

With one day left until the New Year and the beginning of the Days of the Wolf, the entire Temple was buzzing with people, all busy preparing the celebrations. It was normally a time of cleaning, adorning the walls and entrances, and rituals of purification, but this year, the departure of Hestia to the Underworld of the Gods and the High Priestesses going into seclusion in the Cave of the Ways were bringing so many people in the Temple that the Matrons in charge of the pantries and kitchens were going into despair.

Andrada was sitting on a low bench covered in furs, watching her acolytes folding her dresses and carefully arranging her ritual tools in a leather bag with many compartments. In a low voice, she would answer their many questions, absent-minded, while thinking all the time of her encounters with Darzos. She had met the Wolf-Warrior messenger a few good times in the past month, and several times they have taken long walks in the meadows outside the Temple. They both knew their oaths did not allow them to ever get married, or even get too close to each other, but they couldn't stop trying to be together, even if "being together" meant nothing but walking in the cool and soft light of the autumn sunsets. The time of her withdrawal with the others in the Cave of the Ways was drawing near, and she cherished every moment spent with Darzos, watching his face, trying to get his smile etched in her memory for the centuries to come.

She was abruptly interrupted in her thoughts by a loud knock in the heavy door. One of the acolytes rushed to open, and one of the priests of the Temple, his simple woolen priestly robes showing he was of the Kapnobatai, entered, bowing his head in greeting. "My Lady, the Great Queen and the King would like to see you. You are summoned at the entrance to the Dungeons." The unexpected words made Andrada frown in concern, and she raised from the bench and grabbed her silver belt and sica, putting them on with the precision and fastness brought by habit. "Keep on with the packing" she told the acolytes, and the acolytes bowed in acknowledgement. She exited the

room and started walking the long and narrow corridors of the Temple, followed at short range by the Kapnobatai.

When she reached the dark arch of the entrance to the Dungeons, in the dim, flickering light of the torches, she saw that Darzos was there too, keeping a respectful distance behind Hestia and Zalmoxes, a puzzled and worried look on his face. Those last steps before reaching the group were the hardest to make, as thought after thought rushed in her mind. Were her mere walks with Darzos an infringement on her oaths? They haven't even touched each other, apart from the short kiss he had stolen a couple months ago, before going to summon the tribes to the great announcement for the Feast of the Harvest. Were they to be punished? Hestia's smiling eyes appeased her worries somehow. At her side, Zalmoxes was smiling at her too. "Welcome, little sister. We're glad you could come right away. We have work to do. Come, son, follow us." He said, turning to Darzos.

They went down in the Dungeon and after a few turns in the maze of the corridors, Hestia leading, they started on a path that Andrada had never taken before. After many minutes, they reached another stone arch, symbols etched deep in the rock, spirals and circles, and wisps of mist coming from within its deep opening. Why, this was a Way! Andrada never knew there were other Ways besides the ones in the Caves of the Ways. Never stopping, Hestia and Zalmoxes went through the misty opening, their silhouettes slowly disappearing in the faint blue light. Seeing Darzos looking back at the Kapnobatai stopped three paces behind, then looking ahead again, unsure, towards the mysterious entrance, she reached and touched his shoulder, squeezing with a reassuring nod. She started walking into the Way, and felt him walking behind her, and soon was able to see the white shadowy figures of Hestia and Zalmoxes again. The short time they walked through the faint blue lighted mist seemed to take ages, and finally they emerged in an enormous cave. The crystalline walls of the cave seemed to emanate a faint blue light, and the floor, even and round, was streaked with glittering veins that could have been only gold or silver ore encased in the smooth rock. On the other side of the great round cave, another passage was opening its great maw full of darkness and all around the walls were rough statues of men and women, standing tall, facing the center.

Hestia and Zalmoxes stopped at the fringe of the round floor, and turned around, waiting for Andrada and Darzos to reach them. “Little sister, and you, Daoi” Hestia said, her eyes still smiling, “were found guilty of loving each other”. Darzos swallowed hard, and Andrada felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. Seeing that she was ready to talk, Hestia raised her hand “The Gods do not look unfavorably upon your love. Unfortunately, you both have given oaths, and pledged your lives to higher purposes, for the good of our people. Those oaths can not be undone, and cannot be taken back. But the Gods, in their wisdom, want to give you a chance to be together, while still fulfilling your oaths, and respect your pledge. Nevertheless, you will never be able to have the joys of the flesh that lovers have. This is all the Gods can do for you and your love: to make you able to be together for a long, long time. Do you accept?”

Stunned, Andrada looked at Darzos. All she could see in his eyes was his love for her, and the joy at the words of hope they had just received. Without taking her eyes from his, she reached with her hand and met his hand, and squeezed, with all the pain the knowledge of what they would renounce was bringing, but the tears that started swelling in their eyes were tears of happiness. They both looked at Hestia and bowed their acceptance. Smiling, Hestia and Zalmoxes bowed back to them, then turned around and faced the cave’s other passage.

The white glow of the focusing of the magic power started to envelop them both, until the light that surrounded them chased back the darkness in the other passage. Raising slowly their arms, they called in one voice: “Ye hear, Eternal Guardian, and come! By the will of the Gods and of the Ancestors, we bring here two that would join their paths with yours, and become of the Guardians of the Land, forever to watch over our lands and over our people!”

Before the echoes of their call faded, a deep rumble started. The walls of the cave were shaking, as if ready to collapse, and from the great opening a scuffing noise grew louder and louder, as if great scales were rubbing against the rock. Then from the depth of the opening a huge muzzle appeared. The feral eyes locked upon the small group as the big wolf head

emerged, followed by the snake body, as thick as two tall men's height. The Eternal Guardian, Dracones, the wolf-headed dragon, coiled on the glittering stone floor, facing them, head held high, wisps of mist escaping through fangs the length of a child's arm as he breathed.

"The Gods have told me about these two making a choice today, and I was waiting for your call" the growling voice came from above. "If you are sure about your choice, step forward." Andrada and Darzos, still holding hands, stepped between Hestia and Zalmoxes, and came to face the dragon. The wolf-head bent low, and came to lay on the floor in front of them. "Yessss. I can see you will make great Guardians of the Land. I can see courage, and love for the people, and the desire to protect this land. And I can see you love each other enough to give up so much just to be together." The great muzzle opened and suddenly breathed over them a thick, white mist, engulfing them both in an almost solid layer. When the mist dissipated, where Andrada and Darzos had stood, two stone statues were now, holding hands, facing the dragon. The Eternal Guardian took them in its great mouth, gently, and placed them in the circle of statues around the big cave. Then it turned around, bowed deep to Hestia and Zalmoxes, and slowly, made its way back to the passage and disappeared in the deep.

"So it is done, Son. Let's go back up to the Temple. The Night of the Wolf is almost over."

Up, on the mountain, the ghostly figures of a young woman and of a wolf were running together towards the rocky peak. They stopped there and looked up at the starry sky, and then at the expanse of land around them. Beside them, from thin air, coalesced another ghostly figure, a great white wolf with wise eyes. "Well met to you, new ones. I shall be your Guide for now."

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