



A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

“We are starting to lose the torches.”

That was Saria, our dour but always realistic Bladesister from Karadal. She is snobbish, pessimistic, and - gratingly - always correct.

We all turned to look at the two torches, one at the front of our ragged little column, carried by Saria, and the other - towards the back - by Kerlo, our youngest member and squire to our leader.

Saria was right; their flames were starting to wane. Darkness began swallowing the cramped tunnels we were in.

Two hours into the exploration of a cave will do that.

Saria looked at me, her dark eyes burning in the dying light. “You are a fire wizard - fix them.”

Her voice was accusatory, as though her bad decisions and the seemingly endless cave had not dealt us this inevitable setback, but my treachery.

I laughed at her.

That probably was not the smartest thing to do. I may be adept at fire magic, but as close as she was to me, she could have skewered me before I could do anything about it.

Her face tightened.

“What is funny,” she asked belligerently. She looked like she would tear my head off, and I was more than willing to admit she could.

“You are running out of fuel, not fire,” I chided as confidently as I could. In all actuality, my heart was racing and my core was shaking. You don’t confront anyone from Karadal unless you are ready for a fight. “Setting it ablaze is only going to burn the wooden stick in your hand, and then you. What you should have done is bring more torches.”

Then I held out my hand, concentrated, and whispered a few words so softly even Saria couldn’t hear them. Fire leaped from the palm of my hand, illuminating the room in a way the torches could not have, even burning at their most brilliant.

“Why did you not do that from the start, Wizard,” She demanded.

Because if I am concentrating on making light, I can not throw fire at the eight-legged monster lurking in the tunnel, can I?”

“Knock it off, you two,” A booming voice came from behind me. It was Vorad. Vorad was our leader, and rightfully so. He was a full-fledged Bladeseecker from the schools in Jendal. His Kolekar looked to be on fire in the reflection of my flames.

I smiled a little as I thought: Just wait until it IS on fire...

He snapped me back to reality with a gentle prod to the chest.

“Save it for the monster,” he added.

“It is no surprise we can not find the thing; it has heard you two yammering since we entered the cave.”

“If you want to fight, or kiss, or whatever, do it after we are out of this abominable place.”

Saria gave an angry huff and hastened further into the narrowing tunnel, shoving me as she passed. I gave her my best rueful smile.

I heard laughs and sniggers from the rest of the crew, but as much as I would like to, I did not encourage them. Dying to fulfill the warrant - well, that was one thing, and my family would at least benefit. But perishing because I made the grouchy bladesister angry? That was quite another.

Vorad was right - War Spiders were not stupid. Half animal and half demon, they were wily, voracious predators and formidable opponents. If it heard us it could wedge itself into some impossibly small nook and hide - we might even have passed it.

"This is why I prefer the ocean," said Chor wistfully. I agreed with him, even though I had never been on an ocean - did the Inner Sea count? Probably not to a seasoned sailor like him. Either way, anything was better than this cave right now.

But here we were, in the belly of the beast. And why? Because Klaris Jasda, Sheriff of the Twin Creek Basin, had paid us to hunt the spider that had been making off with sheep and even cattle over the past fortnight.

Everyone was on edge - and with good reason. How deep were we? How far did the Moons Shadow Mountains tower over us? If something happened would they ever find...I stopped myself. No. I was spiraling and needed to push those thoughts back.

I looked around at the other shadowed faces around me.

The only one of our party who seemed at ease was Togov. His heavy armor alone would have made me feel claustrophobic. Even when he had to contort his burly armored frame and shield to fit through the narrowing tunnel, he was unfazed.

He passed me, following Saria ahead. He patted his gauntleted hand down on my shoulder as a show of solidarity and maybe of pity, and I tried to smile in thanks even though his heavy armored hand hurt when rapped upon my skinny little shoulder.

He was humming, almost soundlessly under his breath. I barely made out the tune as he went; I think it was Wild Lass of Delan. Maybe singing was his secret to keeping calm. Or maybe, it was that the earth and stone entwined deeply with his knightly order.

Either way, I was glad of his presence.

A quiet whistle came from ahead, echoing back through the tunnel.

It was Saria. Something had changed, and she was signaling. Vorad moved forward, and behind him came Thadal, our Royal Forester and scout.

Thadal had been making sure we weren't snuck up on from behind. Now, that job fell to Kerlo, a Swordsman squiring to Vorad. I looked back at the young man as Thadal moved toward Saria. I could see fear in his eyes, and I empathized with him. The further into the cave we went, the worse I felt about it.

I nodded at the squire. He raised his shield a bit. His Blond hair danced in the embers of his torch. Though shadowed, I thought I saw his countenance become more determined.

Good, I thought. Poor guy. This was only his second or third time out with Vorad.

After a few moments, Vorad slipped by the others and brought word: "Cavern Ahead. Big enough that we can't see across it. And...it is covered in webs."

I put on a brave smile. "Looks like this is it then."

Vorad nodded. "It would appear so."

"Everyone should close up on Saria. We are about to lose the torches, so I want you up front, Jaral."

I looked quickly back to Kerol's torch. They were going to extinguish any minute.

Vorad looked at me earnestly. "We need to finish this quickly - stay safe - you may be our only light getting out of here."

I nodded and moved up into the mouth of the tunnel. Vorad and Kerol were behind me.

I almost had to jump to see over and around Togov, and was relieved when he flattened himself against the tunnel wall so I could pass.

The cavern air smelled...stale.

Saria looked at me with icy eyes. "Are you ready for this, wizard?"

To be honest I was not sure.

"Of course," I lied to her.

I conjured a flame just as Saria's torch went out. She tossed the useless stick down beside the cavern entrance and crept cautiously into the yawning maw of the cavern.

I followed her, even more cautiously.

The cavern was large. With my flame, we could barely see the rocky ceiling high above us. The cavern walls beside us were visible, then trailed off into inky black nothingness around us. Every footfall echoed in the chamber, and none of us dared speak.

We followed the wall around the room in a close single-file column. None of us wanted to venture out of the light.

It is different in a tunnel. It might be claustrophobic, but at least there is a direction and a sense that you are not getting lost. We had no idea how large the cavern was or what was in it, and it filled me with a sense of dread even the tunnels had not elicited from me.

Something made a sound behind me, a wet sound as though someone had thrown a rock into a deep body of water. It was followed by a painful scream - from Kerlo.

We all turned, only to see the shadow of a creature quickly retreating towards the ceiling, carrying a limp form in its unnaturally large legs that could only have been Kerlo.

The flame from my hand disappeared, extinguished as I concentrated on another spell. I stuck my arm into the air toward the hideous thing, and sent a cone of twisting, writhing flame towards the spider, hoping to head it off. The torrent of fire raced towards the creature, but it was scuttling back up its web too fast and was beyond my reach.

But for one brief moment, the entire cavern was bathed in orange light.

The cavern WAS large; much larger than we could have even fathomed. The light never reached its edges, but it revealed something far more insidious: the bright reflection of hundreds of eyes.

And everyone saw it.

“Three Hells,” whispered Saria.

I quickly brought back up a flame for light.

The creatures were on us before our next breath.

I clapped my hands together and pulled them apart, muttering an ancient incantation as I did. A raging ball of fire grew in the separation, and I unleashed its energy at one of the spiders charging Togov.

It hit with all the fury of the sun, engulfing the screeching creature. Togov didn't even flinch as the fireball smashed into his nemesis - he launched himself at the creature - no mean feat for a fully armored knight - and brought his hammer down on the creature's smoldering head, pulping it and throwing black ichor in all directions.

The dead spider continued to burn, giving me enough light to see. It was a good thing, too - there was a price to be paid for conjuring too much too fast - and I was on the brink of paying it.

Thadal was next to me, behind the others, loosing arrows into one of the creatures trying to attack from the cavern roof. Two arrows thudded into the creature's hard carapace. It stopped, screeched as a third arrow struck one of its large eyes, and then ran back into the darkness in frustration and pain.

In front of us, Vorad and Saria battled one of the eight-legged monstrosities. The Bladesworn were a sight to behold - weaving, ducking, and landing their blows gracefully and precisely. If we hadn't been in a life-or-death situation, it would have looked like any other training exercise for them.

But for all their training, they could not pierce their enemy's tough hide. I held my hand out and muttered. Saria's blade, gleaming in the dying light of the smoldering spider, burst into glowing white flame.

Saria did not miss a beat, but the spider was not pleased. Its hideous face contorted toward the burning blade, and it hissed its contempt. The distraction was all either of them needed.

Vorad spun and cleaved one, then another, of the creature's legs from its body with his mighty Kolekar. The spider tried to keep its balance but stumbled, landing hard on the rocky ground and flailing with its remaining legs.

Saria jumped over the grasping legs and thrust her flaming sword downward into the forehead of the beast. It let out one last scream of pain, flailed, and went still.

I turned and watched in horror as Chor was webbed by one of the beasts before being impaled on one of its sharp limbs. I ran toward The creature as it struggled to throw Chor's body off, giving Togov and Thalar time to cover the ground.

Togov hit it first - literally. He slammed into the massive creature, throwing it off balance as it flailed desperately to keep Thalar at leg's length. Togov did not let up, following his body check with two wild blows from his hammer along the creature's body.

While he did, an arrow streaked into the thing's abdomen. Thalar then drew his sword and charged into the thing. I couldn't do much from where I was, and I was already feeling weak from the magic I had allowed to pass through me. I whispered a few words and conjured fire onto the spider they were fighting - every little bit helped.

Vorad's booming voice grabbed my attention, spinning my head around.

"Three more!"

My gaze went to his voice. Three more of the creatures were preying on Vorad and Saria. They were moving more like a pack - two advancing, one circling back and forth - trying to keep them off balance. It wouldn't matter. Three of them were too many for the two Bladesworn to fight.

Vorad and Saria moved steadily back, driven by the three spiders. I moved to them, desperately conjured a fireball with my remaining power, and threw it at the pack of spiders as they moved closest together.

It exploded with a burst of light that nearly blinded me, and there was a hissing scream from somewhere within the blast. The flames licked toward the cavern's ceiling.

Two spiders emerged from the blast - both burning - but still moving.

A painful scream from behind me tore my attention from the two mobile torches coming for Vorad and Saria.

Looking, Thalar was on the ground, holding his leg. Above him was Togov, shielding him from repeated blows from the War Spider. The creature was still smoldering, but now clearly had the upper hand.

"Thalar is down," I screamed at Vorad.

He looked back, and our eyes met for a moment. For just a moment, I thought I saw panic. The fire danced and it was gone, replaced with resolve. He grabbed Saria's shoulder and pushed her back. "Get to Thalar!"

She looked at him for a second, then obeyed.

Vorad was not far behind her, swinging his Kolekar and striking a blow against one of the monsters before quickly backpedaling toward the wounded Forester.

I had already staggered back into the group of fighters when Vorad got to it, both burning War Spiders scurrying close behind him.

They stopped suddenly, as though some force had restrained them. We exchanged looks as they stood there, burning and swaying back and forth with their forelimbs up, ready to strike.

They began circling, their spindly legs weaving in and out as they skittered. Even the creature hammering at Togov had backed off and began carefully moving around our small group.

They reminded me of wolves; circling the doomed, terrorizing their prey, looking for weaknesses, before striking.

Vorad, Saria, and Togov wasted no time in tightening their small circle, with a wounded Thalar lying in the center of it. I knelt beside the Forester, trying to gauge the extent of his wound. He was unconscious, babbling wildly, and still bleeding.

The three fighters formed a little circle around us. I put my staff to the ground and physically pulled myself to my feet. It took a lot of effort - too much effort.

I had spent far too much of myself far too quickly.

Now we were all about to die, and I was not sure what I was going to do, except maybe beat the War Spiders with the end of my staff. Even then, I was not sure what that would accomplish; except of course making them angry - angrier than they already were.

“Stand fast,” Vorad said sternly. “Do not let them pull you out of our circle.”

No one said anything. The spiders dancing slowly around us kept our attention.

Then they attacked.

All of them at once.

They reared up, tucked their abdomens under their legs, and sprayed a noxious, sticky webbing. We were packed into a tight circle, with nowhere to go. They could not miss us.

And then they charged.

Togov's shield took the brunt of the webbing, and it didn't slow him down a bit. When the arachnid nightmare attacked, Togov met it with his hammer, slamming it up into the thing's mouth even as its sharp front legs tried to impale him. Togov's armor held as he landed the blow, and the spider wisely backed up, shaking off the attack.

Saria and Vorad fared a little worse. With no shields, they tried to dodge the webbing, cutting their way through any they could not. When the spiders attacked, they found our blades were still sharp.

And where was I? Well, I was on the floor. I did not have a shield, a sword, or any training that would allow me to dodge a War Spider's webbing. I was caught in its sticky embrace, and struggling only sent me crashing - face first - to the cold, rocky floor of the cavern.

They must have known our defenses were weaker with me down. Of course, if they had truly known how little help I could be to anyone up to the moment I hit the floor, even myself, they probably would have attacked sooner.

I could only watch in horror as, swinging their front legs like a scythe, the arachnids' attacks fell on my three remaining comrades. Vorad batted them aside with his Kolekar, and Saria weaved and dodged as the sharp legs crashed down toward her. Togov - with complete faith in his shield and armor, let the blows fall and took advantage of the opportunity to land another blow with his hammer.

For the first few moments, it looked like we were winning. Then Vorad missed a parry and took a glancing body blow that knocked him backward. He recovered but seemed to be on his back foot.

Togov was shoved further and further back until I was sure that he would step on me with his giant steel sabatons. Saria was holding her own, but could not land a killing blow.

I realized, as I struggled to free myself from the sticky webs, that we could not keep this up forever. They were wearing us down - the spiders were playing with their food.

Try as I might, I could not escape the webs. I had no energy left.

But I could still move my hands, however slightly.

An idea came to me. It was a bad idea, as many of mine are, and of course, would end with my demise. Looking around though, it was just a matter of time before that happened anyway. I would much rather go out on my terms than be the main course of a spider's banquet.

I concentrated. It does not sound difficult, but when you have pushed as much energy out of yourself as I had that evening, it was nearly impossible. Lying on my back, I motioned with my hands in a rising gesture. "Thra Eriya," I shouted.

Nothing happened.

"Jaral!" It was Saria.

"Jaral, do something." She fended off another attack. The creature hissed angrily at her even as she dodged its clawed leg crashing down where she had been a moment before.

I closed my eyes and pictured the three War Spiders in front of me. I could see the fire smoldering on them still. My arms, still unnaturally fastened to my body by the infernal strands, began to rise as far as I could move them.

"Thra Eriya!"

Nothing.

"Thra Eriya!" I screamed it as loud as I could.

I felt the energy flow out of me, and with it, my entire body went limp. The cavern spun above me, the fires on the War Spiders bursting into renewed life and searing light. A scream filled my ears, but it was very very far away.

A stark white overtook my sight until it was all I could see. My head swam, and I had a vague awareness of being tossed about on a stormy sea, sinking fast into the deep.

And then darkness.

There was light again. More dim this time. Grey.

I opened my eyes. It hurt. Everything hurt.

The cavern's darkness had been replaced with a setting sun, the rock and stones with trees, grass, and - most importantly - fresh air.

There was a fire crackling in the fading light.

I painfully turned my head and saw Thalar lying next to me. His blue eyes were open, and he managed a weak smile.

"Well, well." A voice came from somewhere to my right. I managed to turn my head to see Vorad striding toward me.

"Our hero has awoken." He smiled warmly.

"How do you feel," he added.

"Dead," I whispered.

"We thought you were," Vorad said, kneeling beside me.

"How did you get out?" The question came out more as a rasp than a legible sentence.

“Just before you passed out, whatever spell you used reignited the torches. Everything that could catch fire did,” said Saria from beyond him.

“Except us,” added Vorad, turning his head to look at Saria.

The look on Saria’s face told me she had not thought about that until just now.

“Except us,” Saria mused aloud, more to herself.

“And then Saria carried you,” Vorad added with a smirk and a wink. “And a torch.”

Saria bounded over, smacking Vorad upside the head with her gloves.

“He does not need to know that,” she said grumpily.

Vorad gave me two soft, playful pats on the cheek. “Good to see you awake.”

He stood and walked back to the fire. He was replaced with Saria’s unsympathetic scowl. She towered over me.

“Rest up wizard,” she said. “I may have carried you from the cave, but I am not carrying you down this mountain.”

