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The Star of Zara  
And the Quest for Ladon

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Act: 3

Krampus lay dead along with many paladins, fighters and of course Zara's father. We were no closer to recovering "The Book of Virtue", and all this seemed like a massive unnecessary set back as I kept my head lowered, unable to look up and watch Zara grieve.

"Good job Archmage", I heard from Valkyries as she carefully walked her horse next to me, as if she was walking through a graveyard, because she was. Valkyries got off her horse and kneeled by me. She put her arm around me, then leaned in and whispered into my ear. "It's a shame no one is operating the Dragon Soulforge right now". I looked up at her, as she smiled at me and then Kumara rode in on the dire wolf right at this moment.

Kumara got off the dire wolf and walked over to a tree and then I noticed the ruby arrow, which Zara had fired from that ruby gem-encrusted bow, that Kumara was walking towards. The arrow must have gotten stuck in that tree and somehow pierced through the demon from that hurricane force wind that came from who knows where to kill Krampus.

Kumara pulled the arrow out from the tree which seemed to have something else with it and he walked over to me. He handed me the arrow and what looked to be a black heart. This must have been the heart of Krampus and then I thought-quickly that if this arrow pierced the heart of Krampus, as it clearly did, then this shot was a one in a million shot. How could this even be possible, I continued thinking.

"This is [A Heart Blackened by Despise] Archmage and this arrow is [Cupid's arrow 2012], as he handed me both items. Twenty-Twelve, there was that number again, I thought. "Hold onto this heart, as I have a feeling it may be of some use to us while we search for my brother", Kumara instructed.

I took the items as Kumara walked over to where Zara was at and he kneeled down next to her and said: "Your love has conquered the corruption here today Zara and as you have restored the heart of the virtues, so will I restore the hearts of those that have fallen here today as well". Kumara lowered his staff, the dragon signet, onto Zara's father and as he did a jolt of life entered his body as he gasped for air. "Papa!" Zara yelled out, as she continued to cry. "Zara my girl", the ranger-scout replied, in a weakened state and they both embraced each other with a hug.

Kumara stood up and walked to the middle of the battle field and one by one he walked through the carnage and with his signet breathed life back into the fallen. I watched with Valkyries in delight as the brave paladins and fighters returned to the living and I turned to Valkyries and said: "Yes, what a shame no one was operating the Dragon Soulforge indeed". I began to smile, then said to Valkyries, "thank you, old friend".

As the fallen were brought back to life, they started to check themselves and each other for wounds or damage. Once it became clear no one was suffering from injures, not even a single scratch could be found, they all started to cheer and laugh together.

The Paladins slowly started to gather around Kumara and took a knee in front of him. Kumara didn't say anything and waited until everyone had finished celebrating. The dire wolf walked over and laid next to Kumara, at his feet and then let loose a loud menacing bark, as Kumara put his hand on the wolf's head. Everyone, being slightly startled stopped speaking and focused on the dire wolf and then to Kumara. Zara looked up and both her and the ranger-scout stood to their feet. Me and Valkyries stood up as well, waiting for what looked to be some kind of announcement by Kumara.

"You have all fought bravely here today and each one of you showed great courage, but only one of you summoned the courage to be compassionate in the face of despair to overcome that which is truly corrupt and full of despise", Kumara said as he looked down to Zara. "Zara", Kumara continued, "from this day forth, you shall be known as Zara, the Champion of the Virtue of Compassion, for you are truly

worthy of such honors". The paladins rose up and drew their swords up in the air above Zara and shouted in unison, "Zara, the Champion of the Virtue of Compassion". Everyone started to cheer and repeated that phrase over and over, so me and Valkyries joined in as well.

In the distance I could see the judge, Saint Valentine, who was not participating with the celebrations and looking rather obtuse. I walked over to him and asked him about the arrow, in which Kumara had called, "Cupid's arrow of Twenty-Twelve". Saint Valentine said, "twenty is the number of "The Book of Angels" and twelve is the sum of a champion of virtue, so in Zara's case her virtue was that of compassion. Instantly all the clues started to add up in my head and I looked to the black heart, of which I was holding in my other hand. Despise, as I thought, of course that is the anti-virtue of compassion and then I laughed a little, as I should have known this all along.

What was that massive force of wind that clearly picked the arrow up as it was falling to the ground? I was there to see it first hand and that arrow was destined to fall short, yet it pierced this heart here and killed Krampus. "I don't know Archmage, but I have an idea", Saint Valentine said in response. Kumara walked over to me and handed me another book. I looked down at this book and back up to him again. "From your sister", I asked, expecting a confirmation of my deductions. "Not exactly-Archmage. This book is a small account written by those most loyal to me in my ranks and within my house."

I opened the book and read the title, "Of Clocks and Time By: Archangel Destiny of the Angels". I closed the book and smiled at Kumara, thanking him. I will be sure to read this.

Zara ran over to Kumara and hugged him, "thank you so very much", she said. Then Zara ran over to me and Valkyries and hugged us too. "We did it Zara", I explained with excitement.

Zara got quiet for a moment and then said, "not-exactly Archmage", as she looked down at the corpse of Krampus strewn upon on the ground. "Santa is dead you-see, even though he became something else, this is still a loss the world will not soon recover from". Wise words, from such a little girl, I thought to myself and then I noticed her words also piqued the interest of Saint Valentine who started to pay closer

attention. Kumara also noticed this and said to Zara, “you are right young one, Krampus is dead”, as he walked over to stand over the demons’ corpse.

“Krampus is dead, but Nicolas remains among the living”, he said as he brought his dragon signet over the body and we watched the power of the staff breathe life into the remains. The mere contact of his staff started to transform Krampus away from a twisted demonic corpse into a jovial fat man with a white beard and red over-coat. At this point everyone was closely watching with anticipation and then Saint Nicolas opened his eyes.

“Stand Judge and be heard so that you may be judged in kind”, Kumara proclaimed. The group took a few steps back in awe with this statement that Kumara just made. Saint Nicolas stood up and lowered his head in disgrace.

Saint Nicolas looked up and over to Zara, the one who judged him and said: “For years I have watched the world treat each other with contempt and then their contempt turned to ire for each other and that bitterness started to harden my heart too”. Saint Nicolas continued, “each year it became more of a chore for me to bring cheer and good will to these people who became ungrateful and not filled with joy by the presents I had left behind for them, but instead complained about not getting an item with a certain hue they were after”.

“Then one day I witnessed an exchange between an unscrupulous sort named Arycke who rode down a young girl, much like you, killing her for the very present I had left for her-just so I could see her smile. This greatly angered me and I pulled out my naughty list, to add his name, but realized there was no more room to add anymore names, as it was completely full. I lost heart and gave up on humanity that day”, as Saint Nicolas walked over to Zara and kneeled before her. “You have judged me correctly young girl”, then Saint Valentine cleared his throat to signal to Nicolas his miscalculation. Nicolas looked up to Valentine, then back to the girl and peered into her eyes carefully. He then looked back up to Valentine and asked, “She is not a judge?” “no” replied Saint Valentine.

“Zara the champion of Virtue of Compassion”, Kumara interjected, “for that is what she is and that what she will always be.”

Saint Nicolas looked over quickly to Kumara and then back to the little girl as he was overcome with Joy and said: “Then my dear, I have something that belongs to you”. He reached into his coat and as he did a brilliant light began to shine from whatever was tucked inside. Nicolas pulled out a beautifully colored snow-flake and presented it to Zara. “This is the Star of Zara and it belongs to you”, he spoke. Zara reached out nervously to receive the gift in amazement and while holding it in her hands she could make out an inscription on the star that read: “Zara’s Arc of Wonder”. Everyone leaned in and no one said a word as we watched the event unfold. Zara ran her fingers across the words and over her name on the star, then ran her fingers down to a small hole below the inscription. She moved her hand out of the way to examine the anomaly and looked at the hole, which was shaped uniquely. I leaned in to get a better look at this myself and then Zara seemed to recognize what she was looking at.

“The pendant!”, she blurted out in excitement and reached to her neck and pulled the necklace up over her head. She looked at the end of the ankh of spirituality and compared the feature of the bottom of the pendant and the hole on the star. “A Key!”, she proclaimed, then looked to Kumara.

I looked over to Kumara as well, as he nodded in approval to the young girl. Zara inserted the key into the star, and it was a perfect match. She turned the key and when she did a melody began to play, as is the way of any whimsical music box, but this was no music box. That melody again, I noted to myself, which was the same one that Zara was able to play on Lolo’s lute. When the tune finished playing, the star opened as if the gates of heaven had opened in front of all of us. Everyone around the young champion leaned in to get a closer look.

“Woah”, Zara let loose followed by everyone making similar sounds, for this truly was an arc of wonder. There seemed to be a whole other world inside of this one little star with gigantic structures made of steel and glass. Then as if we were all flying above this place, we were zoomed into a strange looking house, through a window and onto a desk, that was also very strange. I noted the tapestries on the walls and the paintings of some kind of odd and unfamiliar art and then I saw it. Sitting on the desk was

a golden book with a binding that I was well familiar with. “The Book of Virtue”, I said out loud.

Kumara then said, “for only a true champion who is worthy may recover that book from its resting place. Zara the Champion of Virtue of Compassion, for you are that worthy champion, so claim your prize”. Zara reached in and recovered the tome and I quickly asked to see it when she did. When Zara removed the book from its resting place, the star sealed once again and I opened the book to find the pages completely blank and looked over to Kumara.

“The memories of my brother Ladon or as you all know him to be ImaNewbie, should be able to assist us with unlocking this tome. Archmage it is time to conclude this portion of the quest”, as Kumara beckoned me over. Zara reached over to Saint Nicolas and put her arms around him and said, “welcome back”. The redeemed saint replied: “you have saved me young one, thank you”.

Kumara reached down to help Saint Nicolas up to his feet and handed him a scroll, then said “this is the Nice List judge, let’s keep records of those who are nice and not concern ourselves with those who are not”. Nicolas nodded and took the scroll from Kumara. He understood that when we focus on only seeing the negative things in each other, eventually all that is left are the things that we hate and that hate will eventually consume us. “The nature of itself begets itself”, Nicolas said out loud and “love cures all things”, Zara added at the end of that.

Saint Nicolas and the rest of us looked down to Zara as she said this and then she continued. “Oh and Santa?” “Yes dear?”, replied the saint. “The holiday tree in town needs presents”, as she handed Saint Nicolas her star. “This will make a perfect display for the top of that tree and there are not many days left.”

“There is much work to be done still”, as she looked up at Saint Nicolas.

Saint Nicolas replied with a jovial laugh, as he understood her implied hint, for his work was not yet complete

and he, indeed, needed to get to work, back to the business of spreading goodwill and cheer so that mankind does not so easily forget the importance of this.

“One more thing”, Zara added. “No more killing of innocent people, for that is not becoming of who you are”. Again, such wise words from such a little girl, I thought to myself in admiration.

Saint Nicolas replied with a smile:

“As you wish, malady”.

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The End

- Archmage Guildmaster