

## **Moments and Tears of the Stormlands**

Oluwatobi Musa sat back on his haunches, looking over his family playing by the pond. He was fortunate, he knew, to have found such a place in the middle of nowhere. He'd brought his family here in search of a better life, and so far it had been kind to them. He thanked God every day for his blessings, and for allowing his children to experience the joys of this life.

Around him, the desert stretched on, vast and silent, and yet here he and his family were safe and secure, and the future looked a little brighter. As he watched his children continue to play, staring down at the monitor lizard that was hissing at them, he was filled with a deep sense of peace and contentment, and prayed that this feeling would never end.

Both his son and daughter were in their true forms, free from all human concerns. It was liberating, and moments like these were what made him believe that he had made the right decision by taking his family out of Lagos and into the desert. Oluwatobi found solace in the vast expanse of desert around him. Here, he was not only surrounded by nature, but connected to it in ways he had never experienced before. He could see it in the sand, feel it in the air, and hear its call in the wind. It was a kind of communion with the world that he had never known before. Better that they were here, alone, than among the so called civilized people. With their never ending greed, the overconsumption of everything in their way, the technology that robbed them of all connections with the natural world.

He took a deep breath and allowed himself to relax into his environment. As he did so, something inside him began to stir-a longing for what this place revealed to him about himself and his family's journey out here-a reminder of why they had chosen this road less travelled by most people-a reaffirmation of why this was where they belonged as part of something larger than themselves-as part of Nature itself.

Oluwatobi had hated walking down the streets seeing them staring at their wrist screens, letting pixels consume their lives. Mother Earth had so much more to offer.

This was right, he thought to himself.

The air was fresher here, uncontaminated by the toxic fumes of a large city. Here, in this serene setting, he could finally feel like himself again and not be judged for who he was. His family had been persecuted in their home city, where those around them feared what they didn't understand. People had called them "wolves" and were afraid that their presence would bring harm to their city. But Oluwatobi had never felt more in touch with nature than he did now, standing out here in the open desert, with its wildness and its vastness.

It saddened him sometimes, he had to admit, technology had so much to offer, even to his kind. Through it, they had learned who their ancestors were, how they had become who they were. They were descendants of the mighty Andrewsarchus, and even though they had changed, adapted to their dual lives, all shifters felt the call of nature. Technology had given them that, yet the humans and the vampires used it only to exploit.

Oluwatobi felt his mate brush his shoulder as she came to sit next to him. He glanced in her direction, saw the pale dust color of her short fur, the thick brown mane around her neck, the muscles that bulged beneath, the earthy scent that clung to her.

Life was good.

The sun had already begun to sink in the sky and its last rays spilled a warm orange hue across the desert expanse. Oluwatobi and his mate sat in silence, watching as creatures of all sorts made their way home for the night or out for an adventure.

The stars began to twinkle above them, and Oluwatobi looked up at them with admiration. As he did so, he thought back to how far they had traveled and how much they had endured together since then. He thought of how far they could still go if only they stayed true to themselves and followed their own paths instead of trying to follow those set by society-the ones that weren't meant for them. His heart swelled with pride knowing they chose a different road-one less travelled, but more rewarding-a journey that led them here and opened his eyes to a world he would never have known before this night.

Suddenly, his mate turned her head to the sky, and light reflected in her eyes. Oluwatobi turned and followed her gaze, just in time to see white light high up in the sky, getting stronger, a wave of it spreading in all directions.

He heard his mate growl, and he yelped at his cubs, calling to them. The light was too fast, it hit the ground and washed over them all. His world became blinding white, a loud noise filled his ears and it was as

if everything had just ceased to exist. It lasted only for a moment, and when Oluwatobi opened his eyes, his mate was missing. He turned around looking, his ears twitching on top of his head as his cubs yowled in fear. He sensed no sign of his mate, only the fading scent of where she used to be.

He raised his head and looked up, lines of all colors filled every part of the sky, like a giant web of a million auroras. And they were coming down.

Oluwatobi moved quickly, leaping to his children. He grabbed his son by the scruff of his neck and ushered him back to the crude shelter they had made. The lines of light were falling faster now, and he feared what was about to happen.

His children hid behind him as a wall of twisting light hit the ground, and then... then the world went mad.

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Andrew Carter sat at his workstation, the holotable projected the protein and several working versions of molecules that could bind with it. The processor was currently running down the more molecule variations. He could feel it, they almost had it, a universal cure. Soon, disease of all kind would be a thing of the past. Soon, humanity would enjoy the same strengths that the shifters and vampires did. The vampire protein floating above his table was a terrible thing, but they had stripped it of all its nasty tendencies. But it still remained a

weapon, a delivery mechanism that could push past any defense. A weapon of the Sangunium Bacteria, but one that would answer to whatever programming they wanted.

"It is close," Hannah said from his left.

"It is more than just close," Andrew said. "This will work, I know it will."

"We need more testing," Hannah said. "Years of trials."

Andrew rounded on her. "This can work! It can save people now!"

"You don't know that," Hannah shook her head.

Andrew opened his mouth to argue, and then he stopped.

"This is wrong," he whispered, something at the back of his head was nagging at him. "You weren't here."

There was light coming in from the window, and he walked over and looked. A familiar light was coming from the sky.

"This is a dream," Andrew whispered. "I was alone when it came for me."

Hannah looked at him as if he had lost his mind, and he remembered. She and the rest of their team had left him, had gone home for the weekend. They didn't think that what he was doing was right, they had an argument. Andrew alone stayed, he had fallen asleep at the table. The light woke him up. Now as it came for him again, he closed his eyes, welcoming it.

Andrew Carter woke up on a small straw cot. He grimaced, the pain of his burned face aching through his head. The headaches had been nearly constant, but he pushed through it. He had learned to live with it these past few weeks.

How long had I even been here? It had to be close to a month. He knew that his time in this world was expiring. That soon he would be returned. He had learned so much, and soon he would be able to help humanity in ways that he never before could.

Slowly, he stood up and walked over to the small bowl filled with water. Gently, he unwrapped the bandages around his face and cleaned his wounds before rewrapping them. Then, he put on his work outfit, the thick leather gloves and apron, his goggles, and the breathing mask. Then he left his small shack, carefully. He had grown accustomed to this in the weeks since he had been brought here. He grabbed the hanging rope outside his home then Andrew stepped onto the line rope, slowly and carefully, feeling for a balance point.

His eyes scanned the horizon as he made his way along the tightrope, then someone flew by him, yelling as they passed.

"Well woke, Andrew!" The harpiem greeted him as he passed.

Andrew waved, recognizing Jass by his bright blue tunic and the red feathers in his hair denoting him as the commander of the city watch.

Andrew took a deep breath, taking a quick glance down. He never really got used to living in a city made on a side of a cliff. Especially one that had been set up in three days. He didn't know how harpiem

did it, but he was amazed when he watched them drop down the shacks and ropes over the cliff to set up a temporary settlement. He shook his head as he fought against the vertigo and then he started making his way across the rope line that connected the shacks.

With two hands on the top rope, he carefully slid his legs against the one on the bottom, making his way to his lab.

He reached the isolated hut and entered the lab with his limbs burning from the effort. He quickly shook them off and then walked over to his work table. The first thing he did was check his work list again. He didn't know how long he had left, he had lost a few days on his arrival, before the harpiem found him halfdead on the plains.

But he knew that he had to do as much as he could for his new friends. Equip them as best as he knew how, he owed them that much at least.

With an increased sense of haste, he started his work. He took up his simple mortar and pestle getting to work.

He was so engrossed in his work that he didn't even notice when a harpiem came into the lab. "Teacher! You are early!" Andrew raised his head to see his student, A harpiem with red feathers on his wings, skid to a stop with an amazed look on his face as he gazed at Andrew's work

"Wow!" He exclaimed breathlessly. "You have been busy."

"Careful," Andrew said as Brin rushed ahead. "What did I teach you?"

"Never rush," Brin caught himself and Andrew nodded.

"What do you have there?" He asked.

Brin smiled and pulled over his satchel, showing him the assortment of plants he had gathered.

"You found more brown weed?" Andrew asked, surprised.

"Yes teacher," Brin said. "I had to fly far down south, for it, near the old trails."

Andrew smiled for what felt like the first time in ages as he walked over. "This is good, with this we can get your people more healing salves."

The name of the weed was mundane, but it was a very potent ingredient in the healing salve that Andrew had developed. With this he would be able to set up his hosts with enough to see them through the next leg of their journey.

"Good, good," Andrew murmured. "Let's start working on this batch, we don't have much time."

Something told him that he didn't have much time left.

Their work continued into the night, but by the end of it they had made two full crates of healing salve. Enough for the entire tribe.

"That was amazing teacher," Brin said. "I even got a carving from it!"

Andrew smiled, his own Mask had hit a plateau it seemed, after the rapid gains he got at the start. But that was to be expected from everything that he had learned. So much was new to him back then, an entire new world to explore, with ways of doing things that were foreign to him.

He looked at Brin, at his carefree smile of contentment and pride. He knew how hard life was for the harpiem in this world, how harsh it could be. He had seen the beasts that harried their path. Andrew glanced at the chest in the corner of the room and debated with himself.

In the end, responsibility won against morality.

"Brin," he said slowly.

"Teacher?" The young harpiem tilted his head.

Andrew walked over to the chest and knelt down to open it. Inside he looked at the wrapped package, and then before he could change his mind, he picked it up. He carried the package to the table and unwrapped it, revealing three small vials, their contents glowing faint blue.

It was an abomination, created by his superior knowledge and aided by the cursed skills he had gained in this world. And yet, Andrew couldn't bring himself to throw it away. It had a use.

"What is this?" Brin asked.

Andrew raised his head, his heart started to beat faster, the light outside of the lab got brighter and brighter.

"I want you to take this, and give it to your alchemists once you reach Par Nata," Andrew said, naming the large gathering of harpiem tribes, the place where his rescuers had been heading. "Don't use it, not unless you have no other recourse, and if you must, give it to one of the guards."

Brin's thick brow furrowed.

"Teacher," he said slowly.

Andrew looked down on his creation. Working with Source was such a... it was going to change everything. He could already see all the terrible things that humanity would do with it. Like he had done.

"It's a drug," Andrew said. "It will make anyone who takes it strong, but the side effects... I didn't have the time or the equipment to test it properly," he suspected only, his [Document Trait] skill told him... terrible things. "Give it to the alchemists, let them test it out, they will do better than I ever could."

His Mask was not yet on the First Investment, he just knew that harpiem had people better than him, at least as far as matters of the Source were concerned.

Brin nodded. "I will do as you ask, teacher."

Andrew nodded, feeling relieved. At least he would leave the Wandering People with something to repay them.

The light grew more, and he felt a familiar sensation. The Grand Spell had come for him.

The bearer of the Mask of Malefic Alchemist was going home.

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Knight Mage Herim of Roughrock coughed, and blood spilled out of his mouth, falling to the shattered cobblestone beneath. He glanced at his hand, seeing that only hilt remained of his weapon. The blade had shattered, and he didn't even remember when it had happened. His thoughts were filled with a fog, something that he recognized from experience. Head wound, a concussion. He would have to push through it. The air around him was thick with smoke, it was hard to see, and even harder to breathe.

He could make out the shapes of people running about in confusion, but he could not tell who they were or what they were doing. But he could hear screams- screams of terror and pain alike- coming from all directions.

He tried to stand but found himself too weak to do so and stumbled back to where he had been before half crawling half dragging himself across the broken stones towards a nearby alleyway. He pushed himself up against the wall and leaned his head back.

Above the light of the sun shone through the clouds, streams of it stretching to touch the ground as if it was a sign. And it was. It was providence, the light that so rarely shone on the Stormlands had come when they needed it the most. There would have been no victory without it.

The entire night and the morning that followed felt like a nightmare, an illusion cast by the fiends of Asha Kai-ni. In his wildest thoughts, he couldn't have imagined it going this way. Their enemy was dead, burned a hundred times over, its body dismembered and bones pulverized to dust, flesh torn and scattered. They had to be sure, but even now, Herim feared that it wasn't enough, that he would hear that laughter in the air, and that the violence would start again.

He shook his head, no, the vampire is dead. Such a monster should never have existed. Two whole Knight Orders had come after it, and now... Herim couldn't even bring himself to look and see who else had survived.

He had watched the Storm Knight, the Knight Commander, the leader of his order, face the vampire in battle, and he had seen him fall. A man who had lived for thousands of years, who had reached the Eight Investment, one of the highest Investment people in the whole world. And the being from another world killed him.

It was madness, even with all the preparations they had done, they hadn't accounted for the sheer cunning, the intelligence that lurked behind those golden eyes.

The haunting cries of the people filled the streets as they emerged from their hiding places. Herim's heart raced with fear and shame as he watched them hobble across the cobblestones.

Herim had no right to meet their eyes, he was filled with shame. They had hunted the monster, shame kept him on the ground. The monster was gone now, killed by them all at a terrible cost, but Herim could not shake this guilt.

Herim sat on the ground, drained completely. A part of him blamed himself, yes, for surviving, for the little voice in his head that told him that the dream of his life was finally accomplished. His Mask had advanced, Sixth Investment, an accomplishment that put him in the upper echelon of all the Masked in the world. Yet he cursed his Mask, cursed himself for being weak. There was no joy in his accomplishment. Two hundred knights had met the monster in battle, and he had seen more than half of them fall. He was afraid to go out and search, fearing that he was the only one left.

The city was in ruins, and thousands more were dead. They had won, but in his heart, all that Herim could think was that he had failed.

The battle had been the hardest thing he had ever been a part of. The monster just kept healing, no matter what they did. It knew that they had silver, and it destroyed their preparations before even engaging them in battle. It had ambushed them a day before they planned the attack on its lair. It had to have known, somehow. Herim couldn't get the memory out of his head. Mortal wounds closing instantly, a monstrous strength that let it pull armored knights apart as if they were made out of clay. The wings that could blast air with such force to pick up entire wagons and send them spinning down the streets. All of that with no skills.

And its Mask... No being of such strength should ever have a Mask. It was an abomination.

Something caught his eyes and Herim raised his head. The light was filling the horizon, and immediately he knew what it was.

Only one thought filled Herim's mind; that there was an entire world out there, filled with the same kind of monsters.

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Khalil Abd al-Nur, Knight Priest of the Order of the Dragon, looked on at the carnage in front of him as the sky blazed with light. Buildings were razed to the ground, streets filled with craters, the fire was blazing as elves ran down the streets throwing water at it, trying to quell the flames.

Carriages drawn by beasts native to this land carried more water, or just people who rushed to clear the rubble and try to save those who were buried beneath.

Khalil was in the state of shock. What he had seen that night was... unlike anything he could've ever imagined. He had been called up to speak with the knights on the eve of their planned assault against the vampire. He had thought that they were prepared, that they would be victorious. And ultimately they had. Yet there was so much death, so much carnage.

All the stories he heard on Earth echoed inside his head. He had even laid eyes on the vampire himself. He had seen the image of evil with golden eyes and the unshaken knowledge of superiority that they held. Today, he had seen what the worst of vampire kind was capable of. He had seen why his order was necessary.

And he had learned that even here, in this new world, God could still hear his prayers.

When the morning came, the battle had continued under the overcast skies filled with storm clouds. It had given the vampire protection, hid it from the sun. Khalil had prayed as he had never prayed before. He had reached out for the strange new force that Mask of the Believer offered, and he asked with his [Act of Faith].

The skies parted, and the sun shone down, at last.

The vampire had not been burned as Khalil had expected, but the effects were immediate. It had recoiled from the light, almost seemed confused to see that it hadn't died from its touch. And that had given the remaining knights an opening to strike.

Khalil had never seen such might wielded by the righteous, but seeing it, he knew that everything would change. No longer would humanity cower in weakness. This world offered power to all who were willing to reach out and take it.

Khalil stood alone, forgotten amidst the chaos, as light started to surround him. In moments it engulfed him, and took him back to his world. His faith and resolve firm in the knowledge that he would help humanity survive the darkness ahead.