

Divine Domain: Red

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*"The Nine are our lords and power.*

*Mars is our courage and our wrath.*

*The Sisterhood keeps watch over our hero, our champion, our god.*

*To destroy evil, to preserve peace, to achieve victory.*

*The stars are filled with chaos and fright.*

*The demons will never cease in their quest to consume The Nine.*

*Remember this... in times of sorrow and in times of bliss:*

*The Sisterhood must remain vigilant.*

*Even at one."*

*- Lady Rosemary's excerpt from The Red Codex*

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-- THE INVASION --

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It tells us we live on the inside.

Yet, when we see it on the outside we assume the opposite.

When I lift my mace from the demon's skull and I look past the shattered glass, I see the blood of my arm trickle and meld with its limp body. A fusion of inappropriate cosmic proportions.

My world becomes --

-- Red.

We share the same color.

Why?

Elves are bred to kill Demons. We are diametrically opposed.

Introspection through Rage is a unique quality of mine. In the heat of my bloodlust, I commune fully with my lord Mars. His thoughts transcend my mind and I am open to all his wisdom.

I can hear whispers on the sandy winds behind me.

Orchid! The voice is calming.

They've reached the keep! The voice is familiar.

Wake up! The voice tells me to stop.

...

The voice is wrong.

-- THE CALM BEFORE --

I snap to my senses. I am in my bunk. My shield sits between my thighs. My sacred torch is in my hand. Fresh etchings are burned into the sacred metal.

Lavender stands in my doorway, waving. She's saying something.

"Orchid! Hello! Wake up!" She tosses that purple braid of hers over her other shoulder. I think she only does that when she's annoyed. I should say something back.

"Hello, Lavender." I bring my torch to the shield and etch another line around the crest of Mars.

She rolls her eyes, "You stayed up all night again, didn't you?"

"Did I? I suppose it's possible. I haven't slept well since - "

My sister flicks my forehead, "It's breakfast time."

She parts my aged bangs and kisses my forehead, "Grand Cleric Orchid needs to stay strong for the Sisterhood. Get up."

She spins on her heel. Her loose tabard flows across her tunic. She's a charming and elegant presence, even among elves.

I extinguish my torch and clutch my shield, "There's no Sisterhood, Lavender. It's just us two."

She doesn't meet my eye. She never does when I bring this up.

"Tell that to those etchings on your shield."

Expectedly, she walks out.

I sigh and stare into the weathered bronze shield. Every etching... every sister lost in this terrible war. My heart cannot handle the day I have to etch Lavender here.

I pray to Mars that I die first.

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Breakfast was nice as always. Hard bread made from the rough grain of our world's surface. Aged, dried fish brought over from the water planets. And a bit of freshwater Lavender managed to get from the old well. Eating is the one time I don't have to think. That is, until the mutt enters the room.

A three-legged creature, covered in brown fur stumbles through the kitchen. It's floppy ears and slobbering tongue are enough to kill my appetite. How Lavender let's that thing sleep in her bed is beyond me.

It bounds and jumps into my sister's open arms. She laughs and squeezes him tightly, "Good morning, Triad! How are we today? How's my big boy?"

I rub the wrinkles around my eyes, "You know that thing's a demon, right? You constantly violate the tower's holy law by keeping him here."

Triad turns to me. Panting. Slobbering.

Ugh.

Lavender picks him up and cradles him like the babies we use to raise long ago, "He is not! He just came from one of their ships. He's a good boy!" She thrusts the furry creature towards me, "Can you point to his glass skull? Or how about his charcoal skin? Oh, maybe you can show me where he keeps his tiny metal arrows?" I step away quickly from the hound.

"Fine, fine." I pick up my plate and toss it into the messy kitchen sink, "He's not a demon. But he smells like one, and I don't like the way he looks at me."

I crack my neck and head down the hallway towards to the dojo, "It's your turn for dishes, Cleric Lavender. I have to check our Mana reserves." Suddenly, I stop. I have made a mistake.

I turn around. Triad is already on the counter with his long, slimy tongue licking the plates clean. Lavender happily finishes her meal.

It was so much easier when Lady Rosemary was in charge.

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I kneel before the statue of Mars. He stands tall and mighty. His shield matches my own. But his spear, that is unique to the Red Father. The feathers that adorn his helmet was a tradition passed down from Mars to the Grand Clerics. I can't bring myself to wear Lady Rosemary's feathers. I am no Grand Cleric. I am simply the only option left.

I raise my hand to my eyes, down to my throat and then over my heart, "Truth. Command. Passion. The values we need to lead our sisters." I look up to my lord and nod.

Lavender strolls into the room, holding a bowl of incense. It's no surprise she's burning a variety of calming, purple flowers - given her namesake. She saunters past me and places the bowl on one of the closest tomb beds. I can only assume it was Sister Aster's bed. Lavender was always fonder of her than the others. Without a word, I grab some incense from the bowl.

In tandem, we place the billowing scented ash on each of the resting tombs of our fallen sisters. I quickly place the incense down on Sister Freesia and move forward. She was too recent. I can't let those feelings get back to me.

We meet at Lady Rosemary's tomb. We bow together. Lavender offers me her bowl. I take it, dip my fingers into the ash and spread it across my eyes. I trade my bowl to Lavender and she does the same. I speak in a dull whisper as to not disturb my slumbering family, "My Lady, we offer our sight to your spirit. Use our vessels to keep watch over Mars and our holy Tower of Pilum." I stop. Lavender nudges me to finish. I mutter, "The Sisterhood must remain vigilant --"

That beast Triad lets loose a howl from the hallways outside the Sanctum of Silence. Normally, it's because it's lonely and needs constant attention from my sister. But this time, its tone is different. It's darker.

My blood runs cold. The tower's alarm begins to blare. The lights burn red. Lavender looks to me. I know she's scared.

The Demons are here. The next Invasion begins.

This will be their last.

-- THE CHAOS THAT FOLLOWS --

We stand together, at the Entrance of Pilum. Our Holy Armor is adorned with the flowers of our sisters. The contrast of metal and nature always filled me with a sense of contradiction. I take pride in it. A warrior that fights for peace is the same notion. I don't pretend to fully understand the war, I just know my place in it.

Lavender does not. She does not belong here. She shakes in her armor. I can see the fear through her glowing visor. I offer her my hand and she quickly takes it. I hope she can feel the warmth through my gauntlet. I was never good with words but when Lady Rosemary would guide us into battle, she would squeeze each of our hands. And I swear, I could feel the burning mark of Mars himself in my palm.

I nod to Lavender and grip my mace, "It's alright, Sister. You know your role. I know mine." She meekly nods back and grips her mace. I take a breath. She takes a breath. We close our eyes.

We exhale as one.

The mana minerals flowing through my armor inject into my blood as I exhale. I can feel the power of Mars fill my bones. The red planet itself and its elven protectors are one.

We are ready.

The ghastly and familiar lights of the demons shine over the sand dunes in the distance. A dozen or so Demons make their way into focus. Despicable and disgusting creatures. They believe they have a right to our solar system. They move from god to god, consuming the soil, destroying its nature and draining the soul of The Nine.

They haven't filled their gluttonous bellies enough with poor Gaia's blood and now they've come for Mars.

Their charcoal skin shakes weakly in the sandy winds. Their glass skulls reflect the starlight above. Their bodies are covered in yellow circles of light - light I can only believe they stole from the Sun Father. They are far shorter and weaker than us Elves, but they have numbers and weapons on their side. Their bows and crossbows fire the tiniest of metal arrows that have managed to puncture the thickest of cleric armor.

I grip onto my holy mace. My shield is tight at my side. The red mana flows through my mind. *I am warrior. I kill so others may have peace.* I tell this to myself over and over again - I need to believe this.

The Demons are in eye shot now. They ready their metal weapons. I smash my mace across my shield, "To war, my Sister! Protect the Tower of Pilum with your life! These Demons shall not enter our Lord's holy halls!"

I leap into the fray. I can feel my legs crush the first demon I land on in an instant. It feels good. A few others fire their metal weapons at me - I raise my shield and charge into the beasts. A firm bash into the glass skull of a Demon is usually enough to take them down. But that's no fun.

Felling the two in front of me, I turn behind me to another sizeable group and rush them. These invaders do not know how to fight in the red world like we do. I skid to a halt and kick up a cloud of sand - blinding the foolish beasts. I crack my mace into the stomach of a Demon. I leap off its corpse and smash my divine weapon into the fragile skulls of two more demons.

This is for peace. The greater good to end the threat. This is not because you enjoy it. You find no pleasure in this.

I feel a sharp pain in the back of my right leg. I'm under fire - I must move. In a swift dodge, I lunge behind a large rock formation. I can hear the metal arrows pinging off Mars' skin. I check my mana gauges. I'm doing alright for now. I can't see the tower from here. My mind worries for Lavender.

Worrying will get me killed. I need to kill first and worry later. *Be strong, my sister.*

The rocks have given enough and crumble under demonic attack. It's given me more than enough time to recuperate. I command my mana to flow into my boots. Feeling the red energy pool in the soles of my feet, I leap high into the air. As I crash towards Mars' soil, I channel my power into my arms and by extension: my mace.

A wave of red energy crackles from my crater, killing dozens of demons outside of the blast zone. My heart aches and my muscles burn from the dissolving mana, but it'll be worth it. The demons have not gotten reinforcements - this will be their final day.

But to my surprise, they have divided their forces. A foolish tactic usually, but with only Lavender guarding the tower's gate, I fear they might have more than enough.

Suddenly, new pain. My back bleeds. I turn - a mighty demon stands before me. Clearly meant to hold my attention. He stands nearly as tall as me. His thick, charcoal skin almost seems metallic as if it was attempting to mimic my Holy Armor.

An insult.

An insult that shall not go unpunished.

Its arm unfolds into another metallic weapon - spewing an unknown green substance. I raise my shield instinctively, but my arm feels like it's under fire. How could this be?

I look to my shield... it's melting away. The green ooze from the demon has corroded my shield and the armor on my arm. Even my dark flesh sizzles in fear of this dangerous substance. Could this be a power they stole from their home world?

I toss my shield aside. I can't spend any time thinking about my sister's etchings. I grab my mace with both hands and let loose a roar - I can feel blood and mana welling in my throat.

The demon was not ready for my strike - it loses its balance quickly. I've dented the beast, but it still holds firm. It counter attacks, its other arm rotates quickly and punches me across the jaw. It spews another wave of green ooze - splashing across my shoulder. I can feel the heat cut through my armor and tear into my skin. My flesh bubbles and churns.

As I attempt to regain balance, the demon leaps forward and kicks me in the chest. I fumble through the air and crash into the ground without any shred of grace. Light explodes from its feet and glides through the air and lands before me. It walks slowly; arrogantly. It attempts speech with me. Its tongue is foul and guttural. I check the mana gauge on my arm.

I'm low. I respond to the demon, "You will die this day, fiend."

I bite my lip, spilling a small trail of blood into my helm. The demon stands before me, raising its claw-like arm. I wrap both hands around my mace and meet the beast's strike in midair. The clash explodes in a purple light - knocking the demon back.

Where did that power come from? No time for any questions - my quarry must die. It is too large of a threat to get near the tower.

I close the space between us. As it readies its claw again, I understand it's striking patterns. I leap as it slashes into the soil. I run up the beast's arm and swing down into its shoulder. Sparks and blood spurt from its wounds. Excellent.

It readies another ooze fire - it launches. I'm not fast enough to dodge all of it. To my surprise, I feel no pain. I look down to my stomach. The remaining purple energy from before absorbed the hit. My mind turns to Lavender.

I lose my footing and fall off the beast. The demon extends its claws around me and pins me to the clay-crustured ground of the Red Father. I can't move my arms. I am out of mana.

It leans down. I can see my own reflection in its glass skull. I see myself for what truly feels like the first time. An old, weathered and wrinkled cleric hiding behind an iron mask. Consuming their god's very minerals to 'defend' her holy home. Lying to themselves every day that they are doing this for the greater good.

I see what I really am.

I am a warrior. My power is blood. I live to fight. I love to kill. Mars has chosen me to be his wrath. I am not defender of peace. I am a harbinger of the end.

The demon talks through its glass skull. I respond again.

This time without words. I slam my skull against it. The glass holds firm. The demon laughs.

Again. A small crack forms. The demon stops laughing.

Again. My helmet dents. The glass skull cracks further.

Again. Blood fills my visor. The skull is weak. The demon attempts to reel back. I connect my skull with its skull one last time. My helmet explodes, and the metal shrapnel cuts deep into my flesh. My true face is revealed. As is the Demon's.

Underneath its glass skull, the demon is small. It has pink, fleshy skin with a thin layer of brown hair on its head - its

two eyes match its hair color. It has even more hair on its face. The demons hide in this armor just like the elves do.

But I won't hide any longer. And neither shall this one. I curl my legs underneath the demon's core and kick up with a fury of strength. The demon topples backwards. It struggles to regain balance. I wipe the blood from my face with my arm.

My life essence. Mars birthright. The crimson gems of life. Blood... trickles down my arm as I strike into the Demon.

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For I strike again.

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I strike again.

I strike again.

I strike again.

I strike again.

I strike again... and then I stop.

There is nothing left of the Demon. There is barely anything left of my mace or my hand.

I stumble backwards. I witness what I have done. I understand. I finally understand. The Demons. Their plague, their plight... their horror is not their planetary consumption.

It's what they turn you into. I have become something worse. But strangely, I am calm. I feel a soothing aura envelop my shoulders, like a warm blanket during a cold winter.

The sound of the world returns to me. Wind. Sand. Silence.

A scream.

A scream? There's no more demons... who could be --

"LAVENDER!" I yell and turn around. But I do not move.

My sister is there. She stands behind me. Her arms on my shoulders. Her back steaming with smoke. Purple energy fades from her body. She slumps down. All her weight is on me. Blood oozes from her mouth down my shoulder plate.

"Lavender?" I reach to one of her hands with my own.

She coughs, "Hey Orchid... you're hard to wake up, did you know that? You always were the sleepyhead..."

I slowly turn around and guide Lavender's body to mine. She falls into my lap, her face in Mars' soil. Her mace dangles at her hip. I can see her back now. Her armor is completely torn to pieces. Her fair skin has been mutilated by foreign metal. Red holes ooze blood uncontrollably. I can barely speak, "What?"

She coughs again and attempts to smirk, "I was trying to tell you... the demons... they were going to fire on you... I'm sorry, Orchid... I abandoned my post."

She took the full brunt of the Demon's firing squad... to protect me? "You idiot... you had so much to live for. I was... supposed to die first..."

She tries to turn her face to me. I help her adjust. She lets out a soft yelp as I cradle her. I can't help but remember the day she was born. I held her just like this.

"Orchid... you're silly. Can you... can you do me a favor? I'm really tired."

My tears choke back my words, I can only nod.

"I forgot to give Triad a bath... so when you finish off these demons... he needs to be washed. I don't think I'll be around to do it... so maybe you could..." Lavender's eyes are struggling to stay open.

I cradle her face and nod again, my tears mix with her blood, "My sister... I am so sorry. I abandoned you. I left you to die, Lavender. I --" I shut my eyes with guilt. Lavender puts her finger on my lips. She shushes me.

"Come on, Orchid. Finish it for me..."

I open my eyes and wipe my tears. My dying sister smiles as she speaks, "In times of sorrow... and in times of bliss... the Sisterhood must remain vigilant..."

...

I take up my sister's mace.

I kiss her forehead.

I walk into my home.

I march into the darkness.

I find the final demons.

I speak Lavender's final words for her:

"Even at one."

THE END.