

On the other side were guardians. Blood apes stood on either side of the doorway, vile, sanguine creatures like perpetually bleeding gorillas with protrusions of bone across their back and heads. They're big, evil, and mean, but not particularly watchful or quick. I hacked one into three pieces that smoldered with infernal fire before the other knew what was happening, and then dodged its rush.

We were a vast bog, full of rotting wood and pools of mire. The trees pressed closely around, leaning ominously in toward the center clearing where a vast black mound rose nearly twenty feet from the muck. It was made of dirt and the stomach secretions of insects, a black mass that resembled mucus encrusted filth. The whole thing radiated heat and a peculiar malignancy that bespoke an incredible desire to consume without end. It was huge and could harbor many breeding queens.

This was, without a doubt, a job for fire. Lots of fire indeed was requisite. The blood ape had recovered and rushed back at me, but I was ready for it. Agate caught it on one arm and did not stop till the monster fell into disgusting halves. Those began to dissolve as I tied the essence of the guardian beast to my blade and got to summoning.

Similarly to my disdain of necromancy is my disdain of summoning demons. Sure, they're useful, but it never pans out well. A lot of mage's swear the best way to get rid of hostile demons is summon servile ones. That never made much sense to me because the best case ending scenario still involves having demons around. Unfortunately, forsaking learning of their summoning prevents me from using the more elegant banishments, leaving me with a variety of spells I use for the same purpose but are in fact mostly purely destructive. There isn't a huge difference between a banished demon and one smitten into magma and ash. They both come back easy enough unless hit with a spirit eating technique. That's easy against blood apes or similar lesser creatures, but would do me little against the thousand massed vilenesses of that hive.

Thus I summon elementals. As you may have guessed, I'm partial to fire elementals, preferably large, angry ones. It takes four hours to do the proper way, with bonds forcing the thing to obey my will, but I didn't have that kind of time. Instead I sent a message as politely as I could to one which was known to me. She, or it, arrived promptly, for my instructions tend to lie very close to its natural desires.

"Solar," the thing replied. It was vast, casting tendrils of flame a dozen feet above me, and radiating heat like a blast furnace. While initially it seemed to merely be constrained fire, within was a ill defined shape like a woman. There was something like the curve of a leg in the white licks of fire, which wrapped around themselves like gauze over full breasts. The origins of the blaze originate inches above the ground, flickering up from small foci like dancer's feet that are ever moving. Even the voice that is nigh unrecognizable from the roar of an unchecked wildfire seems to be ever so slightly effeminate. It is completely possible I just imagined it all in a delusion, but if so it is a persistent delusion.

"Nakara, thank you for coming," I said with a bow. Its possible the personification of the blaze sprung from its name. That has always struck me as a woman's name, though not in any language I know.

"You usually are such an entertaining man," she replied. "What is it you want?"

"Burn that mound and everything in side to ash and let nothing survive."

"A request near my own heart. But not free. What do you offer?"

"The immolation of many demons."

“What demons?” she asked, intrigued.

“In the mound. They are small but come in great numbers.”

“A very sweet chore indeed, but the sweetness of the task does not render it free.”

“A tithe of essence and power?” I offered. This was the problem with skipping the ritual. What could you possibly offer a being of pure fire?

“Ah, now we get closer. But not quite what I desire.”

“Then what do you desire?”

“Kiss me like you would a woman. I will spare you from my heat.”

I stared at the primordial flame. That didn't make sense. Yet she, and that request had permanently locked Nakara in my mind as a she, wanted something I could provide, and Nakara could always be trusted to burn.

“Agreed,” I concluded.

“Will you stay and watch, then?”

“If you do not mind.”

“I do not. Be sure my end of our bargain is complete,” she commanded me. With that I waved her to begin and stepped back.

My spells to unleash flame are sudden and violent, and can destroy much in moments. But the directed efforts of an elemental match those sudden blasts and sustain them. Nakara lunged like a dancer to pirouette around the mound. With each step her footprints smoldered and burst into flame that grew to the brightness of flares. Soon I had to look away. By the time she had circled the mound once her tracks were an incandescent band of white the burned the swamp's humid air arid. With it came a tremendous rush of wind as she took great breaths. Sparks raged into the sky, meeting the edges of the small sanctum's sky. The dome of heaven turned red as it caught the blaze. Even the magic that comprised this place began to fray, leaking pure power that she greedily sucked into her conflagration.

Yet the fire didn't bother me. The brightness did, but even as the ground water boiled away I felt only comfortably warm. For a while the demon swarm must have hidden in its nest and trusted it's excretions to protect it. That worked for a while. Yet Nakara danced round and round the mound, and then over it in expanding circles, until the entire thing glowed with the same radiance as furious sun. The outer shell sundered and the air inside exploded outwards into the expanding vortex of her blaze. With it came the bugs, vile creatures of all sizes and descriptions, though most loathsome were the vast, bloated queens with distended abdomens swollen with screaming young. They tumbled upwards into the heart of Nakara's blaze, and burned so brightly that she ate the essence of their spirits and left neither trace nor ash. Then she reduced the whole of the sanctum to a white powder. The swamp vanished into the fire, and there was nothing left.

“You treated me in good faith, Solar,” she said, when the inferno had consumed everything that this endlessly consuming hive could offer. “So I will do so to you. These four things resisted my flames. Though I could crack their enchantments, I think that you would prefer to do so yourself.”

She extended her blazing hands and offered me four crystals. They were small, palm sized, and bore the mark of Lemora. When she dropped them they were nearly white hot but felt comfortable in my hands.

“Thank you,” I replied seriously. “This means much to me.”

“Then you hold my part of the bargain paid?”

“In full,” I assured her.

Without another word Nakara leaned in very close to me. My clothing fluttered in her omnipresent wind, as her fires reached out for air. Then, throwing caution to the burning wind, I reached out and took her like I had a certain southern woman. The elemental's flesh burned like passion. I lost myself for a while.

“Thank you, Solar. I have long been curious about that,” she told me once she'd drawn away. I nodded, too unsure of words to speak. With no other mention she twirled on herself and vanished like an extinguished candle. I stepped through the portal and returned to Tein, and his white brothers.

They came to me with questions, but I forestalled them with a hand. Reverentially I put the crystals on the ground before counterspelling the bonds on them one by one. As each crackled and turned to ash, a wind escaped. I felt gratitude from the air. Then the crystals were gone too. I turned to the Dragon-Bloods.

“It is done,” I said seriously. “Tein, I hold your agreement fulfilled. I will not doubt your word of honor again.”

“Good,” he said calmly. “We have watched your mount and spoken to the field's owner. Ultimately it proved simplest to acquire from him the land and the four head of cattle you deprived him of.”

“Four?” I asked, curiously.

Tein gazed at me blandly, and then flicked his gaze over the vast crater we still stood at the middle of.

“Oh. Right.”

“Now, will you speak of purging the shadowland?” he asked, returning to business.

“Easily. My terms are simple. The process will leave me vulnerable for the duration of the casting, which should not exceed a few hours. During that time you must protect me from all hazards, be they overt or circumspect. Shambling dead, skeletons, or assassins will surely appear to stop me, for I must cast the spell from the shadowland's very center. If you can provide for my security to my satisfaction, I will do this thing. In return, I ask for silver, as much as I can carry in both hands, freedom from prosecution in Lookshy, and guarantees that no one I have associated with in that city will come to harm from knowing me. You must also promise to pay due respect to the Unconquered Sun on his day

so long as you live, and say a quick prayer to Rush the Falling Water afterwards for the same duration.”

“I have no authority to free you or those you know from all persecution,” he said seriously.

“Your best effort is acceptable.”

“Then I have but one final condition.”

“Being?”

“When this is done, you will apologize to me for doubting my integrity.”

That piqued my pride a bit. Still, I squished that down, reminding myself it would be well to remember humility. “I accept.”

“Then we have a deal,” he agreed.

We shook hands seriously, and I did nothing to bind him to his word.

There was a feeling of completion as our first bargain fell away from the both of us. Now there was nothing to insure he kept his word but him.

We mounted up and rode down to the street. Along the way they formed up around me at some silent command. We returned to Lookshy with very little talking, nothing beyond bits of direction and observations the white brothers made to each other. Of this they did a fair bit.

The six riders were lead by Yushoto Tein, but he did not appear to have any formal authority. The others deferred to him when he spoke but did not ask his permission to act. Now Tein and a woman rode in front while two more women rode on either side of me. One of the two riders behind me was the other man. They were all wearing the same white reinforced plate with visored helms. It didn't look painted. The metal itself must have been an unusual alloy.

As we went they would call out to each other culverts and ambush spots. A party of local police elicited a warning between the brotherhood while they were half a mile distant. I've known old veterans who work in complete silence, but these seemed to have developed another way. Information passed between the six like a single nervous system exchanging the data of its senses. It seemed likely they were all in the imperial guard, due to the similarities of their arms, equipment, and horses, and just as likely they had worked together for a while. I didn't think they were related by blood. None resembled each other save by action.

Along the way I sent a silent message to Rush the Falling Water. His divine ability to hear prayers directed to him allowed for easy communication, albeit one sided. Without giving off an indicator, I prayed that he would take Salation and Telitia back to their house, and encouraged him to protect them as best he was able. His duties as a minor bean god should not be too oppressive. Besides, autumn was growing towards winter, and the season might very well be over.

When we crossed back over the soaring bridges over the Yanaze the toll keeper let us pass without a word. At the center of the river the bridge leaped in a great hump that allowed the river barges to pass, and even the high masted galleons that plied the oceans could traverse with care. Then we rode down

and past the lesser city. Now a few of the soldiers who patrolled looked twice at me. They must have recognized me. A few cheered my 'capture.' The White Brotherhood never reacted.