

## NOTE 3 – REQUIEM

This morning, I woke up with a pain in my chest and belly more intense than I had ever felt. I got out of bed and vomited, mostly bile. My head was throbbing to the rhythm of my racing heart. The stench was unbearable, but it did not prevent me from hearing the cries of pain coming from around. I was not the only one to feel sick. In fact I could call myself lucky to be only sick. Indeed, a few meters away, a woman was lying, her head in her own blood, her eyes empty. Other bodies were scattered around the caravan, frozen in expressions of pain and surprise. What was happening? Was the antidote Elias concocted inefficient? As far as I could tell, the symptoms were obviously different. None of the dead villagers we saw had vomited blood, and according to the stranger the poison there was acting a lot slower.

Getting on my feet, I managed to carry myself to the center of the caravan, where most of the still living were gathered. Some faces were pale and sickly, others were healthy but concerned about their families. Some were lying on the ground, talking nonsense and coughing. Apparently half the caravan had been hit by the disease, and a fifth of them had already passed out. More were dying every minute. The water tanks had been brought in and Elias and the doctor were running tests. A spike of pain threw me to the ground, my vision darkened. Only then did I realize the danger I was in: people were dying of this sickness we had. Would I die here, after all that had happened, lost in a desert? Would I never see my sister, Aria, again?

After a while Elias spoke up to explain that the water had been poisoned, but the substance was different from the dead village. This time, two of the four tanks had been contaminated with coral snake venom. Even those who had never stepped in a desert before knew this serpent. Its venom is amongst the deadliest natural poisons on Creation. Some fainted, some cried, I took the shock full on. I was going to die my pitiful death, having accomplished nothing but failure since my exaltation. However, my spirit rose when the doctor announced he had only three doses of antidote, as he only expected one or two bites along the way. The answer was obvious: one of these tiny bottles had my name on it.

Slowly, carefully, I unsheathed the scythe and one by one unfolded its blades. Its twenty-seven chords tensed, one after the other. Having caught most of the attention, I closed my eyes and started playing. Gently stroking the chords, I sent shrill tones out, all merging together to form a melody of pure regret. Many shed tears, other averted their eyes. They were all watching me with sadness, all but Saya whose face looked puzzled. She must have seen what I am doing, what I am trying to achieve through playing. How she resisted, this I do not know. But my survival was my only concern as of now.

This performance had the expected effect. The moment I stopped playing, I could at last enjoy true silence. Then the doctor came to me, holding out a vial of antidote. Under his breath I heard him mutter something like “I save the music”. Having to beg for my life here, I felt dirtied. But I could not afford my legend to end here. Not yet. Thanking him, I drank the antidote and left, taking shelter under the shadow of a caravan, where I could see the scene from. In a few minutes, the gnawing feeling in my stomach was gone, and the fever receded, letting me think more clearly.

The doctor and Elias spent the afternoon trying to brew another antidote, against the wheels of time. Every minute brought his lot of cries, screams and deaths. Saya lost one of her guards, this seemingly affected her a lot. Scavenger birds were gathering above us, their shrill cries filling the air with ill omens. Corpses lied on the ground, their faces soaked with their own vomit. Moans of pain came from all around, the stink was enough to make me feel queasy. I should have been moved by this scene. Instead all I could see was its artistic potential.

By the time the doctors found the antidote, nearly half of the caravan had perished. They had managed to cure a dozen of travellers, few were the families that left this ordeal unscathed. People started glaring in my direction: the effect of the music was releasing them, they found strange I had had the antidote and not their child, father or wife. I heard a blade unsheathed from behind me. I turned.

*You received the antidote, and my son died.  
It could have saved him, but you killed him. You  
killed my son. I want revenge.*

*Hurting me now will make no difference, nor  
shall it bring you son back to life. Moreover, you are  
not thinking clearly: the doctor gave me the antidote,  
I did not beg for it. If you want revenge on someone,  
go against him.*

*Hum... I guess you are right. You were saved,  
my son was not. The doctor, the doctor, it is his fault.  
Yes it is.*

*Good. Now, one last piece of advice: take care  
not to underestimate me. That would be your last  
mistake.*

He left then, going straight to the doctor with his sword in hand. He was quickly mastered by the man from the desert, who I now know is named Baroona. They chained him to a caravan and went back to the matter at hand. Several merchants were accusing Ned. Tension made voices rise. Shocked, he had nothing to answer. Instead, he named Baroona head of the caravan, and went to hide in his caravan. Saya reminded the dead deserved proper funerals. They fixed a pyre from the wood of caravans whose owners were deceased. I dozed off for the rest of the afternoon.

It was time to burn the dead. I gathered my stuff, preparing to leave the caravan if need be. The mountain army emblem provoked quite a few reactions. The burning corpses sent flames high up in the air. It was magnificent. As we returned towards the caravan, Saya looked up in the air, and, calling for her simatha, she rode out in the desert with her guards. Leaving, she told a few of her men to watch the caravan the Stranger was in. Baroona followed them running.

Elias and Straal went with Saya's guard to talk with the Stranger. Some event of the night might have made him suspicious. A few minutes later they got out, and a guard was placed outside to prevent him from leaving his caravan. Straal and Elias both headed towards the water tanks. I sat near the fire and petted Metronome, all the time remaining alert for any sign of danger.

I heard voices coming from the tanks. Going there, I found Straal and Elias confronting the Stranger. I had not seen him nor heard him coming out of his cart. One of the tanks cork had been removed. Something was amiss, and I now knew the Stranger had some link to the poisoning. When he saw me coming, he called to me.

*You there! You are a fierce warrior from the mountains. These two men are frightening me. Help me!*

*Then tell me how you got out of your van without anyone noticing. You are clearly more than what you wish to appear. Do you have a satisfying explanation for this?*

*I just went out for a drink. I was just thirsty, that is all. You must have missed me.*

*Oh, I don't think so. You poisoned the water, and you were trying to do the same now. Weren't you?*

*No, that wasn't me...*

But at the same time, his outline began to blur. His skin went pale then transparent. In a moment, he disappeared.

Later, Saya came back from the desert, then Baroona. We exchanged the information we had gathered. When she came back from the pyre, she saw two ghosts in the sky and followed them. But as the ghost showed no intention of losing altitude, she gave up and came back here. From that we came to the conclusion that the Stranger had poisoned the tanks, and he had accomplices out in the desert. Then, as the topic of people being more than they appear, I asked each of them if there was a good reason for their abilities: a little girl mounting a fierce tiger-horse, a warrior running as fast as horses, a jeweler who doubles as a gifted apothecary. They eluded the question and returned it to me.

At that moment I heard footsteps, coming from the dark. I caught a glimpse of white skin. Immediately I unsheathed my scythe and jumped above Saya, towards the source of the noise, Metronome in my wake. With a wide arc I sliced the first enemy in half. Baroona was closely behind me and impaled a second ghost. The last was trapped by Saya in a circle of salt. She and Elias tried to question her, but the ghost had dematerialized. Then a bright golden light emitted from Elias' body, and a corpse appeared on the sand. We recognized one of them as the Stranger. Revenge had been achieved.

Seeing that one of us was obviously a solar exalted, we felt more comfortable to confess. Baroona went as far as to give us his name. But behind us, the rest of the caravan had gathered, puzzled about what was that light they just saw. With a few speeches, we managed to convince them that their better choice for survival was to stick with us for the time, at least until we reach the fertile plains of Val'lon. Even those of the Immaculate faith saw the wisdom in that.

What were the odds of meeting four other beings of my nature? At last, it means there are people I do not need to hide. With them I may have found my place, for now. It has been a very long day. I long for a real bed.

I miss Aria.