

The S'Tlis

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Men are afraid of walking alone through the Wood of Kalbana, even more so after the sun falls and darkness covers everything. For it is seldom that any hint of the moon sheds light along that path. Whispers of danger and fear are spoken throughout the surrounding villages, and even the most unlearned commoner heeds the warnings and avoids the path. The only safety lies in traversing the Wood in the mid-day sun amongst a group of travelers.

The villages that lie around the borders of the Wood of Kalbana trade their goods with each other, but only the bravest souls will carry those goods from one village to another. But when carrying non-perishable goods, even these brave people will take the longer path around the Wood, preferring to stay on the road a few days longer over a half-day trip through the Wood.

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One day, a man named Surai came to the village of Endile, which lies to the Southwest of the Wood. He was a foreigner, hailing from the other side of the continent. Surai proudly walked through Endile's gates, not deigning to cast his eyes on any man or woman that he passed. He made his way through the town disdainfully, giving only the shortest of glances at each building, until he came at last to the place of food and rest.

He entered and proclaimed his need for sustenance; before receiving a response, he sat at a table in the corner of the room. Every eye in the room was on him and his rich clothes. After feeling the stares upon him, he turned to fix a withering look upon each and every one of them. "And why on earth are you looking at me? Can you find nothing better to do with your time?" The other customers quickly dispersed.

Baran, the proprietor of the inn approached him with a plate of their local crops. Surai rudely grabbed the plate and without a word of thanks began eating. Upon finishing his meal, he tossed a few copper coins on the table, paying much

less than the meal was worth. However, the proprietor did not see fit to mention this. Surai then asked, "What is the quickest way to Leffar?"

Baran's eyebrows raised slightly. Leffar was about a half-day's journey North of the Wood, and was the most prosperous of all the settlements around the Wood. It was said that Leffar drew people from all over the continent. Baran led Surai to a cloth hanging on the wall. On the cloth was drawn a crude map of the Wood and its surrounding area. Baran pointed at the representation of Endile, then traced a path around the Western edge of the Wood. "You should leave the Northwest gate and follow the trade route. If it gets dark, make for Epwis," here gesturing at a town along the path, "You can rest there. If you do not tire easily, you should enter Leffar's gates before the falling of tomorrow's sun."

Surai pointed at the large mass of the Wood. "And why would I take such a detour when clearly I could make straight for Leffar through this forest and be in Leffar by tonight?"

Baran quickly made a sign with his hand as if to ward off evil. "That is no mere forest. There are few who are brave - or foolhardy - enough to cross the Wood of Kalbana even when the sun hangs high. It already has begun its descent; you would still be within the Wood when it falls."

Surai crossed his arms and looked down upon Baran as he would a common imbecile. "And what if I would? I fear nothing."

"Then you risk death," Baran was almost trembling. His voice shook and he spoke in a voice near a whisper. "It is spoken that even those who cross the Wood in safety are never the same, and many who enter the Wood never leave it. If you value your life, do not walk in the shade of the evil trees of Kalbana."

Surai laughed derisively and walked out of the inn without another word. Baran sighed and offered a prayer for the soul of the traveler. But somehow he doubted that the haughty man would ever see the gates of Leffar.

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Surai left Endile immediately, and as the sun fell ever closer to its bed, he approached the borders of the dark Wood of Kalbana. For the last remaining time of sunlight, Surai walked deeper and deeper into the Wood. The path was

not well-traveled, but he was able to follow it well enough. However, as the sun reached its bed and darkness shrouded the Wood, Surai found it more and more difficult to make out the path. Surai spoke truthfully when he said that he feared nothing, but in his life, he had never known anything worth fearing. Now, as his steps slowed and his eyes darted around him, he began to wonder if he shouldn't have avoided the Wood after all.

Suddenly, Surai stopped walking. He heard something moving off to his right. His hands began to tremble as he peered into the murky darkness. Then the sound came again from behind him, and he jumped, turning to face the new sound, backing his body up against a tree. He called out in a shaky voice, "Who goes there? I demand you show yourself." However, his voice carried no power, and conveyed his fear clearly.

Surai turned in what he hoped was the direction he had been going before the sun fell and walked as quickly as his feet would allow. The sounds of movement again came, this time seemingly from all around him, and Surai began to run, not caring now what direction he followed. He simply wished to leave the Wood.

He suddenly broke into a clearing, and all sound stopped, even that of harmless wildlife. As if stepping into the calm of a storm, Surai heard nothing now. He stopped, taking deep, ragged breaths. The moon revealed itself into the clearing, and Surai's breath stopped for a moment. There were strange forms all around him. Their shadows seemed to move with a life all their own, and Surai even fancied he could vaguely see the trees through the dark figures.

He stood, trembling with fear and tried to speak, to challenge these shadows, but no sound emerged from his lips. The figures drew close to Surai, and slowly circled him. They seemed not to walk, but to hover somehow above the ground.

Then he heard voices speaking to him. "Zhi alad, mon'arte quol en'op? Duk da'nazm. Irtu feln, bi'tah!" Surai shook his head, completely unable to understand the words. He was a learned man who knew most of the tongues of men, and had at least heard the rest. This was no earthly language, he realized.

Small pinpoints of yellow light shone from where the eyes might be if the forms were men. They spoke again, this time sounding more urgent. “Duk da’nazm! Duk retu’nih, feln alad, yas’stor! Mon’arte quol en’op?” Surai began to weep with fear and shook his head, not knowing what to do or say in reply.

The dark forms ceased their movement and the yellow lights brightened. Tendrils reached out from each form to join with neighboring tendrils, forming a complete circle around Surai. Then, before his very eyes, yellow light shone up from the ground in a strange design that he had never seen before. Suddenly, he felt his feet beginning to sink into the earth. Finally finding the will to move, he tried to run, but the ground was becoming soft, and he could not extract his feet. He screamed out loud, tears of fright streaming from his eyes, but he could not move from the spot. The yellow light shone brighter, and he fell into the ground. He knew no more.

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Surai finally awoke. He found himself lying on the ground on the outskirts of a forest. He did not remember leaving the Wood of Kalbana, but he knew that he must have, to find himself here. It was still dark, so he could not have slept long. Looking up, he saw the faint glow of some sort of town or village far off. He stood and ran toward the glow as fast as he was able.

But as he drew near to the walls of the place, he heard not the normal sounds of merrymaking coming from an inn or a tavern, not the sounds of animals in their houses or pens, not even silence. He heard nothing but screams and moans, uttered as if in sheer terror or utter agony.

Cautiously entering the large, uneven gap in the roughly-made walls, he searched for a sign, any kind of marking that could indicate what town he was entering. However, he saw nothing of the kind. All he saw were crude buildings with the signs of dim fires flickering inside them. And from almost every direction, he heard the awful cacophony of terrified screams and painful groans.

Suddenly, a voice called out at him, “Halt! Who enters?”

Surai cried out, startled, raising his hands in the well-known signal of peaceful intent. “I am Surai, a weary traveler who has happened upon this place by pure chance. I mean no harm.”

A man entered Surai's vision, and Surai gasped. The man's hair was pure white, and his eyes were wide and bulging. His mouth hung slack, and a tangled, unkempt beard fell down to his chest. He spoke again, "Well met, Surai. However, though I also mean no harm to you, harm will befall you. You have been cursed, as have all of us here."

Surai stepped closer to the disheveled man. "What do you mean?"

A shaking hand gestured all around. "Hear you not the sound? There is none left here who is sane, save me. I alone remain, and I find myself beginning to fall prey to madness." Suddenly, a gleam came into his wide eyes, and his mouth widened into an odd semblance of a grin. He came closer to Surai. "Perhaps if you and I can both find the hole in the sky together, we won't be driven mad!"

Surai was perplexed. "The hole in the sky?"

The half-mad man pointed with a gnarled finger up, and Surai looked at the sky for the first time since he awoke. He gasped, for he saw not the stars or moon or even clouds, but an uneven dome of clay and rocks. Far off, a mountain jutted up toward the top of the dome, and a yellow light illuminated the peak of the mountain.

"That is how we all came to be here. You, I, the others. Well all came through the hole in the sky. At first, we all resist, and try to return, but we never make it far. They speak into our minds."

Surai looked back down at the man. "They? Who are you talking about?"

The man's voice dropped to a whisper. "Them. The ones who encircled you, just as they did all of us. The ones who brought you here to their domain. The S'Tlis."

An involuntary shudder ran down Surai's spine, for even though he had never heard the name before, it caused his blood to run icy, and he was filled with fear. And then, his own eyes widened, as he heard whispers of that strange language the dark forms spoke, the words invading his mind.

The other man nodded. "It has begun for you as well, I can see it. I know that I have very little time left before I, Nojar am defeated. Maybe it is even now too late for me. But if you are strong, perhaps you can yet escape."

Surai looked around again. "What about all of them?"

Nojar shook his head and looked down sadly. "Their time expired long ago. They are all completely mad now. Not a single one of them speaks anymore. All they do is scream and rant. And even though they take no food or drink - if there is any food or drink here anyway - they never die. We all wish to die, Surai. But down here, there is no death. There is no end to the torture."

Just then, Surai saw a woman stand atop a building behind Nojar. She wore a few strips of tattered cloth that barely hid her emaciated figure. Her long hair was as white as Nojar's, and with a final scream, she threw herself off the building and fell to the ground. Seeing Surai's look, Nojar turned and saw her. He shook his head. "She will walk again in a few moments." And even as he spoke, the woman picked herself up, screamed again, and ran toward another building.

Surai shuddered. "I can't stay here. Even if I don't make it, I have to try to get back through the hole in the sky."

Nojar nodded. "Come with me. I can show you the way, but I cannot promise to follow it with you."

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They walked toward the mountain, leaving the screaming madness of the town behind them. But the further Surai got from the screaming, the more he heard the awful whisperings in his mind, and he almost began to feel them worse than the screams. Nojar noticed Surai beginning to feel the effects of the voices, and turned to him. "It will only get worse. I can feel my mind beginning to slip. The path here leads up toward the mountain. If I go mad, you must continue on. Once you begin climbing the mountain, the light will show you the path, but the voices will become louder as well."

Surai did not know how long they walked, because time had no meaning in this world. They might have walked for hours, days, even weeks. But although the voices began to fray the edges of Surai's mind, he did not tire.

At long last, Surai and Nojar reached the foot of the mountain, but it was there that Nojar collapsed on the ground, shaking and clutching his head. Surai knelt by him, and heard his last coherent words. "The S'Tlis, they have me, I am theirs. Fight them, please, find your freedom." And then Nojar began to scream,

and he got to his feet and ran back toward the town, never looking back. Surai watched and heard Nojar's screaming fade, even as the evil whisperings of the S'Tlis grew louder in his mind.

He began to climb the trail up the mountain, and with every step, he felt a part of his sanity leaving him. The voices grew louder in his mind until they consumed his every thought, and the only thing he could think of was he must be free of them, die, or go mad himself. But somehow, part of him fought that madness, and with a strength he did not know he had, he pushed ever onward.

Surai did not know how long it took to scale the mountain to its summit, but at last he set his foot on the top of the mountain. The voices were almost a scream in his mind now, and he endlessly gritted his teeth and clenched his fists with the effort to remain in control of his sanity. He looked up and saw the ceiling of the dome mere inches above his head, and right above him, there was a circular patch of yellow light. Knowing somehow that through the light was his salvation and freedom, he reached up and clawed at the light.

The substance he felt was unlike anything he knew, but with the voices screaming at him in that inhuman tongue, he grasped at anything solid enough to help him pull his body up. Surai found little purchase within the light, but little by little, he worked his way through it.

He was enveloped now, and though he found no air to breathe, he still fought to free himself. His hand suddenly was freed from the substance, and he doubled his efforts, struggling wildly to get away from the voices that were deafening now.

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Surai calmly traveled through the Wood of Kalbana. With him were many others, for he no longer was alone. And even now, they saw someone walking along the path. He seemed nervous, and seemed eager to get through the Wood.

Surai and the others approached him, but once he heard their movements, the man ran in fear. However, as the path led him to the Heart of the Wood, he froze, as all do who enter the Heart.

Surai and the others once more approached the trembling man, who was unable to run any farther.

Surai looked carefully over the man, and then spoke to him, “Zhi alad, mon’arte quol en’op?”