

ADVENT

For the second morning in a row, Eltharion felt himself being shaken awake. He had not slept peacefully, and had to force his heavy eyelids open. He found himself being roughly shaken by Leigh. The youngster's eyes were wide and terrified, he was babbling incoherently.

Eltharion groggily sat up, trying to clear the cobwebs of sleep from his mind. He started to ask what was wrong, then the thick and acrid stench of smoke reached him.

Fire.

Eltharion, like almost all elves, was a religious man. Elves had many beliefs, but chief amongst these was the belief that when someone was burned to death, their soul is utterly destroyed.

Leaping out of bed, Eltharion tried to push the sickening fear to the back of his mind. If he panicked now, then they would all be lost.

“Daniel!” He yelled, bending to pull on his boots, “Daniel! Wake up!”

“wha?” Came the sleepy reply. Then: “Shit! Smoke!” Daniel was on his feet in an instant, panic in his eyes.

For one surreal moment, Eltharion nearly reprimanded his son for his use of language. Checking himself he instead yelled: “Get your boots on, both of you!” They simply stared at him in bewilderment. “Put on your boots!” He roared. “If you burn your feet you’ll fall!”

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Sluggishly, they began to move. As more smoke filtered under the door, their movements gained urgency.

Eltharion grabbed his keys, telling them both to stay close. Leigh's bootlaces were undone, he stood close to his brother's side, trembling violently.

Eltharion reached for the doorknob, it took two attempts for him to wrap his shaking fingers around it. As soon as he pulled the door open, thick grey smoke rushed in to fill the room with a deadly haze.

The living area was filled with smoke, but there was no sign of the fire. Carefully edging out of the door, Eltharion could hear the crackling of flames. He turned towards the shop door and froze. The curtain that covered the doorway was totally burned away, a few flaming scraps lay on the floor. The doorway was bathed in a lurid flickering amber light, shadows leaped and danced on the walls.

Moving swiftly to the doorway, Eltharion saw that it was mostly his shelves of fabric that were aflame. His quick eyes caught sight of a torch thrust into the midst of the bundles of cloth. *This is no accident!* He thought, a shiver running down his spine despite the heat. He turned and grabbed Daniel roughly by the shoulders.

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“The way to the door is clear!” His voice was hoarse from the roiling smoke. He pressed the keys into his son’s hand. “Get your brother out of here!”

Daniel’s dark blue eyes were wide with terror, he almost dropped the keys to the bare earth floor.

“Wha...what about you?” He stuttered.

“I have to get the cashbox!”

“What? No! The fire...”

Eltharion cut him off abruptly. “We *need* that box, Daniel! It’s all we have!” He roughly shoved them towards the door. “Now go!”

Grabbing his terrified brother by the arm, Daniel all but dragged him into the shop. Fierce heat washed over him, stinging his eyes. As they ran one of the shelves collapsed, showering them with burning fragments of cloth. Dimly over the roar of the fire, Daniel heard Leigh shriek in pain and distress. Daniel turned and slapped embers from his brother with almost brutal force, then turned back to unlock the door. His fingers were numb with fear, he dropped the keys twice before finally getting the door open.

As he ran out into the cool night air, Daniel was vaguely aware that the walls were beginning to burn, the wood popping and cracking under the onslaught.

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Running to the middle of the street, barely noticing Leigh collapsing at his feet, Daniel turned back to look for his father.

Eltharion was partway across the shop floor, a grim expression set on his face and the cash box clamped firmly to his chest. Suddenly flames erupted to one side. Burning cloth and bits of shelving showered over Eltharion and he was knocked sideways, screaming in pain and fear. Through the swirling flames, Daniel was horrified to glimpse a large ash-coloured form, lunging after his tumbling father. The youngster let out an inarticulate cry and raced towards the door, heedless of the roaring flames. Strong arms held him back, the village was coming awake. Several dozen of the locals were forming a bucket chain, passing saucepans, buckets, anything that could hold water, but the flames were hot and fierce, driving them back. They began to wet down neighbouring buildings, trying to stop the fire from spreading.

Malan elbowed his way through the crowd. Stepping around those who were restraining Daniel, he knelt and wrapped his arms around Leigh. He stared despairingly into the flames as he tried to soothe the hysterical youngster.

Suddenly, the hands that held Daniel fell away and a grip like iron took him by the shoulders. He felt himself being roughly jerked around.

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Daniel suddenly found himself looking up into the darkest, deepest brown eyes he had ever seen. Blinking in surprise he recoiled slightly, his brain numbly registering the sheer size of the man who stood before him. Almost a foot taller than Daniel, the stranger had broad shoulders and a muscled chest. The short black hair above those dark eyes gave him a brooding appearance.

“Where is your father?” His voice was resonant and as rich as his eyes.

Daniel barely heard him; he was too startled by the fact that this astonishing stranger was human. Daniel had not laid eyes on a human since his mother had died.

“By the Heavens, lad!” The stranger gave him an impatient shake. “Answer me! Is your father still inside?”

Shakily, Daniel nodded.

Without another word, the stranger stripped off his pack and cloak and headed towards the burning building. As he went he drew two slender daggers from sheathes on his thighs. Barely breaking stride, he disappeared into the flames.

Daniel stood rooted to the spot, unable to tear his eyes away from the burning spectacle of his home. Thin ribbons of flame licked from knotholes in the wood, like the tongues of

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hungry deamons devouring the night air. There was a muted crack as part of the roof gave way. Burning thatch dropped into the building with a shower of angry red sparks.

By Daniel's feet, Leigh let out a heart-wrenching scream, crying for his father over and over, Malan unable to quiet him.

Daniel simply stood and stared. None of this felt real to him, the heat of the fire washing over him coupled with the stab of the cold night air, seemed distant and surreal. The cries of those around him went unheard. Slowly, tears streaming down his face, he lowered his head and wept. It began to rain, droplets running down his face and hiding his bitter tears.