

The cool night air blew past in the fumaroles of Nyamir, causing the volcanic water. Sitting a ways away from one vent was a small, unknown creature. Rumors abounded of it being a spirit called the Sable Specter; a phantom with burning eyes that would carry those who got too near to the afterlife.

In truth, the being was not a spirit, so much as smoke made living.

Positioned on the rock, the creature placed a twig in its mouth and used nearby flint to start a fire, lighting one end and causing it to burn like a match. The sight of the flames and the fresh smoke soothed the being, calling himself Endryk.

While he smoked, Endryk's mind wandered to the questions that had been haunting him. From his moment of creation to the night before, and even the current night, while Endryk stared at the steaming vent, he wondered what his purpose was, and why he was born.

Gripping his stick, which was also aflame, Endryk sighed. "Sleep will probably do more good than staying up too late." Closing his eyes and donning his mask, Endryk slept, unaware of the new day's trials.

The next morning, his smoldering eyes opened in time for him to see the sight of birds flying overhead. He stared at them absently as they soared through the air, high up, near the clouds.

'If only my travel was so easy.' Continuing, carrying his staff in one hand, Endryk journeyed until he came across a small settlement, not too far from where he was. There were people there, but aside from that he couldn't see anything special about it. For a moment he considered passing through, but he felt it would be in his best interest to avoid the village.

Endryk looked for a path that would lead him around the village and found a forest path. From there, he could easily go without being seen, when he heard the approach of strangers nearing the village.

Looking out, he saw a woman dressed in dark blue robes that hugged her body. The make-up on her face, alongside her long, brown hair and bright green eyes stood out to Endryk.

Behind her was a Flor, wielding a bow. His eyes were an icy blue color and his build was lean and tall, his flower was.

Lastly, there was a Heofonite with blonde hair and yellow, almost golden eyes. On his fingers were several rings, each with etchings he couldn't read.

"Excuse us," the woman up front said to a villager. "I hate to be a bother, but my associates and I were interested in learning more about this place."

“This is Cohol village; There’s really not much interesting here.” The villager looked at them, surprised by their appearance. “What brings you folks here?”

“We’re merely a humble band of mercenaries, seeking to protect villages from dangers.”

“I understand, but we really don’t get a lot of problems around here.”

“Really? Because bandits and vagabonds usually don’t come this way.”

“But sir, an attack can happen to anyone at any time.” The woman put out a hand and chanted a hex before a swirl of wind came around, a twister zoomed rapidly towards a small granary. The blast of wind scattered grains and metal all over.

“What the hell?” The villager stared in fear, with several others coming by to see the commotion. “You can’t come around here and destroy things!”

“Oh, but I was just demonstrating the dangers others could bring. However, we can protect you from such dangers.”

“So you want to run a protection scam?” An ellon woman with Lynx features folded her arm and glared at them. “What makes you think we’ll have any of that nonsense here?”

“Simple. We’ll be continuing our demonstrations if you don’t comply.” The mage smiled. “We’ll be back tonight for an answer, and please, don’t do anything foolish when we return. Farewell.” Casually, the woman and her two associates left, while the villagers watched and talked among themselves.

From afar, Endryk began to grip his staff tighter. He didn’t particularly care for how those strangers had treated the villagers, but he knew they’d be back by nightfall.

“I guess I’ll stick around...”

Hours passed, and eventually nightfall came. To conceal himself, Endryk put out his staff and donned his mask, The mask concealed his face, but also made his eyes glow, like lit coals in a dark night. From his current distance, no one would notice, but he saw that the villagers were out again.

Deciding to draw closer, Endryk walked over, sticking to the shadows and listening closely. Standing near the scrap metal and splintered wood from the ruined granary, Endryk observed and listened.

“Are we really gonna do this, James?” One of the men, shorter and more stout asked as he held a hatchet, more suited towards chopping wood.

“We don’t have much choice, Barry. If those guys show up again, we need to be ready.” The other man, who was older and had a shaggy beard held a hunting knife in hand and a bow on his back, though he kept looking around nervously.

The woman who had shouted at the mercenaries was next to speak, her feline ears flattened in consternation. “Can’t we just scrounge together money to pay them off?”

James shook his head. “No, guys like this expect more money each time. Even if we pay ‘em off once, we’d have to keep paying them off over and over.”

“Huh...And you think you two can stop ‘em?”

“A few of the other hunters and loggers are coming, but that just makes eight of us total...It’ll have to be enough.” Barry sighed.

“Then you got numbers on your side. The rest of us will be here if you need us, though.”

“Thanks, Hannah, but making sure the others are safe matters more. Can we trust you to keep them calm and get them out if it comes to that?”

“Yeah, and if you need I’ll even come and help you take those scoundrels out. I’m pretty handy with kitchen knives.”

“Let’s hope you only have to use them for cutting vegetables, not enemies.” Barry laughed, with James joining.

From afar, Endryk smiled too. He had to admit the sight of those three talking to each other amused him. It was nice to see they were getting along, but he also remembered he had a job to do. As his burning eyes travelled back to the entrance of the village, he noticed the approach of the three invaders.

“Looks like we’ve arrived just in time.” The female mage from before and her associates stood together, all three outside the village. “Do you suppose we will be greeted well?”

“I wouldn’t count on it, Celia,” the golden eyed Heofonite seemed serious, to contrast his ally’s playful nature. “They didn’t seem too keen on having us around to protect them.”

“Shame. Seems kind of idyllic, for a backwater. We should make use of whatever we can find before we clean up the mess behind us.”

“The only mess will be you three if you don’t leave!” James shouted as he approached, with Barry close behind. Quickly, six others came to join them, with Hannah waiting far behind them.

“Yeah, we don’t need bullies like you lousing up the place.”

“Yes, you’re doing a fine job of that yourselves,” Celia snidely remarked. “Shame, really. We would’ve settled for whatever petty money you could’ve scrounged up, but I suppose your lives will be the cost instead. Just another reason why protection is necessary.”

“Enough of your talk!” With his bow ready and drawn, James loosed an arrow from it, the shaft sailing for Celia’s head.

With a yawn and an offhandedly chanted magic word, Celia created a whirlwind, that caused the arrow to miss entirely. “A brilliant first move. Speaking of brilliance, Urieus?”

The angelic being pointed his index finger at James’ leg and suddenly, a beam of concentrated light struck, burning the flesh where it hit. Urieus’ face remained stoic, even as his victim fell to the ground. “Any others?”

“Try me on for size, you lunatics!” Running as fast as his legs could carry him, Barry tried to run at the aggressive trio, when he felt something wrap around his ankle. Suddenly, he fell, with a root wrapped firmly around his lower leg. “What the hell happened?”

“Bryon decided your little hamlet could use more plant life. With all the other life being driven out of it, I think it was rather considerate of him.” Celia stepped forward, now more serious. “So, are we done with this futile display?”

No longer able to stand by, Endryk decided it was time to act. Stepping from behind his hiding spot, he made sure his mask was firmly on his face before creating a cloud of smoke.

As the gas spread, it created a wall between the villagers and attackers, catching them all off guard for a moment before Endryk spoke. “This village is under my protection...Be gone.” Behind Endryk, all of the villagers were in awe and confused. Barry had only just managed to free himself and tend to the wounded James, while the others watched. Celia, Ureius, and Bryon, however, seemed only slightly apprehensive.

“It looks like someone in your group knows a parlor trick. Charming, but weak magic doesn’t impress us.”

"I'm not here to impress you, just to get rid of you." Moving closer, Endryk caused his smoke to envelop the three enemies. Celia tried to chant, but she was breathing in the smoke and coughing. The whole while, Ureius flapped his wings, pushing some smoke back as he lifted the spellcaster up by air to save her.

Meanwhile, Bryon tried to get more plants to grow, but he was running out of breathable air and soon fell unconscious.

Behind his mask, Endryk smiled, happy one foe was dealt with. Next, he directed his smoke at the two others, but between Ureius' feathery, angelic wings pushing the gas back and Celia's gusts of wind, no progress was made. Switching tracks, Endryk made two duplicates of smoke. This diminished the size of his gas cloud notably, but he was able to further his goals as the duplicates jumped towards the two, bursting on contact. The sudden blast of smoke was enough to send the two down into the bigger cloud.

Assured of his victory, Endryk recalled the smoke into himself and saw that Ureius and Celia were both losing consciousness. He grinned behind his mask, his fiery eyes still burning as he stared at them. "There. You're finished."

"S...s..." Celia coughed as she struggled to keep her eyes open. "So..Are you!" Shouting a single magic word as loud as she could, Celia summoned a whirlwind, even larger than the one that had been used to get rid of the granary.

The sudden blast of wind threw Endryk for a loop, all of his gas dispersing as he fell down to his normal, small form, his mask falling off his face and clattering to the ground. Weakly, he tried to rise, but he lacked any energy, his body drained. He gasped and saw the villagers surround the enemy spellcaster, before they came to him.

"Who...or what are you?"

Endryk tried to answer, but he succumbed to unconsciousness, glad that he had at least protected the villagers from further harm.

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When he next awoke, Endryk heard the sound of someone humming. He rose while groaning, waking up in bed. He saw his mask and his staff were both next to his bed, and Hannah was directly across from him.

"Ah, you woke up. The boys were right about you being alright after all."

"The others, are they okay?" Endryk asked.

“My, you’ve got a deep voice for a little one. Yes, we’re all fine, and those three were dropped with a peacekeeper who we keep in contact with. We skipped the part about a ghost helping us out, though.”

Endryk nodded as he put his mask on again and grabbed his staff once more. “Thank you for keeping these for me.”

“It was no problem. The boys found your staff and we figured you’d want it back. You mind if I let the others know you’re up?”

“I’d rather you didn’t. I need to go.”

“And without a proper thank you? I won’t have any of it. What’s your name anyhow?”

“...Endryk.”

“Well, Endryk. This village owes you many thanks. We’ve got a lot of questions, but I know that can wait until you’re full rested and fed. I’ll go get you some dinner.” Leaving, Hanna continued her humming.

Endryk smiled despite himself. It was nice to be appreciated, but it was his time to go. Looking towards the window, Endryk opened it and jumped out. Maybe someday he’d come back, but for now, he didn’t want to stay. It was nice to be around others, but sooner or later they would all pass, and he didn’t want to be there to watch it happen...