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Flameheart

Chapter One

Day of dwindled sun

Of discovery, refuge

From darkness's stare

-- Lyric Seven, Codex Draconis Historia by Cyndienth the Careful

When she woke up on the morning of the Festival of Low Sun, Alice of Flameheart did not realize it would be the last festival she got with her tribe.

Like most days for the past few weeks, she woke up late, her second sleep extending deep into the limited hours of sunlight. Alice tossed and turned for a few moments, but the sun kept streaming in through the rough fibers of the tent and onto

her eyelids. *If the sun's that high, then the time right now is... oh no!* She jumped out of her sleeping fleece, rummaged on her red-orange-white robes two limbs at a time, and darted off towards the center of the Flameheart camp.

Her fathers' tent was on the outskirts, clustered with the few other tents reserved for private use. But it was a quick trek to the Pavillion of Feasts and Stories, if you followed the trail worn down by the few years of footsteps. Alice ran along this path, her head tilted forwards towards the Heart Tree.

The tree was the true center of the camp, nestled between Pavillion, sibling Creches, and mustering fields. Its leaves gleamed red, at their brightest today on the day of the festival. Alice's eyes avoided looking directly at the crimson glow, instead tracing out the veins of muddy orange snaking through its wood as they coiled back inward to the trunk. She was so intent on her run that she barely noticed the misty smell and gentle chink of Old Man Theo crushing some harvested ice.

Until he shouted to her, "Where are you running to, lazy lady?"

Keep your head down, he won't taunt you once you're far enough.

"You'd stay home until the Magi comes to sort you out," he continued, "if you knew what was good for ya! Today is a sacred day for the mind-touched trees, y'know? Can't be ruining it through the voices in your head."

Good thing I don't have any voices in my head. Just my own thoughts, telling me how stupid I am for not being able to stay away from my loved ones and properly protect them from how broken-

The gentle warmth of the Heart Tree reached her body through the thin robes, filling her up like a walk in the meadows in the middle of summer, or Dada's all-encompassing embrace. It lasted only a moment, until she saw her four age-siblings in square formation, rehearsing the youth's dance. *Without me.*

I'm not going to cry out. Alice sneaked away from the field where they were dancing, finding a hiding spot among the tall Creimelia stalks growing in rows by the Pavillion. *I mean, they don't want me any more, now that they know my quirks line up with all the behaviors from the stories.* As long as she maintained her focus and didn't look too much at her age-siblings, she would be able to get through this without blowing up.

So Alice looked everywhere else instead. She saw Theo bringing down his cart of crushed ice. She hid between the stalks, reciting the many medicinal uses of Creimelia to herself until she was sure he'd left.

A few moments later she saw Papa headed towards the carving huts, probably to help Dada prepare for tonight. He waved at her, his keen Storeseeker's eyes spotting her

like a berry on the topmost branches of a skybirch. She waved back, before cursing herself for not doing something which might've gotten him to come help her.

Eventually she saw the square disperse for a break, and a figure approaching her from that direction. Derek had spotted her.

Please don't come and gloat about how good the dance is without my clumsy positioning or show me your pity since you haven't even deigned to talk to me since Elena left though that was much more my fault than yours but still you could've taken some respon-

“Hey Alice! Come to watch the rehearsal?” Derek’s right leg was shaking underneath the orange trim on the side of his robes.

Alice turned her gaze away. “I was trying hard not to look.”

“Um, sorry about that. You weren’t here, and the elders said it would be safest to do it without you...”

“Yeah, yeah, gotta wait for the magistrate to come fix me, I know” She hugged her knees.

“Hey, everyone thinks it’s pretty weird. He should’ve gotten here three days ago. Maybe we just need to scout a little farther to find where he’s resting.”

“Listen, both my fathers have met the magi, multiple times. His unimaginative ass has always been in the same grove, the five years we’ve camped by this Tree. You really think now’s the time he decided to find a new spot to meet?”

Derek stepped a little closer, his eyes surveying the rows of Creimelia, making sure the numbers matched. “Look, it’s only a few more days, right? You were doing much better before Elena-”

“Don’t say her name.” Alice snapped.

“Why not?” Derek stared at her, his head twitching from stopping mid-count. “I was hurt by her disappearance too, you know?”

But you didn’t cause it, did you, by getting her all excited for a few days before disappearing for weeks and telling her how much you hated the world and the tribe and herself when she couldn’t be there for you I mean it’s a wonder she didn’t run off sooner to get away from your madness.

“Alice, don’t go silent on me, please. We know you’re mad, but I’m not to blame, and neither are the others. We’re just doing what’s best for the tribe.”

“I DON’T BLAME YOU, I BLAME MYSELF!!”

The blood in Alice’s head felt like it was boiling. As was the sweat on her back. She turned to see a huge flame rising from just behind her in the Pavillion.

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It was a matter of pride for Alice that she was the only Flameheart crecheling who could climb a skybirch tree. Or at least, the skybirch tree that grew outside the carving huts, behind the shed where all the wood was stored.

And so that's where Alice went to hide after her explosion.

Look at you burning down the venue of the Festival of the Low Sun on the day of the Low Sun I mean the whole tribe needs a place to gather during the cold nights but no you had to explode and ruin the whole festival maybe you did it with magic and maybe they'll let you train with a magi but only after killing you and exiling you and stoning you to death first!

Her vantage point on the skybirch provided a great view of the camp's center. She saw that all the festivities had moved outside, torches weaving through the mustering fields, each illuminating a robed tribesman or a stall distributing delicacies. The most popular stall was where skyberries were being mixed with crushed ice to make bowls of cold dessert. Theo was nowhere near his ice, instead supervising the games of jarring fireflies. A great fire in the center of the field was roasting coils of candied squash for dinner.

Maybe they won't mind too much after all. I mean, even an explosion of magic couldn't stop the great festival of low sun, so why punish the exploder? Best to just leave her be, to show her exactly how worthless all she does is, let her see the youth's dance in a square formation without her at the center. My age-sibs were doing just fine during rehearsal, I bet they won't even miss me not watching from the sides.

There was a rustle from below Alice, too weighty to be a squirrel. She froze, her arms gripping tightly on the trunk as her eyes craned down. But before her fight-or-flight response could fully activate, Papa's red-brown curls had emerged beside her.

"Wanna scooch up a bit, Al? Give Pa the more sturdy branch?"

He was dressed for the festival in full Storeseeker regalia: A light tunic dyed a patchwork of forest greens and browns, sturdy trousers with a hundred compartments for storing knicknacks, all tied down by a rope and knot at the waist. He also had a pouch hanging over his shoulder, which he took off and started rummaging in once Alice had given him a space to sit.

"Want some Rojbi?" He offered her the sweet, the golden bits of fried nectar sneaking peeks between the leafy wrapping and spreading a heavy sticky smell throughout the night air.

Alice wasn't going to refuse her favorite snack. She adjusted her weight so she could hold the Rojbi in both hands while maintaining her balance. The first bite was always crunchy, as the spiky edges of the leaf bristled against the fried crust. And then came the burst of flavor, the rich but bitter juices of the Dusil leaf mixing with the oily sweetness of the nectar dough. She sat silently for a while, savoring the sweet and not looking at Papa.

He probably wants me to talk about my feelings and then he'll try to understand why I'm up here and not down there when the answer is so simple it's because nobody wants me there and I don't want to be there either oh flames why do I have to have a father who can climb any tree there's no place to hide with this spatchcocked tribe!

"I thought you were helping Dada with the torch distribution?" Alice finally said, when the tightness in her heart from only following her own thoughts became too much.

"Oh he was managing fine by himself. Too preoccupied with measuring sticks and perfecting carvings to need my help."

"I see." Alice fell silent again, waiting for her father to continue the conversation.
I bet he has some calm wisdom for what to do when you've burned down the tribe's Pavillion.

The torches by the Heart Tree had mostly stopped moving, the people becoming more

full and ready to sit down and enjoy the performances as the night wore on. It was hard to judge how much time passed when everything around her seemed so still, but after a painfully long pause she started again. “So, are you here to ask me nicely to come down and watch the show?”

“Hmm, I wasn’t thinking of asking that, no. It’s very natural, Alice, to be feeling the things you’re feeling.”

“Oh yeah? What exactly am I feeling?”

“Well there’s a lot of anger and frustration boiling up inside you. That’s alright. You’re allowed to feel alone, when your future is destined to be different from the rest of the tribe.”

“Or to be alone when you’re the loony one!” Alice scoffed, then shook her head.

Papa looked up at her, pursing his lips together into a sympathetic smile. “You’re not beyond repair, Al. The people of Sai-Nash’r have been dealing with these behaviors since before the dragons died off. We know how to fix these things. You know that many of the creche-mothers have come to Flameheart from outside, from tribes which couldn’t deal with their behaviors. You too will find a home.”

Except I bet none of them had to deal with two whole behaviors not knowing which one they would get this week between spiraling down inside and having thoughts racing so hard you

can't keep up and of course they won't want someone as broken as me when even my tribe won't take me and-

“Tch-tch, Alice, tch!” Papa was gently patting her leg, his mouth making the clicks and whispers that gatherers used to communicate when trying to avoid the eyes of a nearby demon. “Can I give you a hug?” He continued when she broke out of her reverie to look down at him.

Alice nodded, and was soon enclosed in her father’s lanky but strong arms. She could feel him gently shaking as his hand stroked her hair. “What’s wrong, Papa?”

“It’ll be ok, Al. Even if you don’t have the Magi to escort you. You’re a good gatherer, you know how to take care of yourself out in the woods.” He let her go enough to show her his smile. “The elders have convened, Alice. Your dad and I were with them. We all think it would be best for you out at dawn. For Stormshift. It’s very soon, but you need to see someone as soon as possible. They say one of the Circle of Seven Threes rests by there; he’ll know how to fix you!”

Alice’s throat tightened at that news. “But Stormshift is so far! How will I...”

“You’ll be fine! With your skills, I bet you’ll make it all the way to the Demon Woods in three days. That would make it a couple of weeks to the shore, and before you know it you’ll have reached your new home!”

Alice burrowed her face into a large brown patch in her father's tunic. She didn't want him to know what she thought about a journey where the majority of the path was beyond the farthest place any Flameheart ventured to.

"We'll give you all the food and furs you need. You'll have to make it, alright? You have so much magical potential, Al. I know you will be able to make it." She could feel his sobs straight from his heart.

A warm breeze rushed over them, breaking through the stagnant chill of winter. It seemed to clear Alice's head, making her wonder if she was going to be ok after all.

She raised her head, and saw the whole tribe bowing down their torches in front of the Heart Tree. The breeze seemed to be circling around the Tree, causing its leaves to flutter and fall, a red downpour somewhere between drops of blood and embers from a flame. The colors of the tree and the torches were brighter than normal, though the voices of the Festival had muted down to a pleasant hum.

Alice and Papa couldn't help but bow their heads, letting the Heart Tree's magical rush flow up from their hearts into their minds. After a while Papa let out a chuckle. Alice joined in, giggling uncontrollably.

Maybe the Magistrate not showing up will be the best thing that could happen to me. I won't have to follow his orders and end up some tribe's breeding creche-mother. After my adventure, I bet it won't be too hard for me to become the first female Magi!

Chapter Two

If, on your trek, you meet one other,

beware the gaze, and part swiftly

so you may preserve the good news.

On the other hand, if somehow

you happen to meet two, seek solace,

for evil eye is surely upon you.

-- Chapter Three: Traversing Sai-Nash'r, The Magistrate's Handbook

It took Alice two days of brisk walking to make it to the Demon Woods. A whole day sooner than Papa's prediction. Then again, the Storeseekers' summer treks were far

more leisurely than her mission. By the time she sat down between the buttress roots of a skybirch at the end of the second day, a few hundred paces before the rainforest began, her calves were screaming. But it was a small, silent scream, and Alice ignored it after a few quick rubs up and down her legs. Things would be worse for her shoulders anyways, once she had completed a whole journey's worth of lugging her life's supplies on her back.

The pace had been good for her. When your mind thought about the next step your feet had to take for a few hours, there was little energy left to accommodate intrusive thoughts. And knowing she'd made it to the Woods a whole day sooner than the tribe's elite gatherers gave her hope that the mission wasn't entirely doomed to fail.

As long as we don't get eaten by a demon!

We'll be fine! If a demon shows up, we can thwack it away with the pack.

Will it be heavy enough? Not when we're all out of rations and discard our clothes for their holes!

Great, the first moment of rest I get my mind starts racing again. Alice sighed, the gentle shakes of her head dislodging her brown curls from the top of her head to the sides. It was better than being all doom and gloom about her journey north, but only by a little bit.

Should do something productive to take my mind off things.

Could repair the holes in those extra socks.

Stockpiling the pack is useful. How long will the dried berries last?

Wait, why is it so chilly?

The interplay of purple and orange in the western sky had started to darken by now, heralding the arrival of the biting night wind. It managed to snake through Alice's coat, the layers of cloth and plant wool only barely holding in her body heat.

A fire would be nice. That idea beat all the other schemes. Alice scratched her head. She knew in theory how a fire could be started. Tinder, Kindling, firewood. But that was only from some ramblings Dada had exchanged with a particularly chin-rubbing, sky-staring Magi of Frost. The Flameheart tribe on gathering expeditions usually opted for sparks from the Heart Tree or embers of Everlasting Flame from the last Flame Magi visit. Even the farthest ranging gatherers kept enough torches with them to last the whole journey.

And they didn't see fit to give me flame for a journey north in midwinter.

Cause my mission's all spatchcock anyways.

No, it's because Papa believes in me.

If Dada cared more he would've snuck me an emberjar.

Alice jumped up from her seat in the roots, scanning the ground for dry twigs and leaves. She was still outside the canopy of the woods, and there was an abundance of both in the low grasslands around her. *I couldn't have relied on the tribe's fire for an entire month's journey!* She nodded as she picked up the tinder and kindling from the ground.

The vicinity of the skybirch had the components to start a fire, but nothing to keep it going. Its fortress-like wood rarely fell as the logs she'd need for firewood. The green bark would only blunt her knife if she tried cutting it herself, and anyways the huge water channels inside would never dry enough to keep the wood aflame. Alice turned towards the jungle.

It's too dark to risk our life.

We're quick, we're scrappy, we're--

Ow! Watch where you're stepping!

We're vicious, we're voracious, we're--

Blind as an ant-digger is what we are.

Hey at least we have enough balance to not fall and die.

We're gonna be fine!

Alice let the thoughts race around her head as she stalked through the forest. She took care to not go too far in, always keeping the absence of dense undergrowth at the edge in sight. Even here at the outskirts there were several dead trees she could carve logs off of, alongside woody shrubs whose stems could be both kindling and fuel. In a few months time all this wood would be too soaked to hold a single ember. But of course, then you wouldn't want a fire for the biting cold, but rather a tarp for the endless storm.

The last pale glimmers in the western sky had disappeared by now, and the moon had yet to rise above the horizon of plant growth. In this complete darkness, the woods were almost serene. Deep rumbles, whispered slithers and constant chirping made up an austere orchestra, punctuated by the occasional "Ribbit!" and "Squawk!". The air smelled like the warm musk of humid sweat, despite the cold dry wind blowing through the branches. Alice spotted something glowing deeper in the forest, but she didn't dare to leave the edge to investigate further. At best it would be fireflies, but at worst it might be a wisp waiting to lead souls to their death.

Once she carved through a particularly gnarly branch, which fell and broke on the mulch below with a loud CRACK. Followed by a silence uncharacteristic of the

forest. Except, somewhere to her left, the gentle rhythm of a breath, the slight tremor of weight shifting from one limb to another. A presence.

It's a boar! It's a pig!

It's a shadowcat! From the land of fairy!!

Definitely a demon!!! A quiet one, though.

Wouldn't a demon have rent my soul out by now?

Its heartbeat is remarkably stable.

Why are shadowcats from the realm of fairy rather than the shadowfell? Were they just badly named?

Nomenclature aside, Alice knew it was not a great idea to stick around to find out the exact type of deadly the presence in the dark was. She had enough logs for the night, maybe even some to carve into torches which might save the fire for a few days. So she quickly shuffled out towards the edge, not looking back until she'd reached the roots of the skybirch.

Depositing the logs next to her pile of leaves, grass and twigs, Alice sat down with her knees in her arms. Her thighs brushed up against her chest, feeling her heart thrumming rapidly against her ribcage, relishing the fact that it was still moving. She

wasn't dead yet, but if the creature had found her in the shadows, demon or otherwise, she would have gotten close.

Didn't they know it would be dangerous to travel through the Demon Woods?

Alice took two of the twigs, and started striking them together to get a spark. A fire would bring safety, and it was better to get started sooner than later.

Why did nobody else come to help me if the path was so dangerous?

The twigs were more damp than ideal. Apparently not enough of the morning dew had dissipated. But she kept trying, striking them together with more violence.

Does dada or papa or anyone else care if I make it out of this journey alive??

Alice realized by now that she had forgotten to prepare a pile of tinder to catch the fire from her spark. But at this point she could care less. Get a spark first, then we'll see about a whole fire.

DO THEY ALL JUST WANT ME TO DIE???

There was a flash, and Alice let go of the twigs as her hands grew painfully hot. They fell, fires igniting both ends. *Didn't know the sparks would catch on the twigs themselves.* She stared at her hands for a bit, marveling at how they hadn't been burnt despite directly holding onto the flame. *Or maybe the flames just came out of my fingers.*

Alice shook her head, realizing that she needed kindling quickly if she wanted the fire to stay. It took her a while to stand up and gather up her piles, but somehow her flame staved off the cold wind, never flickering even when the breeze bit into her sleeves. She placed the smallest and driest logs in a cross to catch the fire, before gingerly dropping the flaming twigs into the center. She'd expected it to take some time for the fire to start, but the twigs cracked on impact and spread their flames all over the twigs and logs. Reassured by the warmth, Alice felt the full extent of the exhaustion in her body and mind. *Carving the torches can wait until tomorrow.* She contemplated climbing the skybirch for protection, but realized that its knots and branches were completely different from the one she'd learned to climb over the past few years. She yawned, giving up on learning the climb and placing a few more logs near the fire before curling up into a deep sleep.

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Dada had taught Alice how to make the torches which kept Everlasting Flame alive. It had been the one craft she'd taken to, perhaps only because it was useful in gathering adventures. Slowly carve out a hollow in the middle of the log, making each cut along the lines of a specific rune. A few quick stabs to thread grass strands through.

And in the center, nestle a dried Heart Tree leaf from her pack. She didn't have the time or equipment (or patience) to knit the careful patterns which kept the flames alive for basically forever. But each of her torches would last a day, which was good enough.

They even managed to keep the flame alive when the rains started. It was light, the little raindrops falling as sharp as needles on your skin. Of course, not many drops made it to the floor of the woods. But it would collect on the leaves above, dripping down in fat globs cold enough to almost freeze your heart if one fell on you. Alice took care that the worst of the water avoided the torch in her hand, even if it meant drenching her leather jerkin more than was good for it.

It was the moon bleeding that did her in. It was earlier than usual, coming before the crescent in the sky had waned fully to a sliver, and it was intense. Alice took the softest leaves she could find to secure her underclothes, but it was a poor approximation for the Creimelia petals she'd used in the tribe. There were even larger flowers in the Demon Wood, their petals blooming blood red or lethal blue. But Alice had seen flies and worse swarming on those flowers and wouldn't risk even touching the plant.

It was dusk on her fifth day in the forest, and she'd had to switch out the padding leaf fourteen times already since the morning.

That's what you get for refusing Mother Marisa's Tanium Berries for a few months straight.

Spatchcock! It's because of all this walking.

Maybe if I left the damn pack behind I wouldn't be bleeding all my stress out.

Did it get dark all of a sudden?

These clots are getting larger and larger. Hope I don't start cramping soon.

Must be the sun going below the treeline.

Wait, shouldn't our torchlight make up for that?

Alice looked over at where she'd left her things on the floor while she squatted behind a tree. Even in the gloom, she could make out the torch, with flame conspicuously missing.

She rushed over, almost tripping over the large snaking roots. "Hah" she squealed upon touching the torch: it was cold. The trappings were meant to keep the heat away from your hand, but they shouldn't have cooled the wood more than its surroundings. That could've been a particularly cold drip from above, but the torch was also dry.

Alice felt a familiar shift, off in the shadows beyond the next few trees. A change in breathing, or a small but heavy movement. She'd suspected a similar foreign presence several times since she'd first encountered it at the forest's edge. But it had never

directly influenced her journey till now, and she'd discounted it as idle fancy. Perhaps that was a mistake.

“Come on out, fairy bastard. Show yourself, and take responsibility for my torch!”

The Demon Woods weren't known for the mischievous misdeeds which built some other woods' reputations. But who was she to say? Maybe she'd only heard the worst rumors. When people can talk about giant monsters made of limbs and eyes and claws, they might forget to mention the odd fairy trickster.

Alice stepped forward, walking towards the shadow where she'd felt the presence. But there was no trace of any creature once she got close. “Damn pixies.” She looked around, not finding any fairies but spotting a good amount of twigs and logs lying around. Perhaps this was a good place to stop for the night and rebuild the fire.

I've done it once, I can do it again. Alice repeated to herself as she gathered up the wood for a fire. It was a little damp, but not too much worse than the twigs she'd managed to spark at the edge. She crossed a pair of logs, surrounded it with grass and kindling, and started striking at two twigs to produce a spark.

You've been doing this for a whole hour. C'mon, time to give up and be cold.

That damn fairy's cursed me as well as my torch.

Argh I need to change that leaf again.

How are you even supposed to get a spark from two pieces of wood? It makes no sense!

Alice threw the trigs on the ground and stomped away to the nearest tree. She let her head softly slam into the trunk, her teeth clenched.

Stupid stupid stupid stupid! Why can't we even make a stupid fire!

She grabbed a thick branch which was splitting from the trunk just above her head, and started shaking it violently.

I hate this stupid mission and my stupid pack and stupid torches. I hate the stupid moon for making me feel all this stupid pain with these stupid leaves. And I hate you, stupid tree, for NOT CATCHING FIRE!

She heaved, and there was a loud CRACK as the branch caught on fire and snapped off the trunk.

Elders save me. Alice shook a little as she looked at the flaming branch. Now that it was on the ground, she could see that it was twice as long as her, with many sub branches and a veritable canopy of leaves. And her hands had somehow managed to light it all on fire.

“Magic,” she whispered. Her stomach felt light, and her cheeks curled up into a smile. She stared at her hands.

And this time I didn't burn down everything!

Man this is going to be the greatest adventure ever!!

I bet no magi's ever managed to control their flames within a week of setting out on their grand journey.

I mean technically my journey hasn't even started yet.

Which is why I'm going to be the first female magi and join the Circle before the year is up!

The spell was broken by a “whoosh” as the fire spread from the branch to a log nearby.

“Ohnoohnoohno!!”

It took her half an hour to clear the debris around the fire and dig up a shallow trench. She finally collapsed, satisfied that her flame wasn't going to burn the forest down. A little meal was all she could manage before exhaustion overtook her.

~*~

Alice blinked, her mind ambling over from sleep to waking. The canopy above was lit only by the flickering glow of her fire, and not the pale light of dawn. She was

about to roll around and close her eyes again, when she realized something was standing between her and the fire.

It was large, heavier than anything she'd sensed in the forest so far. Five limbs sprouted from its center with no care for symmetry or beauty. All of them ended with four-toed hands, with claws as large as her knife, but all were also supporting its weight on the ground. Its back was dark against the fire, but Alice could make out jagged spikes and writhing tentacles emanating from all over its arms and torso. At the edges of the silhouette she could see green, purple and pink flesh cording over each other, with a couple of soft white bulbs sprouting from its "shoulders".

De-de-de-demon!!

It's not moving, maybe the fire is distracting it.

Yarrgh that tentacle just picked up a worm from the dirt!

Elders, my pack is still by the fire.

Well, this is why you always sew a knife compartment into your jerkin.

Alice pulled out the knife with shaking hands as she rose to a squat. She crawled towards the demon, one bent leg arcing in front of the other. *Does it even have a face that can see me?* No matter what her mind said, some primal instinct told her to "stay low and shut up."

Up close, the limbs weren't entirely indistinguishable. The one closest to her tapered near the ground, its muscles approximating a thigh and a calf. It also didn't have any tentacles, just an annoying number of hard spikes. Alice aimed for a spot between those, raised her knife, and stabbed.

A thick gray slim oozed out as she pulled out her knife. *Take that!* But, to her dismay, the ooze almost immediately started clotting, turning pale and hard just like the spikes. And right above where she'd stabbed, the muscles ripped apart like a seam to reveal a white bulb with a black slit in the middle, staring right at her.

"Arrrrgggghhhh!!!" Alice landed back on her elbows, her mouth ajar at the horror before her. Before she could think, her feet jumped up, and she scrambled over towards the fire. Only when she reached her makeshift fire trench did she realize she was on the other side from her pack.

The demon was now facing Alice, with more and more bulbous eyes popping out to look at her. It lifted two of five arms, its claws poised. Alice scooted back on her butt, her eyes not leaving the demon while her hands scrambled behind to feel where she was going, the useless knife still clutched in one of them.

The demon's arms dropped on the earth where Alice had sat moments before. The ground shook with the impact, and Alice collapsed onto her back. The trench also

collapsed, one of the lit logs she'd fed to the fire rolling down onto the demon's limb.

The pale gray clot where she'd struck earlier sizzled with a roaring flame, and the orange glow spread along its muscles up to the torso. The eye which had opened earlier burst open with a pop, leaving a gaping hole behind.

“GLUBWERPLEPPP” the demon bellowed. It had no mouth, but tentacles and muscles gnashed inside several of its body cavities to let out the guttural scream.

Fire fire I can kill it with fire.

Did you see that eye go pop?

My fire is too dangerous, there's no way I can pick up any logs.

My muscles are probably more flammable than its.

Why do we need to pick up a log? Are you going to be a magi or not??

Alice forced herself up to sit, leaving her knife behind on the ground. *Focus. What would a magi do?* She'd seen the Everlasting Flame get lit many times, but rarely had she paid attention to the rituals of the casting. She put her wrists together, hands spreading out into a flower, hoping the one detail she recalled would conjure some flame.

Nothing.

You're a good for nothing magi that's what you are.

How am I supposed to fight a demon when I've barely figured out how to light a campfire!

Ahhh those tentacles are cleaning its eyes.

Anger, I need anger to fuel my fire.

The demon was up on all fives again. The flame still flickered on its wound, but it was now only a small blaze restricted to the wound she'd left with her knife. The rest of it seemed fine, especially the two arms rising up to claw at her.

Terror replaced the last dregs of focus and anger that might've remained in Alice's heart. She zeroed in on her pack, on the other side of the fire, lying just beyond a quick sprint away from this monstrosity. She jumped up, and made a run for it.

Blood splattered from her arm as the demon's claw glanced against her left tricep. Its arms had slammed into the ground she'd just vacated. Alice's head was shaking, but somehow her legs managed to stay steady and kept leaping forward until she was by her pack. She looped it around her right hand, lifting up to get it through her left.

But her left arm screamed in pain as the weight of the pack fell on it. It was spasming as more and more blood gushed out, her dangling sleeve looking like a crimson carp thrashing on the shore.

Ha ha, our arm feels funny.

No no I can't go into shock right now.

What if I just lay here until it is all over...

Does a hand wet with blood make it easier or harder to conjure fire?

Say what's the demon doing right now?

No no no just run don't look!

Despite her inner monologue's screams, Alice turned around, forcing her head to raise a little from its limp. The fire was flickering as bright as ever, and in its light she could see the green and pink sinews of the demon sliming around its unblinking eyes very clearly. Or well, she just could, before it all became so fuzzy. The demon was getting larger, but it's so hard to keep seeing.

Alice blinks, drawing her eyes into focus once more. There was someone behind the demon. Her presence felt... familiar. Even while facing the demon, she was calm, the furs coating her body rising and falling in a gentle rhythm. Her hair was pale, almost silver, and in several separate braids which swung as she shifted her weight from side to side. Some shards circled her, white one moment, clear the next, always sharp.

Alice tried to sit up to get a better look at her savior. But just as she stabilized her weight, she was shaken off by another tremor. Alice winced, but there was no pain

besides the bleeding in her arm. No crushed bone, no snapped throat. She opened her eyes, and saw the ice-wielding woman on the ground. She was pinned by two of the demon's arms, and a third was poised above her, claws pointing down into a four pronged point. Alice felt the knots in her stomach, which had momentarily dissipated, were coiling back with double the twists. She put her head in her hands.

You couldn't even figure out some simple fire magic. Now look at what you've done.

You're good for nothing, spatching little whiner.

You deserve to die, you deserve to be torn apart limb from limb by that demon.

You couldn't help Elena, and now you can't help this ice woman, and that's why your whole tribe abandoned you.

But does the ice woman deserve to die with me?

She probably does, she ruined our torch.

You watched Elena suffer for your actions. Are you going to watch someone get gutted by a demon you conjured up?

Don't just sit there, do something!

All the voices in her head united into a single despondent whisper.

Spatchcock! You wouldn't even do anything if you tried.

Something rushed by Alice's ear. Like the Heart Tree's breeze, but less gentle and more... forceful. Her sleeve fluttered in the wind, droplets of blood getting picked up and fluttering away. It felt soothing on her wound, neither too cold nor too warm. But the gust picked up speed as it spread away from her. It swooshed against the hulking figure of the demon. "Glub wub lub" the sound came as the wind swirled through its cavities. The rush grew, almost deafening Alice, as the storm passed from her towards the monster. She looked up, and through the tears in her eyes she saw the air swirling with a full torrent of gray ooze. Right where the demon stood moments ago. Alice saw the pale woman rise up slowly, face glinting in the firelight, right before she collapsed.