

Wraithhunter Ilieva

Part 1 - The Duke's Rest

Evening had fallen on The Duke's rest, a small tavern that hadn't lived up to its fancy name in years. War and strife had taken its toll, but it was still a place dear to its regulars. Times were dark and everyone was on edge, and gathering with those near and dear to you was one of the few joys that remained. That evening, however, there were few visitors in the Duke's rest. Huddled in corners around flickering lights, they held their steaming brews and broths as they listened to heavy rain beating against the roof and the rumbling of distant thunder. More than that, they were trying to ignore the crying and wailing that could be heard from upstairs. Pained, desperate howls called out from locked rooms and drowned out all other sounds. It wasn't a night for games or songs.

The door slammed open with a loud bang, and every behind in the tavern jumped out of their chair. A strong gust of wind followed and blew out several candles, making the darkness all the more heavy. Every eye in the room was drawn to the door. There stood a tall, gaunt figure, silent as an omen of death. A wide-brimmed hat covered their face, and a thick poncho with dark patterns whipped around them in the strong wind. At their hip was sheathed a strange, black blade covered in writing. For a moment, it felt like a messenger of death had come with all the wrath of nature at their back.

But the figure simply tipped their hat, closed the door behind them and stepped inside. Heavy footsteps echoed against creaking wood. As the figure removed their rain-drenched hat, a woman was revealed. Curly hair framed a round face that was marked by a pale spot on the left cheek. Dark brown eyes peered out from beneath heavy eyebrows, watchful and alert. As she unclasped her poncho, she revealed a light leather armor, ornamented in an old and flourished style. The family pattern of those that no one wishes to speak of. A strange, elaborate piece of metal armor covered her right arm, glinting in the low light of the tavern.

As she approached the counter, the tavern keeper tried to keep a calm demeanor. He had grown wary of strangers over the years. Oftentimes

they brought violence, or worse. But he pulled up a mug and tried to act unphased.

“Nasty night for a wanderer. Mayhaps I can offer something to warm your belly?” he tried. A full stomach made for a lazy troublemaker.

“Gladly. Nothing strong though. Save that and some food for later.” The stranger had a deep, confident voice. “My name is Ilieva of the Olega family, and I was told to meet a lady by the name of Anyasa here. She needed some urgent help.”

The tavern keeper hesitated. The Olega family had a certain reputation, one that he didn't care for in his tavern. He weighed his words as he poured a mug of hot honey brew. “Yeah...That's my daughter. I think I have an idea what this is about,” he eyed Ilieva a bit as she took the mug between her hands to warm them. “Let me go get her.”

Ilieva watched him as he went into the back. Seemed like whoever summoned her here hadn't been keen on sharing it. But she was used to the apprehension, just as she was used to the eyes staring at her behind her back. Right now, there were more important matters at hand. Like the wailing and crying going on upstairs. She closed her eyes for a moment and shut out the world around her. Then, bit by bit she reached out with her mind to sense if something else was present. And sure enough, she sensed a cold darkness brush against her, trying to get a grip. Like a slimy tendril it tried to wrap itself around her. She knew better than to risk getting in too deep too fast, so she pulled back and centered in on herself again. When she opened her eyes, the tavern keeper and his daughter were looking at her with concern.

“Are you...are you alright, miss?” the daughter – Anyasa, supposedly – said with a bit of apprehension. Ilieva noticed that the young woman had deep bags under her eyes and severely chewed fingers. There was an air of severe nervousness around her.

“I'm quite alright, thank you,” Ilieva said, giving the two a comforting smile. “You are the one who called for me then?”

The tavern keeper grunted, “You drew this ill fortune upon us. You can take care of this,” and went over to sit with some guests. Ilieva watched him as he went away, smile still on her face.

“I take it your father does not approve of you calling on me?” she said, turning to the young woman, whose gaze was fixed on the floor in shame.

“No...” Anyasa mumbled, wringing her hands. “But I didn’t know what else to do. I – we – can’t go on like this anymore,” her voice broke as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Perhaps we should speak about this in the back?” Ilieva said, keeping her voice low and comforting. Anyasa nodded, wiping the tears out of her eyes. Together they walked into the back rooms of the tavern, and Ilieva sat down at a table, while her host took to stirring a boiling cauldron. For a while there was only silence as Anyasa gathered herself.

“It started a little while ago...my husband had left to the big city to get some special wares for the tavern. He was a bit worried when he left, since... since things are the way they are these days. Afraid of highway bandits or other brutes.”

“A fair worry,” Ilieva inflected. “Did something happen to him during the trip?”

“He came back safe and sound, but...” Anyasa stopped stirring and just stared into the pot. “There was something different about him. Like he wasn’t quite the same. He took to locking himself in his room, and was convinced that someone was following him. Every day he got worse.”

“Am I right in guessing that the... sounds from upstairs are your husband?” Ilieva asked carefully.

“Yes. But not just him. Several days ago, he locked himself in his room and has refused to come out since. Through day and night he just talks to himself, and sometimes he screams and cries so unbearably loud that it breaks my heart. Soon after, a guest that was staying the night did the

same thing. And then..." Anyasa's voice broke again. "And then another..." She sunk to her knees, covering her face and weeping.

Ilieva sat down beside her, and put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't you worry. You did the right thing reaching out, no matter what your father might think. There is something foul afoot here."

Anyasa looked up with fear in her face "There is!? Do you know what is going on with my husband? Can you help him?"

"I do not wish to make promises too early. Is there a key to the upper rooms or some other way to get in?"

Anyasa pointed at a set of keys that hung on a hook besides the door to the serving hall. "Yes, those open the doors. My father hasn't wanted to enter himself, because he's afraid that there'd be violence."

Ilieva got up, and took the keys. "That may have been a wise choice. Please stay down here while I go investigate a bit." Anyasa looked like she was going to protest, but a stern look from Ilieva made her reconsider. She silently nodded, wiped her tears and returned to her work.

As Ilieva stepped out into the serving hall, all eyes were on her. By now she would be the only thing they were talking about. If she wasn't careful, these people could easily make the situation much worse, without even knowing it. As she reached the stairs leading up to the upper floor, she saw the tavern keeper sitting with some guests. He didn't hide his displeasure, his face twisted in a brooding grimace. But he did not intervene either as she made her way up the creaking stairs to the upper rooms.

She could feel the air grow heavier with every step up the stairs. Almost as if the air itself was tainted, saturated with fear and anger. Again she could feel that cold whisper of a touch against her mind. It was testing her defenses. The murmur coming from downstairs almost sounded muted, as if it was far, far away. A dark corridor stretched out before her, with a handful of doors going into different rooms. She could now make out the different voices that were whispering, jabbering and howling behind the closed doors. She could make out a few words, but most of it was

incoherent ramblings. A hand lightly placed on the hilt of her blade, she approached the first door and knocked gently.

The voice that had been speaking inside went silent, and there was no response for a long while. So Ilieva tried again. Again, nothing but silence. But just as she was about to reach for the key to force open the door herself, there was an answer.

“...who is there?” The voice sounded like a woman’s, hoarse and tired yet with a manic tinge to it. Ilieva weighed her words.

“I’m a friend, here to help in whatever way I can,” she finally said, as tenderly as she could. “Could you open the door?”

A long silence followed. “I have no friends. Not anymore. Only enemies,” the woman’s voice trailed off into mumblings. “WHO SENT YOU!?” she suddenly screamed, banging at the door. “WHO SENT YOU!? WHO SENT YOU!? WHO-” her screaming became incoherent and soon broke down into sobbing and weeping. For a moment Ilieva considered forcing the door open, but decided that the woman was likely safer inside for now. She proceeded to the next door and placed her ear against the door. She could barely make out the voice of a man talking to himself, seemingly trying to talk himself into calming down. As she knocked, there was a small yelp of surprise from inside.

“Go away! Please...go away,” the voice inside pleaded, his voice weak with weariness.

“I can’t do that, friend,” Ilieva replied softly. “I need to figure out what’s going on here first. Would you please open up?”

“I...I can’t do that. They’ll kill me. Or maybe you’ll kill me. I can’t...” His voice faded to a whisper.

“There’s no one here to kill you. I promise.”

“That’s...exactly what you would say if you were here to kill me!” His voice grew more panicked.

“I have a key to the room. I could have forced my way inside already if I was here to kill you,” she tried. The more riled up he’d become, the worse this would get. “Would you really want to continue to sit alone with your thoughts?” There was a long silence. Suddenly, the door clicked and creaked open. The weary face of a man at the end of his middle age peered out, frightened, but pleaded.

“No...no, I don’t want to be alone anymore,” his voice spoke of unbearable loneliness and fear.

Suddenly, Ilieva got the sharp feeling that the man would lure her inside, only to stab her the first chance he got. But she kept her hand steady, her blade still sheathed. It was a trick. A deep breath focused her mind again. She couldn’t waste this opening. “Can I bring you something? You must be very hungry.”

There was a spark of fear in his eye, but also a glow of deep need. Survival instincts are a strong thing. “I...would you do that for me? I don’t...I don’t dare go downstairs.”

Ilieva nodded and smiled gently. “I’ll fetch you a warm meal and some drink. Keep the door locked until I come back,” she had barely said it before the door was slammed shut in her face.

It didn’t take her long to get a warm meal and - by her request - the strongest drink the house had to offer. Soon she was sitting with the man in his room, watching him devour his meal and drink like an animal. He had, of course, insisted that she taste it first to make sure he wasn’t being poisoned. Once it was all gone, he agreed to share his tale.

“I came here...three days ago? Four? I can barely recall,” he started, his gaze lost in a flickering candle. “I was traveling eastwards, going to trade around Narogav. Cloths and thread mainly, nothing terribly expensive. But as I stopped here for the night...I got a terrible feeling that I was being followed. Enemies of the family, or someone else, I wasn’t quite sure. Everyone seemed to be looking at me very strangely, and come morning...” He paused, seemingly lost in thought. “After a horrible night, I couldn’t bring myself to leave the room. I just knew that they were out

there, waiting for me to come out. Waiting to kill me..." He shuddered, cradling his legs towards his chest. "And that horrible wailing from the rooms next to mine...what dreadful sounds..." Ilieva listened patiently, watching the man intently as he spoke. Time and again, cold tendrils of darkness brushed against her mind, trying to get a grip. But she was certain now of what they were dealing with. As the man went silent, she let him clear his mind a bit before speaking.

"I'm happy to say that no one in this tavern is trying to kill you," she said, smiling. "But there is something dark here that has taken hold of you, whispering those menacing things in your mind." The man went pale as he listened, unable to speak. "But that's what I'm here for. And if you are willing to trust me, I could very much use your help."

He watched her with tears welling up in his eyes, visibly struggling with his fear. Finally, he whispered "What...do you want me to do?"

"It is very simple. I want you to go downstairs, sit with the other guests and try to enjoy yourself. Have a drink or two if it helps." The man looked at her in confusion, trying to make sense of it all. "If I am to drive this dark thing away, I need you to replace that fear with some joy, or at the very least slight mirth." she said with a smile. "That makes it harder for the thing to latch on to you again."

The man hesitated, distraught at the idea of leaving his safe room. "You guarantee no one is waiting downstairs to kill me?" Ilieva nodded. "Would you...follow me down there?"

Soon, Ilieva had the man sat down with a hot drink in the company of other guests. Still very nervous, but getting him out of the room was a good start. Now she'd have to deal with the woman in the other room, before confronting the main victim. So she went into the kitchen, where Anyasa was still distracting herself with work. When she saw Ilieva enter, her face lit up with hope. But before she could ask her burning question, Ilieva spoke.

"I got one of the guests to come down. And I'm now certain of what we are dealing with."

“Is it...is it something bad?” Anyasa asked, voice shaking.

“A noya. A dark creature that makes you paranoid, and feeds off you as you sink deeper and deeper into that fear and suspiciousness. If you don’t deal with it quickly, it grows fat and strong, affecting more and more people,” Ilieva said somberly. “They are becoming very common in these dark times...”

“Can you...kill it?” Anyasa asked carefully, eyeing Ilieva’s blade with fear.

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy. Violence and blades can’t kill these kinds of creatures. It must be starved, and to do that we must deal with what attracted it to your husband in the first place,” Ilieva said, as she started to search through the dried herbs that were stored in the kitchen. “Tell me...was there something that worried your husband in particular when he traveled away?”

Anyasa hesitated. “I-I’m not quite sure. I suppose he was frightened of the chaos and violence, but who isn’t these days?” She watched as Ilieva picked through the herbs but didn’t dare question it. “I suppose he was a bit distraught about a fight he had with some friends, but”-

“A fight? What kind of fight?”

“It-It wasn’t anything big, really. He and a few of his friends gambled, and my husband won a great deal of money from them which led to a bit of a quarrel. Afterwards, he felt bad about taking the money and-and...I guess he was a bit afraid that they were very angry with him. They are very dear to him and-”

“-and he was afraid he’d damaged their friendship...” Ilieva paused. “It may sound like a rather silly thing, but that might be enough for a noya to latch on to if he’s all alone.”

“He did talk about them a lot when he came back,” Anyasa said, weakly.

“Where are these friends? Can you fetch them here?” Ilieva said, her tone now more severe and demanding.

“I-I suppose I could, but”-

“Then do so, as soon as possible. Don’t waste a single moment. I’ll make preparations in the meantime.”

“What kind”-

“Now. Please.” A stern look told Anyasa that there was no room for questions or negotiations.

As Ilieva was left alone in the kitchen, she picked a few select herbs as well as a candle and went back upstairs, barely giving the tavern keeper a look as she passed him. Once outside the door with the crazed woman, she pondered her options for a moment. The herbs she had picked would, if lit on fire, produce a smoke that would put whoever was in there to sleep. It was not ideal, but the other option was to try and talk sense into the woman, and there was no guarantee that would even be possible. Time was of the essence, as the noya would no doubt start to defend its prey. So she got down on her knees, and after lighting the herbs on fire she pushed them under the door. In a matter of moments, the ramblings that could be heard from inside became panicked shouts followed by loud banging. Then, suddenly, a loud thud followed by silence. Wasting no time, Ilieva got up and unlocked the door, holding her breath. Inside was the limp body of a young woman, unconscious but alive. The room was in tatters, furnishings thrown around the room and walls covered in bloody scratch marks. A ghastly hint at the horrible days and night that had passed.

But there was no time to waste, so Ilieva picked up the woman and carried her downstairs. The other guests looked on in dismay, but Ilieva simply smiled back at them as she brought the woman into the kitchen, slung over her shoulder. The tavern keeper wasn’t very amused by the idea of having a guest stashed in the back, but soon saw reason when told what exactly had been festering in his establishment. So as he took care of his now unconscious guest, Ilieva prepared herself to face the heart of the problem. She stepped outside in the rain for a brief moment of isolation to clear her head. As the wind tossed her curly hair, she breathed deeply and let the sound of rain fill her mind. The noya would use any little chink in her armor to try and unsettle her. Losing her balance could have disastrous

consequences. Though this was not the first noya she had dealt with, each and every one of them was unpredictable in its own way.

Finally, she could delay no longer. She returned inside, and as soon as she did she could feel the darkness brushing against her mind. The mood had suddenly gotten much more dour, and people were watching her much more fearfully. The guest she had brought downstairs earlier was still sitting at the same table, quiet and sulking. It became clear that she would need to be far more aggressive, or the noya would gain the upper hand. So she put on a smile, and made her way straight upstairs. As she was about halfway *They are going to come after you and kill you.* She stopped, focusing her thoughts. Suddenly, the force was much stronger. Bringing the woman down that way may have been a mistake: it had made the others nervous. Fed the noya even more.

She put her hand on the hilt of her blade as she continued onwards. The noya could strike at any moment, but if she didn't keep calm it would use it against her. On the upper floor the corridor seemed much darker and longer, as if it went on forever into the night. *Who else is hiding in these rooms? There might be someone waiting in ambush...* For a moment, the thought lingered before she shook it off. She simply had to trust what they had said about the guests. Giving in to doubt now would not end well.

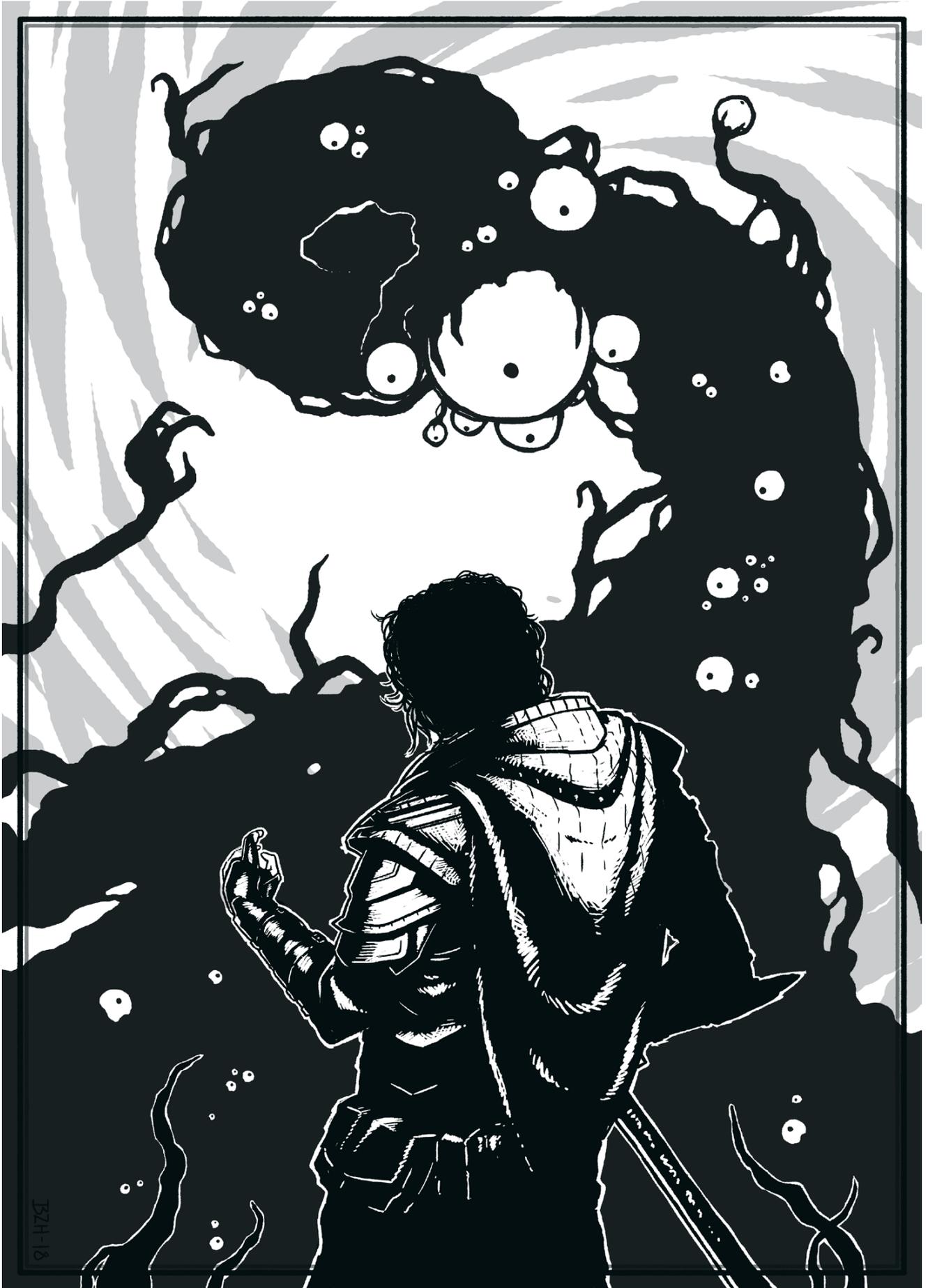
As she slowly made her way down the corridor, it felt like she was being watched from the shadows. Dark tendrils seemed to lick the edges of the few pools of candlelight outside the doors, and faint whispers could be heard from behind the doors. All tricks, she told herself. She was the hunter, not the hunted. The constant wailing that had been echoing throughout the tavern all night suddenly went quiet as she reached the door from where it came. *He's waiting to kill you.* For a moment she hesitated. Should she simply knock? It was too quiet in there, and maybe he – no. No time for doubt. She took out the key, and unlocked the room.

“I mean you no harm. But I'm coming in right now,” she warned before she pushed the door open, her blade at the ready. The room inside was almost completely dark. Only a few pieces of battered furniture and scattered belongings could be seen in the faint candlelight. *He's going to get you, Ileva. He's going to get youuuuuuu....* She took a deep breath, cleared her mind, and stepped inside carefully. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could

make out a room in complete disarray but no man inside. That is, until she spotted something hunched up in a corner of the room, watching her.

“It said you would come,” he whispered. “It said you were coming to kill me, that they had- that they were-you are”- his speech became warped and incoherent before screaming at the top of his lungs and lunging at her. A split second before he was upon her, she saw that he held a sharp piece of glass in his hand, aimed right at her heart. She shielded herself, but the glass glanced off her armored arm, cutting her across the neck. A lightning-sharp pain twisted her body, but the cut was shallow. Muscle memory instinctively took over, and a quick blow to the gut took him down. In a matter of seconds he was a wheezing pile on the floor, trying to steady himself. There was no time for pity however, as Ilieva took out a pair of thick leather wraps and restrained him. Hands and feet bound, he would be secured. That’s when she got the unmistakable feeling that something else was watching her.

Carefully, she turned around, blade at the ready. A cold shiver came over her as she saw the grisly figure watching her – the black, twisted form of the noya, a mass of dark tendrils spotted with beady clusters of piercing eyes, all focused on her. Twisting and contorting, it stretched out and wrapped around her. *They’re going to think you killed him, and now they are coming for you!* Nothing of the light remained, there was only the smoky haze of the beast trying to claw its way inside her. *He’s getting loose, he’ll cut you to pieces!* The cold veil of the noyas influence was trying to suffocate her, force her to panic and give in. In her mind she was forced to relive terrible moments – moments of persecution, of alienation and otherness. Hateful, fearful looks and the constant fear of a dagger in the back that their family suffered. But the noya pushed too hard, dug too greedily. And in doing so it exposed itself. Quick as a blackclaw she struck, clutching the noya’s heart. A dark scream filled her very essence, and her hand burned from an otherworldly fire. For a moment, she balanced on the edge of madness, desperately holding on to her own mind. A split second of control was all she needed and with a great effort, she pierced the noya’s heart with her blade. A whirlwind of darkness and despair erupted, with a scream that threatened to tear her apart. A second later, utter silence. Catching her breath, she stumbled to her feet and out of the room. She caught the wall, and leaned against it, trying to make her spinning head calm down.



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From inside the room she could hear whimpers and sobs. Once her own head had finally settled, she returned inside and sat down beside the man. He looked like ten rough years, clothes soiled and broken, hair torn out in spots. She did not wish to guess what kind of darkness he had gone through in there.

“What...happened?” he whispered between sobs. “All I’ve known is darkness and fear...I thought they were coming to kill me...but is it gone?”

“Do not worry. Things will be fine. Someone will come to help you soon,” she said softly. Telling him that the noya wasn’t dead would only make matters worse. Once it recovered, it would try to come for him again. Now they needed to make sure it couldn’t come back here.

She left him there, sobbing, after freeing him and covering him with a blanket. As she got out into the corridor, she stopped to take a deep breath. Then, she straightened her back and shook off the last of the noya darkness. As she returned downstairs, it was clear to see that the mood had lifted. Anxiously waiting by the serving counter was Anyasa, together with three men that all looked like they had been dragged out of bed. Meeting their looks, Ilieva gave them a comforting nod.

“Is he...alright?” Anyasa asked, hands anxiously clasped in front of her.

“He is,” Ilieva answered curtly. “Now listen to me carefully and take every word seriously: you will all go upstairs to your husband. You will then stay with him and talk all this through. The whole reason the noya could get a hold on him was because he worried himself sick over things that could have been easily solved.” She looked at the men, making sure they understood. They were very visibly confused, but did not protest much. “If you do not work all this through, then I assure you this will not be the last time the noya takes hold.” Anyasa went pale, and solemnly promised that they would do as told. With the three men in tow, she hurried upstairs to see to her husband.

Realizing that she could do nothing but wait now, Ilieva finally got the hot meal and drink that she had been promised earlier. She would still need to stay a while to make sure the noya didn’t return, but she had bought them

time to work things out. The tavern keeper, now a fair bit more agreeable, offered free food and room as a thank you – on top of the pay his daughter had promised, of course.

The food was flavorful and the drink was strong. But though the mood in the tavern was lighter now, she still ate alone. Such was the way of things for strangers such as her.