

Both inside and out, the ruins above the derelict catacombs stood taciturn, a testament to a primordial time. Only the white noise of the surrounding forests, its noise of insects and the croaking of frogs from the nearby swamp, detracted from the solemn silence. However the locals of the city Lykaria, roughly a couple hours' trek away, knew better than to trust it. The Forests of the Moon, as they say, hold secrets as numerous as its branches.

Beneath the surface of the crumbling, weathered ruins, she who would disturb those lost to time walked onward, peering over her shoulder and back again on what lay ahead. Her chestnut hair flowed down to her shoulders, curled and somewhat unkempt. Over a corselet of boiled leather and a white linen skirt was her scarlet tunic; around her neck, a violet cloth scarf; around her wrists, bracelets of gold. A small satchel of rawhide hung from her shoulder over her left hip, bottled liquids of strange scents and stranger effects sloshing quietly within.

As human-like as she was shaped, she also wasn't quite so: she seemed to be more leonine than humanoid. Covered head to toe in a light, tawny pelt, the lass named Rachel appeared to be a lion on two plantigrade legs, possessing paw-like hands and feet. A dagger hung from a humble leather scabbard at her right hip, though her fingers twiddled impatiently in the air inches from them.

She was expecting trouble. Why wouldn't she after all the advice, solicited or otherwise, that came from the folk of Lykaria? These catacombs served a purpose for those of the past: a place for noteworthy dead. While common rabble had the luxury of having their remains left to animals, or the disgraced having their corpses burned, the wealthy who oft cared little for the wilderness surrounding the city were buried there. Giving not to nature nor to man, thus their remains would rot beneath the surface in their mausoleum.

This lass, a stranger of Brigalian stock from another province, cared little about the ways and superstitions of the men of Lykaria. It wasn't that she was ignorant toward the culture; no, she was more concerned about the dangers that lie in the tomb than why it existed. Further, she cared more about the reward for her quest than why she was on it. The ways of nobles, in her mind, were slothful and pedantic. Rachel preferred the ways of the world, of the common person; she did not envy the excess of food and drink, the politics, nor even the riches of electrum coins, or even jewel-encrusted trinkets. No, she considered such nobles fools for trusting in their advisors and their gold pieces.

But, as it was, most folks could be greased into doing things which they loathe. Even Rachel knew this, and fell victim to such. In the back of her mind as she padded across the dust-covered stone floors, she knew her prize was only a noble's trinket away. She told the brat that if it was indeed his birthright, that he himself should have delved into the depths himself, perhaps with fighting men by his side. No, she was told, only someone like herself could be trusted, an outsider with the abilities to handle oneself against the guardians of the crypt.

Thinking on this, tension began to rekindle itself in Rachel's bestial mind. Every person she'd asked about the mausoleum's guardians told her a similar tale. If the restless spirits of the catacombs did not find mysterious ways to harm her, then a particular roaming sentinel would. The ghosts were constantly mentioned; this wandering beast, or demon, or whatever it was hadn't been discussed in-depth. Quite simply, few people knew it even existed. The fiend in question had been mentioned by a trapper on the streets, who told his friends, who then disregarded the whole thing due to the trapper's alcoholic reputation.

This is more trouble than it's worth, she thought to herself as she continued to walk the silent zone alone. Though the derelict crypt had stood quiet since she entered, by now she was beginning to get antsy. A telltale noise rung out from behind her. Turning on a heel sharply, she half-hoped it was nothing; the other half of her mind, however, was itching for a fight, a flight, or just something to happen.

It was then that she saw them. Out from the shadows, a pair of pale, white hands began to flow from a

coffin atop a long pedestal, fingers slowly wavering in the stale air as they manifested. In a flash, Rachel cleared the dagger from its leather, holding the weapon in a reverse grip as many did in that age. Extending the index and middle fingers of her other hand warily, she called out to the phantom hands, certain that they already were aware of her presence. "Who are you, spirit?" she demanded. "Answer if you can!"

The ghostly hands said nothing, but rose up into the air, reaching across from the tomb they slid out from and toward a pair of crossed, ornamental swords on the wall opposite of it. Taking up the grip of one of the long, northern blades, the hands held the sword aloft in both of its pale palms. Seeing this, her fingers loosened around the grip of her own blade just long enough to twirl it in hand, pointing the blade upward from her thumb.

The sword lingered in air for a second or two before abruptly swinging downward in a huge swath at the Brigalian lass, who by now was beginning to back away from the phantom appendages. She danced away, letting the blade clash to the ground where she was standing just moments prior. As the blade lifted up, it was pointed to the intruder, and no sooner than it was lined up did the hands dart it forth in a thrust. Swerving, Rachel thrust her dagger forth, not to try and stab the unseen body of the ghost but to catch its blade. The crossguard of her dagger hit the flat of the sword with a clang, the ghostly hands providing resistance like a physical person's arms would against her push.

It was then that she raised her fingertips on her other hand once more, and that she began to mutter words in her native tongue. The language of the Brigalians was an alien one, difficult for most foreigners to replicate due to the animalistic growls, snarls and other cat noises that comprised the tonal speech. Clipping her words, she spoke swiftly of the sun, of the skies, of fiery wrath.

As the blade swung backwards into the air, straightening the edge horizontally to try and cut the grave-robber once more, Rachel readied her dagger to parry its onslaught again. Her eyes remained fixed on that long sword, while her dark lips continued to quiver as she spoke her incantation. She was too focused to try and recite the chant in her head, which would equally provide the same mystical effects as it would if spoken aloud. Fearing the sword-swinging spirit would gain the upper hand against her if she stopped to think her spell, thus she murmured the words.

Again she backstepped from the swinging sword, the blade wooshing past just inches away. Ever mindful of her cramped quarters, she finished her spell and, at the moment of the last words, her fingertips seared with an uncanny warmth. Springing into existence, inches from the tips of her left hand's claws, was a mote of pale flame that swelled into the size of a floating torchlight. Snarling at her enemy, her dagger-arm turned aside another thrust.

She was nearing a wall by now, and only her batting, lowered tail gave her any indication of what was at her feet. As the ghostly hands hefted the sword aloft yet again, the lioness made her move. Letting out a fierce roar, the corridors shook and reverberated with her cry. Those fingers shot forth, the magic flame crackling before shooting forward itself, streaking at it flew toward its victim. For those the mystical flames had met in the past, it was clear that the off-colored fires were not of mortal origin. No, these flames were thought to be the embodiment of the holy sky's wrath itself, a smokeless flame that burnt both flesh and soul as one.

Unfortunately for the phantom, it was not aware of the flame's properties, nor was it sapient enough to realize such. As the orb of flame surged forth, it managed to strike the hands gripping the sword. The hilt's aged wrapping instantly crumpled to ashes on impact, finished wood underneath scorched and metal turning a bright orange as the orb blossomed into a larger gout of holy fire. In the blink of an eye the hands were swallowed up in the incendiary plume, and as soon as they came the flames fizzled from the mortal world.

Thankfully for Rachel, they also appeared to take the phantom with them. Twirling to the ground and hitting the dusty floor with a clatter, the seared sword was now without a controller. Traces of the weapon's

user, however, remained on what was left of the hilt; smeared across the surface, the faint glow of an uncanny slime was visible in the cat's eyes. She lingered for a few moments, eyes fixed on the sword and fingers extended toward it. Only after a few seconds' passing did she approach the sword, and staring at it just a while longer, she finally left it be.

Feeling her heart slow back down to a relaxed pace, the Brigalian mentally thanked her goddess for the aid as she sheathed her dagger. While she was by no means devout, she did acknowledge that she happened to have more fortune than the average individual, especially when it came to danger. Besides, had it not been for a follower of her so-called Devouring Lady, she would not have been able to master such a spell. And while those mystical flames were the only thing she knew how to manifest through magic, they served her well over the years.

Reaching for her satchel, Rachel opened it up and drew forth a flask of white wine. Uncorking it, she poured the sweet liquid down her throat, trying to calm her nerves a little. She had little time to reminisce about her involvement with that shaman, nor did she have time to worry what else was down inside the crypt. She was on the second floor; the third was where that trinket she sought to capture was thought to lay. Pondering if it truly was there, hidden from fellow raiders like herself like her client said it was, she pressed on.

Past a few more walls and beyond a pillar, the stairs down to the third floor stood. Continuing her march, the lioness suddenly stopped. Something seemed to ring out from the floor beneath. It was one she recalled from her savanna days, though it was anything but nostalgic. No, the sound it resembled was unpleasant, one made by feeding hyenas -- the sound of crunching, cracking bones. Again that hand flew to her weapon's hilt, and Rachel crept slowly toward the stairs, trying to spy whatever was breaking the calcified bones beneath her.

Alas, she couldn't see a thing from the stairwell. She quickly swerved around, drawing her blade from its scabbard. Nothing was there, but the cracking noise continued. Only when she padded to the stairs did the noise die down. This only made her more tense. Whatever it was, it was on to her. She was sure of that.

No sooner than when she realized this, her feet unconsciously crept backward. A sudden cold draft filled the corridor, seemingly drifting upward from the staircase. It's then that she saw it. The primal being's skin was without a trace of fur or other covering, but was instead an inky black color. While the inexperienced sneak might think pitch black is the perfect disguise in the dark, it was far from it -- in the dim candlelight of the magical, ever-burning and heatless candles, the creature's shape was foreboding. It slunk forth like a great ape, each digit tipped with a dark grey claw.

She could see no eyes on its face, but she knew it could see her. Devoid of sockets, the seemingly blind beast's head peered onward, almost as if staring daggers. Splitting from the shadowy skin laterally, a lipless mouth sneered on the featureless, yet disfigured face. Rows of yellowed, blunted teeth glistened in the light. The fiend opened its savage mouth wide, letting out an ear-piercing shriek as it darted forth on all fours.

Terror clenched tight at the lioness' heart, who at that moment felt like she'd die of a heart attack sooner than by whatever method the demon had in its draconian mind. She dared not turn her back to the beast, and yet her paws continuously scampered backward. No rational thought filled her mind, but primal instincts of self-preservation took over. Just one more second to live. Just one breath more before it's upon me.

As her heel caught a loose bone, surely left by either the predator during its prior meals or even a careless grave-robber before her, she slid and fell back with a cry. Impulse took over again, her hand reaching for a blade handle that evaded her grasp. She hit the floor with a thud, her back slamming on the hard stone and sending a jolt of agony down her spine. The creature took advantage of this. No sooner than its fresh, living meal's having ungracefully met the ground did it pounce on her.

Its breath reeked of carrion as it shrieked in the terrified cat's face, its three sets of horrid teeth giving way to nothing but blackness beyond. Marrow-filled slobber oozed from its gums, though she had little time to peer into the abyss of its gullet before its hands came down. One after another, palms came crashing into her face as if playing a hand drum. It was toying with her, or perhaps tenderizing the facial meat before it feasted. A wrist to the eye, a slap to the left cheek, a palm to the nose -- she was bloodied up in a matter of moments.

Despite the overwhelming pain, regardless of her pleading bellows of pain, the lioness' mind was elsewhere. She was fading fast, certain she was going into shock from it all. But as they say, it is the darkest before the dawn; the darkness crept upon Rachel's mind, but within a fire burnt bright. A hatred of her fortune going south. An anger at the thought of perishing due to being a filthy noble's errand wench. A wrath searing with the intensity of the sun of the holy sky.

With an eye swollen shut, a bruised and bludgeoned face, she snarled and roared as the beast's wretched hand drew forth, ready to end it all with an intended swipe at her throat. The walls shook with the sound of her bellow, legs sliding up toward the beast's midsection. All of her might went into this single thrust, claws drawn from her toes and digging into the beast's belly as she kicked it as hard as she could.

As the demon stumbled back up onto its legs, Rachel's mind was already aglow with the words of her chant. Her fingers were dancing with ethereal flame, a floating fire forming between her palms before searing forth in a blazing spray. She couldn't see past the blaze, but she knew she'd struck her target; an odor worse than any flesh she'd burnt before, another high-pitched cry from the fiend.

The flames kept pouring out. She cared little for the repercussions of unleashing her magic for so long. All she cared about was the complete and utter destruction of her enemy, the monster that had the audacity and misfortune to get in her way. The beast's screaming lingered before fading in a gurgle, and soon only the roar of her wrathful fires could be heard.

Feeling a tremor flow across the floor, presumably from the demon's fiery demise, Rachel's flames died down in a second's notice. The moment the flames vanished from being, her hands flew to her temples. The thing she disregarded was happening -- she'd exerted herself too heavily. Her mind seared with electric agony, a sensation seeming to flay her brain within her very skull. Coughing up blood which trickled down her jaw, she forced herself onto her side, a hand shakily reaching for her satchel.

Sliding the cover flap away, her fingers slid across the bottles until she found a rectangular one. Pulling it out, she popped off the cork and downed in as quick as she could. No sooner than the fluid hitting her belly did her mental pain end; now, at last, she could focus on the physical trauma. Closing her eyes, her palms tenderly covered her beaten face. Whimpering a few words of praise to the stars in the sacred night sky, a warm tingle flowed out from her hands and across her face.

For the denizens of her world, it was a dull, visceral feeling to have one's body reconstructed through eldritch healing arts. Muscles and sinews wove back together, bones ground back into place and set themselves, and dirtied wounds seemed to burn themselves clean of infection before sealing back up. But Rachel was anything except squeamish, and by now she was used to her magical healing. While she wasn't skilled at using her spells to heal more life-threatening damage to her mortal coil, she at least was able to restore her countenance to its former splendor.

Slowly getting to her feet, her mind now possessed a soft ache once more. The elixir she'd consumed had relieved her splitting headache prior, but the continued use of magic only reopened the proverbial scars. She still had a task to do, and with any immediate threats disposed of, she took one last glance toward the demon's remains.

A few steps from where she'd kicked it away, the fiend's body lay on its back. Even its flesh was dark as

tar, but the blood that flowed from its body wasn't quite the inky ichor she thought it would be. Just as any person, or any natural being, crimson blood drizzled from incinerated, blistered flesh. Ashes and blood alike pooled at its fried upper half, its heat-cracked bones burnt too deep to tell what color they were before.

"Good riddance", she spat as she turned away from the grisly display. Limping from the dread experience, down she went into the depths of the third floor, more than ready to finish what she's started.

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"To think, it's finally mine", gasped the voice of the incredulous bastard child. "My birth right, the very mask my grandfather possessed. The mask of Clan Kalaburnos is finally in my hands..." The sun was setting on the outskirts of Lykaria. Rachel stood before the illegitimate child, one hand on her hip, and the fingers on her other twiddling impatiently. He was olive-skinned like many of the region, dressed in a commoner's tunic, slacks and shoddy rawhide shoes. His chestnut hair was surprisingly well-kept and combed, though his facial hair was scruffy on his cheeks and neck.

The mask in question depicted a phoenix's visage, adorned with preserved feathers and made from hardened leather. Like a masquerade's mask, it only covered the top half of the face, with the beak extending down just above the lips. While the leather was cracked and dusty from many years of neglect, it was sturdy enough to give the impression that it wouldn't just disintegrate when worn.

"Indeed", replied Rachel. "As much as I enjoy the plights of the rich, I do believe you owe me payment. Unless you'd nodded off from my tale of getting that relic, I nearly died to earn it".

The lad's eyes glanced up from the mask and into Rachel's, indignation burning within his hazel pupils. "But of course", he said. "A deniable asset like you would appreciate her hard-earned coin". He sneered a cocky sneer, reaching for a pouch of coins at his hip and putting it into her vacant hand. "So here they are. Fifty-three electrum Hawks, as promised. And before you say anything, I haven't forgotten this, either".

Going to the knapsack at his feet, the lad reached inside, pulling a thin, sealed tube out and handing it over to the lioness. "...the formula and theory of a spell, scrawled directly from one of my grandfather's journals on magic".

Rachel took the tube in her right, and carrying the coin pouch in her left, she ventured off with little more than a wave. "Good luck with your endeavors", she said over her shoulder, feeling a lack of a need for formality. Fifty-three electrum pieces. It would pay for her food and lodging for a week or two by itself. No, the reward she truly looked forward to was the spell. Though it would surely take time to understand the formulas and memorize the chants -- especially if written in a dead or secretive language, as most spells she'd heard of were wont to do -- adding something new to her bag of arcane tricks was always helpful.

Thus she made her way back into the thick of town, ready to order up some supper at a local pub. Like most, she was neither politically powerful, nor would her legacy likely be passed down like that of the rich, or of those chosen by the gods. She was a walker of the world, a seeker of wisdom from beyond the starlight. A daughter of lions, the child of a healer and her warrior mate, her home is where she rests her weary body, born of the rolling green savannas of the Brigalian province.

For until she left the realm of the living, before taking her final mortal breath, she was Rachel the Seeker, a lion in scarlet, and one caught up in the misadventures of an uncanny life in a perfectly imperfect world.