

Kast Dazril, Knight of the Masked Maiden, waded through a wide, blighted path of slightbushel. Half the stalks of the normally brown and green plants stood from the lazy river, but a swath of black, lifeless plants slumped along the bed and coiled into thick patches of rotten vegetation. Her partnered knight, Sinsara Rilintusk, traversed the mucky waters in her wake.

Constant breezes cut the summer sun's violent heat into a manageable warmth. Clouds had vacated the valley. There was no solace from the sweltering warmth than those quick winds.

The two paladins wore the uniform of the Seven Knights of the Masked Maiden. Shiny, glinting armor reflected the rays onto the murky water. A silver plate, forged into a vizier and clutched by a spindly hand—the symbol of their goddess—marked the center of their chainmail shirt. Magic swords clanked in the scabbards at their hips, and metal masks obscured their faces from the eyes of the world.

Kast stopped and gazed into the water's surface. Her reflection stared back at her. Water rippled her guise, but she could still see the soft smile, pointed nose, and thin eyebrows etched into its surface.

She had not taken the mask off since she had received it a decade ago, except for a few private movements. A common saying among the Quickriver Valley's people was, "when they are initiated, the seven Knights of the Masked Maiden lose their faces."

Kast did not mind the duty. It made her happy; it made her proud.

"I think these farmers were right in their judgment," Sinsara said.

Kast turned around and faced her companion.

Sinsara's mask was a plain, serene, feminine face with a well-defined philtrum between the thin mouth and skinny nose. Her brown hair matched Kast's, except for the blonde highlights at Sinsara's roots.

Sinsara unsheathed her sword, *Brooding*, and lifted a knot of dead plants with the flat of her blade. A soiled scent filled the air.

I usually like the Valley's nature more than its villages and towns, Kast thought, *but this smells as putrid as their chamber pots*.

"I agree," Kast said. "I'm happy they came to us so quickly, for I fear a poor fate would have met them down the path of inaction."

"As it usually does. It's still grim though, Kast. Defilers are a serious threat."

"I'm aware, Sinsara, but I'm still allowed to be thankful."

She's too serious sometimes.

The two knights waded down the slow river. No bristlebears weaved through the greenish waters and their matching grasses. Boilfishes' bodies floated dead atop the water, their orange, warty, uneven skin reflected the afternoon sun, and a pair of weavedeer, characterized by their antlers that crossed into an elaborate wall of bone, timidly drank from the shores.

Kast and Sinsara trudged down the waterway, and the swaths of blighted vegetation grew. Weeds as weak as logged paper broke apart underfoot and polluted the path behind them.

The stream widened and with it the area of decrepit life. To their right, a lush farm sprawled untouched over the moist lowlands, and the Umbral Forest's thick tree line stood to their left.

Kast noticed an abundance of green and copper needles floating on the surface of the water. She looked toward the woods. A gale swept through the Valley, and a storm of pines blew from a wall of evergreens into the river.

In the distance, the slightbushel stuck from the water, hardy and lush.
That's strange, Kast thought.

"Hold up, Sinsara," Kast said. She raised her gauntleted hand and put her other to *Arclight's* hilt. The ancient sword's ivory grip molded into her palm.
"Look here."

"What is it?" Sinsara asked. She continued wading until she was even with Kast. "More weeds and grass?"

"In a way. The defiling stops here for the most part."

"A defiler doesn't stop defiling—it's a glutton of a specter. There must be a path of its blighting, unless one of these farm folks slew it."

"I wouldn't put it past them," Kast said. She looked out onto a faraway cabin, visible only because of its stilts at its corners. "Lendentamier spoke highly of the forester he travels with. She's from around here, if I remember right."

"A farmer's daughter doesn't compare to a Knight of the Masked Maiden," Sinsara said bluntly.

"He must think otherwise—he's the Stranded Knight, and he chose her."

The Stranded Knight was the only Knight of the Masked Maiden whose duo was not another knight. He or she had to find someone outside the order.

“By necessity, mind you.”

Kast shook her head.

“Regardless, the path *does* continue.”

Kast pointed toward a few rows of trees. Their sparse branches revealed dark brown bark and contrasted against the vibrant greenery.

“Perceptive,” Sinsara said.

The two crossed the river and hiked up the steep shore to the forest’s edge. Water streamed from their silvery armor and blue tabards. The beads of water patted against the ground. The wet cloth slapped against their protective plates and chain.

“Do you think the trees are dead?” Sinsara asked.

“I don’t know,” Kast responded. “I guess we should keep a forester around, too.”

“Drop it.”

“It’s just a joke.”

Sinsara unsheathed her weapon, *Brooding*. Kast and Sinsara’s swords were twins. Above the cross-guards of each artifact, a hollow, crystalline reservoir sat in the middle of the flat of the silver blades. The only thing that distinguished the swords from each other was the jet inlaid into *Brooding*’s pommel and the citrine set into *Arclight*’s.

The weapons were the only twins that the Knights of the Masked Maiden wielded. Though the weapons were kin, their properties were opposite. *Arclight* produced massive amounts of arcane energy, while *Brooding* could absorb it. The greater the evocations emitted from *Arclight*, however, the weaker the blade became. The more *Brooding* absorbed, the stronger and sharper its ancient edge.

Arclight regained its energy from the touch of rain, the grumbles of thunder, and the lashes of lightning, while *Brooding* slowly lost energy over time and returned to a state akin to the average sword.

She pressed *Brooding*'s sharp tip into the tree's bark. The blade pressed the wood inward, punctured the soft surface, and slid into the trunk.

"It's soft," Sinsara said. She removed her weapon. "It's as if slicing through a melon or pumpkin."

"Have you absorbed anything recently?"

"No. It should be in a normal state."

Kast walked a few paces away to a different tree, beyond where the river blighting stopped. She took *Arclight*'s tip and ran it into the bark, but the pine resisted her stab.

"This one is hard as stone," Kast said. She smiled. "So curious. I feel the defiler went into the forest."

"Well, that puts us in a strange spot," Sinsara said. She sheathed *Brooding* in its ornate scabbard. "If there's plenty farmland and river brush to

defile just a stone's throw away, why did the defiler turn tail into the Umbral Forest?"

"I don't know."

There's far worse stuff that lay between the needles and branches of the woods than the slow flow of the rivers, Kast thought.

"Perhaps something warded it away?" Kast continued. "Maybe a local knows something or someone that could do this. Or perhaps something lured it into the wood's depths."

"Possible, but this has given us a pretty clear path—look."

Sinsara pointed through the shadowy understory of the Umbral Forest. Though the sun shined overhead, few rays pierced through the roof of needles that thatched together almost unnaturally. However, through the gloomy woodlands, a path lined by wilted flowers, brown grasses, and beds of copper needles led farther into the growth.

"Let's follow it then," Kast said. "We're here for the defiler after all, aren't we? If we can't destroy it, it will continue weakening the woodlands and depleting crops of the people nearby—or worse."

Sinsara nodded and stepped into the grove.

The two traveled for several minutes and tracked the creature's blighted path farther into the forest's heart.

Mushroom colonies studded the bottoms of trees. Their light-brown and orange heads contrasted against the pines' black bark. Birds crowed deeply and echoed each other's songs, while insects chirped, rattled, and buzzed.

“I never knew how wonderful this place was during the daytime,” Kast said. “Did you?”

“No,” Sinsara answered quickly. “I’ve only heard the rumors and stories of what lay in the wode.”

Kast smiled under her guise. The northern farmers loved the Umbral Forest. Every fireside and bedtime story of bandits, fairies, fiends, and ghosts originated from its shadowy darkness. But most of those tales were grim, and none that she had heard had ever praised the region’s verdant greens, crystal ponds, and lush clearings. They only spoke of the gnarled knots in the trees and the claw marks which marred the bark.

“What have you heard?” Kast asked. “There are thousands of stories about this place.”

“None that I’d care to remember right now,” Sinsara replied. A gust of wind slipped through the trees. “Regardless, we should leave here by nightfall. This isn’t a safe place to be when the moon rises.”

They marched. The threat of nightfall hastened them and purchased silence. Kast thought less about the defiler, and more about the Umbral—the source of so many things. She knew the conversation wasn’t over. It didn’t have the same punctuative finality conversations with Sinsara typically had.

“I don’t know why I’m scared here,” Sinsara said. “I’ve been a Knight of the Masked Maiden for five years. Besides, the stories of this place are *just* myths.”

Just myths? Kast questioned.

“Unlike these trees, myth still takes root outside the woods. If you look for shelter from winter snow, summer rains, or autumn winds, you’ll find it at a farmer’s house, a barkeep’s tavern, or a priest’s temple, but within those walls and under those roofs, you’ll find no protection from myth and legend.”

After another moment of walking down the withered trail, they approached a glen. A small pool rested and surrounded a collection of rounded, lichen-crowned stones in the middle of the clearing.

Sinsara stopped and sat on a stump. The stool’s bark and wood flaked on to the soft ground.

Kast didn’t want to stop until they had slain the defiler, but they had been trudging through the slow, slippery-bottom tributaries and rivers of the northern valley since sunrise. The trail had been easy to track, and it would be wise to keep strengths high.

One of the only things she knew about defilers was that they fed off lifeforce and could quickly enfeeble other creatures just by being near them.

Perhaps we can stop briefly.

Kast dragged a log toward Sinsara’s stump and plowed a line into the forest floor. The old tree trunk’s underbelly crumbled and left soft chips in the dirt. Kast sat down on the decayed wood. She sighed.

“Do you know what myth means?” Kast asked.

“It’s a story,” Sinsara replied. She looked out onto the small lake.

“They are usually stories, but more importantly they’re truths.”

Sinsara chuckled.

First time I have heard that in a while.

“Do you think they are true? Do you believe that a massive rangestag roamed the world, and its hoof print made the Quickriver Valley?”

“Not entirely,” Kast admitted, “while the stories may not be entirely true themselves, they contain truths about our world. *The Rangestag* tells us that it was the first animal the five gods made, and through the gods’ power, whether it be a giant deer or through their own fruition, created the Valley. That’s something that I accept.”

Sinsara mulled over Kast’s words.

Woodflies zipped over the water and perched on the rock tops. The small insects were said to eat anything but favored rotted and decomposed vegetation and carcasses.

“The story of knights losing their faces is a myth,” Kast said, “but there’s still truth in that too. We know our face isn’t taken. Yet none truly know our faces—not even our fellow knights. It’s an order from the priests; it’s praise and imitation of our Goddess of Good.”

“I’ll think about that,” Sinsara said, “but we’ve had our moment of respite. I think it’s time to continue.”

“That’s okay with me. Let me drink some water from this pool first.”

The two stood from their organic seats in unison, and Kast kneeled next to the water. Sinsara averted her gaze to some other portion of the clearing.

Kast lifted her mask slightly, lowered her face to the pond, and put her lips to the cool, shadowed water.

She sipped the surface. The taste of rank water plagued her tongue and tortured her lips.

Kast repulsed and spat the water back into the pool and secured her mask back to its original place.