

Breath of the Mountains

The Trial

The bonfire roared to life in the belly of the stone circle. Great towering stones which had erupted from the earth centuries before surrounded the young girl huddled in her scratchy woollen tunic. She reared back from the flames as the fat from the large stag's head spat and burst in the soft haze of the foggy dawn. The sacrifice to Brusynn had been accepted, its thick blood staining the krina in the centre of the circle. People rejoiced beneath the light of the fire. The spirit of Sprigann would be well pleased with this revelry of the growing days, the end of the harshest months of Frustnarr. Village drummers led dancers in a chant while they circled the fire. The head priestess, an aging woman with a stooped back, tapped her bangled staff in time to the music. Her crown of antlers perched on her head like she was a great stag herself, wise and powerful in her years.

In the dim rising sunlight, the great stone towered above the flames. Thirteen years ago the girl was born to the first light of Sprigann underneath the same high stone. Legends told that the first elf of the mountains died in that very spot, her body turning to stone, her blood fertilizing the earth, and her breath guiding the great elven migration to the mountains. She was a mountain of a

woman herself, a demigod born of some forgotten goddess of the flatlands. Her sacrifice allowed those refugees of the Dragon's Fall to cultivate the land and discover the seven sisters of the mountains. The girl often spent hours by the ancestor's stones admiring the carvings and paintings depicting her people's history. She was always more subdued than her family, preferring the quiet rather than chaos.

The flames grew more powerful, the heat striking the girl across the face, interrupting her moment of remembrance. She made to step back, turning her head away from the blaze. A hand to the back of her neck stopped her. The girl's mother, who had been a priestess once, held her still to watch the flames.

"Look into the heart of the fire, Lur-Atal," Haloa whispered; Lura could hear the smile in her voice, "what do you see?"

The girl's eyes burned from the intensity of the heat in front of her. She tried to look away, blinking against tears from the acrid smoke, but her mother's hand kept a firm grip. Through the glossy haze, Lura breathed in the sweet smoke of the mountain sage in her hands. The weight of Haloa's hand held her steady as she searched the flames for meaning. Dancers threw their offerings of pine and barley into the blaze, strengthening the fire.

There. Right there.

A deer, clear as day. Lura could see a shivering faun, its leg trapped in a snare. The image was only there for a blink of an eye before the flames swallowed up the little creature. Lura turned to look into her mother's dark eyes.

"I saw something." Lura murmured, "A faun, she was caught in a snare."

Haloa's face tightened, a hint of a frown pulling the corners of her mouth down. Lura knew that nothing good would come of it when her mother frowned. If her mother had a feeling that Lura would fail during her trials, she would be so disappointed. But the morning was not for her mother to criticize her, it was for Lura to prove herself as a worthy apprentice to the temples. She and her family gathered closer to the fire where the head priestess stood on the chieftess' tear stone. A murmur began to spread through the crowd, the small group of temple apprentices in woollen robes looking on in interest.

Lura bowed to the head priestess before her; Nahid was a wizened old shaman, having served Fena as high priestess for nigh on seventy years. She wore the shaman's crown of antlers and red garnet beads with pride and could trace her family history to the first chieftess, her own family having served as leaders and shamans for centuries. She had been invited to sit upon the elder's council countless times over the years, but her calling was for the goddesses and spirits. Lura's mother spoke of her time serving as a priestess under Nahid fondly. It was during her time with the woman that she found her own calling for weaving. Nahid nodded gently to Lura, before speaking to all those who joined in the Sprigann festival.

"Gather round, everyone! Today is the day our young Lur-Atal will start her journey as an apprentice!" A cheer rang out through the crowd of dancers, her family loudest of all.

"Let us celebrate her journey as she commences her trials, and may the goddesses grant us a new keeper to the shrines in the coming days!" Nahid tapped her great staff against the cobbled stone ground to call for silence, before turning to Lura, "Now, child. Are you prepared to perform your trials?"

“Yes, Alprest-Nahid.” A pit of butterflies rushed around Lura’s stomach, sure she would pass out from fright in front of everyone.

“Don’t be nervous, Lura,” Nahid whispered, sharing a small smile with her, “you’ll do wonderfully my dear.”

She gifted her a wink, turning to call one of the priestesses in the crowd to come forth. A tall woman wrapped in the traditional white robes of an elder devotee approached, bowing before Nahid. Her long greying hair was arranged in two braids draped over her shoulders, complementing the intricate embroidering of the short mantle she wore.

“Prest-Hekalan, do you accept Lura as your ward for today, to prove herself devoted to the temples by shadowing you and your girls in your duties?”

“Yes, Alprest-Nahid,” Hekalan spoke with a rumbling timber, looking down her nose at Lura. She took a puff of hash from her short pipe. Smoke flowed from her nose like a buck on a frosty day, curling around her eagle totem surrounded by the talons strung on her necklace. Her bright green eyes, sharp and lined with kohl, flashed yellow in the firelight.

Lura took in a shuddering breath.

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The great temple below the circle of stones was magnificent, a home for all manifestations of nature’s love given life on the mortal realm. It had stood for a thousand years since the early days of Fena, acting as a guiding light for those seeking refuge in the valley. The thick beam that emerged from the sloped roof was carved into the head of a gryphon. It loomed over the stone

courtyard trod smooth over the centuries. The gate towered above her, two massive dragon statues of ancient cedar on either side of the entrance, guarding all who resided within. Lura had in her life occasionally been to the temple for services, but her mother didn't like her leaving the village walls.

She spent the day cleaning the altar chamber. Hekalan found every single possible spot she could to make Lura tidy, dust, mop, scrub, sweep, snuff out, relight, and more. Anything she could do to make Lura work. And to top it off, Lura was holding a vow of silence as an initiate in the temple, not allowed to speak, a commoner in the holy hall of the sisters. The apprentices ignored her except for when she missed a spot. They all giggled behind their hands watching her struggle with the stiff brush against the stone floor. It was as if they had forgotten all about their own trials, they were hardly that much older than her.

By evening Lura felt exhaustion in her bones but had pushed through to prove herself to the sharp eye of Hekalan. The elder had always glared at her whenever she visited the temple with her mother. She suspected that her work was not the traditional initiation before her totem day. The temple had plenty of thralls for cleaning.

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That night she was to join a vigil for a fallen warrior. His name was Puras-Wershann, a foreboding figure in life even when he had aged. He had not been killed in battle but lived to see the age of seventy and five years. His body had laid in his home where his family had performed their own vigil, set in cleansing herbs. Burning pine incense had filled the house the entire day, competing with the Sprigann bonfire by the stones. Lura watched as a handful of people carried

the cot his body rested on through the streets. They were all tall and built like logs, clearly members of his family. The procession was led by two priestesses holding lanterns of burning sweet grasses, lighting the way towards the temple. His body would be laid in the great hall where the priestesses would bless him before bringing his pyre to the marshy lakeside. Not trusted with anything too important, Lura was to simply watch and observe without speaking, her vow of silence continuing through the night.

Lura had only been to one other funeral, the one for her brother who had been stillborn. She had been near ten at the time, hardly able to understand the grief saturating the world around her for months after his passing. Her mother never had another child, and after his funeral, Haloa seemed to reject any idea that he had ever existed, blotting him out from her memory. She had never been quite the same to Lura or any of her siblings in the years since.

The priestesses hummed a mournful hymn as the warrior's pyre floated in the frosted marsh. Lura watched on while the warrior's family readied their bows, dipping the arrowheads alight into the torch piercing the shore. The pyre caught beautifully, soon becoming a beacon illuminating the cold marsh mists. The fire spread across the cloth covering the warrior's body, seizing upon the stacked wood beneath him, and smoke billowed and intertwined with the moor fog. The apprentices gasped behind Lura as a fierce blue light emerged from the fire. It grew into a mortal's shape but flickered in and out of sight like the fire beneath it. Then, in the blink of an eye, the blue mist became the form of the late Wershann in all his glory, an axe in hand and a mighty bearskin cloak around his shoulders. He watched over his family with a soft smile, his children whooping and hollering their war cries in reverence of his memory.

The warrior's spirit then looked to Lura. He gazed directly into her eyes, a kind of recognition passing through him before his expression turned radiant. Wershann nodded to her, clasping his right hand to his chest. A warrior's greeting. He then turned his gaze upwards, his essence drifting away with the smoke from the pyre. His body, in reflection, floated in the marsh while it burned, his remains soon to be picked up by the rushing creek. The devotees and family members stood by the edge of the lake in silence until well past moonhigh.

Lura was guided back to the temple by one of the kinder apprentices, and told to rest until sunup for her next trial. She laid on a deceptively comfortable cot by the eternal fire before the seven sisters. Their stern but kind faces guarded over her bed. The little faeries around her twittered about the great hall, the soft ringing of bells lulling Lura to sleep. She dreamt of spirits flowing around her in a cacophony of sights and sounds, wolves howling in the distance as she held onto a glittering golden crown. Bright, colourful lights erupted from her hands while wild spirits whirled about. The sound of drums beating grew louder while the crown melted and dripped through her fingers to create a glowing waterfall of gold.

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The day Lura was to find her totem was foggy and cold, the promise of snow drifting above. Lura passed the growing fields; they had been covered in dried grasses before the first snow so that the sowers could work the land with extra help once the thaw came. The sun of the previous days had fled, leaving the meadows covered in crisp frost that crunched underfoot. Lura shivered in her hide parka and trousers. The exposed tips of her ears had fluffed up instinctively, like the gooseflesh that would run her body when bathing in the freezing streams. She spotted a

priestess stood at the edge of the Thalfen, the bright red of her veil standing out like blood on the snow. For all her life Lura had wanted so desperately to wear the red veil of a priestess.

The woman greeted her with a raise of her hand, the billowing sleeve of her robe falling to reveal an intricately tattooed forearm. Lura stumbled in her hurry to reach her, the gangly legs beneath her refusing to cooperate. The priestess chuckled softly before gliding over to the young elf to help her up. Lura's cheeks burned with shame.

"Don't be embarrassed, Lura," a soft smile graced the priestess' healthy lips as she pulled Lura into a warm hug, "it happens to the best of us. Brusynn knows I was clumsier than a newborn calf when I was your age."

"Thank you, priestess." Lura mumbled, chin pulled towards her chest as she gazed at the priestess' rosy cheeks. She recognized her as Talike, one of her mother's friends from the temple. She was always kind to Lura, bringing her extra sweet bread from the temple's oven whenever she visited the family.

"Now, I'm sure your mother has already explained to you the process but let us review. This trial is the one to decide your fate. You will enter the Thalfen in search of your totem. You will not return until you have found a totem or received a sign that you were not chosen." She lifted a carved wooden pendant from where it rested on her chest. "As you know, my totem is a bear, for love. I'm sure you've heard the tale of my own battle with that side of myself, Alprest-Nahid really set me straight about what love could look like, and not to be ashamed of a 'soft' calling. No one knows what your totem will be or how you will encounter it. Every experience is different."

“What happens if I don’t find it?” Lura was embarrassed to feel her voice hitch as she spoke, the concept of failure had indeed crossed her mind before, but now it was a crushing weight. Her hands trembled and her grip on the bow grew weak while shame fell deep in her stomach. What would her mother think? Lura would be exiled for sure. The only first-born in her family’s history to not be a priestess. Her mother would be so disappointed. How would she survive on her own?

“Oh Lura, I can already tell you will find a beautiful totem.” Talike pulled Lura into a warm hug, “And if somehow the spirits decide you are not meant to be a priestess, that’s okay. You will find a purpose Lura.”

Lura silently prayed that the spirits would be as merciful to her as Talike.

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Hours had passed since Lura had entered the forest. The mid-morning sun offered no warmth, only serving to light her path. It had started snowing in earnest while she walked; the forest turned quiet with only the sound of her breathing to keep her company. She had already stopped in the path a few times to catch snowflakes on her tongue, her eyelashes covered in a fuzzy layer. Lura had hoped to find some sort of sign of her totem by sunhigh. A sprite or two guiding her way to her totem, finding it glistening in a stream, something. But there was nothing. Lura kicked a stray branch sticking out from the snow, yelling in frustration.

She tripped and fell into a snowbank.

She may as well take advantage and rest for a moment. She was thankful for the priestess letting her sleep that morning when the witching hour had started, but the vigil was the latest she

had ever stayed up. Sometimes she would try and stay up to listen to her aunt spin legends by the fire, but she was never entirely successful. Now, her eyes had drooped closed, ready to simply lay in the fresh snowbank.

Until a wolf howled in the distance, ragged and hoarse. Lura shot up from her seat in the snow, her heart racing at the prospect of seeing a live wolf up close. Typically, wolves avoided the valley for the elves, but some packs would prey on shepherd's goats when the dogs couldn't keep them away. Those that did would have to be hunted, but wolves were left alone, their intelligence keeping them away from the elves. Cave bears, elk, drulfs, and other non-magical creatures were much more common prey for the village's hunters. Her father was a hunter, one of the leaders of the troupes that would set out on weeks-long trips to bring back meat and furs to preserve. Lura slept underneath an elk fur herself, basking in the scent of the wild each night.

As she tracked to where she heard the wolf's howl, Lura saw a puddle of an odd black liquid settled upon the snow, slowly being covered by the fresh snowfall.

"Ow!" Lura stuck her burnt finger into her mouth to sooth it, then in the snowbank when that hardly helped.

The tar had instantly burned her hand like the baked clay of a furnace when she tried to touch it, but it wasn't melting the snow. By the puddle there were fresh wolf prints, stained black. Lura followed the trail. On a few trees, the tar stuck to the snapped ends, as well as huge drops scattered along the trail like the blood spray from a goose's neck. Tufts of soft grey fur were caught in the snapped branches.

When Lura was younger, one of her aunts became ill from some mysterious infection. The priestesses and her mother sent her to an abandoned cottage on the field's-edge, where her aunt was to be delivered food and water, but not to be touched or allowed outside the hut. At the time, Lura hadn't understood why she could not see the woman, and one day she snuck out to visit her. Lura could still remember her horror when she parted the curtain over the door. The sight of her bedridden aunt — covered in black boils all over her skin, hardly able to open her eyes for the swelling, barely clinging to life — was forever ingrained in Lura's mind. A terrible wheezing breath scratching its way from her aunt's throat. It was the height of summer, so her aunt had no need for blankets, leaving her boil-covered body exposed to the bright light coming from behind Lura, casting a pitiful little shadow into the hut.

Lura's mother and grandmother found her there hours later when the sun had nearly gone down. She had not moved from that spot in the doorway, watching the cooling corpse in the cot decay into tar. Her grandmother was horrified, but she guided Lura away from the hut. Lura could see the head priestess and an entourage approaching with torches, singing a hymn to Iaris, Lura recognized the hymn as one to call upon her destructive but cleansing power. It was sung in the old tongue, but Lura remembered hearing the sowers singing it when burning away moulded crops.

Lura was snapped out of her memory by the howling again. This time it was much closer to her, she could practically feel the rusted timber in its voice, the pain carried across the forest's canopy like a wave. Suddenly she heard a screech coming from her right.

There. Right there.

Lura stood on the edge of a clearing, a hulking wolf a few paces before her. She dropped to the ground behind a fallen log, praying to Krytia she wouldn't be noticed as she carefully drew some arrows from her holster. The dire wolf in the clearing was nearly as large as a buck. It was staring down a growling drulf mother guarding three, no, four cubs. Deep bleeding scratches ran the entirety of the mother's body, trembling legs hardly able to hold her up as she defended her cubs to her last breath. The deer-wolf mother continued barking to try and scare the wolf off, but the rabid beast wouldn't budge, seemingly halted in its advancement by the dark illness. One of the cubs, clearly the runt, was dwarfed by its siblings trembling behind their mother. The poor little ones had barely opened their eyes, bright blue like a faerie's, blinking gems reflecting the soft cloudy light of the snow. The snow came down heavier by the moment, wet and thick with the new spring warmth.

The dire wolf's snarling maw was dripping with the putrid tar, jaw open and drooling foaming saliva. Its eyes were wide open; the whites stained a blood red around the bright yellow irises. The creature's body was rife with oozing scratches along its sides, its light grey pelt stained black around its mouth and cuts. The scent of the beast was thick and reminded Lura of when she had gotten a scratch on her knee that had bubbled and harboured pus for days before finally scabbing over. The horrid stench of the herb paste her grandmother had slathered on the wound was ingrained in her memory yet did not compare to the rotten tar.

Lura notched an arrow quietly. She took aim, pulling a breath of frosty air in, shakily releasing it with her grip on the bow, just as her father taught her.

The beast lurched in the clearing, oily black pitch oozing from where the arrow struck its leg. It locked eyes with Lura. She drew another shot, hands trembling from the intensity of the beast's gaze. The second arrow loosed, landing in the meat of its shoulder. A horrific scream tore through the sharp air as the wolf staggered where it stood. Lura released another two arrows in quick succession, one just barely hit while the other whiffed into the flurry of snow kicked up.

The beast lunged towards Lura, launching across the clearing with a blazing fury, but stumbled two paces away from the girl. Lura dodged to strike the beast's side with her knife. It skipped like a stone over water along its ribs, sinking deep into its hip before the wolf's own momentum pulled it free. She dropped her bow, but the knife had cut a jagged line deep into the thick skin. The pitch seeped out of the wolf's body through its side, steaming in the chill.

Caught up in her adrenaline, Lura didn't feel the presence behind her until it was too late. Her wind knocked out of her chest, Lura struggled underneath the wide paws of the dire wolf. The beast's sharp claws dragged down her shoulder, etching deep grooves into her upper back to scrape against her shoulder blades. Blinding, white-hot pain threatened to knock her out if not for the fighter's energy coursing through her body. Its ragged breathing echoed in the trees around them, hot puffs hitting the back of Lura's head, nearly soaking her hair with its drool. She felt its weight shift, the body on top of her pausing, petrified. When she craned her neck back to check, the beast had stilled completely like when she first saw it in front of the drulfs.

Lura took the opportunity to wrestle free from the paws; her knife still clutched in her hand. She slashed wildly at the wolf's belly, releasing its stained black entrails to collapse into a wet heap on the snow. The horrible scent of rotting flesh swamped Lura while she rolled away from

the deluge. She managed to crawl on her hands and knees to retch into a nearby bush, but only bile came up as she had not eaten for the fasting. There was no conceivable way Lura should have survived that, but she did.

She turned to face the dying beast, still panting on the ground, its eyes rolling around in its head like fish in a stream. Stepping up to its side, Lura raised her knife in the air, ready to carve out its heart to end the unholy suffering the beast had wrought upon the forest.

Its eyes flashed with a split second of intelligence and soul.

Wolves were wise; they knew not to prey on young cubs. A spark of life remained in the cursed beast's eye. She could not kill this wolf in violence. Gently, Lura rested her hand on its cheek, gazing into the frenzied eye that she now saw as mournful in its cursed state. Lura's mind brought her the image of the wolf running through the stars, free from the corrupting tar that now plagued its body. Holding Lura's gaze, the wolf came to realise her own fate. She closed her eyes, tilting her head to allow Lura to strike her at her most vulnerable point.

The wolf's last breath ghosted in the air before her body lay still, finally at peace.

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The drulfs were all dead when Lura approached them, the tiny bodies still like stones curled up around their mother. Lura stood there for a moment, her mind miles away while she looked at the little family. She fell to a kneel by the mother, brushing her eyes closed to the world. At rest and hopefully at peace.

It was then that she saw the little wood carving. Her totem. She remembered being anxious for the small item before but couldn't bring the energy to do much more than simply stare at it while she knelt. Her totem was a wolf, regal and imposing in its power. It was carved with fine runes in the old script, just like the ones Lura had seen around the necks of the people who cared for her for her entire life.

The tinkling of bells caught her breath, looking up to see a handful of frost faeries drifting over to the drulfs. A shimmer of light surrounded the family before Lura could see clear as day the spirits of the drulfs lifting from their bodies. Mother and cubs danced in the air together before the mother stepped across to the space in front of Lura. Her very essence billowed around the snowflakes and faeries surrounding her and her children, like morning mists. The drulf gently bumped her forehead into Lura's own, sending a comforting chill down her spine. The three cubs clumsily ran through the air around their mother, barking soft bells at the faeries playing with them.

Lura heard a soft whimper below her. The runt. It had survived.

The runt bleated for its mother, curled up in her still-warm fur. Lura winced at the tug on her shoulders as she reached for the pitiful little scrap of fur. The runt wriggled in her hold as she tucked it into the torn remains of her mantle, swaddling it like a babe before holding it tight to her chest and wrapping her scarf around her and the cub to secure it. She looked up to the mother.

“Don't worry; I'll take care of him.”

The mother nodded. Lura watched as they climbed the snowfall into the clouds above. Their forms disappeared into the mists, intertwining with the fat snowflakes that fell into Lura's eyes as she looked above, melting with her tears to shimmer down red cheeks.

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