

# The Red Palace

By Verna McKinnon

*There are many tales of Obsydia's early conquests in our world. The legends are ripe with her deeds of chaos and the death toll of her reign. But the first triumph of the Bloodstone Queen was horrific in its darkness. A few souls escaped the terrors of her victory. It is from these witnesses I record the bloody tragedy of the Red Palace and its victims.*

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

Shrouded in crimson velvet, Obsydia walked the curved balcony of her black tower, watching the lightning dance along violent, gray clouds. Intense, primal thoughts of conquest obsessed the dark queen. The cocoon of storm shielding her fortress only infused her restless mood, for she longed to explore the world beyond the tower. Beyond the veil of mystical storm, the ocean roiled thousands of feet below, contrasting with the calm shoreline in the distance where the continent began. Potent senses breathed in the raw earth and tangy salt air. The world was ripe for her coming.

"Are you daydreaming, my Queen?" Shade asked, stepping outside. The moonlight cast a greenish hue to gray demon skin, but her black eyes glittered brightly in the shadows.

Obsydia tilted her head curiously and asked, "What is a daydream?"

"A human expression. In daydreams, they imagine forbidden or unattainable desires-wealth, power, love, beauty...even pain. Mortal mortals are full of exotic humor."

"Dangerous wishes for insignificant creatures. Their wants are dust to me."

"You are immortal, my Queen, and above the petty goals of the lesser beings. Should I summon Solem for your amusement?"

The name of her warrior-priest spawned a vibrant smile. She changed him from human man to demon with her immortal blood kiss. Solem still looked human, except for the red eyes, which were once sky blue. To her delight, his skills exceeded warrior talents. Her body heated with the memory of their first night. He enjoyed the pain she inflicted. She pushed those images aside, for work demanded her attention now.

"No. Let him sleep. He needs the rest," Obsydia replied. "I am restless though. I must ponder ways to conquer this world for my father, Ahridum. How do I begin?"

Shade grinned sharply, "That is the purpose of your coming, my Queen."

“How do I achieve this mortal task?” Obsydia asked, though speaking more to her Eternal Ahridum of Darkness far beyond, than to her demon handmaiden.

Shade replied, “Solem is gathering more followers to build an army.”

“I know. But I must go beyond that. I need more than mercenaries. I need more than a few warrior-priests that obey me because I have made them demons in the bodies of men. I need worshippers to slaughter the world for me. I also desire to explore this world of earth and water. I am a living goddess, yet my mortal essence is tender with memory of the living earth and sea. I know the secrets of its dark waters and the wild lands fertile with life and death. I can smell the blood of humans that walked this shore, full of mortality like a plague.”

The cry of a lone seagull pulled into the gravity of the storm shield distracted Obsydia. She extended her hand and extracted the bird from the violent winds, and brought it to the stone floor at her feet. The frightened, soaked bird lay on the dark stone before her, breathing heavily. She stood over the creature and peered into its terrified eyes. “I look like a woman, but my shape is illusory,” Obsydia mused. “I know that I am the hell of dreams. Even this simple bird has this wisdom. It’s an elemental creature. Food, sleep, and mating are all that matter. Except for now of course. Its heart is full of terror.” She waved her hand and said, “Take flight, lowly creature. Be glad I have better things to kill.”

The bird took flight and fled her sinister presence, flying high above the storm.

“An unexpected mercy,” Shade commented softly.

“My actions are not kind, but sensible. Animals do not worship gods. They have better things to do.” Obsydia paced a moment, and said to her handmaiden, “I may achieve dominion easier than anticipated.”

“You have a plan, my Queen?”

“The world is full of victims subjugated by defeat. Men war on the will of a god-or the will of a man saying that god spoke through him. Religion has an intoxicating influence. This world is crowded with temples and cathedrals, devoted to the Eternals of Light. Even my father, the feared Eternal of Darkness, Ahridum, has temples where men congregate. Worship of gods allows humans to feel important; that because they were created by gods, they are equally precious in the eyes of the universe. That is the key to my conquest.”

“Mortals are prone to such delusions, my Queen,” Shade agreed. “Many are weak and not worthy of effort.”

Obsydia retreated inside to the comfort of the tower and cast off her velvet cloak. A handmaiden mutely retrieved her garment and stepped back into the gloom. Obsydia paced the vast chamber, her scarlet lips pursed in thought. Only Shade followed her Dark Goddess as she revealed her plans with zeal.

“I will seek to convert these petty creatures to a new faith,” Obsydia said. “Me.”

“An Obsydian cult,” Shade approved. “It is inspired.”

“I need their worship to do my bidding. I will reveal myself to a select few to begin my crusade. As a goddess among these lower beings, I will have temples, war, followers...sacrifice,” Obsydia beamed.

“Theology is a valuable tool for manipulation,” Shade agreed. “Do you intend to make more like Solem, my Queen?”

“No. There must only be a few like him. I need to carve out my congregation on this world with broken hearts willing to stain their souls for what they desire.” Obsydia sought out the Eye of Shadows that loomed in the antechamber; its odor of powerful diabolical magic permeating the room. She inhaled the mirror’s mystical aroma, enjoying the feel of power as she touched the exquisite ebonite frame tenderly. “My forces will rise through worship, not only conquest of battle. I will seek souls that barren and in need of faith to cling to.” Obsydia faced the mirror-her moon-colored eyes luminous in the dim light. “Mirror, mirror, reveal the wounded and lost with rotted dreams that cry out unheard. Show me the weak-hearted that will rise to my will.” The glass dissolved into mist and shadows. The black jeweled frame shimmered with bright power. Scenes unfolded before Obsydia of lost kingdoms and dead loves.”

“There was so much pain in the world,” Obsydia said, “You would think they would have learned to embrace it by now.”

Shade poured a goblet of wine and handed it to her, “Humans are not known for wisdom.”

“Are they the only race?” Obsydia asked.

“There are three races-Human, Elfsharan, and the Dwarves. The humans are easier prey. Elfsharans are a race long favored by the Light Gods. Dwarves and Elfsharans live apart from human in their own lands. Humans do make up most of the population. They also war amongst each other, as the other two races do not.”

“You are an excellent teacher, Shade.”

“Thank you, Goddess,” Shade bowed.

She sipped delicately of the ruby red wine, watching the scenes the magic mirror revealed, until one finally trapped Obsydia’s attention. “Mirror, show me the weeping woman again.”

The mirror revealed a woman, grotesquely obese beneath her vibrant silks. A brown-skinned bald man, his simple linen tunic straining over his own wide girth, knelt beside her. He fed her plump honey buns, which she ate between sobs.

“They interest you, my Queen?” Shade questioned, watching the tearful scene. “They seem so insignificant and weak.”

“That is why they matter. She has ties to power that can be elevated,” Obsydia replied, drawing upon the knowledge of the mirror. “Her name is Anjana. She is but an echo in her palace. Once, she was a great queen, the first wife of King Kadesh the Conqueror. He began his trade as a warlord, and now he rules three kingdoms with iron sword and great armies. Anjana was given to him by an uncaring father trying to save his throne. Yet, the fool loves this man that has so easily forgotten her. She gave him children, all dead through palace intrigue. Kadesh took many concubines and no longer visits her bed. Jealous harem concubines poisoned her children to make room for their own. She is sorrow now. Food is her only solace. Her brown-skinned eunuch feeds her with joy, for he loves her, despite her vast, misshapen body. He cannot offer her anything else. A pathetic pair, which makes them vulnerable to enticement.” Obsydia smiled sweetly, “I will visit Anjana. Summon the handmaids. We have much work to do.”

“What do you plan, my Queen?”

“To offer her the fruit of temptation.”

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Anjana, Queen of the Three Kingdoms, and first wife of King Kadesh Sin the Conqueror, sat by her window watching the sunlight fade. The airy, elegant chamber was devoid of the chattering of fellow wives and concubines. She loathed their presence anyway. Empty-headed girls, eager to dance and fawn over her husband, to writhe in his bed for a bauble or trinket. It has been years since Anjana felt her husband’s touch; years since her children were poisoned so cleverly by the whores of the harem.

She shifted uncomfortably, for her great girth made even walking a trial. A few steps left her breathless and aching. Voluminous robes of fine silk did little to conceal her enormous body. The laughter and cruel remarks of the other women in the harem isolated her. Only her devoted eunuch, Raman, offered kindness in her isolation.

So she was alone in her palace suite. Once, her face and body was praised by poets and princes. She never looked in the mirror now. Smooth skin the shade of dark honey no longer felt her husband’s caress. Her large black eyes, beautiful even without the deft line of kohl, were often red with tears. Her wealth of luxuriant black hair flowed down her back like raw silk, her only undamaged beauty.

Raman knocked gently, his voice breaking her morose thoughts, “I have brought your supper, my Queen.”

“Thank you, Raman. You may enter.”

He smiled warmly as he placed the heavy laden food tray on the fine cedar table. “The night is chilly. You should take care, my Queen.” He covered her shoulders with a bright shawl and lit lamps to brighten the room.

Anjana smiled at his care. He always addressed her by her proper title. Not even her husband acknowledged her status anymore. Raman helped her to the table and handed her linen napkin. She ate the spicy golden rice and gravy-soaked meat. She consumed several pieces of flat, soft bread. For dessert, she devoured sweet nut cakes and drank honey wine. But they did not sooth her ravaged heart.

“Raman, what girl has my husband chosen tonight?”

Raman frowned and shrugged, “Just some little wisp of a slut.”

“Tell me, Raman.”

He sighed, “Jasmine.”

“Ah, his favorite flower. Hid chief concubine is my bane, I know she poisoned by babies though I cannot prove it. He could not believe his flower could harm his babies.”

“You are still first wife. Anyway, since Jasmine became pregnant he has not shared her bed for pleasure. He spends time with her now only because he hopes for a son with such desperation he sleeps with her. Her time is soon and men cannot bear to witness childbirth. She will most likely have another daughter.”

“A shame he did not take such care when I carried his children. Three sons I bore him, three sons died. All within a fortnight of their births. He did not show me such protection.”

“Surely it is the punishment of the gods that Kadesh has no sons. All of his other sluts have born only daughters. Only you bear the title of Queen. Blessed Anjana, you are loved by the people. Your generosity does not go unnoticed. They sing your praises and revere your name. You are the daughter of a king. He is a conqueror with no true noble blood. You are a true queen.”

A hollow crown, without love, sweet Raman. I would trade all for release from this misery.”

A commotion outside her chambers alerted Anjana and Raman. For a brief instant Anjana’s fat face dared to smile. Her husband always had several bodyguards with him, making a great deal of noise when they made way for the king. Raman quickly helped Anjana off her chair. She clumsily knelt on the lush carpet and bowed her head.

King Kadesh Sin walked into the chamber, flanked by four soldiers. A conqueror is always careful to have his guards near. He was dressed in sun-golden silk robes and his turban

shimmered with a giant ruby, complimenting his olive skin and glossy, neatly trimmed black beard.

Kadesh impatiently waved his hand and briskly said, “Rise Anjana, I have come to tell you something.”

Raman helped her up, a difficult maneuver that pained her swollen, massive body. She finally stood, with as much dignity as she could muster.

“It warms my heart that you visit me, Your Majesty.”

He raised his hand to silence her. “I have only respect for you, Anjana. But things have changed between us. I have decided it would be best to divorce. I will give you a house and a pension. You may even take Raman for company.”

Bitter tears blinded her. “But I am your wife...your first wife!” she wept.

“The kingdom needs a queen who can be seen in public. The kingdom needs an heir. And Jasmine since became pregnant, she desires to be a true wife. The seers assure me it will be a boy. I would prefer my future heir’s mother to have the title of Queen. Surely, you understand. I will send men to help you pack.”

She crumbled, “But husband, I love you. How can you cast me aside?”

He recoiled from her begging, revulsion twisting his handsome face, and said sharply, “You have served your purpose, Anjana. But you failed me.”

“You have your crown because of me,” Anjana interjected, “My royal blood in marriage secured you this kingdom!”

“I need sons! Not a fat, bloated sow wallowing in her own filthy pity. Be grateful I do not banish you not send you to the streets to beg, though you could stand to miss a meal. Many meals.”

He brusquely walked out the door, his warriors following him.

Sobs wracked her body. The tender ministrations of Raman were futile. Grief and loss burned her soul.

Obsydia watched the scene with satisfaction.

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Night fell. The air was mute of birdsong or crickets. Even the iridescent moon moths hid from the darkness.

Anjana’s heart had turned to stone. She lay awake, despite drinking wine heavily laced with blood poppy potion. The drought did not bring sleep. She breathed laboriously, wishing

each breath were her last. On the floor, Raman slept restlessly, a devoted servant to an unwanted queen.

A wave of shadow exploded in the room, so intense Anjana shielded her eyes for fear her soul would be drawn into its black void. The air sparked hot and dry as the desert. Death had come to fetch her soul. She would gladly give it and quit this wretched life.

But it wasn't death.

Dread clutched her heart at the mystery unfolding. She cried out, stirring Raman from sleep. He too saw the terrible vision and shuddered.

A woman of devastating beauty stepped from the shadows. A dark halo shrouded her flawless face. Anjana realized that shadow that flowed from her skull was ethereal hair, tendrils of it curled around her face like smoke. A gown of black chiffon clung to the slim body, contrasting with bone-pale skin that shimmered like pearls. Scarlet lips smiled at her and it was so terrifying Anjana wanted to away. But could not. Captivating eyes, moon-bright, looked upon Anjana with intense power.

Obsydia's red mouth spoke caressingly, "Do not fear me, Queen Anjana. I come with tidings of joy. Blessed are you, for you are chosen to serve."

"Are you god or demon?" whispered Anjana grasping Raman's hands in terror.

"I am Obsydia, a living goddess, born of Eternal Ahridum. I am Ahridum's gift to this world. Rejoice, Queen Anjana. Know the salvation of Darkness."

"Ahridum is the Dark Eternal," Anjana whimpered. "The father of demons!"

"Lies spoken by false prophets. Have the Eternals of Light blessed you?" Obsydia responded lightly. "Did they protect your babies when jealous whores and palace spies poisoned them? Where is your husband now? Lying with another concubine he will soon call wife and queen."

Anjana crumbled at her sharp truth.

"He has cast you out."

"Yes," Anjana whispered, head bowed in misery.

"He used you, a true daughter of a prince, to realize his coarse ambition and rule."

"Yes," Anjana was forced to repeat bitterly.

"Kadesh has slain all that stood in his way in his quest for power. Now he slays your heart."

"Yes," Anjana cried, folding into a ball of quivering jelly.

“Kadesh reaped the riches-land, jewels, women...yet he reject his greatest treasure-you. Grief has consumed your soul and body. It has been scoured empty with pain. No food or drink can fill it-but I can fill it,” Obsydia commanded.

Raman shivered with terror, but found courage to speak, “You are evil made flesh. Oracles have spoken of your coming since the dark star fell over a century ago.”

Such poor oracles who keep repeating the same doom without truth of what I am.”

What are you!” Raman cried. “How can you help my mistress?”

“I can restore Anjana’s beauty and give her the rightful throne stolen by Kadesh. And I can restore your manhood, eunuch. My darkness is the way to redemption and power. Worship me and know the salvation of Dark.”

“Evil is wrong,” Anjana said shakily. “The way of Light is better.”

“Light?” laughed Obsydia, circling them like a beautiful serpent ready to strike. “Light is not the true power-Darkness is. Your priests say that the twin moons in the sky, Ku and Tu are the creation of the Light Eternals, Rhone and Araema. But what is light without the darkness that cradles it. Tiny pricks in the velvet dark. Even the stars that sparkle are nothing compared to the vast cloak of darkness that is the universe. The bright sun bows before night each sunset. Consider darkness as an ocean. Are the fish in the ocean great? No, they are but particles of insignificance to the vast seas that hold them. Darkness is the way to truth and salvation. Ahridum sent me to this world to save it from light that has so corrupted the hearts of men. I am your savior.”

“But what can we do? We are nothing,” Raman said shakily.

“You are chosen, my children. You are chosen to rise up against false prophets. A new era is before you. Worship me and I shall give you all you desire. Kadesh will be the first to pay for his sins.”

“Kadesh,” whimpered Anjana, “He doesn’t love me anymore.”

“He never did.” Obsydia walked toward the frightened pair. “He treated you worse than any palace whore. Embrace your true power, Anjana. He is the usurper. He is nothing without you. You are the rightful queen. He is not worthy of you.”

“I-I hate him now,” Anjana cried. “I wish I could kill him.”

“Yes,” soothed Obsydia. “He treats your love like offal. Kadesh followed his own ambitions.” She stood over Anjana, and whispered, “What do you truly wish, Queen Anjana?”

“To kill Kadesh! To make him suffer!” Anjana howled, the black seed of hatred blossoming. “I want to kill him and all the cruel harem women that mocked me and...And-”

“Murdered your innocent babies?” Obsydia added.

Anjana's stopped weeping. "Yes. They must pay for their sins against me."

"No, Queen Anjana, they must pay for their sins against me and you are the hand of righteousness now."

Obsydia walked to a tall mirror covered with a tapestry and ripped the colorful cloth away. She commanded, "Come to the mirror and see what Kadesh reject. See what I alone can give you, Queen Anjana."

Anjana, aided by Raman, faced the cruel mirror. She trembled when she saw its reflection, not her fat body tormented by loss, but a slim beautiful girl of sixteen again, cleansed of life's sorrows. She gasped at such hope and reached for the glass to touch her image gently.

"That is not a pathetic cast-off I see ion the mirror, but a radiant woman capable of having any man she chooses," Obsydia encouraged.

"Illusions," scoffed Raman. "Trickery by a demon woman."

"Perhaps you should look again at your image," Obsydia suggested smoothly.

Raman looked into the glass. His face and body was lean and handsome.

"How old were you when slavers cut away your manhood and made you a eunuch? Destroyed your hope of love and children."

"I was thirteen," Raman replied coldly. "Raiders destroyed my village and took slaves of the survivors. Some of the boys were made eunuchs for palace harems. The gods chose me for that fate."

Obsydia shook her head and said, "No Raman, the gods left you to rot. Don't you see-men have long been duped by the forgetful Light Gods." She whispered in his ear, "Darkness never forgets."

Raman wept.

"I am your Goddess now. Your protector. I offer you the joy of worshipping me. Build temples to my glory, raise armies to do my bidding, sacrifice the unworthy, and life shall be sweet for you both. Lead my Holy War. Be the new saints of a new order."

"Even if my beauty is restored, how can I take the crown," Anjana asked, looking at Obsydia with increasing love.

"I will help you achieve power," Obsydia promised. "Do you cast aside all other gods and worship me?"

"Yes," cried Anjana. "I will worship only you, great Obsydia."

Raman bowed his head to the floor and said, "Yes, great Obsydia. I offer you my body and soul."

“Yes...body and soul,” Obsydia whispered. She revealed two rings, slim bands of ebonite, each set with a bloodstone jewel. “Put upon these rings, my children, for they will mark you as my chosen ones. I will call to you through these rings, for they are blest, as you now are.”

Anjana and Raman each took a ring, slipping them on their fingers with quivering hands and the rings shaped to fit the wearers instantly.

“The ring feels hot,” Anjana said with a tinge of fear.

“Because they carry my power,” Obsydia assured her. “You are mine now. Forever.”

“What must I do now, Holy Obsydia, Goddess of Shadows,” Anjana asked.

A red apple appeared in Obsydia’s white hand. “Eat of this fruit. Share this apple and grow beautiful and whole again. Take care though, for though it shall give you what you desire, the cost is great pain for a day and night.”

Anjana held out her plump hands like a greedy child and seized the apple. She bit into it fiercely. The ripe fruit was not crisp and white beneath the skin, but a bloody, pulpy mass. She offered the next bite to Raman. He too shared in their feast.

“Go ahead, eat your hearts out. You won’t need them anymore,” Obsydia promised darkly.

They had just begun to suffer the penance for their evil contract as Obsydia vanished into the shadows.

The wails of their suffering echoed throughout the palace.

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Obsydia delighted in her conversation. She stepped through the Eye of Shadow, exhilarated by her conquest. Her waiting handmaidens knelt before her as she returned in triumph.

“You were right, my Queen,” Shade commented, rising from her obeisance, “they succumbed to your power.”

Obsydia twirled about like a young girl, for in fact she was only a handful of days old despite her mature appearance. “They were so lost! So eager to fall from grace.”

“Now what, Queen Obsydia?” Shade asked.

“We must act quickly. Summon Solem. I have a number of tasks for him.”

Later, Obsydia sat on her throne, watching Solem approach. His panther-like strides swift and graceful. He knelt before her feet, touching his forehead to the marble floor.

“Rise Solem. Would you please you me?”

“Whatever you desire, my Goddess. It shall be done.”

“Go to every temple, every tavern, every corner, in the kingdom of King Kadesh. Speak of his treason to the people, and to his queen. Speak of a new goddess, Obsydia, and how I might redeem them.”

“Will they believe the words of a stranger?”

“They will believe you with this.” She handed him a small vial of delicate black glass. “This potion will make any who hears you heed your words. They will fall under the spell your words and believe them. Tell them Kadesh used foul sorcery to defeat those kingdoms that stood against him, and to deform his queen. Anjana needs the aid of her people. Use the mirror to travel. It will be quicker.”

“I shall obey,” he replied, taking the vial in his gloved hand.

“I wonder how my new acolytes are doing?” she wondered aloud.

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Anjana and Raman suffered great agony through the hours of transformation. In the shadowy chamber, long abandoned by guards, they endured travails of pain so ravaging they longed for death. Those few servants that came near fled again in fear. They did not know if Kadesh might have poisoned the poor queen; and they knew that to bear witness to such foul play would surely cost them their lives.

Throughout the night and day of their transformation, whispers filled the taverns, markets, even the palace of Kadesh, and his dark dealings. Houses and temples murmured of the King’s cruelty to his people, that he murdered the Queen’s father and used evil sorcery to deform her. They whispered of the sacrificing his own sons to achieve his power. Queen Anjana was the true ruler. And as they related these stories, one person to the next, the only source any could recall was a hooded man with strange, crimson eyes. That man of course of Solem, Obsydia’s warrior priest. With his words and dark enchantment was cast over any that heard them.

In the dark tower, Obsydia’s handmaidens cast their runes into bronze braziers of unholy flames, chanting incantations that mixed with foul smoke and filling the air with evil. Obsydia led these Rights of Eternal Power; far more potent than any common sorcery. She smiled. The grim enchantment over Kadesh’s kingdoms was complete.

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Anjana moaned and opened her eyes. She moved; the sensation strange as she was no longer encumbered by her bulk. She realized it was night by the total darkness of her chamber. The lamps were unlit, and the moons dark. She tried to stand, slipping in a pool of something warm and sticky. Crawling to the lamps, she struck a fire wand and touched it to the wick. A warm, amber glow hurt her eyes for a moment, but allowed her to see. She touched her body,

which was no longer obese; the rolls bulging fat gone... no, not gone. Raising herself on her elbows, she saw she had discarded the bulky flesh, as a butterfly sheds its cocoon to emerge sleek and with beautiful wings. The disgusting mound of flesh made her queasy. Her body felt raw. Stumbling to the mirror, she stared with amazement at her reflection.

Anjana's naked body was smeared with blood, but beneath the scarlet stains she was young and sleek again. She admired her tapered, tiny waist, full breasts and rounded hips and buttocks. Her belly was flat; unmarred by childbirth. A face, no longer hidden beneath thick layers of fat, was now youthful. A small pointed chin, high cheekbones, full lips, and large slanted eyes. She was beautiful again! Anjana laughed, touching the mirror, bereft of all innocence. Plans of revenge, against all who ever tormented her, suddenly filled her mind.

"Anjana," a whispered, hoarse voice pushed back her thoughts of vengeance.

"Raman!" she cried, stumbling toward his naked and bloody form; the skin of his old body having fallen away to reveal a handsome face, masculine and strong. With a physique sculpted to a perfection that only darkness could conceive. Below the waist, she saw the truth of Obsydia's gospel—he was a man again, and she longed to use his manhood now, feeling the heat rising in her new body.

He opened his eyes and smiled weakly. "My beautiful Queen, you are more radiant than the sun."

"And you are my moon, Raman," she whispered, kissing his bloody hand. "Now, we shall have justice. We shall rule together."

"The doors to the chamber burst open. Soldiers armed with spears and swords surrounded them. "How dare you," Anjana hissed. "I am still Queen!"

"No longer!" cried a ragged, tenor voice from beyond the curtain of steel. A monk strode into the room, robed in pale golden robes. He was very old, a withered raisin of a man with black eyes and sun-browned skin. The hem of his ragged habit was stained by the blood that splattered the floor. "The god Rhone has sent me a vision of your evil." He held the silver symbol of Rhone out as a talisman and raged, "The daughter of evil has corrupted you. You must be destroyed or our kingdom is lost."

King Kadesh stormed into the room, his dark eyes flamed with anger. He gasped at Anjana's appearance, but kept his distance. "This holy seer speaks of evil in my palace, Anjana. I see that you have indeed, and that your price was beauty. The monk says you made a pact with Ahridum, the Eternal of Darkness."

Anjana smiled coldly and said, "Not with a god, but a goddess, husband. And my payment is more than you will be able to endure."

The quivering monk cried, "Darkness made flesh fouled this room. The oracles are right! Evil has come into our world."

"And it holds no pity," Anjana spat. She entreated the palace soldiers, holding her arms wide, as though to embrace them. "See the true evil, good soldiers, in my husband. Kadesh put a curse on me and stole my throne from me. Do not any of you remember my father, the King? This man was a conqueror only. Throw down your weapons and bow before me, your rightful Queen."

"Lies!" cried the monk, who attempted to strike her, but Raman pushed him down and held him by the throat.

Anjana spoke boldly as she faced her accusers. "You have been fed lies by false prophets and priests. Light is the false path. Darkness has released me. There is a new Goddess that has been given onto us-and her name is Obsydia!"

"Blasphemer!" cried the monk.

"Kill them. Kill them both," King Kadesh commanded.

The men poised to strike, but wavered, the shadow of Solem's mystical words clouding their minds. The seeds of doubt that Solem planted flowered.

"Fools! I will kill them myself!" Kadesh shouted and grabbed a spear from a stunned soldier.

Fear cooled Anjana's bravery. She gasped as Kadesh struck.

But a slim, pale hand snapped the spear in two before it pierced her flesh.

Obsydia.

She barely touched Kadesh, but her power flung him across the room. A shimmer of shadow formed a nimbus around her as she stood before the mortals. They backed away, fearful and dropped to their knees.

Anjana and Raman prostrated themselves before Obsydia, who had appeared from the shadows without warning. In her dark glory she was terrible as she was radiant in her beauty.

"See your true salvation!" Anjana cried. "Kneel before your new Goddess! Give praise to Obsydia, daughter of Ahridum."

The old monk sprang forward, and his holy symbol brushed Obsydia's hand. The silver glowed briefly. The monk gazed into her silver eyes and stammered in the face of true darkness. His prayers failed in his mouth as she gripped his throat. She snapped his neck with a deft turn of her wrist and released him. He fell to the floor like a pile of broken sticks.

Obsydia, her red lips livid, said, “It is time to sanctify your crown, Queen Anjana. Lead the palace to the temple of my enemy-the Rhone temple. It must be deconsecrated now. Make it mine with the blood of holy sacrifice. Tear down their foul symbols of Light. Kill the priests and monks. But...the first sacrifice shall be of your choosing,” Obsydia offered.

Anjana’s feral smile burned those who witnessed it. “Let the false king and my husband, Kadesh, be the first to offer his heart. Then his chosen bride, Jasmine shall follow him. I beg only that the baby she carries be given to me. She killed my infant sons. Now I will claim hers.”

“So it shall be,” Obsydia answered. “Worship me and know salvation. Let the temple be sanctified with the blood of many hearts.” She faded into the shadows.

A rage ensued, casting a horrific spell over many in its wake. Kadesh and his favorite concubine, Jasmine, were carried to the temple by the mad throng of people. The ancient steppe pyramid of the sun, Rhone’s sacred symbol, lost its light. The icons and statues were torn down. The ancient scrolls and holy books, burned. Blood flowed like a river of raging sorrow. Anjana and her consort, Raman, led the new ceremony in Obsydia’s new temple.

Solem, Obsydia’s warrior priest, guided the new worshippers in the ritual. He carried a bloodstone mask of Obsydia’s face, leading his dark robed mercenaries up the steps of the pyramid. The people gathered at the foot of the newly dark temple of Obsydia went wild with blood lust. Kadesh was forced to an altar of black stone and his living heart was cut from his body. Jasmine, Kadesh’s concubine, heavy with child, suffered a more gruesome fate as she was carefully cut open by Anjana and her baby taken from her bleeding body. It lived, a boy, who wailed with life and terror as Anjana held him to her breast. Anjana laughed when Jasmine, who had survived that horror, had her heart ripped out and thrown into the sacrificial fires.

Raman, with Solem as his side, was guided to lead the crowd in prayer to their new goddess, Obsydia.

Obsydia watched the festivities through the Eye of Shadow. Her handmaidens danced around her in celebration.

Light did nothing to stop her rise. But she was bothered. Obsydia touched her hand. The silver symbol of Rhone had touched her briefly, and though she felt no pain, it left a faint red mark for a moment before it faded. This disturbed her enjoyment of the holy day.

“I must take care,” Obsydia whispered, “that light can sting me.”

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The Dwarven warrior with red hair that waited by the river was impatient. He was more than he appeared though. Not only did he have command of the small army, but a snowy eagle sat upon his shoulder. Along with a sword, he carried a staff with the top carved into the likeness of the eagle’s face.

He was a wizard.

The children and adults under his care were quiet with fear. Neelam and his men, both human and dwarf, had spent the whole night and following day since the chaos getting people not possessed by Obsydia's diabolism out of the city. He stared at the lights in the distance, of what had been a temple of Rhone. Now it was a place of death. He was about to guide them out of this hell when someone cried out.

"Neelam wait, there is another coming," cried a woman, pointing across the river.

A young priest stumbled in the distance, swimming with desperation across the narrow, shallow river. His yellow robes were ragged and stained with blood.

Neelam strode over and helped pull the youth out of the water. He helped him to stand and gave him a blanket. "Easy boy, you're safe now. If no one else is coming, we need to cross the border before sunrise."

The boy nodded mutely, his face ashen with terror.

"Stop shaking boy," Neelam said roughly. "We need to get moving now."

Surya, his snow eagle, commented softly, "Be easy on the boy. He has been through a horror."

The young woman said, "We have all seen horror this night."

"How did you know to come help us?" the young monk asked.

Neelam replied, "An oracle named Ambera, who's also a friend of mine, had a vision. I wish I had come sooner, but all I could do, according to Ambera, is get the ones not corrupted by Obsydia out of the country."

"We are lost," wept the boy, who fell to his knees. "What do we do now?"

Neelam laid a hand on his shoulder and said, "You must be strong. The war of Darkness and Light has come. We must all be warriors now."

THE END

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