

Several nights later, Dahn-Taza woke in darkness. Not suddenly, as from a dream or nightmare, nor with the slow progression of the mind and body cycling up to start the day. His lucidity simply occurred. This had been happening often of late. Sleep had become a source of enormous anxiety for him and thus never failed to be troubled. He feared what might happen while his subconscious reigned, what he might do or remember. Were he able, he would avoid sleeping altogether. It both amazed and frustrated him that with all the power and versatility of magic, some fortresses of the mind could not be breached. Whatever was wrong with him clearly fell into that category.

Since escaping the Darklands over four months before, despondence had become his constant, unwelcome companion. There had been a few bright spots, notably his growing love for Sanlara, but even that anchor was dragging itself loose. He had been traumatized by what had happened down in the Darklands, riddled with guilt over costing his friends their lives, over surviving. He had failed them all, and they had died for that failure. The hellish memories of S'Shasa dying in his arms, that lone tear falling down her cheek, Trinto falling to his death, body sprouted with swords, Fantren's final look of wide-eyed shock as fell to the ground, lifeless, played over and over in his mind. He hadn't seen what had happened to Azor Hunter or Emericus DeCantry but he could imagine both of them fighting with their last breaths, at last overcome by sheer weight of numbers. Those images, too, ran through his mind like the rest. All preventable, avoidable, if only he'd done his part sooner. He wondered if they'd ever forgive him. He wondered if he'd face a reckoning from them when he left this plane of existence for the next life.

There was more. Since coming to the colony, he hadn't used magic. At first, the physical strain had been too much; he hadn't had the stamina or concentration. Now, he was afraid to use

it. If his conscious mind became re-accustomed to calling on that power, then his subconscious would, too. What terrible harm might he cause the colony if he opened that magical channel when he wasn't himself? It was only a matter of time before they all found out. He couldn't allow that to happen, and there was only one way to prevent it.

As a result of his dark hours of troubled contemplation, Dahn-Taza had become convinced that the best thing he could do for himself and for everyone around him was to take his own life. He was mad, mind-sick, and would soon be uncontrollable. How could Sanlara love a man like that? What good was a man like that? No matter how much he loved her and she loved him, he had no illusions about their feelings continuing to be mutual.

Thinking back on their recent interactions, he wondered if there hadn't been some subtle reticence in her voice, some insincere tambor to her words. Had she reached the same conclusion about his future that he had? Was she simply playing out her part in this sad drama to keep him calm while she and the rest of the colony figured out what to do about him?

They had to be watching him very closely, hoping he would resolve the dangerous matter of Dahn-Taza Gentikoman, praying that his mind sickness led him to self-destruction so they wouldn't have to do the job themselves. Yes. Much cleaner if he killed himself. In that scenario, they held no guilt, no responsibility, no accountability. They could just shrug their collective shoulders and be done with him: "He was mind-sick and killed himself. It's sad and tragic, but what could we do?"

On the other hand, maybe they wouldn't wait for him to kill himself. They could hope he would but there was no way to be sure. For the safety of the colony, they would come for him. Probably soon. They'd catch him unaware in some quiet, idle moment.

Whether he died by suicide or execution didn't matter. Something had to give. Thus far,

he'd managed to keep the sluice gate of his connection to magic locked down, but eventually, his subconscious would find a way to throw it open, and gods help them all when that happened.

Tears rolled down his face as the hopelessness of his situation overwhelmed him, the jagged, rusty irony of it. He had escaped the Darklands and Destrik Godslayer only to end up destroying himself or being murdered by his saviors. Pathetic.

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Sanlara lay awake, staring into the darkness. Dahn-Taza had been hiding something from her for days. She had tried to be patient but whatever it was had been steadily deteriorating his state of mind. She didn't want to have a confrontation with him about it, but she likewise couldn't continue to pretend that nothing was wrong.

She knew he'd been having trouble sleeping, so it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for her to stop by his tent at such a late hour. In fact, it might be a good time for them to talk, with the colony silent and free of distractions. She slipped a cloak over her shoulders to keep the night's chill at bay and left her tent.

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Dahn-Taza blinked awake once more. Morning? No, still dark outside. He reached under the bed and pulled another blanket from the floor. As he finished spreading it over the existing one, his tent flap opened, revealing Sanlara, wrapped in a cloak. When she saw that he was awake, she nodded and entered, sealing the flap behind her. The wizard nodded, too, but his was a nod of understanding. This was it. She had come to kill him. Sending Sanlara had been the best option. Ostensibly, he'd never suspect her. She loved him, right? He didn't think he could bring himself

to hurt her, stop her. And really, why should he? Killing him was the right thing to do. Dahn-Taza shivered beneath his blankets, trying to prepare himself to die with as much dignity as he could manage.

“I was hoping and not hoping you’d be awake,” the elf said. “I know it’s late, but are you up for a visit?”

‘A visit.’ That was surely the nicest way he’d ever heard murder described before. She made it sound so innocent and sincere! He wondered if she’d rehearsed this moment, hoping to distract him, calm him so he’d never expect or even see the knife.

“I... I...”

Sanlara froze as she was about to sit in the chair beside his bed, her hand covering her mouth in dismay.

“Good gods, I’ve been presumptuous. I’m sorry, Dahn-Taza. I... I’ll leave you and come back in the morning. I’m sorry I disturbed you...”

She turned and began to head for the exit. Why was she doing that? Why would she abandon the opportunity to solve the problem of him? Had she been hoping he’d be asleep so she could do it more easily? Maybe, seeing him awake, she had resolved to do it anyway, then lost her nerve.

Taza shook his head. No. Something was wrong in his mind, in his thinking. Wasn’t there? No. There was *nothing* wrong in his mind. He had guessed correctly. She had lost her nerve. But now that he knew the colony had decided to kill him, the idea of continuing to wait for it to happen was too much for him to bear. She was here. She needed to do it now. It would be best for both of them, and he wanted to make it as easy for her as possible.

“Please,” he managed just as she was about to exit the tent. “Wait.”

Sanlara returned to him and sat in the chair, concern settling over her features.

“Dahn-Taza, what is it? You’ve been so sad, lately. I’m worried about you. Please talk to me. Please let me help you.”

The wizard sat up, trembling in his bed, his face a mask of solemnity.

“I’m... I’m afraid,” he admitted.

“Afraid?” she replied, a perplexed expression angling her face. “Of what?”

It hurt him that she kept perpetuating the charade. It seemed cruel. He was trying to help her do what she came to do, for gods’ sakes! Steeling himself for his final moments, he said, “I’m afraid of *you*. I know you’ve come here to kill me.”

Her jaw dropped and her eyes went wide with astonishment.

“What?!”

He had to give her credit. She was a marvelous actress. If he didn’t know better, he’d say she seemed authentically shocked by his statement.

“Please don’t continue to insult me with this performance. We both know that since neither you nor anyone else can make me better, you have to kill me before I hurt anyone. I understand and accept this decision.”

She tried to say something, but he had to get this out while he still had the nerve. And the opportunity. There was a strange tranquility in knowing he wouldn’t have to face another day.

“I’m insane,” he went on before she could speak. “You can’t love a man like that. But thank you... for being... kind about it. I know you did it to avoid hurting me. Please, all I ask is that you make it quick. I think I deserve that much...”

Tears spilled down Sanlara’s cheeks. She seemed beside herself. Was she just overcome that they’d reached this final moment of his life and she would now have to carry out her task?

She caressed his cheek with a look of such love and compassion in her eyes it nearly brought him to tears. Then, she took his face in her hands. He tensed for her to snap his neck, but she merely leaned forward, touching her forehead to his. It was a bizarrely tender gesture, but perhaps there was a kind of intimacy at a moment like this. She'd be the last person he'd ever see. She'd be the last person to see him in this life.

Gazing into his eyes, her face less than an inch from his, the elf said, "By every god there is, Dahn-Taza, do you have any idea how wrong you are?"

Why would she say something like that?! What kind of twisted, perverse soul would torture a man at a time like this? How had he not seen what she was before now?

But then, as he gazed into her soulful brown eyes, their metallic shimmer blurred by her tears, as the warmth of her touch seemed to permeate the very cells of his skin where they made contact, a notion presented itself to him. Maybe, she was not twisted at all? Maybe, this murderous plot was nothing but a paranoid delusion conjured by his own fevered mind.

Placing his hands over hers, he said, "I... I... don't know what to believe. I don't know what's real. I don't understand why you don't just kill me and be done with it!"

"Listen to me very carefully, Dahn-Taza. Listen to me with all of your mind, heart, and soul. Listen to me with every fiber of your being. I love you. I *love* you! I would never hurt you, and there is not a single person in this colony who has spent a single moment thinking about harming you. You are completely safe and loved. By me. By every single resident of Windmeer. We are 100% invested in your recovery and survival."

"Is that the truth? Are you lying to me right now?"

She leaned in and kissed him deeply for a long, long time. When their mouths parted, she said, "*That* is the truth. Love is the truth. Nothing else matters. Nothing. Do you believe me?"

“I... I want to. Gods, I want to, so very badly...”

“There’s no better place to start.”

She kissed him again, and the two became one.

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