

An Excerpt from Fates' Guide by David Hart

A welcome voice sounded in his ear. "Are you alive?"

Ehric whispered back. "Yes, I'm trying to get closer to whoever is throwing those things."

Even through her whisper, Ehric could tell Shoptim was in pain. "That is a good plan. I will try to draw him out."

"How badly are you hurt?"

"I will be fine, thanks to your warning. Just keep moving and don't be spotted."

Ehric did not bother to respond but did as she said. A minute passed, punctuated by sudden explosions of flame, seemingly tossed out at random. He made good progress, confident that whoever was lobbing the fiery spells had no idea where he was.

Shoptim's whisper came again. "Are you ready?"

"Just about."

"Very well."

"Do you know what it is yet?"

"I'm not sure. I have never seen its like before. Reptilian for sure, but bipedal with useful hands. It has some wands hanging from a belt and is obviously a spellcaster."

"Alright, I'm ready. I can't really see it yet but I am within a dagger throw."

"Save the dagger and use your lightning."

"I'm ready."

"Give me a moment to cast." The spell reached his ears as a whisper and didn't take long to complete. "He should be very distracted in just a moment. When you hear the... here they come now." A moment later, he heard it, a droning and clicking noise he quickly identified as a huge swarm of insects.

Ehric started to cast as he stood, and the reptilian spellcaster was plainly visible even in the relative gloom of the chamber. The ground around it

seemed to writhe as thousands of insects swarmed up its legs. Despite his peril, the sorcerer quickly spotted Ehcric and leveled a wand.

The wand activated before Ehcric finished his incantation, but apparently the insects were having an effect on the dragon-kin. The narrow violet beam shot wide and Ehcric was able to complete his spell.

The sorcerer ducked to the side but the lightning found its mark. Insects exploded around the reptile and it screamed in rage and pain. With impressive quickness it leapt away, clearing a full three rows of the mounds.

Ehcric had started forward, sword in hand, when he spotted Shoptim. Somehow she had gotten behind the creature, her fingers moving furiously as she cast. Ehcric decided to forego spells and continued to charge forward.

Intense cold slammed into him from behind and his legs locked. He threw out his arm to break his fall, rolling off one of the mounds of stone to land on his back. His legs were numb but he managed to push himself up to see his assailant.

It was a woman, not one of the animated statues, and Ehcric didn't have time to worry about where she came from. She wore fairly primitive armor, what appeared to be a bronze or copper breastplate, engraved with the crude shape of a dragon. A pleated skirt reinforced with strips of the same metal fell to just above the knee. Her legs were bare, with only thin leather straps wrapped around her ankles to secure her sandals. What captured his attention was the wicked looking morningstar she held in her right hand. The weapon had multiple heads fashioned into bestial skulls. Her left arm ended in a scale mail glove. Two knife blades gave the appearance of claws jutting from the back of her hand.

Ehcric gaze shifted to the priestess' face even as he scrambled to cast a spell. She wore a white shawl wrapped around her head and neck. A narrow band of stiff leather stretched across nose and cheeks, holding a translucent veil across her mouth. The veil was caked in frost. Her eyes were wild as she ran forward.

Ehcric was nearly exhausted but he found some hidden reserve of

strength. The woman was only two strides from him when he unleashed the lightning. Ehric's magic guided the bolt straight into her breastplate, and then nature took over. Much faster than Ehric's mind could comprehend, the lightning sought a way to the ground. It danced across the woman's metal armor, heating it enough to sear her skin through the thin cloth padding she wore underneath. The lightning arced from one of the tassets of her skirt into her thigh. It burned down her leg and exploded out the bottom of her foot into the cavern floor.

All Ehric saw was a blinding flash and then the woman was falling, her momentum carrying her forward. The priestess hit the ground with a groan, releasing her grip on the morningstar, which continued to tumble along the irregular cavern floor. He twisted to keep her in his sight, hoping she was incapacitated or killed.

Her breathing was labored with pain but she quickly rolled to her side and swung her bladed hand out in front of her.

Ehric didn't get a chance to attempt another spell. The priestess shoved off with her uninjured leg, launching herself at him with the clawed glove aimed at his neck. The Drow sword leapt to his defense, almost of its own accord. He interposed the blade and swept her arm to the side. The priestess' open hand latched onto a strap of his armor and she pulled herself close. A sharp twist of the bladed glove nearly wrenched the weapon from his grasp.

With his free hand, Ehric grabbed the edge of her breastplate, just under her arm. The metal was still hot enough to burn his palm but he retained his grip.

They struggled for a few moments without either getting the upper hand. Ehric was the stronger but he was relying entirely on his arms, his legs still numb and unresponsive. The priestess' uninjured leg pushed against a nearby mound, giving her the leverage she needed to stay on top of him.

Her body slipped forward and the hand on his armor moved to his throat. Suddenly he was struggling for breath. Her veil fell across his forehead and he could see and feel the chilled air flow from between purple lips. He feared another icy blast hitting him in the face and

instinctively brought his free hand up. He clamped his burned palm over her open mouth.

The grip on his throat tightened but Ehric managed to push the air out of his lungs, whispering the few words required for a simple spell.

Using the same method he had to save Shoptim, Ehric envisioned the air in the woman's lungs. Similarly, but more violently, he drew the air from her chest. Icy breath pushed against his hand and blew from her nose, emptying her lungs in one burst. It was a simple matter to keep air from returning, though he could feel her muscles struggling to pull in breath.

The pressure on his throat disappeared as she clutched at her own. The priestess rolled away and crawled a few feet before collapsing.

Ehric kept his eyes on her as he called out. "Shoptim?"

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