



SONS OF DARKNESS

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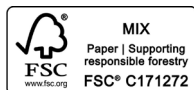
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PROLOGUE



I

The stench of split flesh from the carcasses of the Children of Light wafted out to mock his hunger. The wolves had come, and then left without feeding. Ravens circled overhead, yet none descended. These details lingered with the rider as he drew rein at the very spot where his foes had made their last stand. With his dagger he flicked the strands of his long hair, clumped with dried blood, away from his eyes, wondering when his topknot had come asunder. As he took in the sights of the carnage that had taken place mere hours ago, he absent-mindedly applied a luminescent powder to his blade.

For a Hero of Light, he reckoned he cast a rather grim shadow. *Hero.* The word slithered nastily in his mind. An honour bestowed upon you when you had killed all those who would have called you a mass murderer.

‘Shall we, Muchuk?’ Asha walked her horse amidst the sprawled bodies to where he sat astride his stallion. ‘Time to deliver the good news.’

Ab yes. Trisiras is dead. He nudged his mount onto the slope of the hill, urging it into a collected canter as his sister followed suit. They made their way up the tortuous track towards the mountain fortress of Svarg – a great hulking fastness that loomed like a crystal-white orb against the dark, poisoned heavens. A faint

pillar of light that rose from somewhere within the fortress served as their lodestar. *The beacon of tyranny*, Muchuk mused.

Two sharp eyes stared out from Asha's beaky, grimy face packed in a half-helm. If posture was personality, his sister was a pig. It was a miracle she did not slide off her horse. 'You seem awfully quiet for someone who has won a war.'

Muchuk shrugged, turning to stare up at the sky. By now, the third moon was a jade monstrosity. Green light leaked out from it to the west, staining the heavens with stolen emerald hues. *Won a war...* He sighed, as if it were a great revelation. As if he had not spent years of his life severing, slashing and slitting the *Danavas*, the Children of Darkness.

But Asha was right. He should have felt victorious, elated even. And yet, despite his valiant efforts, he felt like a man who had finally opened the box of glory to find that it did not contain what was etched on the lid.

They rode past their Men who were busy cutting the heads off dead *Daevas*, the Children of Light – the few righteous ones who had aligned with the Danavas. Their luminescent white heads made for macabre lamps, if you were into that sort of a thing. It would have been beautiful had it not been for the stench. Perhaps this was why he preferred slaying the Children of Darkness. They immaterialized into the air in a puff of odourless smoke when they fell. No stink. No bodies to toss. Clean, gutter-friendly kills.

'Muchuk Und?' Asha persisted.

'Yes, yes, *victory!*' he answered dryly, half wishing he could race his stallion ahead and leave her promptings far behind. 'Tired of this place yet?' he asked in a pitiable attempt to change the topic of conversation.

Fortunately, Asha took the bait. 'I don't know... this world has been growing on me. Battles and wine aplenty. So many wonders to behold and cherish— Will you *stop* rubbing that powder on the dagger, you miser?! Now that we know how to make it, we can create it any time and drown in it.' A pleasant thought, all things considered. Muchuk Und sheathed the dagger. 'Now where was I?

Yes. Hm... I like this place. Not to forget,' her face split into a wide grin, 'the Daevas are especially ravenous in bed.'

'Just what a brother wants to hear,' Muchuk Und sighed.

She lifted her half-helm, treating the world to her scarred face and long hair. The beaky nose did her flat face no favours for her. She might have snatched their mother's lush tresses in a cold bargain, but she looked every bit their father's daughter. Men disappeared from her path. Soldiers obeyed her commands without a murmur. Bards shuddered to sing in her presence. Envy filled Muchuk's heart. Was there any warrior as fortunate as a truly ugly one? And Asha was as ugly as rain on a wedding day. Her good fortune might have been tolerable had he not been afflicted with his mother's heart shaped face and lengthy eyelashes, but as it was, Muchuk Und was far more used to being called beautiful instead of brutal. Just what a warlord likes to hear.

'On the other hand,' she continued as if Muchuk hadn't spoken, 'I do wish we could've taught those Nagas a cold lesson in manners. To usher in the Age of Man. And I'm sure you yearn for your wretched family too.'

Family. How long had it been since he saw their ungrateful faces? Now that he began to count the years, Muchuk Und could not believe he had been away from his world for a decade. *Guess time passes swiftly when most of it is spent on battlefields.*

'Hopefully less than they crave for me,' he murmured, though he had his doubts. His daughter must be what, eleven summers by now? Would she even remember she had a father? He pushed away the dark thoughts before he tumbled down into the pit of melancholy again. 'But I doubt your imperial interests will be as entertaining as we had imagined them to be, Asha. With the weapons we will carry back from here, it will be... too easy.'

Her face twisted with distaste. 'Where is the joy in that? Home will just be... disappointing.'

Muchuk sighed loudly. 'But what is left to be done here?'

Asha turned to him again, her eyes quizzical as she studied him. 'Ah, I see now. You suffer the staleness a man feels when he has achieved everything, Brother. The Daevic indifference has

infected you. It will pass. You are too cocky to be crabby for long.'

I hope so. Because, like a homing pigeon pining for its humble cage, Muchuk Und was homesick.

II

They swung down from their horses. Seeing Asha's clumsy dismount, Muchuk gave emitted another profound sigh. For one who claimed to love riding, she was quite an embarrassment to the family name.

'Ready?' he asked caustically.

'Aye, aye. Stop fretting!' she said as she finally managed to disentangle herself.

Jerking their sword belts straight, they strode towards the palace. The red doors yawned open, as welcoming as a burning pyre. Inside, grim-faced Daeva guards spoiled the mood under every archway they passed under.

'I swear this palace is just *ghastly*.' Asha sniggered as they finally reached the inner sanctum.

It felt like they had crossed over into a different realm. Playful fountains threw pink spray at them. Closely scythed grass spread below their feet. Hedges, carved into wondrous monsters, stood like a guarding legion on either side of the grassy pathway that led to the Dome.

The Daevas were a strange race, Muchuk reflected. In his time here, he had realized that the Daevas had ceased to procreate; had, in fact, stopped living. Immortality was their curse. They merely continued to... exist. Passion had been extinguished from their beings, along with passion, bloodlust, gluttony and envy – all the things that made life *delicious*. If they were indeed Gods, then the Gods were really bored. And yet, they were obsessed with something as dull as gardening. Just one of the many ironies of his employers he had unravelled over time.

The other irony he had uncovered was about why the Daevas once swooped down to his world to seduce earthlings when the

Daevas themselves were such exquisite creatures. Turned out, Mortals excited and enflamed them, gave them reason to *feel* again. A fact he had unfortunately come to learn from his sister's accounts of Daevic endurance.

There was also the whole thing about sacrificial worship, which the Mortals had once practised to revere the Daevas when they had not known any better. Muchuk didn't quite understand how, but these ornate rituals *fed* the Daevas. Not with food but with... vitality, a currency in which the Daevas were most impoverished.

Not that it mattered any longer for this was ancient history. All of it had happened a long time ago, much before Muchuk's time, before the Daevas had been banished from his world after being defeated in the War of Spring.

Come to think of it, no one really won that war, Muchuk reflected. The Daevas, though beaten, survived, and were gone. As for the Mortals, a hundred races became extinct overnight, and along with them the one thing that had helped them win that war. *Elementals*. To think he was going to be the one to bring it back to his world...

'Asha...'

'Yes?'

'This is my last season in this Daevic nonsense,' Muchuk declared. 'Their war is won. They can manage the measly battles that remain on their own. And they may be virile in bed, but I need the smell of mud again.'

Asha stared evenly back. 'I knew I shouldn't have brought up your wretched family.'

'It's not just about them, Asha. You were right. The staleness here has affected me. Let's go back now, while we're still young. Don't you wish to go back to awe the other races into bending the knee; to rule over all with an iron fist, and not be answerable to anyone, *anyone*, regardless of how easy defeating them now sounds?'

Asha, surprised into silence, stared at him. Muchuk stared back from beneath the rim of his helm, cold sweat prickling awake beneath his armour.

'Well, when you put it like that...' She scratched a scar on her

face. 'Alright, Brother, I'm with you. The Danavas are dead. Thorin can continue holding the crown of this blasted world, and we can melt away to rule ours.'

'That's it?' Muchuk was surprised at the ease with which he had convinced her. He had been preparing a whole speech. 'You do not desire to stay?'

'I do, but someone needs to teach you how to squat on a throne. And I can see you have made up your mind.' She patted him on the back, then stopped short, looking around. '*Another* garden, seriously?'

They had entered a second garden, this one being special in its own way. The beacon, a prehistoric column of light said to come from a time before the Daevas, stood tall in the centre, the light stretching up like a pillar into the sky. The immensity of Thorin Drazeus' sanctum towered around the column on three sides, in the embrace of a scorpion. Statues dotted the cobbled path to the Sanctum – a Daeva gifting knowledge to a Man; a Daeva giving alms to a Naga; a Daeva shielding a Danava from danger. At the end of the pathway stood a half-finished Daeva statue, chiselled only at the legs.

'I bet that'll be a Daeva massaging a unicorn's arse.'

'If it isn't the most cherished maggots of Aea!' Savitre Lios, the youngest of Thorin Drazeus' brothers, rushed towards Asha. Like the other Daevas, he was tall, with silvery skin and haunting golden eyes. Patterns were tattooed on his lean arms, which blazed with yellow light. Savitre Lios was probably the last Daeva to harbour any interest in anything materialistic. Unfortunately, the 'materialistic' here happened to be his sister.

Asha grinned as she gripped Savitre Lios' waist and leaped up, shinnying up his tall frame to kiss him full on the lips. After what felt like a lifetime, Muchuk coughed. Savitre ceased groping Muchuk's sister and turned to look at him, while Asha continued sucking on Savitre's neck.

'Why her?' Muchuk asked with distaste. He knew the picture of this beautiful monster pecking his monstrous sister was going to visit him routinely as a nightmare.

'I am addicted to her dirty mind and pure heart.'

'Right at least on one count,' Muchuk snorted. 'Thorin here yet?'

'Yes. Faraladar is here as well. The Twins, too.'

Faraladar was the one who had signed Muchuk Und and Asha Und to this adventure in a deal forged in a *Vachan*. It bound them to the Daevas, to fight the rebellious Danavas. In return, Muchuk was taught the Way of the Elementals, or as Faraladar called it the art of the *N'yen Valren*.

It was a good deal.

For the Daevas had lost their will, their viciousness, their cruelty – all important ingredients to winning any war. They needed Muchuk, a warlord of repute back in his own world, to do their dirty work for them. And Muchuk needed their arcane knowledge to awaken the Elementals back home, to lay the foundation of his own earthly empire.

It was a good thing a ritually ordained Vachan worked the same way for both the Mortals and the Daevas. Faraladar had brayed on about how Men and Daevas had essentially the same map within their bodies: the same *nadis* through which blood, dirt and soul flowed in and out of their hearts. A Vachan had the effect of binding these nadis in chains that made the soul, or what the Daevas called *atman*, stronger. Made stronger in the manner a man wrapped in iron chains becomes when he is forced to work bearing such weight. But Vachans were a nasty business. And they were unbreakable. If one was inclined to break his Vachan, the chains would contract around the atman, and the oathbreaker would be obliterated.

Asha looked up. 'Shall we go in, Muchuk? Best not to keep the King of Daevas waiting.'

III

They passed into the Main Hall of the Sanctum, where enormous suits of armour belonging to Drazeuses long dead stared down

at them. Around these dented armour-suits were weapons the Drazeuses had presumably used, rather thoroughly by the look of them. One did not need to be a sleuth to understand the Drazeuses had never shirked from a fight. It was for this reason that Muchuk thought it rather odd when he found Thorin Drazeus engaged in something as unwarlike as painting.

‘My ancestors,’ Thorin said, standing crabbed over a canvas and wielding a paintbrush instead of a sword. He had the mannerisms of a kindly grandfather, but Muchuk knew better. Failed artists made the worst tyrants. ‘You know, not one Drazeus in the last two millennia has died in his bed. Source of pride, that.’

Of course, quite a few of them had died in other people’s beds, if Savitre was to be believed, but Muchuk felt it prudent not to mention this. ‘Indeed, Your Worship.’

Thorin turned from the portrait he had been working on and wiped his red-stained hands on his robe. Turned out he had drawn a lurid portrait of himself, standing atop a battlement with a sword held aloft, an army of grateful Men behind him. Muchuk gaped at it for a moment, hardly knowing whether to cry or laugh.

‘Mankind, such a dashing species, I’ve always thought,’ Thorin remarked with a fading smile. ‘I mean, the Vanaras are pompous and the Nagas venomous, but one always feels there is something grotesquely gracious about the human will to survive.’

Muchuk exchanged a smirk with Asha and proceeded to bow humbly. Two blonde-haired, slender female guards took their places on either side of Thorin as he approached a basin to wash his hands with ether. *The Twins*. The long purple cloaks that trailed behind them had cowls that covered their heads, but even with half their faces hidden, they possessed an angelic beauty that was breathtaking. But then the world was full of demons with pretty faces and angels with scars. While Muchuk Und was busy gawking at the Twins, another Daeva paced over to where Muchuk, Asha and Savitre Lios stood.

‘Faraladar Saan!’ Asha shook his arm. ‘Now this is what I call a royal welcome.’

'Lady Asha,' Faraladar smiled and bowed politely. 'Lord Muchuk Und. *May your Night be Bright.*'

'And yours,' Asha returned the traditional Daevisch greeting. 'You do see the irony of calling me a *Lady*, when my breeches are coloured with the blood of your fallen kin?'

Faraladar shrugged. 'Those Daevas chose to side with the enemy. Their kinship had been severed,' he declared flatly.

'But of course. How practical of you.'

Thorin cleared his throat near the basin. 'What is the fate of Trisiras, my son?' Thorin asked, hands now white and clean.

'Well...' Muchuk Und blew out his cheeks, and wondered if he should speak of the plague. He decided against it. Power is not just in what a man knows but in what he hides. 'His body has been eaten by one of my Pisachas. But I ensured they saved the head for you, Your Worship.'

There was a long pause. Thorin stared at them. They stared back, like a pair of accused waiting for the judge to pass sentence. Thorin finally nodded. 'How did he die?'

'He drowned.'

'How did he drown?' asked Dewi Raith, one of the Twins.

'Well, Raith, he could not breathe when Muchuk held his face underwater in the river,' Asha stated flatly.

Muchuk Und shook his head. Tact wasn't Asha's strong suit.

Ushas, the other Twin, her dagger-whip coiled around her waist like a belt, and a spear by her side, was the kinder twin but by no means less deadly. 'But was it really necessary to exterminate Trisiras' entire army?' she asked, softly. 'Did they not surrender?'

Muchuk scowled. He had won their war for them. And while he did not hold a grudge for not being given a victory parade, he surely was not going to subject himself to an interrogation. 'In my defence, Ushas, I was left unsupervised.'

'That line is foul enough to make a maggot retch!' Dewi Raith grated.

'You had orders to let Trisiras live. He was ours to torment,' Ushas said with the calmness of a dandelion in a breeze.

Asha interjected before Muchuk could spit out another retort. Addressing the King of Light directly, she said, 'Your Worship, it is a childhood problem of his. He cannot take orders. He can barely take suggestions.'

Muchuk chuckled.

'That will be enough.' Thorin's command stopped Raith from responding but the ripple of twitches coursing through her cheeks spoke plenty. 'Peace is a brittle thing, and Muchuk Und has assisted us with stretching it for a few more centuries. No one has ever achieved peace without getting their hands dirty.'

A sermon on peace from Thorin sounded like a sermon on chastity from a whoremonger but Muchuk Und nodded in solemn agreement.

Thorin turned to Faraladar. 'Let refreshments flow for our fine warriors. I am sure they would like to clean up before the next battle.'

'About that, Your Worship, I...' Muchuk glanced at Asha, who nodded, '... *we* wish to return home. Only small pockets of resistance survive, which the Men I leave behind can deal with.'

'The Pisachas, you mean,' Raith scoffed. 'Cursed cannibals!' she fumed.

'Enough, Raith.' Thorin scratched his perfect chin. 'So Faraladar was right again. He suspected you ached to return to Aea. Home is where the heart belongs after all.' He smiled amiably as he approached Muchuk. 'But don't you have everything you need here? Your race there is on the brink of extinction. Have you really thought this through?'

No. In fact, Muchuk had only thought of it a few moments ago, but now that the words were unsheathed, best to swing it all the way. 'Aye, Your Majesty,' he said. 'We have fulfilled our Vachan, and so have the Daevas. We long to return to our homes, to be with our kind again, wretched though they may be.' That fetched him no smiles. 'And,' Muchuk rallied, 'to teach Mankind the ways of civilization that we have both learned under you, Your Worship, and to protect them from the other belligerent races. As you often

say, every flock of sheep needs a shepherd with a flute to entrance them, and a sword to keep away the wolves.'

'Ah, perfectly understandable then.' Thorin turned to look at Faraladar and nodded. 'Muchuk does make valid points. What was the Vachan again?' he enquired.

'I was to defeat Trisiras and the Children of Darkness for you,' Muchuk answered instead. 'You were to teach us how to use the Elementals, I mean, N'yen Valren.' He turned to wink at Asha, who smiled back. His brief spat with the Twins had resurrected the insolence in him. It felt good to be himself again. 'Naturally, not killing me and returning me home safely were part of the Vachan too,' Muchuk added.

Thorin exchanged a sad look with the Twins and then sighed with a smile. He draped an arm over Muchuk Und's shoulders as if they were old friends and guided him to the open terrace. Thorin was as silvery as the other Daevas, but the patterned tattoos on his hands shone white instead of gold. He was older than the others; that was plain to see. 'Son, your wish will be fulfilled. Truth be told, I foresaw that the moment of parting was upon us, and so I had already prepared a farewell present for you. Though I had not imagined that I would be gifting it to you so soon.' He pointed ahead. 'For services rendered, son.'

All three moons were high in the star-splattered sky as they walked outside into the night. Muchuk Und almost moaned with pleasure. Because there, right before him, resting on the terrace like a leviathan, was the most glorious Daeva ship he had ever seen. Muchuk narrowed his eyes against a rough breeze, pushing his long hair out of his face. 'Now that is what I call a gift, Your Worship.'

Thorin smiled, evidently pleased. 'It is why I built the thing, son. It is why I built Svarg. It is why I signed the Treaty to keep the Daevas out of your world. For Peace and Beauty. The old Drazeuses cared only for war, but I look towards fraternity. See there.' He pointed into the distance, to the green sky behind the enormous moons. 'There is your world, twinkling, always in sight, so I can keep an eye on it. Like the flowers of my gardens.'

‘We are fortunate to have a Protector like you, Your Worship,’ Muchuk lied easily.

‘I do miss the Mortals’ *yagnas*, you know... a sublime thing it was.’ Muchuk thought he saw Thorin lick his lips. ‘But hard decisions had to be taken for peace.’

‘What does Faraladar say? The road to paradise is paved with pain.’

Thorin squeezed Muchuk Und’s shoulder. ‘Faraladar is the wisest among us, even if a little too melancholic for my taste. I wish we Daevas were half as enthused about life as you Mortals. It’s a good thing you came to aid us, Muchuk Und. We had the numbers and the weapons but not the will to kill. So, tell me son, what will you do with your newfound knowledge once you get back home?’

‘Do some conquering for ourselves, Your Worship.’ Asha came forward, wine cup in hand. ‘And you give us too much credit,’ she continued. ‘The Daevas were instrumental in the war effort in their own way.’ She winked at Savitre Lios.

‘Modesty does not suit you Mortals,’ stated Thorin, apparently missing the exchange. ‘Yes, our armies played a part, but it was your leadership and barbarity that brought this War to a conclusion. Your cruelty, your savagery, your love of butchery—’

‘Oh stop, Your Worship, you will make me blush.’ Asha laughed.

Thorin withdrew his arm from Muchuk’s shoulders and walked ahead before turning to face them both. ‘I can imagine the triumphant welcome that awaits you when you return. You shall ride the streets of Aea, and the Mortals will shower you with flowers to honour your victories here. You will be revered as Gods, the way we used to be. Your sons and daughters, your lovers and peers, your subjects, will all be there, waiting in jubilation.’

Muchuk wasn’t really sure what awaited him back home. Ten years was perhaps not so long a period, but one never knew. But he made no demur. ‘It is certainly something to look forward to, Your Worship.’

'Believe me, they would have... were they not all dead a century past.' And just like that Thorin's assuring smile fled like a gust of wind.

Metal glinted. Muchuk brought his hand up instinctively. A gurgle escaped his mouth as a wire twisted around his neck, lacerating it on either side. His thumb was the only thing between the wire and his windpipe as the wire began to choke him from the sides.

'Muchuk...' Asha tossed the cup away and started towards him, her hand on her weapon belt, mouth half open. There was another shimmer of metal as Ushas' spear pierced Asha's skull from behind.

Muchuk tried to scream in fury as his sister, his general, his companion, crumbled to the ground, dead. But all he could manage was a squeal as he felt a pair of soft hands brush against the nape of his neck. *Raith*. Her nails dug into his back as she choked him remorselessly. He could not believe that all that remained between life and death was his measly thumb. Blood trickled from his neck in vertical lines where the wire had cut into the sides of his neck. His face burned as he grasped for every breath. For a race that had become jaded and lethargic, Raith was certainly zestful about killing him.

'What have you done?' Savitre Lios dropped beside Asha, cradling her corpse but doing naught to save Muchuk.

Muchuk's free hand fished around for his dagger but someone caught his wrist and held it fast. Faraladar pressed up against him. 'I must apologize,' he whispered in his ear as he pulled the dagger from Muchuk Und's sheath. Calmly, he pushed it once, twice, and then one more time, with soft precise movements, into Muchuk Und's side. Blood shot out across the floor in long streaks.

'Have a care, Raith. He cannot die or we will break our Vachan,' Faraladar said.

Savitre Lios rose, open-mouthed, stupefied. 'Yes! What of the Vachan? Why aren't we dead?'

'The Vachan was not to kill Muchuk,' Thorin said. 'These arrogant Mortals never look beyond themselves, do they? If you

are done crying over your whore, Savitre, help Faraladar drag him into the ship. Put him on ice so he doesn't die.' Thorin turned to Raith, annoyed. 'Will you take a century to knock him out, Raith? Faraladar stabbed him thrice, for crying out loud!'

'The damn wire is caught on his fucking thumb!' Raith hissed.

'Do I have to do everything myself?' Thorin walked to Muchuk. 'Give him to me! No wonder we were defeated by the Mortals.'

Raith's grasp loosened for the briefest moment. Little though he knew it, Faraladar had done Muchuk a favour by stabbing him with his own dagger. The powder he had rubbed on his blade had now mixed with his blood. Muchuk Und grabbed Raith's cloak with his free hand and focused his eyes. The purple bled from her cloak as he absorbed it. In the passing of a heartbeat, her cloak was bleached white.

'Seven hells...' Raith gasped.

Muchuk Und used the purple to ignite his Crown Chakra, the focal point of energy located between his eyes, giving him a fleeting moment of genius clarity. He stomped down on Raith's foot with all his strength. Her grip slipped from the wire as she staggered back. Growling, Muchuk pushed Faraladar away, deftly snatching back his dagger and rolling away to a safe distance from them.

Raith and Faraladar prowled towards him. Muchuk began scraping the surface of his dagger vigorously with his nails. It made an ear-numbing sound. His nails tore. His fingers bled. But he did not stop. 'C'mon, goddammit!' he cried.

The zinth finally rose. And he turned to his last ally in this world, the Elemental he had barely learned to channel – Darkness. Muchuk Und raised his hand, sketching the Mandala, his finger weaving white-rimmed dark trails in the air, as if on an invisible canvas. He etched the fastest Mandala he knew how to draw.

Thorin took a step back. 'How is he channelling?' he demanded. 'I thought we had swabbed the place clean of zinth!'

'His dagger, Your Worship,' Faraladar replied in alarm. 'Get back, Sire!'

Muchuk's cloak fluttered in the power of the Mandalas as he felt some of his strength return. There wasn't enough zinth, the dagger had been too small, but maybe just enough for him to escape alive. 'Your turn to shit the sun, Thorin!' he screamed.

Muchuk saw Thorin's eyes dart to something behind him. A flash of moonlit black darkened the corner of his eyes. Muchuk turned, but it was too late. A leathery serpent gripped his wrist and uncoiled again with the ferocity of lightning. In that instant, he realized his right palm had been severed from his wrist by Ushas's dagger-whip. The Mandala shattered into a million tiny fragments that dissipated in the air, along with hope.

Before Muchuk could shriek, Raith's fist crunched into his skull. He felt himself fall; his head cracked sickeningly on the ground. The heel of Ushas' boot came down on one knee, sending searing pain lancing up his thigh.

This is unfair! What did we do to deserve this? Muchuk Und found his last thoughts to be pathetic. Expecting fairness in this world was to expect a viper not to poison you because you did not eat it.

'Toss him in, Savitre,' Thorin screamed.

Savitre's hand descended on Muchuk's ankle and dragged him like a rag doll, leaving a bloody trail on the white floor. Muchuk tried to grab at Savitre, but all his power had leaked out through the holes in his side, the cuts on his neck, and the flattened bones in his legs.

'Forgive me, Muchuk. I did not know,' Savitre said.

Muchuk forced his head up. 'May Lions bite your Loins, Lios!' It wasn't his wittiest insult but it was straight from the heart.

Savitre did not respond as he heaved Muchuk up the ramp to the ship. But Thorin did. 'That was rude of you, Muchuk Und.' Thorin's face appeared before Muchuk's blurred vision, looking pained, as if genuinely disappointed at his lack of politeness. 'He really did not know. Do not think of us as animals, son. There is a reason, a necessity, for our actions.'

Muchuk felt himself hauled to a sarcophagus within the ship. His shoulder blades cracked against the bottom of the coffin as he was thrown in. He tried to spit at Thorin's face but the spittle flew a short distance in the air before falling back into his own eyes.

'Let me put your mind at ease,' he heard Thorin say as a cold hand wiped the blood and spit from his eyes. 'See, you learned much about us here – our weapons, our magic, our way of doing things. That Mandala you used was impressive. I am proud of you. Truly, I am. Regrettably, you were not permitted to learn everything. The thing is, time travels differently on this realm. You say you have spent ten years here... well, yes you have, but – how do I say this – you see, that is a century in your world. Do you understand what I am saying?'

A century had passed... All gone. His children. His wife. His kingdom. His life. The Daevas had cheated him. Suddenly, cold wind tugged cruelly at his hair and roared in his ears. He began to feel numb as cold water began to rise around him. He could feel ice forming over his eyes, his lips, his face, his body, each tiny crystal as pure as a star, prickling his skin like freshly cut grass. The lone tear that traced a difficult path through the grime on his face froze before it hit the rising water.

'I see wisdom dawning upon you.' Thorin smiled. 'You always were quick on the draw. So, you understand it is nothing personal. We just wanted to spare you from any vile thoughts of vengeance. Now rest, warrior. You have earned it, son.' Thorin turned to someone on the ship. 'Are the arrangements ready?'

Muchuk felt the frost settle over him like a glacier on a river. He lay sprawled and helpless, trapped in a coffin of ice, breathing in the stink of his own blood. His eyes darted around desperately, searching for some way to escape. But all that remained was the wreck of his body – the bloody stump at the end of his hand and the bone sticking through the leather of his breeches.

'You could...' Muchuk rasped, barely able to hear his own voice, 'you could still let me go. I won't come back. I wouldn't even know how to.'

‘True, true. But you cannot be permitted to go back with all you have learned, to become a threat to us when we return,’ Thorin said. ‘You see, Mortals think they are liberated now, since they *defeated* us. But they are slowly forgetting everything that made them victors in the first place. Sorcery is gone from your world. You think yourselves to be lions, but you are merely scurrying rats upon whose tails our paws linger. The fact that the rats still live is not because of anything the rats have done.’

Thorin stroked the hair on Muchuk’s head. Icy crystals snatched greedily at Muchuk’s body, forming a crackling sheet over his legs, his stomach, his neck. ‘A Protector is required to be harsh sometimes, son. A gardener needs to save his flowers by being cruel to the pests. We cannot have you upsetting the balance. So... sleep well, warrior. Dream of spring. *May your Night be Bright.*’

The frost spread over his heart, then his throat, and then spread to his face, capturing him in an ice sculpture of grief and agony. Thorin smiled sadly as he closed the lid of the sarcophagus. It shut with an ominous hiss, trapping Muchuk Und in cold darkness for eternity.