and old, battled against the dark queen that sought to conquer their world. Training for war had become as necessary as planting corn. No land was safe from the Bloodstone Queen. Many feared to say her name. Old women began threatening naughty children with the evil queen's anger should they disobey. Nirea hoped the wars would not touch her borders, but for selfish reasons.

The devastating battles that raged so far away mattered little to a village girl who suffered unrequited love.

The shouts of the warriors in the distance drew Nirea from her forest path. She ran over the hill and watched as the warriors trained, seeking one in particular. When she found him, her heart twisted with longing.

Arestes.

He aimed at the practice target, sun-browned skin slick with sweat. He shot true and the arrow struck the center. Arestes' handsome face, clean-shaven for summer, broke into a broad smile.

"If only he would smile at me like that?" Nirea sighed.

She had known and loved Arestes all her life, with the quiet patience of a martyr. Arestes, so handsome with blue eyes and long black hair, tied back with a simple leather thong-she dreamed of him each night. She was fourteen when he left to train as a warrior; fifteen when he returned with a new sword of iron at his hip. At festivals and holidays when the village gathered together to celebrate she would often fill his drinking horn with downcast eyes. He was always polite, and always said thank you. Once he even smiled at her. She could never confess her secret love for fear of rejection and scorn. Arestes was a god made flesh. Nirea was ordinary.

The men dispersed to go home after a long day of training. Nirea retreated behind the bushes as they passed. She ached when Arestes walked by. Safely out of sight, she sat on a fallen log, miserable. Looking at her empty basket, she jumped up, "Oh dear, if I return without any mushrooms, mother will scold me good and hard." She ventured into the woods to gather them, lost in love-soaked daydreams of sensual desire only a virgin could imagine, she did not realize she had strayed from the forest path. Sunset extended the shadows of the forest. Old, gnarled trees, exposed roots rising from moist earth crowded the landscape, menacing and ancient, full of foreboding secrets. The woods suddenly seemed strange and alien.

"Where am I?" she cried, "How could I be lost." In the growing chill of fear she walked on, hoping to find some remnant of familiar territory. The sky suddenly blackened with a storm. Rain fell so hard not even the forest canopy shielded her from its torrential downpour. Thunder pounded the sky and lightning flashes blinded her. Nirea ran, soaked and shivering, until she stumbled into a grove of old black willow trees. A pool of dark water glimmered in the storm. "Rhone, Father of Light, guide me home," she prayed. Terrifying stories her granny used to tell of demons lurking in murky woods filled her mind with vivid clarity.

A flash of lightning lit up a small cottage on the other side of the pool. Heavily curtained with vines and shadows, she had never seen that little house before. The glow of a fire burned within. Perhaps some old hermit lived there? A path of shiny dark stones formed a bridge to

the mysterious hut. Drenched by storm and wary of the night's surprises, the fire within was worth the risk.

"Hello!" she shouted.

Only thunder answered her call.

Shelter and warmth beckoned her. She hesitantly stepped onto one of the stones that rose above the rippling water. It neither wobbled nor sank. She moved to the next, which remained true and solid. Taking a deep breath, she quickly walked to the other side, gathered her meager courage and knocked on the door.

"Hello? Anyone here?" she called. "Enter," answered an aged voice.

Nirea lifted the latch and entered. A bright fire burned in a small fireplace. Exotic scents mingled with the smoke. A cauldron bubbled over the fire, clouded with white vapors.

"Are you lost?" the old voice inquired.

Startled, Nirea spun around to see a hooded, cloaked figure standing in the shadows.

"Yes," Nirea murmured, shaking, and wishing she would stop such nonsense.

The head lifted, exposing an ancient face, withered and fragile as an autumn leaf. Eyes the shade of silver moons lifted to scrutinize Nirea, and she wondered if the old woman was blind. When she looked at Nirea, a chill brushed her heart. A pale, skeletal hand extended from the black robes, "Welcome. Take shelter from the tempest. It's unsafe for a maiden to be alone after sunfall," the strange woman said. "Times are dangerous."

"I know the forest well, yet I've never seen this part before," Nirea said. "Or this little house."

"Old forests have many secrets," answered the old woman, moving closer to the fire.

"Perhaps your name is not a secret? I'm called Nirea."

"A lovely name for a pretty girl," the strange woman answered. "You are sad for one so young. Come, warm yourself. The fire is hot."

"I'm not pretty," Nirea answered. The heat did feel good. Soaked to the skin, she wrung out her hair, and removed her sodden cloak and shoes to dry off.

"There, that is better, isn't it? Would you care for some tea? The kettle near the cauldron should be boiling now."

"I don't want to be a bother."

"Nonsense, it will sap the chill from your bones." The old woman fixed a tin cup of steaming tea from the kettle, adding dried tea leaves from a clay jar. She offered it to the shivering girl with a smile.

Nirea accepted it. "Thank you," she said, and sipped it, feeling better and a little foolish.

"Why are you living here? Are you a hermit?"

"I'm a witch," the old woman said. "We are solitary creatures by nature."

"I've heard tales about witches. You make charms and read runes of bone to tell the future."

"Yes, we do. Perhaps you would like a charm to capture a young man's heart?" the witch whispered, sitting on a wooden chair.

"I doubt a charm would entice his love. Arestes can have his pick of any girl in the village."

"Arestes? A strong name. Has he chosen his love yet?"

"No. He is occupied with being a warrior. Most of the young men are, even the old. My father is even learning to use a sword. Mother isn't happy about that. He's rather clumsy, you know."

"I have a charm that will reveal secret love. A potion to wake the truth." The woman rose from her rickety chair, "It's night and the rains are violent. Stay, until the storm passes."

"My mother will fret and send the village out looking for me if I'm not back soon. Then she will whack me with a leather strap for my foolishness. Thank you for letting me in. I'm sorry to disturb your solitude."

"It is no hardship. Even a recluse occasionally requires the voice of another to ease the passing of time. I have something rare to show you." She moved gracefully toward her, bearing no infirmity of age. She opened her robe to reveal a large, beautiful black flower.

"It's so lovely," Nirea commented. "I've never seen anything like it before."

"Black roses. They possess the magic to reveal a lover's heart. No one knows the origins of these strange flowers except the gods."

"How does such magic work?" Nirea laughed.

"You pluck the fresh black petals and grind them into a powder. It takes only a pinch, though, to do its work. Add just a bit to food or drink; it will be undetectable. Offer it to your heart's desire and he will reveal his love. If he does not love, he will reveal that to, so it is a risk."

"What cost is this magic?" Nirea asked.

"How can anyone judge the price of love? I offer it in friendship, to the young maiden that gave me a moment's comfort in my solitude." She extended the flower to Nirea.

Nirea bit her lip, tempted to accept this strange gift. What harm is it, she thought, to accept the token from an old mad woman? She took the flower, and its thorny stem pierced her finger, drawing a drop of blood. "Ouch."

The witch smiled, "Take care, its beauty has teeth." She walked to the small window.

"The rain has stopped. It may be safe for you to travel home now."

"Then I will go, if it's not too rude of me," she begged, donning her damp cloak and putting on her shoes. "My mother will worry."

"Go seek your love. The black petals will answer your pleas." The old witch took a torch and lit it in the fire, and it burned with a strange blue light. "Take this to guide you in the darkness, young one."

"Thank you," Nirea whispered. She laid the flower in her basket atop of her meager collection of mushrooms. Holding the torch high, she skipped across the stones to the other side. She quickly found the path again, and chided herself for being such a fool to think herself lost. As she hurried, she realized the witch never said her name.

When she arrived home, she dipped the torch into the water trough outside and entered the small cottage to face her mother's scolding.

"Where have you been girl?" wailed her mother, wiping her hands on her apron and boxing Nirea smartly on the ears. Her father kept silent, eating his meal, though he gave her a sympathetic glance.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I was in the woods gathering mushrooms when the storm broke."

"Well, good thing you're safe and sound. Change those wet clothes and take off your shoes, you're tracking mud on my floor."

"Yes, Mother."

Nirea changed into a fresh frock, and tucked the strange black flower under her pillow. When she joined her family for supper, her irate mother softened and hugged her. A bowl of savory stew and hot fresh bread scented the room.

"Eat up, Nirea."

"Yes, Mother," she replied. Each spoonful was a challenge. But if she didn't eat her mother might think her ill and give her nasty tonics to drink.

All that night she tossed and turned in her bed. Could such a potion truly reveal if he loved her? It would be painful if he didn't. But then she would know, at least. But if he did-well,



such happiness would know no bounds. Would it be dishonest? she wondered, until her lovelorn heart drove her to decide that she must know.

The next morning, she swiftly did her chores. When her mother went to feed the pigs, she took the flower from its hiding place. She dashed to the cooking hearth and with care, plucked a single velvet-soft petal. With a pestle, she ground it in the mortar until it was a fine powder. The fragrance was strong, like incense in the temple. She carefully scooped it into a tiny cloth pouch and tied it securely. That done, she washed away all residue. She had no idea what to do with the rest of the flower, so she put it back under her pillow-for luck.

Taking her cloak off the wall peg, she left the house. When Nirea arrived at the practice field, the afternoon sun was so hot she took off her cloak and carried it. The men laid down spear and sword to rest and eat the midday meal, talking of small things, and filling their bellies with meat and bread, or lounged in the grass enjoying the sunny afternoon. Arestes sat on a moss-covered rock under the shade of a maple tree, sharpening his sword, his golden skin moist with sweat from sun and exercise. Other women had arrived, bringing their men food and drink. Fetching a cup of water from the barrel, she opened the pouch and added a pinch of the crushed black petal. It evaporated to nothing, leaving no trace. Shyly, she approached Arestes, nervous and hopeful.

"Good day, Arestes," she whispered.

"Hello, Nirea," he smiled.

"You looked thirsty. I brought you some water."

"Thank you," he said. He drank it down quickly. "That was good."

She waited for a moment, feeling like an idiot. No change. No transformation occurred.

Well, it was silly to expect a miracle. Wood witches! No better than gypsies and carnival folk. She turned to go, but he stopped her, "Wait, Nirea. Why are you always running away?"

"I don't want to get in the way."

"You're not. Stay," he begged. "I've wanted to talk to you. I know you look at me when you think I'm not aware."

Her cheeks turned scarlet with embarrassment, "I'm sorry. I won't-"

"I look at you too. Do you care for me, Nirea? I hope so because I care for you. I love you, Nirea."

"You love me?" she gasped.

He loves me. The magic was true. He loved her! He loved her! He loved her!

I love you too, Arestes." she stammered.

"Then stop this game," he grinned. "You think I never noticed you. You're wrong. You were too busy hiding from me. I wanted to ask you, but you always seemed so shy."

"Oh, Arestes," she wept. "I never dreamed-"

His face suddenly turned red. He collapsed to the grass, gasping for breath.

"Oh no, Arestes, what is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Can't breathe. I feel so weak-" Arestes' blue eyes closed and his breath stopped.

Nirea screamed for help.

They came running, warriors and women, faces knotted with concern. The old archer felt his heart and pronounced, "Arestes is dead."

The men carried Arestes away. Nirea's heart burned with grief and guilt. Dozens of voices echoed around her. "What killed him?" "Perhaps sun fever." "He was so strong." "One of our best."

Gentle hands lifted Nirea from her knees. The women gathered around her, guiding her from death's curse. Numbly she allowed their hands to lead her home to the village. Her mother put her to bed amid hushed whispers. Consumed by torment, she was scarcely aware of her parents worry as she lay in her bed. She refused all food and drink. Her mind finally woke to one coherent thought.

The witch.

"The old wood witch in the cave did this!" Nirea whispered.

She got out of bed. It was night again. Taking the black rose from beneath her pillow, it still bloomed fresh and fragrant still deadly in its poison. Tempted to drink a draught of its cruel death, she stopped. No. She would confront the wicked woman that deceived her.

"Oh, Arestes, I'm so sorry," she wept.

Her mother's voice in the next room alerted her and she crawled back under the covers.

"Nirea?" her mother whispered, cracking the door open.

"Is she asleep?" her father asked.

"Yes," her mother replied softly.

The funeral for Arestes is at dawn. Let her rest," her father suggested. "We should get some sleep to. It's so tragic about that boy."

"Do they know anything yet about what killed him?"

"They can't agree, except it might have been sun fever. Two men died of it last summer. But never one so young."

They closed her door. Waiting until she was sure her parents slept, Nirea took the flower, put on her cloak and shoes, and tiptoed out of the cottage. She headed toward the woods, guided only by moonlight. She walked, somehow guided back to the grove of dark willows

and the shabby cottage. She crossed the pond on the stones and entered without knocking, heartbreak her only weapon. A fire blazed in the center, but a cold aura clung to the room.

The witch stepped from the shadows, cloaked and hooded. "Greetings, Nirea."

"Arestes is dead! You poisoned him!"

The witch threw back her concealing hood, revealing not an aged crone, but a woman of terrible beauty. A halo of shadow flowed from her head, skin pale as bone, crimson lips curled in a decadent smile, her moon pale eyes glowed with delight. "You poisoned your love, Nirea-not I. You got what you wanted his love."

"And he's dead!" Nirea screamed. "Why would you do such a terrible thing? Who are you?"

Obsydia sighed, "Your nightmare. The bane of all mortals. I have many names, but my holy father named me Obsydia, the Bloodstone Queen. I am an immortal sired by Ahridum, the darkest of all gods."

"You are the dark queen everyone fears!"

"Yes. The game we played was sweet. I enjoyed it. Thank you."

"A man's life is no game! Take it back!" Nirea demanded, throwing the black flower at her feet."

He is dead, Nirea. Your foolishness was your own undoing and his doom. Your Grief and pain is delectable I taste your anger too."

"Please, bring him back! If you are so powerful, have mercy in this one thing!"

Obsydia's laugh unearthed primal fear. Its evil so penetrating, Nirea felt its bitter cruelty down to her soul. Obsydia threw off her cloak, standing in her glory, her crown of bloodstone glittering in the flame's light, her gown of black lace webbed into a spider design that caressed each wicked curve. Nirea stumbled back, shuddering at her supreme glory.

"Yes, fear me, Nirea. All mortals should. You are nothing. I am a nightmare made flesh."

"Why all this horror to crush a simple maiden like me?"

"You were merely a moment's diversion to amuse me. I smelt your weakness, Nirea. You were so easy. Drink the poison of the black petals. You will not notice the pain as it strikes your heart with death-your own grief will soften its stabbing. You don't deserve to live. You are worthless."

Nirea crumbled, sobs wracking her body. "Fool. I'm a fool. I killed Arestes."

"Yes," Obsydia whispered. "One petal will end your pain. Die. Do your penance. The sin of murder must be hard to bear. I offer you this gentle exit."

Nirea lifted the flower with shaking hands. She was a weak fool. Her sin could never be washed clean. She thought of Arestes, strong and pure, and how she ended his life with trickery. She plucked a deadly petal and put it to her lips. "He said he loved me. Was that even true?" she asked, tears streaming.

"Yes. Ironic isn't it."

A fury bloomed alongside her sorrow. Dropping the poisonous petal, she straightened.

Her suffering brought such joy to Obsydia. This malevolent demon ruled an empire, crushed armies, yet still sought out an insignificant life to torture. Any remnant of innocence shed from her soul in that instant. Rising from the dirt, she cast the black rose into the fire, where it flared brightly before succumbing to the flames.

"I won't give you another death," Nirea answered. "Let the Gods of the Underworld judge my foolish acts. I won't crawl into a death shroud for your pleasure."

"I am even more amused. Such courage at such a useless time? Perhaps if you found it earlier, you could have discovered Arestes true heart a long time ago?"

Obsydia faded into the shadows, laughing.

"Go back to your dark throne, Obsydia," Nirea said.

Nirea walked back to the village. The funeral ceremony would start soon, as it was almost dawn. She entered the humble temple. It was empty, but for the body of Arestes. He rested on a platform beneath the altar garbed in leather armor, his shield and sword at his side. Flowers covered most of his body, soaked with oil, for after the service, his body would be taken to the holy mound for burning. She wiped tears from her face and kissed him gently on the forehead. "Forgive me," she asked. "I will take up your fight now."

She reached into the mound of blossoms and took his sword and scabbard. It weighed heavy, but not as heavy as her heart."

I leave the village today, my love. In the southern camps, they are training woman warriors for the fight against the dark queen. I will learn battle. I probably will die in this terrible war, for the forces of Obsydia are great-but I will die fighting for you."

She left the temple and took the southern road. Death was inevitable. Surrender was not. The sword heavy on her back, she walked to her destiny, whatever it might be.

THE END

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