

The Demon Fortress

By Verna McKinnon

Immortal queen of shadows, Obsydia was the daughter of the evil god Ahridum and a doomed seer named Lilith. Thirteen days after her mystical birth, she awakened a grown woman of dangerous beauty, with hair a living shadow, lips red as blood, and moon-colored eyes. She rose like a black flower of death.

Obsydia's war of darkness raged in the east, moving further west as kingdoms fell to her armies of men and demons. Served by her train of demon handmaidens, and her mortal Warlord Solem, she ruled from her dark tower in the sea of Isini, an isolated fortress and her sacred birthplace. But domination required her shadow in the world, so Ahridum created a palace in the lost kingdom of Skarros, where Obsydia could oversee her kingdoms. Obsydia's wickedness spread over a broken world where few heroes had the courage to rise against her.

But there was one hero who had the courage. He was one of the Dwarven people of the west, a Wizard named Neelam.

From "Tales of Obsydia's Dark Rule," by Cathal the Sorcerer.

Obsydia's Temple Palace in Skarros loomed above the blistering dunes; casting long shadows across the sands, a monument to the Bloodstone Queen that reigned supreme. A wasteland; barren of life for two hundred years since the fall of the dark star that ravaged the world, few visited this fallen country.

Neelam shook sand from his beard and spat out grit. "I wonder if Hell Bitch is home."

Surya, his snow eagle familiar, flexed her talons nervously, "I doubt we'd be welcome. Why did we stop here, Neelam? Are you insane or drunk?"

"It's on the way, my lovely," Neelam answered, taking a swig of water. I wanted to see where my enemy lived, in case I need to knock on her door in the future."

Jelani, their guide and tribal War Chief of the Ucarans, had the common sense to fear, but could not veil his amazement at the beauty of Obsydia's palace. "The rise of her palace is a mystery, but many whisper around campfires that the Eternal of Shadows and Chaos, commanded its rise from the Otherworld as a gift for his immortal daughter. Do you think it is true? You must admit, Neelam, it's a rare vision to mortal eyes."

"Some things are best left in Hell," Neelam answered. "I think your men would agree." He glanced at the band of weary soldiers resting in the rocky shelter. Though bred of the desert and its harsh ways, still the warriors trembled at its foreboding bloodstone and marble

architecture. No mirage caused by sun fever, they kept their distance, huddled together, chewing dried meat and fruit. A small group of three dozen men, they rode for speed, using horses instead of the tough, shaggy kundra beasts native to desert lands. But even they had doubts about this mission-and about the small man who hired them, an outlander from the west.

Neelam wiped sweat from his face, rinsed his mouth with warm water and spat. "Damn, I'll never get the sand out of my mouth and nose!" He took another drink and said, "I'm bored too. A round with Obsydia might liven things up a bit."

"You're in a foul mood, Neelam," remarked Surya. "Take care with that water. I'm thirsty too."

"Sorry love," Neelam replied and filled a cup for his familiar. "The sand erodes my good manners."

Jelani, his black skin glistening in the fading sun, drank sparingly from his water bag as the winds cooled with sunset. Suddenly he erupted with deep laughter.

"What's so funny?" asked Neelam.

"You are-a tiny little man with a wild red beard one of the greatest wizards alive? You're not what I expected when you arrived in my tent asking for soldiers and a guide."

"I'm only common on the surface, Jelani. Magic does not discriminate, unlike most humans. Also, I'm a Dwarf, not short; and I am considered a giant among my people, especially the ladies."

Surya rolled her eyes, "Modesty is not one of my wizard's attributes."

"I heard that, Surya," Neelam challenged.

"Why did the mage council send you, Master Neelam?" Jelani asked. "You're a wizard from the northern countries. Neither desert born or trained, and have pink skin that burns in the sun."

"And his nose is peeling," Surya observed, peering into her wizard's face. "I told you to keep your face covered!"

"I could do without your acute observation of my complexion," Neelam grumbled.

"Your familiar mocks you," Jelani laughed. "Her chastising tone was not lost, even on me. Your snow eagle familiar is a beautiful bird. Majestic, like a queen."

"I like him," Surya said.

"Of course you do," Neelam replied, feeding her a bit of meat. "He thinks you're beautiful." He said to Jelani, "I insisted they send me. It's a question of family. Many women

have been abducted by the shadow raids recently; but one of them is my niece, Magda. I will find her, for good or ill. I also intend to take a few heads for their offense against my kin.”

“I understand family bonds,” Jelani nodded solemnly. “I will pray to the gods that she will be found safe and unharmed.”

Neelam nodded, “Thank you. First we need to find the gate of bones, the entrance to Ralnazzar, the demon fortress where Obsydia is rumored to be raising a demon army, literally. I intend to put a stop to it.”

“You? Well, if your magic is as big as your ego, I will take care, Wizard,” Jelani replied seriously. Jelani signaled his men to mount their horses. Mounting his own stallion, he said, “Our storyteller speaks of this land once being a vibrant place where magic ruled with light.”

Neelam grimaced, “That was over two hundred years ago, when opalescent towers rose high above green meadows and a river that flowed crystal clear. Then a dark star struck this land, turning it into a wasteland. The towers fell, the grass burned, and the river was swallowed by flames. It will never rise again.”

“You speak as though you saw this wonder,” Jelani remarked.

“No. I’m only a hundred and twenty years old. My father saw it during the Sapphire Age. He often described this land’s former beauty to me when I was growing up in the mountains of Ironia. Mages of the three races gathered here-Sorcerers of the tall folk, Dwarven Wizards, and Elfsharan Drusai, to study the wonders and magic of the universe. Then the Sapphire age died with that dark star, and the Bloodstone Age was born, killing many of the mages since they regarded it as their homeland. Now we are few and scattered. But we are not extinct-yet.”

“I am glad, for a world without magic is a bleak place.”

“It will grow worse unless we stop Obsydia. I intend to put a crimp in her plans. Getting into the demon fortress is the first step.”

“The gods are mad,” Jelani said. “And so are you, it seems.”

“It’s a family trait,” Neelam replied, gracefully mounting his Dwarven pony. Neelam looked back at the palace before riding on, “Ahridum can choke and wither, along with his cursed daughter.”

Jelani made a sign against evil at the mention of the dark god’s name.

“I’ll scout ahead,” Surya said and flew into the night sky.

“Take care!” warned Neelam, “I don’t want to lose my favorite familiar.”

“I’m your only familiar, you dunderhead!”

“Our country borders this forsaken land, and we feel its wickedness growing,” Jelani said. “We plan to migrate to another land, and pray that someone will take us in.”

“Pray that the gods get off their butts,” Neelam grunted.

A gate of bones opened as Obsydia entered her new citadel of Ralnazzar on a steed of blue-black mist that floated deathly silent over the harsh sands. Solem, her Warlord and High Priest, was magnificent upon a black warhorse, both heavily armored with jewels and polished ebonite, the rare black precious metal of the world. Totems of polished human skulls encircled the fortress. Atop each grisly column, a great torch; its greenish-blue flame lit up the night.

Human mercenaries from many lands occupied the dusty streets and courtyards; drinking and brawling unchecked, but falling silent upon the approach of their dark queen. Other, stranger inhabitants also wandered freely about the new demon city. Grotesque figures with scaly, reddish-gray mottled skin; Goblins called by Obsydia from out of the murky places of the world, strained to control shaggy, red-eyed, slobbering Trolls. Tethered on heavy chains, these War-Beasts hungered for the taste of human flesh. Obsydia rode to the center of the main courtyard, dismounted her mystical steed, and gracefully ascended the thirteen black-granite steps to her throne. Solem dismounted and followed, to stand at Obsydia’s side. He watched the hooded handmaidens with interest, as they burned incense and performed the ritual chanting that charred the very air around them.

Shade, her Chief Handmaiden and High Priestess, seemed not so much to climb, as slither, up the dais steps; kneeling at Obsydia’s feet. “We are ready My Queen. The ritual will begin at your command.”

“Can it be done, Shade?” Obsydia demanded. “Can you call upon a demon essence, pure as night?”

“We have suffered many losses in trying my Queen, but now I believe we can call the demon seed from that dark realm, and this time, it will bear fruit.”

Solem turned to his Mistress. “This is why we have taken so many more human females? I thought you wanted slaves.”

“Some I need some to serve in my new palace. My handmaidens, of course, require time to prepare the black magic necessary for my needs, and to wait upon me personally. The rest of the human females will serve as hosts.” She pointed toward the great dome, arising from the center of the city, hewn from smoky stone and adorned with human bones from her countless conquests. Here was the nursery; breeding ground for the future demon warriors that would be bred to serve in Obsydia’s armies.

Solem understood. “The few demon species in this world are flawed; tainted or defective of mind. Trolls are useless, though they are vicious in battle, are useless otherwise. The goblins are shrewd and brutal, but difficult to tame and reluctant to take orders.”

“Yes, my mortal beloved,” Obsydia smiled. “You recognize their flaws. The problem has been how to bring pure demon essence into this realm, which Shade,” Obsydia glanced at Her High Priestess, “now promises, by her life, can be done. That the human hosts will not survive does not matter, as long as the demons shall live.”

Shade threw back her hood and smiled, “As you command, my Queen. We shall begin with one, to make certain the incantations are true and strong.”

“Excellent well, Shade. Solem, stand with me as we witness a birth; to a species that will rise to new terrors.” Obsydia commanded a nearby guard, “Fetch a maiden from the cages. Chain her to one of the pillars around the fire pit.”

The soldier bowed, replying, “At once, Holy Goddess,” and departed.

Obsydia reclined on her throne and said, “Tonight blood shall mingle with fire, to make flesh the beasts of darkness. We must also spare a few maidens to offer as sacrifices to my Father.”

“Very wise,” Shade grinned her approval. “You are a dutiful daughter.”

“Which shall you choose as your father’s sacrifice, my Queen?” Solem asked.

“You may choose for me. I know how much you enjoy it. Perhaps I will let you cut out a heart, as a reward.”

Solem sighed with pleasure and kissed her hand.

Obsydia descended the dais, slipped off her black velvet cloak, letting it fall on the steps behind her, to reveal a silk gown of deepest crimson. She stood before the flames of the fire pit, enjoying the sparks of heat mingling with the cool night wind on her pale flesh. Soon, a filthy and frightened young woman, struggling desperately against her captors, was dragged into the courtyard. She begged for mercy, as shackles of iron snapped about her slim wrists, chaining her to the thick pillar.

“Begin!” Obsydia commanded.

Shade began to chant, words both archaic and strange to the mortal ear. The handmaidens, still cloaked and hooded, sang hymns to the dark heavens. The young woman screamed and wept as the handmaidens sang louder, their voices echoing with her continuing cries for mercy across the barren sands. Each handmaiden in turn visited the sacrifice, and with a small ceremonial knife of red metal, delicately cut her skin, just enough to draw a trickle of blood. When each had drawn their own bloody ribbon upon the young woman’s flesh, they

circled the fire ring, and in unison, walked into the flames. Despite the roaring blaze, the handmaidens suffered neither pain nor injury, for the fire was of demon making. They laid the bloodstained daggers, point- to- point, at the very center of the inferno.

Rapt with anticipation, Obsydia felt a wild stirring in her blood. She could sense the ether of another realm, far from this mortal plane. It made her long for its embrace, for half of her was, after all, made of a god's passion. The flames rose higher, casting a glow over the skin of the young woman bound to the pillar. A great cavity took form at the center of the inferno, shimmering with what seemed to be the very essence of the Otherworld. The flames of the pit slowly diminished, and from the growing cavity streams of black energy swirled outward. A sudden beam of darkness shot from the core, striking the shackled woman full in the chest. The evil energy spread across her, enveloping her body. She howled with agony as the smoky spirit of evil penetrated her flesh.

The transformation was unexpected by the crowd. The woman screamed for only a few moments before she lapsed into a deathlike coma. Then she withered, skin and hair bleached white of all life, and became a mold of cracked clay, breaking apart in chunks to reveal a demon bursting out of its human egg. Though of human height, it was not of human make. The creature's flesh was not skin, but burning gray brimstone, with orange embers cracking through its body. The skull was human size-but the shape twisted and deformed with the pure demon essence; the mouth a vicious open maw with needle sharp teeth and longer spear-like fangs protruding from its broad jaw. Eyes black with red pupils dilated wide in the flame's light, huge clawed hands flexed with power. The body was strong, as was discovered by a hapless soldier that came too close. It raged and grabbed a soldier with its massive claws. It crushed the soldier's head with one blow. The demon then threw him several hundred feet across the courtyard. It was evil incarnate, bearing no stamp of a soul-a pure force of battle for her army.

The fate of a lone mercenary was of no interest to Obsydia. He merely helped demonstrate the value of the new demon. Obsydia smiled sweetly and raised her arms in benediction. She cried, "Welcome, my devil child." The newborn demon of brute strength recognized the power of the Bloodstone Queen and quelled its rage. It bowed before Obsydia.

"Send for more women," Obsydia commanded. "We shall make more demons!"

In the depraved excitement of demonic rituals, no one noticed a white eagle flying overhead.

Neelam and Jelani lay belly down in the sand. The Wizard was in deep concentration. The glow of unnatural fire in the distance marked Ralnazzar.

"What is happening?" Jelani asked. "Can you use your magic to see past the gates?"

Neelam opened his eyes and turned slowly toward him, and the look of horror on his face gave Jelani his answer. Neelam's features grew hard and resolute, "I saw with the eyes of my familiar. Surya witnessed the birth from high above just as the demon was conjured up from Hell. Now we have seen what they can do. They called a full demon, using a sacrifice-a young woman. I have no words for the pain and horror she must have suffered."

Jelani made a sign against evil. "It is an abomination. I pray her soul is in Paradise."

With the flapping of great wings, Surya landed on Neelam's leather-wrapped arm, shaking with disgust. "Obsydia's wicked ritual worked," she cried. "That poor woman. No one deserves such a death. Oh, Neelam--"

"There now, my love. I know it was brutal."

"It's burned into my mind forever. We must save those women! There are many kept prisoner in the dome."

"We will rescue them," Neelam promised.

Neelam comforted his familiar as best he could. He quickly related Surya's information briefly to the men, before turning back to his familiar. "I'm so sorry, Surya. I never wanted you to see such an atrocity. Did you see Magda?"

"No. But, we need to hurry, Neelam."

"How many warriors?"

"Several dozen. They have goblins and trolls too-and Obsydia is there, Neelam."

Jelani drew his scimitar in one fluid motion, his eyes flashing. "What do we do now?"

"Do you trust me?" Neelam asked.

"Yes, though something tells me I'll regret saying so."

"Good. Now- listen while I explain the plan of attack. You won't like it, but it may be the only way."

"I think I will need to say an extra prayer," Jelani muttered.

"You may well be right," replied Neelam.

In the grim prison chambers of Ralnazzar, the over-crowded cages reeked of despair, sweat, and waste. A tall, wild-eyed woman, with raven hair and dark blue eyes, defiantly beat against the iron bars. "Foul monsters! Give us some food and water! Empty our buckets! Curse you all! Burn in the hottest hell and squirm like the vile snakes you are!"

A diminutive young woman with long blonde hair hovered at her side, so tiny she was lost in the packed cell of forlorn-looking prisoners. “Hush Alethea,” she said softly, “you’ll only make them angry.”

“Foul demon lovers!” Alethea shouted louder. She looked down at her little friend, “How can you be so calm, Magda? Didn’t you hear? The ritual worked! Not only are we forced to bear abominations, but we will die for it!”

“I’m not calm. After so many days of suffering, I’m just numb. How long have we waited to be chosen for a horrible sacrifice or fight off the damned desert rats that swarm all over the place?”

“This horror disgusts me too,” Alethea grumbled. “I’m a woman of the tribes. Freedom is our life. I long for that freedom! For clean air, not to mention a hot bath, and food...decent food! Not this swill these scum throw to us, at their whim!”

“If only we could escape,” Magda whispered. “I know my family must be looking for me.”

“How will they even know where to look?”

“My mother’s side of the family are wizard born. If anyone could find me, they will.”

Alethea shrugged. “You didn’t inherit any magic, I guess. Shame. You could turn them into cockroaches and we could smash them.”

“No,” Magda sighed, “no magic for me. My parents hoped I would be a wizard. I’m sixteen now, and if it hasn’t shown up by now, it probably never will.”

The groans and weeping of the women intensified as a hard-faced soldier rushed in, flanked by a number of goblin guards. They carried neither food nor water, which meant only one thing-sacrifice.

Alethea and Magda retreated from the bars, mingling into the crowded cell, fear and anger etched on their faces. They clasped hands firmly, having formed a bond of friendship in this place of death that could never be severed. An odd pair, Magda being the only member of the Dwarven people captured, her height reaching only to Alethea’s waist.

A soldier began to pick the next sacrifices. Men and goblins opened the cages, forcing out those helpless women chosen. Suddenly, he pointed his leather-gloved hand at Magda, and something snapped within her. A newfound fury burned white-hot, pushing back all reason. As they opened the cage, Alethea stepped forward to defend her, but Magda picked up a bucket of waste and hurled it with all her strength at the soldier.

He gagged and spit, wiping his face in disgust. “That’s it, slut! You won’t make it to the sacrificial altar!” He drew his sword and, knocking Alethea aside, grabbed Magda by the filthy remnants of her clothing, pulling her from the cage.

Alethea spat out imaginative curses and leapt upon the soldier like a mad wasp.

The wiry goblins roughly pulled Alethea off, throwing her to the ground. One held the struggling Alethea down easily, planting his iron-shod boot firmly on her chest.

Magda screamed and kicked at the soldier holding her. He lifted his sword to strike-

Then one of the many rats that scurried in the prison bit the soldier’s heel, distracting him from striking Magda.

The cruel soldier shouted a curse but before he could slay the rat, it shimmered with rainbow colored lights; the brilliance causing the soldier to wince and cover his eyes. In a blink the vibrant rat transformed- into Neelam, sword in hand. A gush of blood burst from the soldier’s mouth as Neelam’s blade pierced his gut to the backbone. The wizard wrenched it free, and the dead man’s twitching body fell to the ground. Neelam grinned with satisfaction, a dripping sword gripped in his strong hand.

“Uncle Neelam!” cried Magda, and fell weeping into his arms.

“No time, love,” he apologized, drawing her behind him, “Uncle must finish cleaning house first.” His sword flashed in the torchlight, as he separated a goblin’s head from its shoulders. Surya flew in, raking the eyes out of another soldier with her talons. He howled, trying desperately to shake her loose, until she bit into his throat, silencing him forever. Of the remaining two goblins, Neelam raised his hands, and energy bolts shot forth, striking each one, burning them to cinders.

“Impressive,” Alethea complimented him.

“Thank you,” Neelam replied. “You’re a comely wench.”

“Watch your tongue, Dwarf,” Alethea replied. “Don’t let these rags and stink fool you. I’m worth at least a hundred horses for a bridal price.”

“Those meager scraps of cloth reveal of a lusty figure worth every hoof,” Neelam winked.

Magda retrieved a heavy set of keys from one of the fallen soldiers, and quickly released the prisoners from their cramped iron cells.

“Assemble them,” whispered Neelam. “Smartly now...and keep them calm!”

“I’ll do that,” Alethea offered. She turned and clapped her hands, “Everyone, gather quietly. We are to be saved. Whatever this wizard asks, obey him.”

“You handled that well girl,” Neelam winked.

“My name is Alethea,” she answered proudly. “I’m a chieftain’s daughter.”

“She is my friend, Uncle,” Magda added. “The best anyone could ask for.”

“I’ve no doubt about that.” He hugged Magda and brushed at her tears, “I’m so glad to have found you, child. You are my favorite niece, after all.”

Magda laughed and wiped her face, “I’m your only niece, Uncle. But Obsydia is bringing demons into the world. So many women have died in the attempt-”

“I know. I’m sorry I couldn’t rescue them too; but I will save all of you, that I promise. I’ll also leave a blood trail to send Obsydia into a tantrum. You must escape first though. Are you prepared to be...changed... for a bit?”

Alethea raised an eyebrow; “You’re turning us all into rats, aren’t you?”

“No...actually I felt crows would be best at the moment. We can fly out of here.”

“Very well, but I better not develop a craving for worms,” Alethea warned.

“You won’t, as a precaution, though, I will make sure you return to human form within a couple hours,” Neelam assured her. “There are a handful of Ucaran warriors about three miles from here. When you leave the citadel, fly west. They’re waiting for you, and know you will most likely be in bird form. You will be aware in your bird state, so don’t worry. Magda, guard the door while I shapeshift them.”

“Yes, Uncle,” she said.

“Now, all we need is a good sized hole,” he observed and with a few chosen words the back wall blew outward, creating a sizable hole. Neelam set to changing the each of the nervous women, a few at a time. The rustle of blue-black wings filled the air as they transformed them and they fled through the newly formed hole into the night air. Only a few were left now.

“Now Magda and Alethea, you go with the last group-”

He stopped and fell to his knees as a wave of dark sorcery bubbled over Neelam’s body. He raged as the translucent sphere engulfed him and Surya within its prison. Both Wizard and familiar beat against the brutal magic and cursed violently.

A dark soul stepped into their presence.

“Yes, they are the last,” Obsydia said coolly, standing in the doorway, “and you will watch them die in my dark cause.”

Solem seized Magda by the throat, lifting her off the ground. Before she could act, two foul-smelling goblins rushed from the shadows, pinning Alethea’s arms behind her. More guards swarmed into the chamber, swiftly taking charge of the few remaining prisoners.

Anger smoldered in Obsydia's moon-colored eyes. She gracefully circled the dark shroud that entrapped Neelam. "I thought I smelled the blood of a wizard. You're out of your territory little man. You dare to offend me? You dare to be a hero? There are no heroes left in the world, wizard. I have made sure of that."

"You demon bitch, let me out of this bubble and I'll demonstrate my heroics."

"I shall...after the ceremony. But, you will have the honor of witnessing my new triumph first-the birth of new devils more powerful than this world has seen. Then I will see to your punishment-personally." She turned to Solem, "Bring him."

They chained the remaining women to the black pillars circling the fire pit. Alethea and Magda, Solem shackled side by side.

"I refuse to give them the satisfaction of weeping," Alethea shouted proudly.

Magda bit her lip to stop it from quivering. "You're braver than I am. My poor Uncle risked so much for me, and now he will die too. I'm sorry, Alethea."

"Hush. It's not your fault."

"I wish...I wish..." Magda wept, tears streaming.

Obsydia's gently touched a lock of Magda's blonde hair. "You are the first of the Dwarven race I have met in this world. Tell me; are all of you so impetuous?"

Magda sickened at her touch. It burned her, not with heat, but with the soulless cruelty of the Dark Queen. "I wish I could set us free. I wish...I wish I could," Magda said with passion. "If I thought I could wish to destroy you and the gods smite you where you stand, I would wish that too."

"The gods are not listening," Obsydia sighed. "Worship me and know salvation. I may spare you."

"I would rather die!" Magda cried.

"So you shall," Obsydia smiled.

Neelam and Surya, still trapped in the black swirl of evil sorcery, raged harder. Magda looked at Neelam's determined fury. "No, I will not be another bone for this evil queen to gnaw on. I must not surrender to this," she thought.

Obsydia left the circle of sacrifice and regally took her seat on the throne. "Begin the ritual," she commanded.

The dark-robed handmaidens began their demon song. The leader, Shade, chanted her strange words. The fire pit flared high into the night sky.

The chaos of fire and death swelled Magda's anger. "Free...must get free," she cried.

She glanced at her uncle struggling in his captivity, and noticed faint cracks in the dark sphere that held him. He would get free, if he had the time, if only she could help!

Then something stirred within her, strange and wondrous, as though her very being became a cool white fire demanding release. Just as one of the handmaidens touched her with the blade, a burst of bright energy poured from her body, knocking the handmaiden several feet into the flames. The demon handmaid screamed as the pure, magical energy charred her skin. Sparks of energy arced like lightning, striking the already damaged prison that held Neelam. The bubble shattered, and he burst free, Surya at his side.

"Stop them! Kill the wizard! And that girl! That wretched girl!" Obsydia cried.

Alethea gasped aloud at Magda's transformation. "You said you weren't magical?"

"I guess I'm a late bloomer!"

Shade leapt at Magda, but the young girl's untrained wizardry erupted again as the High Priestess grabbed for her. A spark of white energy burned Shade's hands and she recoiled in agony.

Obsydia raised her hands and bolts of darkness arced toward Magda, but Neelam jumped in front of her, raising a shield of light around both of them. Obsydia's attack wilted against the strength of Neelam's magic. He turned, using both sword and wizardry, to strike down the soldiers foolish enough to try and subdue him. Neelam barked a sudden incantation, and about three dozen Ucaran warriors shape shifted from the desert rats that roamed everywhere about the sands. The Ucarans quickly took to horseback, their steeds having also transformed from the desert vermin, too common to notice amidst the chaos.

Magda and Alethea rejoiced, as the transformed warriors drew their bright blades, and a tall black-skinned man in flowing robes, obviously their leader, commanded, "Kill the enemy! Save the women!"

Magda quickly freed the other prisoners. Alethea leapt into the fray, snatching up a fallen sword and slashing at anything that attacked her.

"We need to leave now!" Magda cried.

Obsydia's rage became unbound. An Ucaran warrior in a foolish brave act mounted the steps of her dais, steely resolve in his eyes. In a single motion, Solem quickly barred his way, driving his own sword through the warrior's heart.

Without a word, Obsydia shoved Solem aside and walked into the fray. The arrows and daggers of the Ucarans unable to harm her, they reluctantly retreated from her path.

The handmaidens dispersed during the fight, but the newly born demon raged at the scent of fresh-spilt blood. Obsydia, pointing to the Dwarves, commanded it, “Kill them!”

Magda panicked and stumbled. Neelam ran to her, helping her up as the demon advanced on them. The creature lashed out mercilessly, ripping flesh and howling, against both ally and enemy, who got in its way.

“We need a distraction,” Neelam shouted.

Surya flew down, her special power of light flaring from her snowy feathers like a small sun. The brightness of her light blinded even the demon called from hell. Goblins and trolls howled.

Neelam laughed and hastily called up a fiery storm that sent bolts of lightning upon the heads of Obsydia’s remaining army. The lightning also struck the demon, but only angered it.

Even Neelam had the sense to back away from death.

“Retreat!” Neelam shouted above the din. “We have what we came for!”

A nearby Ucaran leapt to his horse, and deftly lifted Alethea into the saddle behind him. Alethea, still shouting curses, her sparse rags barely covering sweaty, well-shaped thighs, swung her bloodied steel, hoping to strike any final opponent foolish enough to follow.

The Ucarans fled demon fortress, the women safe in their arms, passing beyond the enemy reach with the speed born from a gift of magic. Neelam’s nervous but brave pony trotted up to him. Neelam picked up Magda and set her upon the pony, and smacked its rump. “Run like the wind,” he commanded.

The pony, fueled by wizard magic, ran so fast that no one could catch them. The small animal bolted out of the gate of bones into the dark desert.

Obsydia descended upon Dwarven Wizard, hands curled into claws. She threw her dark magic, wave upon wave, against him. Each attack he managed to deflect with his own shield of light. The streams of her unrestrained power made molten, black smudges in his defenses.

Amid the crash of thunder and rainless lightning, Neelam winked at her, “Fear not. We’ll meet again, Obsydia.”

In the single beat of a mortal heart, Neelam the Wizard shapeshifted into a white eagle and flew into the sky with Surya at his side.

One of the remaining soldiers rushed to Obsydia, “What now, my Queen? Should we go after them?”

Without bothering to even glance at him, Obsydia reached out, and with one slim hand, snapped his neck.

“No,” She whispered to the dead soldier. “Not today.”

Solem, bloodstained and breathing heavy, knelt at her feet. “Forgive me, my Goddess.”

“Rise, Solem. This is a sober experience. A lone wizard defied me and won today. The mages of this world are a threat. One that must be dealt with. For now, choose several of the surviving soldiers that failed me and chain them to the pillars. They will be the hosts for the first generation of demons. Men should work just as well. Recruit better warriors next time. Later, I must think about how to destroy the mage races. They are a greater menace than I thought.”

“Yes, Queen Obsydia,” he bowed.

The weary travelers did not feel safe until they had passed well beyond the borders of Skarros. The massive strain of using so much strong magic weakened Neelam more than he cared to admit. But once clear of the demon fortress, he fell into a deep coma and slept for two days. Alethea and Magda looked after him as they rode for Ucara and freedom.

In Ucara, they all gathered to celebrate the return of the stolen women and their victory in battle against the Bloodstone Queen with a feast.

Neelam reclined in the tent, sipping honey wine, instructing his newly magical niece on the fundamentals of magic. Surya preened her feathers and accepted tidbits from Jelani, who enjoyed doting on the bird.

Alethea entered, freshly bathed and adorned in a blue silk gown that clung to her ripe body. Her smoldering smile was not lost on Neelam.

“Jelani, I have a question,” he asked.

“Yes, Neelam...you have only to ask. Many Ucaran tribes are grateful to you for saving their women. We owe you everything, Neelam,”

“Well then, do you think you can arrange for the purchase of a hundred horses for me?”

Jelani laughed, “What does a wizard need with a hundred horses?”

Neelam grinned, “I hear that’s the going price for a good bride.”

THE END

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