

The gale which had been driving the snow horizontally suddenly faltered and died as though someone had clicked off a switch. Fat snowflakes continued to drift lazily from the iron grey sky, settling peacefully over mounds of weathered rock. The white flakes also began to cover smaller mounds, the snow around which was stained red. As more snow fell the crimson stain diluted to pink, and soon the small bumps were indistinguishable from the rest of the clean white landscape.

The only visible signs of man in this part of the wilderness were the pairs of stone markers which marched steadily north a hundred paces apart. Each stayed clear of snow as a side effect of its enchantment. The markers showed travellers where the road was. Just as importantly, they showed where the road wasn't - stepping off the ancient cobbles could be a death sentence, as the bodies cooling under their mounds of snow testified.

Standing on the road was a small figure with large, dark eyes. The figure clutched a ragged blanket around itself and blinked as it checked the surroundings for movement. It appeared unbothered by the bitter cold. There was no noise but the faint sound of fat snowflakes settling on the drifts, and after a few moments of contemplation the figure began walking north, keeping to the absolute centre of the road.

The figure was barefoot in the snow, but it left no tracks.

Nyissa drew her fur lined cloak closer to her body, and shivered. The soft leather padding under her armour helped, as did the body heat of the shaggy northern pony she was riding. But her tanned skin and dark hair showed she'd been born in the south where snow rarely fell even in the depths of winter. After weeks of travel in the north she still wasn't used to the cold, and she probably never would be.

The huge, colourfully painted wagons of the trade caravan were close, and for the umpteenth time in the last hour she felt the urge to retreat inside one and huddle up with a firepot and a hot drink. But every capable body was required to patrol ahead and behind the caravan, so she resolutely stayed in the saddle, bow and sword close to hand.

In the lands far to the north of the inland sea, the dead stalked the living. And of late, the dead seemed to be particularly hungry.

Unlike the restless dead sometimes found in haunted crypts and fell ruins in the south, the frozen dead coming out of the north these days were fast moving, cunning and actively malignant. These mountains and icy forests were their domain, and they seemed to resent its invasion by the living. The northern city of Desai had become a lonely fortress of life under siege, and a single road that crossed the frozen wastes was the cities only lifeline.

Desai was independent, yet paid tithes to the Empire in order to remain on good terms with it. Taxes on goods stayed reasonable as a result, and occasionally the Empire would provide aid in difficult times. This years sudden and early onset of winter counted as one of those times, and the caravan contained food and supplies provided by the religious sect known as the Balm of Joy, not to mention a whole flock of the soft spoken priests.

Nyissa had not been eager to make this journey, but someone in the temple hierarchy wanted a pair of Losari eyes involved and as the only Sword Sage who wasn't otherwise engaged, she got the job. She suspected her selection had been encouraged by members of the ruling priesthood who disapproved of her past misdemeanours. Her protest that the bitter cold of the north would ruin her perfect tan had been ineffective, as had her enquiries about exactly *why* the temple was so keen to have one of their troubleshooters in the far North right now.

Despite her theoretical rank, Nyissa was not the leader of the expedition. That honour fell to Toberion Earle, a hugely fat but very canny Belani caravan master. His robed and fur covered bulk partly filled the lead wagon, a perpetually smouldering hookah of some foul Eastern tobacco spluttering and fizzing by his side and a cup of ferociously strong southern coffee always to hand. His management of the expedition had been flawless to date, and Nyissa had decided he deserved his reputation as a man who got things done. Toberion was a sharp merchant-priest providing a humanitarian favour on behalf of his temple rather than heading one of the profitable caravans he'd normally be in charge of. While his enormous body was immobile due to old injuries, his dark eyes missed very little. He had a gaggle of runners to do his legwork and his caravaneers followed the commands he gave them as though they were holy writ.

One of the caravan masters responsibilities had been choosing the people he needed to take along. Toberion had hired two dozen mercenaries from the barbarian land of Spanhour, led by a weapon master named Rifus the Iron and his lieutenant, the impressively titled Yanafalis Feathered-by-the-black-Crow. Both men were competent and had experience in the north. Nyissa knew them by reputation, Rifus as an uncompromisingly tough commander and Yanafalis as one of the deadliest archers around the inner sea. The Spanhour were fearsome barbarian tribesmen, highly sought after to serve as mercenary guards on expeditions to lands outside the empires borders. Nyissa suspected they'd been expensive, and counted their hire as evidence that the caravan master knew what was worth spending his money on.

Nyissa looked back over her shoulder to where Yanafalis strode stoically across the packed snow at the back of the procession, a pair of quivers strapped across the back of his worn leather jerkin and his bow in hand, unstrung. He alternated checks to either side as well as cast his gaze back behind the caravan every ten steps or so. At a glance it appeared he was wearing some kind of fancy cloak until you realised the dark feathers were attached to his arms and back. The crest of soft feathers which took the place of head hair on a full-blooded human was raven black, but the feathers shimmered with colours when the sun caught them from the right angle. After some thought she'd decided he was quite attractive. He'd made a casual pass at her early in the trip, and hadn't appeared to take offence when she'd politely declined his invitation. It wasn't that he was especially unpleasant to look at, but Nyissa was wary of bedding one of the beast-touched. You never knew what kind of surprise you might get once you got down to business.

His bow was a great big thing longer than Nyissa was tall, all elaborately carved auroch horn layered with strips of wood and sinew, worked around with silver wire and fine leather strips. She could sense some enchantment worked into the weapon, but the lack of visible runes left her ignorant of their purpose, and Yanafalis hadn't answered when she asked. In fact, during the several weeks they'd been travelling he'd said very little at all. Nyissa had seen him string the bow and get an arrow nocked and aimed by the count of three though, which, given that she probably couldn't have drawn the damn thing at all, was quite an impressive feat.

Nyissa looked forward again, to where the archers commander rode point with a pair of his men. Weaponmaster Rifus was a broad shouldered, dark bearded hulk of a man with heavy scarring vying for visibility with extensive tattoos over every inch of exposed skin. He favoured a pair of short hafted two bitted steel axes, and his massive frame wore a wildly mis-matched collection of armour pieces which appeared to have been assembled from several different sources. Reputation called him a Barzark, though Nyissa suspected he'd spread the rumour himself for intimidation value, as he seemed smart and wholly resistant to frothing and drooling. The Spanhour warriors he'd brought along with him obviously respected their leader greatly, and Nyissa suspected the man might have some barbarian blood of his own. After seeing him organise his troops, it was obvious he knew his business, and Nyissa was happy to let him get on with it. The Spanhour probably wouldn't have followed her instructions anyway.

Rifus had taken her aside early on in the journey and asked direct, honest questions about what she was good for. Nyissa didn't take it personally. Losari worshippers were normally sages or occasionally battlefield advisors, and he stated outright that he needed neither. When she'd explained that she was a Mage and Sword-Sage, one of a handful of Warrior-Priests the temple sponsored to aid in its holy work of collecting knowledge, he'd accepted that she might actually be useful. A brief sparring match had convinced him that she could fight and they'd agreed that it would be her responsibility to defend the gaggle of surgeon-priests personally while he and his troops concentrated on defending the wagons. Since then he'd proven himself willing to listen to her advice, and Nyissa found him an acceptable, if grim companion.

Toberion had outlined what he and his crew would do in a number of likely situations, Rifus had drilled his troops, Yanafalis was constantly aware of the best fields of fire and the priests had sensibly stayed in the warmth of their wagon except for when they emerged with bowls of hot soups for the working crew and guards. It was all very professional and reassuring. If it wasn't for the intense cold and lack of a decent bedmate, Nyissa might have found herself enjoying the expedition.

The scenery in the far north, she reflected, almost made up for the discomfort.

The north road was wide enough for two of the huge trade wagons and the teams of Auroch drawing them to easily pass side by side, and its ancient cobbles marked the path for hundreds of miles of hills and ice choked conifer woodlands. At a few points it ended at deep chasms, most of which were bridged by newer constructions which led over to where the road began again on the other side. The newer bridges were of variable quality, but more recently they'd crossed one of the ancient original bridges, a massive structure of worn granite marked with an unknown system of runes that looked as solid as the hills themselves. Nevertheless, the bridge was missing half its width at one point. It looked, she'd reflected, as though some giant had taken a bite out of one side. The caravan had edged past the gap carefully as a dry mouthed Nyissa had nervously estimated the weight of one of the huge wagons and its cargo and draft animals, but they had all made it past the damaged span without a long fall into the depths of the earth.

The road was said to be older than the cities it joined together, its ancient route the reason they were built where they were. At either end had been found the foundations of cities which pre-dated any civilisation currently known around the inner sea. Neither city had survived the ravages of time, weather and warfare. The road itself had.

Rarely did the road deviate from its course, and then only to bypass some huge stand of raw granite or other forbidding obstacle. The rest of the time it cut through the landscape like the scar from a giant sword blow. It had been here since the current settlers began working their way north, defeating and absorbing the native tribes that opposed them. The tribesmen said the road had been here since their ancestors first hunted in the hills, and that it had been built by the gods. By long tradition it was considered sacred, and spilling blood on it was considered an insult to the gods. Even the wildest tribesmen wouldn't attack someone who stood on the road, though they would often stalk alongside and taunt them in an attempt to make them leave the road where they could be killed. Nyissa didn't know if a divine engineer had built the road, but it surely was a wonder. The cobbled surface had survived generations of hooves, bronze shod wheels and harsh winters, acquiring a kind of natural magic in the process. The tradition of sanctuary had become fact, enforced by whatever spirit of the land was responsible for such things, carefully enhanced in recent generations by mortal sorcery. Now nothing *could* attack someone standing on the road, nor damage the road itself.

So the frozen, lonely mining city of Desai endured in the far north due to its stone lifeline to the inner sea, even when all sanity demanded that the city be abandoned forever. For one night, the dead in the cemeteries had suddenly risen from their frozen graves and brutally slain all who happened to be outside the city walls. No one in Desai knew why, or at least, no one who was willing to talk. Only the cities high walls had saved those inside from the same fate. The survivors found themselves cut off, a fortress of the living in a hostile wilderness swarming with hungry revenants. During the day the creatures prowled the lands around the city, and at night they stood at the base of the walls and *howled* until the Sun came up.

The priests had made sacrifices to appease the deities that surely must have been mortally offended by... something. But when the gods stayed silent, the people tried older, darker gods, and made worse sacrifices. No answer ever came, even when they tried the very old names, the ones called on by the hill tribes themselves.

Some of the survivors fled the city down the magic road carrying word to the cities to the south. Merchants and thieves quickly fleeced the survivors of whatever wealth they had managed to bring with them, and the survivors learned not to say where they were from, for many shunned them for fear that the curse would spread.

Not all the citizens of Desai fled however. The road was still safe. Supplies could be bought in and people could leave by it, and even the dead could not break the geas on the road and prevent them. The remaining population were grim faced men and women who refused to give ground to the supernatural threat. As word spread a few adventurous types trekked north to join them, as did a few desperate exiles, outcasts and criminals searching for somewhere no one else would bother to look for them.

Silver from the cities mines was Desai's only trade item. Even if the population had a surplus from the hardscrabble farms they'd established within the walls, no one from the south wanted to buy food grown in cursed Desai. Nyissa suspected that their caravan, loaded with food and medical aid, would head back south bearing trade silver. The Empire aided allies when they were in need, but the mercenaries guarding the caravan still needed to be paid. Her own job was to represent her religion and show that it was committed to aiding friends of the Empire, but Nyissa planned to keep her eyes out for opportunities to make small profit. It would be useful to bribe the priesthood into not sending her on assignments like this one.

One

Cloak spread back from her arms so she could strike if she needed to, Nyissa knelt in the snow while Yanafalis stood with his back to her scanning the tree line. She kept the blade of her sabre outstretched towards the corpse, wary of it bursting back into life.

Nyissa had seen plenty of bodies in her life. Corpses which *got up and moved* still gave her the creeps. This one didn't seem inclined to do so any more though. One of Yanafalis' arrows had taken it in the eye socket and punched right through the back of the skull. That had been enough to slow it down long enough for one of Nyissa's spells to blast the unquiet spirit from the body and put it down, hopefully for good this time.

It was hard to tell for sure, but judging by the shrivelled breasts the creature may have been female once, though it's original species was a matter for debate. The head had a few patches of hair clinging from the skull but the jaw was too elongated to be human, and sprouted jagged tusks. Dried out eyeballs hung loosely in their sockets like shrivelled fruit. Nyissa wondered how the creature saw its victims. Perhaps it didn't - its nose had huge flared nostrils, so perhaps it smelt its prey. The twisted arms were unnaturally long too, with tattered hands sporting thick filthy claws, splintered like stubs of broken bone. The whole thing reeked of decay, and the bloated stomach had split when it fell, spilling an horrific mass of decomposing organs into the snow. Nyissa felt her gorge rise and turned away to retch.

There was more than a hint of Troll about the thing, which didn't surprise Nyissa much. Troll magic tended towards the macabre, and they had a long standing tradition of raising zombie labourers. Since Trolls usually ate their dead to honour them, they didn't usually have as many Zombies about as their more hysterical Human neighbours expected. This thing though... it was no ordinary zombie.

It had burst out of a snowbank without warning when one of the Mercenaries stepped off the road to squat behind a tree. With his breaches halfway down he'd been unable to run and it'd torn him apart before anyone had been able to reach him.

From the speed and ferocity the thing had displayed, Nyissa began to suspect that Toberion hadn't hired enough guards after all.

Rifus seemed to think so too. He had recalled his men and instructed everyone to stay on the road at all times from now on. They grunted their assent, casting nervous looks out into the white landscape and making signs to ward off evil. Gathering the leaders around Toberion's wagon he spoke in a low voice designed not to carry to the rest of the men.

"What do you think of this... thing, Swordmistress?"

"I don't know much about this type of undead, but it seemed pretty much unaffected by physical damage. We might try fire next time. The spell I used damages the soul of the target and it seemed much more effective than I'd expected, but unfortunately it's quite draining. I can only cast it two or three times without needing to rest."

"Fire. I don't think telling the men to hit these things with torches will improve their morale. We knew there were walking dead up here, but this thing... it was fast. Not like any Revenant I've seen before". Rifus frowned and rubbed his scarred chin. Nyssa nodded in agreement.

"Me either... but fire works against some kinds of Undead. I don't know if torches would be enough, but there are spells that cause weapons to burn. Unfortunately I can't keep them active on everyone's weapons at once."

"I know a spell that makes arrows burn. I will use it." This was perhaps more total words than Yanafalis had spoken in the last week. Nyissa broke the contemplative silence that followed one of his infrequent comments.

"Fire is only a possibility. There's no guarantee it will be effective, though I think it's worth a try. Blessed salt is supposed to deter them too, but I'm not sure how we can put that to use." Toberion shook his huge head, jowls wobbling under his fastidiously neat beard.

"Undead cannot cross a line of blessed salt. We have a substantial amount with us, but making a circle of it would probably only be useful if we are besieged. Besides, it needs to be blessed first. Perhaps our priests will be willing to do so, if we find we have need of it."

So far, the priests of the balm of joy had been useful more for their skills in cooking than for anything else. The balm of joy was a healing order, and it's priests refused to harm another being. Nyissa hoped they wouldn't extend their tolerance to the walking dead.

"If it comes to that, I can bless the salt. Technically, I'm a priestess." She continued in the face of their obvious surprise. "I don't understand why the thing was so far south. I thought they were besieging Desai."

"I believed that too. I had heard the curse which raised them bound them close to the city. And I understood that the light of the sun usually destroys undead, so I am surprised that it was able to attack during the day." Toberion had every right to feel concerned, since he would be unable to run away from an attack. Nyissa shrugged.

"I know very little about necromancy, but I do know that sunlight isn't automatically harmful to the undead. Why should it be? They're just bodies. Sunlight didn't hurt them in life, there is no reason why it should affect them when they're dead."

"I had heard otherwise." Commented Rifus. Nyissa shook her head.

"No. I did some research before I left Hawkgard. The Trolls are big on necromancy, and there's quite a lot about it in the libraries. Sunlight hurting the dead seems to be mostly legend, except for some types of darkness spirits. Most undead lurk in old crypts, or the Trolls animate them as labourers and keep them underground. That might explain where the idea comes from."

"Hmmp. Well, let's hope the stories about travellers on this road being protected isn't wrong as well." Rifus stood, ready to move on. Toberion nodded.

"Let us make haste then, and stay on the road the whole way. Another four days should bring us to Desai, perhaps three if the snowfall lessens."

The snowfall didn't get any less. In fact it got heavier.

The caravan slowed to a crawl, the draft animals struggling against the biting wind and banks of deep snow that built up on the flagstones. Visibility closed in to less than twenty paces, and the further north they got, the more often they began to spot figures lurking in the blizzard.

The road would have been impossible to follow if not for the stone markers sticking up out of the snow. Snowflakes which fell within an arms length of the stones melted away, but the snow was free to build up in deep drifts closer than this, and several times the markers vanished from sight simply because the snow drifts surrounding them were higher than the stone obelisks themselves. It was perilously easy to walk straight off the road in these conditions, and sometimes, half blinded by cold and wind, men did.

The caravan lost five men in the first two days. In each case the victims were struggling through the drifts when the snow erupted and the victims were dragged under. Rifus himself took to leading the caravan on his huge horse, Eyebite. The added height gave Rifus a better chance of spotting the markers in the snow, which allowed him to keep the caravan in the middle of the road. Rifus and his ill-tempered mount could only manage a few hours at a time in the torturous conditions, and Eyebite wouldn't allow anyone else to ride him, so Nyissa took her own mount out ahead to give him a rest whenever he had to stop and recover. Her hairy little mountain pony was too weak to breach the drifts for long, but she struggled on long enough for Rifus to warm up and take point again.

Eyebite fell late on the fourth day. Momentarily confused by a rising haze of icy mist and half dead from the fatigue of riding point through snow as deep as Eyebites chest, Rifus misjudged the markers and allowed his mount to step off the road. The Axemaster barely managed to jump clear as a pair of undead monsters surged out of a snowdrift and the horse went down screaming, streaming blood and torn intestines. Rifus landed back on the road and scrambled towards the caravan as the creatures began tearing at the agonised horse with claws and teeth. Yanafalis notched an arrow, muttered a short incantation and loosed. The arrowhead flared as it was fired, and the arrow sped like a meteor to impact with a crack in the skull of the animal, ending it's agony and terror immediately.

Nyissa drew a bead on one of the undead with her own bow and recited the same cantrip, focussing her will and loosing a flaming missile at her target. Her arrow thumped into it's chest and the creature reared back, flailing at the shaft and snapping it off as magical flame began pouring from the rents and wounds in it's body. The creature thrashed wildly as the intense heat continued to burn it up from the inside, then toppled into the snow out of sight. The other slid back out of sight in the deep snow. They were smart, these monsters.

"Fire works." Yanafalis commented, arrow notched and scanning for more trouble. Nyissa nodded, still scanning the area herself. Together they covered Rifus' retreat and the backs of the mercenaries who ran out to escort him back. His furious face promised death and destruction for the killers of his favourite horse.

"Fire works." Yanafalis offered to their leader as he stomped up. The bigger man grunted and took the mug of mulled wine Toberion handed down to him, taking a huge swig while he gathered himself. He belched loudly and wiped his snow dusted beard with a gloved hand before continuing.

"The things are shadowing us, digging through the snow by the road. How do they know where we are?"

"Perhaps they can hear the wagons on the road, or feel the vibrations through the ground." Nyissa suggested. Rifus nodded glumly, considering the group of priests in their dark robes who approached to check him for injury. The mercenary shrugged them off and cleared his throat, addressing the caravan master directly.

"It is getting hard to see. We should stop here until sunrise." Toberion cast his gaze upwards at the swirling snow.

"I agree, though even in daylight this will be treacherous. This blizzard could last for days, perhaps weeks." One of the dark robed figures drew back his hood, and Nyissa recognised the shaven head and tightly cropped beard of the Arch-Abbott Syngress.

"I fear, master Toberion, that we will not survive for weeks in these conditions. May I be permitted to offer an alternative?" The huge caravan master scratched at his beard and nodded his head slowly. The priest nodded his thanks, dislodging snowflakes from his smooth pate.

"My brethren and myself are blessed with the great privilege of being able to call upon the divine aid of our patron at times of need. One of his gifts is the provision of holy light, which should disperse the snow around us. We can therefore walk ahead, and the rest of the caravan can follow our tracks." Rifus was shaking his head slowly.

"These things would slaughter you the moment you got clear of the caravan."

"We would stay within the confines of the road markers, I assure you."

"You would try, but it is not as easy as you think. Lose your way for just a few steps..." Toberion interrupted the Axemaster.

"All of you... look!" He pointed up ahead, and all heads turned to follow his arm.

A patch of sky to the north was growing darker. But this was not the darkness of snow laden clouds. This was like a spill of black ink spreading across parchment.

"What... is that?" Rifus asked, his voice a mere whisper in the cold, still air. No one answered. The group shifted uncomfortably as they watched the darkness spread further southwards. It seemed to be elongating, making occasional twists but continuing inexorably towards the caravan. Nyissa had a sudden revelation.

"It's following the road!"

"What is it?" Toberion looked to her, his eyes wide in his huge tattooed face.

"I have no idea. Get everyone to the wagons! We may need cover." Rifus apparently agreed, as he began bellowing at his men before Nyissa had even finished. The Spanhour began scrambling under the wagons, their commander urging them on with shouts and waving axes, eyes still locked on the apparition approaching from the north. Toberion's men ducked back inside their wagons and began bolting hatches shut.

Nyissa hurried the priests back to their own wagon, despite half hearted protests from the Arch-Abbott. As she bundled them up the steps she heard a distant but rapidly increasing roar. Reluctantly she turned her back on the warm air billowing from the entrance to look.

The inky darkness was approaching fast, and now it was close enough that she could begin to resolve details. She swallowed hard. The biting cold of the North bit less than the chill that she suddenly felt.

"Oh gods!" Screamed one of the mercenaries.

The cloud was made up of faces. Thousands and thousands of them.