

INTRO

Legend has it that in a time before time was measured, long before the age of the clans and even before the time of the Queens, amongst the people there lived a man who controlled magic. He was not a conjurer cleverly creating illusions, but a sorcerer, perhaps the only one who knew all magic by name and tamed it so it did as he commanded.

He saw the good in the people who crossed his path, but also the bad. And wherever something bad happened, he saw it put down roots and spread. And so he came up with the plan to rip up the bad by those very roots and transplant them elsewhere, where they could not cause any harm.

He went to Lyaskye, and on arrival told her, the monarch of all the lands: “Good mother, I come to liberate you from all the wickedness. All I require is a piece of land from you, land with impregnable boundaries, where I can banish the wickedness.”

Lyaskye, however, was not in agreement. Taking away the bad weakened the good, she enlightened the sorcerer. And who decides what is good, and what bad, and how much wickedness is required to justify banishment?

And so it came to pass that Lyaskye denied the sorcerer what he sought.

This angered the sorcerer and so he called down the magic from the sky, that Lyaskye might see what happened when her beloved people were granted so much power. Magic rained down from the sky, soaking the animals, plants and stones, seeping into the earth where new magic was borne of it.

But the magic was wild and strong and hardly anybody possessed the power needed to tame it.

Lyaskye had to stand by helplessly as her beloved people perished under the magic, whole generations fell and their bodies turned to dust.

Once only a few families remained, the sorcerer spoke to Lyaskye for a second time: “Are you ready now, to give me what I demand?”

And Lyaskye did something she had never done before; something that she did not know she was capable of.

She relented.

In deep despair she ripped out a part of herself and handed it to the sorcerer. Leaving behind a gaping wound, her sorrow smouldering in it until today: Abyss Gorge.

The sorcerer ripped out a part of himself too: the power to control the magic. He broke it into five parts, entrusting each into the hands of the surviving families, and so the clans were created.

But the sorcerer went away taking the land that Lyaskye had given him, concealing it in the folds of the dimensions, where it was invisible, and in it he created his realm of damnation, and every person that stepped foot there left their soul and became a daema.

The guiltiest of them all, the lord of all wickedness he appointed Lord of the Daema.

And the lore of the realm between the worlds spread in all the lands, and the brave and the desperate shared the secret of the Lord of the Daema amongst themselves and to call him into their service all that was needed was to utter his name, that he might take anyone playing a dirty trick and make them his slave.

Like all true stories, this one too was forgotten. Wounds heal, tears dry, and fields and forests grow over graves.

But there is one place where the memories live on, for this is where the sorcerer holed himself away. A land where back then there were no people, and therefore nobody to gather the magic and tame it.

*A land, whose youth called the mountains family and the winds their friends.
Welcome to Nemiya.*

CHAPTER 1 LAIRE

The night was running away from me.

I quickly shoved the jewellery box back into its hiding place under the loose floorboard. The red agate bracelet was staying behind. No jewellery was needed on my mission, especially not this piece, glowing as it did with memories. I would only take the pea-sized, perfectly round stone that hung around my neck from a leather strap under my linen shirt. It had failed as a lucky charm up to now, but who could say that our time was not maybe still to come. I did not want to leave it behind. The magic within it was hardly palpable, but it was more than enough to get mother into bother if anybody were to find it here.

Initially the wait had seemed to go on forever, but now that I had finally packed up my things – provisions for several days, water, change of clothes, some medicines, as well as the anemone lamp glowing away silently and peacefully in my rucksack, as if everything was as it always was -, I would have to get a move on if I wanted to have left the valley basin by the first light of morning. The others would notice soon enough that I had disappeared. And as soon as the prince, who had once been so much more to me than my monarch, got wind of it, I would have the Nemiya guard on my tail. But I was ready to expose myself to far greater dangers to free Desmond. I was prepared to face the Lord of the Daema and all of his creatures. What could people do to me, compared to them?

I thought I heard something and listened carefully in the darkness, but could not hear anything. Maybe it was just a draught coming through the boarding? My mother's gentle snoring had stopped, it was as silent as the grave in our bedroom.

At some point this silence would last forever.

The very thought created a feeling of emptiness in my chest, in which every heartbeat was accompanied by an echo. I would have liked to run to my mother, shake her awake and give her the biggest hug I could. Stupid, naive thoughts. I would just hurt her. She had become so weak. The pain in her limbs was slowly but surely eating away at her. On good days she could still make it to the well, on bad days she even needed help to get from the bed to the chair. It was a rare exception for people to suffer from the withering before they reached old age. It had gripped my mother as a young woman and with each winter it got worse.

It left me as icy cold as the north wind Myr to leave her behind on her own. So I had asked our neighbour Anken to take care of mother, and I knew she would do it conscientiously. But how could I go not safe in the knowledge that I would return? How long would Anken

wait? When would she realise I had lied and my journey had nothing to do with looking for rare medicinal herbs?

I knelt down silently by the clothes chest and lifted the lid. Right at the bottom, under sheets, shirts, smocks and rough trousers for stable work – things that I would never have been allowed to wear before –, was my last ball gown. The emerald green one that we had not sold or re-purposed into something more practical, after we were banished to the village. Mother had always been of the opinion that I would still need it. In certain respects she was right, for hidden in the folds of the skirt my myrodem was waiting, the traditional weapon of the Nema. It had to be hidden because I was no longer worthy of wearing it. I pulled the curved handle, I had sharpened and polished it days ago, as well as cleaning and oiling the belt of the leather scabbard. It nestled against my body and balanced the weapon so perfectly on my side, it was as if it were a part of me. The rucksack, however, was heavy. I only had to slide on the gloves that I never left our cottage without. I looked back again, casting my eye over the outlines of the cupboard and trunk, over my bed and the one my mother was sleeping in. There was no more space in our cottage. In the other room, the kitchen, we bumped into one another if we were both in there at the same time.

“Laire?”

I closed my eyes and sighed silently on hearing my mother’s weak voice. Now I had to say goodbye and couldn’t leave the explanation to the letter I had left on the table next to her bed.

“Lai-lai, are you awake? Could you bring me some water, please?”

“Of course.” I scurried to the kitchen table where the jug was standing and filled a cup. My hand was shaking as it poured, I left the spilt drops on the wood, which would stain, and took my mother the water. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

“Thank you, my dear. Sorry to wake you. I should have sorted it out earlier, you need your sleep.”

“Don’t worry”, I interrupted her. “I was awake anyway.” Had she not noticed that I was dressed? That I already had linen trousers and even leather gloves on? In bad times the illness hit her senses and she saw everything as if it were in a haze. But it shocked me that she didn’t even notice the woollen cloak that transformed my silhouette into a shapeless shadow. Could I go when she was in such a bad state?

I helped her to have a drink and grabbed a cloth to wipe away what dripped out of her mouth. She looked bad, her skin appeared grey. The answer was in front of me as clear as the starlit sky. I had to go. Not just for Desmond, but for her.

“I am going away for a few days”, I whispered. “But I don’t want you to worry, alright? Anken will take good care of you.”

To my astonishment she smiled, in the moonlight that fell through the window onto her sunken face, I could see it clearly. “Are you going to the castle, Laire? Will you meet your dearest?”

Good that she did not notice my eyes welling up. “Yes, Mum. I am going to Desmond.” Not to the castle, for my fiancé was not there anymore. He was somewhere completely different. “I am going to make sure the wedding is not postponed again. By late summer, Mum, you will live in the castle again, in Desmond’s family’s wing. You will not have to freeze anymore, when autumn comes with its rainstorms and winter with Myr and cold, and the best

healers will take care of you. After the wedding everything will be better.” Not good, it will never be that again. But better.

“The main thing is that I get to see you dancing there, Laire.”

I force a chuckle. “Then, for you, I will dance every day.”

I waited by her bed until her sighing breath told me that she had fallen asleep again, and lent over her until my lips touched her hair. “Don’t be angry with me, Mum. You won’t approve, but I’m doing it for you.”

Then I put the heavy rucksack on my shoulder, grabbed my leather boots and carried them to the door. Quietly now, quietly.

After I had slipped outside through the narrowly open door– it was cool despite it being early summer -, I closed it bit by bit. It clicked like a secret signal, and scared stiff I waited for lamps to be lit in the windows of the neighbouring houses, for doors to open and for guardsmen to come galloping along the street.

Pull yourself together, I chided myself and silently asked the mountains for a little protection in their shadow. I had spoken to hardly anyone about my plans and acted inconspicuously. When the first rumours about Desmond’s execration reached the village a few days ago, I like everybody else had not wanted to believe them. But then I had the proof in front of me all of a sudden, proof that did not leave any room for doubt. The letters Desmond had written me crumbled to ashes in my hands. Every child in Nemiya knew what happened when the Lord came and took somebody with him: he destroyed everything that the person had created. There was no person, who in his life had not created a tiny piece of immortality. The Lord took it and destroyed it.

But I had only allowed myself to cry after the proclamation that Desmond es Yafanna, the son and heir of the Supreme Minister had been cursed by unknown forces and taken by the Lord of the Daema, and had been sentenced. Everyone in the village understood, I had just lost my fiancé after all. That I was now heading out to find the bewitched Kingdom of Daema to stand before the Lord and demand he release Desmond – nobody here was expecting that. Not from me, the calm, reserved and ever-ordinary Laire.

In the village I was known as a bookworm, which is why there was so much gossip about what a man like Desmond es Yaffana could see in me, for I was so completely and utterly ordinary – apart from the hideous fact that I was an outcast.

I had been looking after my mother and myself for five years by selling our goats’ milk and hens’ eggs. Apart from that I sold wild and medicinal herbs that I collected in the mountains, where only very few dared venture. That is all anybody here knew about me. They did not know the real reason I went into the mountains or the devious ways I used to sell my wares, I told nobody about them. Not even my mother knew how I paid for the medicine for her condition, and if she had known – oh, she had not been in the position to chastise me anymore for years, but in this case she would have defied her faded abilities and beaten the living daylights out of me. In other respects she had never been rough with me, not even strict. In just one single regard did she have no mercy for me at all. For there were laws in Nemiya, and my mother had taken great pains to be sure that nobody ever found out that I broke one of them with my mere existence.

But why was I so convinced somebody was following me as I crept between the simple wooden houses in the moonlight? I was alone on the dusty paths, the only sign of life was the

smell of smoke, that came from the blacksmith day and night. It was even silent in the hen's boxes, the little noise there was came from the forest I was making my way towards. The wind was making the leaves murmur and somewhere an owl hooted.

Between the trees with their protruding crowns darkness engulfed me, and if I did not want to lose the path I had to get the glow glass out. A green-gold river anemone was floating in water in it and emitted a buttery far-reaching light with the help of which I found the narrow trail and avoided hitting my head on branches. Anything that my light did not reach, however, was plunged into pitch black. I heard something snap and rustle in the darkness, as if steps were stalking up to me. But when I stood still and listened, everything went quiet all of a sudden.

It was only when pale light peeped through the treetops and there was a whisper of morning, that it became clear to me that nobody was creeping up on me, apart from my guilty conscience.

CHAPTER 2 DESMOND

In the songs they sang that death was beautiful. Warm and peaceful and full of light and sweet melodies; after all death led you into the arms of Lyaskye.

It was all a lie.

Desmond regretted never having trusted and instead having always asked those incredulous questions, about how the priests and scholars knew about death when they themselves were alive and well. For had he believed them, he would know that he was still alive.

For what felt like an eternity he lay with his eyes closed, his body numb with cold, his mouth dry and his face in something sticky, icy, wet. It smelt beastly, as if his innards had been taken out and he had been thrown into them to rot. But as long as he did not try to open his eyes to see if he was really dead and had arrived in eternity, the chance remained that there was an explanation. A way out of this cold.

He could not remember anything in particular. Had he not gone to sleep as normal, like every other day? He recalled hanging his shirt and trousers over the chair. The night sky had looked bright through the blue window pane, it had been late, nearly morning again. Why had he gone to bed so late? He remembered music. Dancing on a terrace, where the songs of the strings and singers could only be distantly heard. He had been cold, but he had not wanted to return to the ballroom, where everybody was waiting for him – but why? Instead he had sneaked past quite a few people, gone to his room, thrown a crystal glass at the wall and poured brandy straight from the bottle into his mouth. By Myr, that came from the North – he had drunk brandy from the bottle! Thrown a glass! But why? Was he angry? Frustrated? Sad? It was like it had all been erased. He had gone to sleep, his last memory was the soft, warm fur of his hunting dog Bo snuggling up to his cold feet.

For a moment his thoughts drifted away; he almost plunged into his exhaustion and fell asleep. But just in time he remembered the dreams that tormented him every night, threatening to suck him in again. Nightmares about monstrous figures with long snouts,

bearing their canines, their wings with sharp claws at the end of each joint and leathery skin between them. They had grabbed him by his arms, feet, neck and hair and dragged him through the deepest darkness. Oh, he would rather be here, in the cold, in the stench, than sink back into those dreams.

There was nothing for it, he had to face what was waiting for him on the other side of his closed eyelids.

He slowly opened his eyes. They were stuck together and he had to rub the incrustation from his eyelashes with his stiff hands. He was shocked when he realised he was lying half naked on a patchy layer of dirty, mouldy straw. Had he been mugged and thrown in a gutter? He was only wearing the knee-length pants he had gone to bed in, they were soaked through from the damp in the brick joints. He gasped in shock when his eyes slowly cleared in the hazy light of the flickering wall torches and saw the bars. It was a dungeon. Could he be...? He raised himself up, knelt with trembling muscles and crawled to the bars. The cell he had been locked in did not differ much from any other: stone floor, three stone walls as well as one of bronze bars. Next to the little bit of straw there was a metal bucket, presumably for calls of nature. He was shaken. No, this was not the dungeon of Castle es Retneya, which was his home. He had climbed down there often enough illicitly as a child with Laire and Vika on the hunt for bandits, smugglers and adventurers. But amongst the incarcerated they had only found poor, broken devils, who would surely have licked their boots for a piece of cheese or bacon.

Desmond could remember well enough to know that none of the castle's dungeons had bars made of bronze. He laid his hand on the cold metal, gripped it tightly and clambered to his feet. His knees were so wobbly he nearly fell.

A quiet laugh could be heard outside his cell. "Look. The prince is awake."

"You think I am a prince?" Desmond would have liked to laugh back, to give the appearance that he was not scared. But even those few words were difficult for him. His tongue was swollen like a dead fish in the heat of summer.

"To him you are", replied the voice of a young man, maybe a boy. "To the Lord."

"Your Lord has made a mistake," Desmond responded silently brushing the damp straw that was stuck to his bare chest. *Whoever your Lord might be.*

The other person went quiet for a while. Then he said hoarsely: "You should be careful what you say. If they hear you..."

Who, damn it?

"If the Lord hears you..."

The Lord, the Lord. That lone word whirled around in his head so wildly he felt dizzy. Obviously he had his suspicions who the man – presumably another prisoner – meant. Only one being held that title. But Desmond had done nothing to justify ending up in the dungeons of the Daema Lord. He had not... Horror formed an icy lump in his chest, when he realised that parts of yesterday evening were missing from his memory. He had been angry...angry at...he just could not grasp it. Too much brandy? There was something else.

Celestial herb – he had burnt celestial herb and got high on the fumes. It should have relaxed him, but in combination with the brandy and a feeling of eternal cold, it had not worked. He dug deeper in his memory but there was just the bitter after-taste of rage. Had he argued with somebody? But with whom? And why?

What had happened? He started shaking again, less because of the cold this time, but more out of fear at what he might have done. It had to be something unforgivable if he had been cursed for it.

“They’re coming”, whispered the other man, his voice was trembling with fear all of a sudden. “Again. They heard you, you should have been quiet.”

Desmond could hear footsteps echoing in the passageways too, the stomping feet of many boots moving in unison as if they belonged to a single being.

An ever-quieter scraping sound in the cell next to him told him that the other prisoner was withdrawing to the back wall.

Desmond, however, squared his shoulders and remained standing at the bars.

Yes, they were coming. They were coming to take him for questioning. He would find out what he was accused of. If he had incurred guilt, he would do the time. Nothing, neither punishment nor judgement could be nearly as bad as the thought of having done something unforgivable without knowing what it was.

For nothing short of something unforgivable would be punishable by the Daema curse.