

## A Piece of Kindling (Veithen)

Nemere rumbled all around and underneath Veithen's prone form, dislodging a shower of the smallest pebbles to pelt the side of his face. Roused slowly to consciousness, this new world of pain he now inhabited spoke through him in a language of gasps and groans pushed between the gaps of teeth set clenched to grinding. Even his eyes hurt when he finally opened them, as if suddenly exposed to the noonday sun after sleeping off a hard drunk, despite the fact that all was pitch black.

*No, not entirely black...*

As his eyes adjusted, he could see that a dim violet light suffused the choking, dusty darkness of the cave. An old memory shouldered its way to the front of his mind unbidden, just then. The memory of a lake he had swam in as a child. He and his brothers would sometimes swim to the bottom and muddy it up down there. But the memory went just as quickly as it had come, pushed aside by the presence of a large rock sitting on his back. It wasn't quite large enough to crush him, but it made breathing difficult enough to induce an undeniable sense of panic. Luckily it was top-heavy and lopsided enough that it was easy to push off by tipping it to one side. He was also lucky that he had been wearing his pack, for it had cushioned the boulder's blow, saving his ribs and maybe his spine, as well.

For a long while the only sounds were of his breathing and the earth surrounding him as it rumbled against his front side. Veithen pushed himself up to his knees, fighting a wave of dizziness and nausea as he did so. He flinched away from his own trembling hand, which had quested up to the back of his head without his permission. It came away slick with bloody mud that looked black in the violet light.

Veithen blinked, widened, and narrowed his eyes in an attempt to get the two swaying images of that blurry hand down to a single steady version that was in focus. However, before that could be done, a wracking fit of coughs seized him, each one sending a searing bolt of agony through his brain until he hacked up a black wad of phlegm. He stared at that glistening black glob for an indeterminable amount of time, seized by a span of dimmed wits no doubt brought on by this head injury.

Presently, he blinked and pulled the kerchief hanging from his neck up over his nose.

*A fine spot you've gotten yourself into, this time, Veithen, he thought. A damn fine spot.*

He sighed, blinking some more until his eyes settled on the source of the light a few feet away. It was an amulet made of a clear resin, with seven pea-sized stones suspended inside. Each stone was a different color, collectively forming a circle. Each stone represented a different moon that occupied Nemere's sky at different times in their turn.

Before the cave-in, the red moonstone had been aglow, signifying the presence of Ogothos in the sky. Ogothos, the Blood Moon – sometimes called The Wheel of Fire, depending on the time of year. Veithen didn't know about blood, but he knew about fire, for it was well known that lighting one big enough while Ogothos was out was sometimes all one needed to summon a demon through it. He had never seen one himself, of course, but he had seen their handiwork and wished not to tempt them.

Now, however, that stone lay dormant, and the next in line was glowing. Now it was Gebros, the Spirit Moon up there, somewhere. Gebros, the Doorway of the Dead... All across the face of Nemere, people would be burning those who had died under Ogothos. For The Danger of the Open Flame had passed, to be replaced by The Danger of the Unpurified Dead.

Veithen had lost track of time and the moons had changed on him, causing the quakes that had resulted in this cave-in...

Sighing through his kerchief, Veithen snatched up the amulet. "You had to stay just that little bit longer, didn't you? There was more gold in your bags than-"

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He sprang to his feet, ignoring the wave of dizziness as one might a swarm of gnats congregating in a beam of summer sunlight: by swatting at it with an annoyed hand. The shout he let out made him wince. “Stakai!”

Nemere quaked once more, growing weaker now. A fresh sheet of dust and grit rained down on him.

“Stakai!”

A faint response, almost too faint to hear. “Yeah! Veithen?!”

The voice came from the wall of rubble behind him. He put his amulet up to his belly, covering its light with his hand. Complete darkness revealed a deep but narrow gap in the rubble out of which shone an even dimmer violet glow, this one from Stakai’s own moonstone amulet.

Kneeling down, he put his face up close to the gap. “Stakai! Over here.”

A shadow fell across the other side of the gap. Stakai’s voice came out in a burbling croak now that he wasn’t shouting. “Thank the Gods...you’re alive...”

“And you as well, brother... You don’t sound so good...”

Movement from the other side of the gap that he interpreted as a nod. “Aye. Got busted up good. Think one of my ribs...is sticking in...my lungs. Hard to breathe. You?”

“Just a bump on the head, nothing to write home about.” He bit back an inquiry about his brother’s half of the gold, but Stakai must have heard it anyway.

“I think my...half is buried...somewhere in...all this.”

Veithen felt only a small stab of guilt at his obvious greed. This was followed at an even bigger stab of guilt for the lack of initial guilt.

*What have I become?*

His inner voice answered itself: *The kind who brings prosperity to his people.*

And his outer voice said, “Finally some good news, eh? Back up if you can and I’ll dig you out.”

A fit of burbling coughs followed by some pained sobs, then, “Aye.”

Veithen flinched away as if slapped. In all his years, he had never heard his big brother cry. Not once. Not even when that barbed arrow had gotten lodged in the bone of his upper arm and their father had been forced to cut it out with a hunting knife. Not even when they had cauterized that weeping flesh with that same blade, glowing hot from its rest in the camp fire. No, the most he had given them back then were a few angry grunts, mostly at himself for allowing the enemy to wound him.

Standing up once more, Veithen dropped his glowing amulet at his feet. For the first time in his life, he wondered if his brother would survive. His brother, who had always seemed invincible. His brother, who would always have his back.

Veithen shrugged off his pack, took a long swig from his wine skin, grabbed his small shovel, did a few stretches to limber up, and went to work. He chose to widen the gap in the rubble from the bottom, but it proved to be too unstable and collapsed. It made Veithen’s heart skip a beat as he imagined being crushed by the fifty feet of earth overhead, similar to how Sinedros had been crushed by the God Maldan in the Codex Urneia. Up to that point, Veithen had always imagined being crushed by a cave-in to be a quick death, but maybe that of Sinedros hadn’t been so swift after all. Maybe Maldan had only crushed his enemy enough to break all his bones first.

*Maybe the part where Maldan savored His revenge had been left out...*

All of this flashed through Veithen’s mind within the span of that skipped beat, and he decided just as quickly that worrying about the whims of Gods and mountains was about as pointless as worrying about the weather. Luckily the collapse *wasn’t* catastrophic, and even left a markedly bigger gap to replace the old one. It was about the size of a large orange, and was a few feet higher up. However,

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the collapse also sent up a fresh plume of dust which clouded both of their cramped spaces with its dry murk.

Stakai's voice issued forth from the new gap, significantly more faint and ragged, now. "You should...rest, brother. You've been...at it for...about an hour."

Stakai always did have an uncanny sense for the passage of time.

"Don't go soft on me now, brother. Now's not the time for softness."

A gurgling chuckle from the other side, then, "I'm hard when...and *where*...it counts. Ask any lady in...a hundred miles."

Veithen couldn't help but smirk. "Even Old Nydra?"

"Especially...Old Nydra."

"You dirty dog..." Veithen said through a grunt, shoveling faster now. He didn't like that his brother's voice had started to sound far away. He didn't like that burble, either. Then a short while later his shovel struck the top of what turned out to be a substantial boulder.

"Brother," Stakai said, voice reduced to a whisper.

Veithen's heart turned into a caged animal in his chest and his mouth ran dry. Flashes of pain in his brain created a thundering storm of echoes that only he could hear. His voice was that of a much calmer person, "Yeah?"

Casting the tool aside, he was able to get a good grip on the rock.

"You tell...Reima I...love her...okay?"

Veithen pushed and pulled, and the boulder began to wobble. "If you let a little old rock do you in after all you've been through, then Father'll fall on his sword just to follow *you* to the Underworld to kill you again."

More hacking coughs as the boulder tumbled into Veithen's half of the cave. Whatever his big brother was trying to hack up wasn't budging.

Stakai's voice was that of a drowning man. Each word was a struggle punctuated by gurgling. "*Just. Tell. H-h-h-h...*"

Veithen wiggled his way through the gap, shrugging out of his backpack in the process. "Stakai? Stakai!"

In the total silence all around him, his ragged panting and the hammering of his own heart in his ears reigned supreme. A mangled form lay not too far off. The moonstone amulet on its chest was a beacon amid the dusty gloom. Salt from sweat and tear alike intermingled in Veithen's kerchief, which bubbled in and out of his mouth with every breath.

"Stakai?"

As he drew nearer, he could see that his brother's left leg had an extra joint in it, and was bent at an unnatural angle. The ground around Stakai had become muddy with blood, and his sightless eyes had already been coated in a small film of dust. Blood coated his chin and chest, and his hands had become frozen claws in the grooves they had dug into the ground. One of his fingers had lost a nail along the way.

Veithen saw all of this without really *seeing* it. What he saw instead as he closed his brother's eyes was the town oracle, bent over her divination bowl. Her prophecy came unbidden to his lips. "Not by man, nor beast, nor anything that creepeth; but by Bone Spear and the Red Tide that seepeth. Drowned and cast down shall ye be. None to hark, but blood in the dark."

Tears dripped off Veithen's cheeks and onto his brother's, even as part of him realized that the full share of gold was his now. Providing he could haul it all out... His thoughts also drifted to his

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brother's wife, who he had always lusted after, deep down; and who would be his by Right of Inheritance...

It was at that moment that something *turned over* in him – something that had been growing in the cellar of his mind all his life like a deformed and unwanted child. Something that came to the surface and joined him. Joined him because the time had come. And suddenly the tears dried up, and Veithen looked down on his brother's mangled form as one would a picked over corpse on the side of the road. Worthy of a moment's grim fascination, and nothing more.

He would have felt bad were it not for the gaping emptiness inside him now – a bottomless pit that swallowed up whatever he threw at it. There was only the most fleeting sense of guilt for not feeling any guilt, and then it was gone, lost like a whisper in a tempest.

Veithen then stepped over the corpse, took up its pack, and tossed it next to the gap. He then lit a small fire with some kindling they had taken with them and brewed the last of their coffee, which they had been saving for the exit to the surface. He also fried up the last of the bacon while seeing to his head wound. He was careful not to nap during the brief rest that followed. Veithen had seen many a soldier in the field nod off after taking a seemingly minor blow to the head, and never wake up again. *This* head wound was anything *but* minor.

So it was that about ten minutes later, he was up and at it again. Crossing back over the gap into what had been his portion of the cave-in, Veithen began digging into the opposite wall of rubble there. He had no idea how far he would have to dig, all he knew was that he was out of food and almost out of water.

To do nothing was to die.

His head injury, combined with the weight of gold, and torrid fantasies involving a new, long-desired woman on his mind edged out the significance of the violet light by which he worked. For the light of the moon known as Gebros penetrated earth and flesh alike, even if one couldn't see it. Granted, it wasn't very often that the Spirit Moon worked its magic on dead flesh, but the dead flesh of a royal Mortal bloodline was especially enticing to the denizens of the Underworld. Denizens who were always searching for a way up to the World of the Living. It also didn't help that Veithen, somewhere down deep in his soul, didn't really *believe* that such things could actually happen, despite the fact that he had just uttered the words of a prophecy that had come to pass.

And so, he didn't really pay any attention to the faint rustle of movement behind him, relegating it instead to some sort of aberrant echo. The slapping-squishing-churning of mud was also lost on him, as it coincided with a small landslide which let in a large shaft of violet-tinged starlight from the outside. They had been just about to exit the cave system when the quake had hit, a fact that had been lost on Veithen until that very moment. With salvation in sight, his efforts were renewed. Digging with his hands, now, he heard nothing of the creature approaching behind him until it lost its balance and tumbled through the gap.

Veithen whipped around, wide-eyed. This sudden motion sent what felt like a flaming lance through the base of his skull and out through his left eye. He yelped in agony, tumbling backwards as a hand shot up to cover it. Through his right eye, he hardly believe what he was seeing, and for a fleeting moment, he thought someone else had gotten into the cave before something clicked in his mind.

"Stakai? Gods Above, I thought you were..."

As he was speaking, his big brother pushed himself up so that he was on all fours. Something about that movement reminded Veithen of a play he'd seen long ago.

A play performed by puppets.

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And Veithen quickly realized that most of that impression stemmed from the fact that Stakai wasn't breathing. No burbling, no wheezing; not even so much as a grunt escaped those dry lips caked with blood. Blood that looked black as tar in the faint moonlight.

But it wasn't until Veithen's gaze drifted up from those lips that his own blood froze. For Stakai's eyes didn't belong to him anymore. No, those were the eyes of a predator. Something that hungered. Something that made each pupil twitch erratically and independently as a bright violet light radiated out from them.

Veithen had instinctively scooted back on his haunches as the thing that used to be his brother crawled towards him. The muscles in its face twitched, spasmed, and rippled asymmetrically until they somehow found the feral mask of a lion. And still, no sound escaped its lips. Lips that quivered in a wide, mirthless grin so strong that it split their corners, allowing this thing to show all of its teeth.

Instinctively, Veithen's right hand had drifted down to the hilt of his hunting knife. Somewhere deep down, he knew what this creature was: a *volgoru*, one of the ravenous dead.

Parallel to this thought flashed the faded memory of an elder speaking into a camp fire, passing on his wisdom to any who would listen. His facial features had become a swirling blur lost to time, but his voice had endured: *Among the spirits that travel through the Violet Moon Door to make puppets of our discarded, unpurified flesh is the volgoru, The One Who Rends. Once in possession of a body, nothing short of stripping the bones of its flesh can stop it. You can hack it to pieces and those pieces will find a way to move towards you. You can light it ablaze and the charred remains will keep on going. No, not even fire can remove this corruption. The flesh must be stripped from it entirely, or else the evil thing must be entombed down the deepest, darkest pit you can fi-*

In a blur of motion, the *volgoru*-that-had-been-Stakai pounced on him like some giant spider. Veithen's knife flashed out of its sheath, flicking across his attacker's belly and up into its brain via the soft underside of its jaw. It was a move he had perfected over a lifetime of knife fighting, but those had all been living opponents. Opponents whose strength and speed had limits.

The *volgoru* had almost no limits, however, and advanced on Veithen as if he had merely patted it on the cheek. With hands now as hard as bone, it grabbed his face in one, and his shoulder in the other. Veithen's mortal bones crunched and popped under those merciless hands. His shriek was cut short by the *volgoru*'s teeth as they bit through his windpipe, tore it out. It then bit deep into his neck three more times like that in rapid succession, ripping into flesh and pulling apart bone as easily as one might a particularly soft piece of boiled chicken. Blood fountained out of Veithen's neck, painting the walls in dripping spatter.

Veithen felt none of this, though. For his awareness was already tumbling down a deep, dark tunnel, yet somehow he was still able to feel Nemere shudder beneath him one last time. Turning inwardly to face that shudder, he saw a bright pinprick of light that began to blossom as he fell towards it...