

SOUL BORN ORIGINS: OPAL

A PREQUEL TALE

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The alarm was sounded: a series of horns trumpeted by the young squires throughout the town of Weiden's Rise. Opal heard the signal loud and clear, despite the time: middle-night. It was very late to be astir, but she did not sleep well. Opal would lay awake this time every night; she had ever since she left home. At seventeen summer cycles, she was not too young to know what stole away her sleep: it was guilt, a deep remorse for abandoning her father. She still cared for him dearly, but he could not fill the chasm in her heart.

Opal exited her tiny room within the town healer's home, a space not much larger than the single cot she rested upon, and she shuffled to the front door. The sounds of orders being relayed through town should have been enough to satisfy her curiosity, but Opal wanted more—she always wanted more.

The medicinal healer and his wife were also roused by the mounting clamor outside their home. The couple, both in midlife, could have posed as Opal's parents but did not. They treated her, more or less, as an equal. The senior healer greeted Opal good morning

in jest. She smiled in return. Opal liked these people: Ghaton and Janus. They were kind and caring. Either would have given their last coin to her if she asked, yet it had not always been this way.

When Opal first came to Weiden's Rise, almost two summers ago, they took her in as nothing more than a lowly assistant. She was compensated for her work with a room and a daily hot meal. Ghaton was strict and impatient at times and he tasked her with many chores that she felt were trivial. He would have her stack shelves of jars, organize the ingredients to healing balms, and clean the blood from the tables. Opal knew she was capable of more, but back then he would not listen to her protests.

That changed one night, many months ago, when the captain of the guard was brought to Ghaton with a badly broken leg. The man had been thrown from his horse and subsequently trampled. His name was Sadok; Opal would never forget him because as severe as his wounds were, he did not cry out in pain as so many others had before him. He simply gritted his teeth and asked for his wife and child.

Opal looked over Ghaton's shoulder. Her world dissolved away and was replaced by a new one. Instead of seeing Sadok lying upon the healer's table, she saw her father. He was younger, appearing as she remembered him when she was but a sapling. His hair was red then, like hers. She recalled how she would stare into its waves from his arms. Around his neck was a twined necklace with his wedding band tied to the end. Her father had worn his ring like that ever since the day his wife, her mother, disappeared. She had been taken away by brigands, he would always say. Opal wondered if that was true. *Was she taken, or did she simply leave?*

Like Sadok, her father cared for his family above all else. Opal shed a tear and shook her head; she never should have left him. Opal overflowed with emotion. She wanted nothing more than this poor injured man to be healed, so he could happily reunite with his

family. As she focused on that thought, her hands began to tingle. She did not remember how it felt; it had been ages since her magical powers openly manifested themselves.

Red lights, like dim candle flames, emerged from her fingertips, and slowly engulfed her hands up to her wrists. She did not fear the power. Why should she? It did not feel unnatural. After she pushed past Ghaton, she laid her magical hands on the Sadok's leg. The sensation she experienced was unlike anything she had ever known. For that moment, Opal felt as if she was physically connected to Sadok, their two bodies becoming one. She knew his pain. She also knew she was able to expel it and replace it with the exhilarating sensation of pride and pleasure that brewed within her chest.

The glow from Opal's hands spread out across Sadok's bare leg where the bone jutted through the flesh. Slowly, the wound began to stir. The broken femur shifted and slid under the skin bit-by-bit, where it steadily knit itself back together. Opal closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. When she reopened her eyes, the tear in the man's flesh was gone. A shudder of weakness climbed up her spine from her legs. As soon as the sensation reached her head, she crumpled down upon the now-healed soldier like a rag doll and then dropped to the floor.

Opal awoke later in the safety of her bed. Hushed voices were the only sound to be heard. Opal focused and listened carefully to every word spoken.

"So few mages walk the lands. How's it possible one so strong has shared our home for so long?" Janus kept her voice low.

"In all my travels, I've never met a wielder of such immense power," Sadok said. "Nothing remains of my wound except the stain of blood on my pants."

"If the citizenry knew a sorceress lived here—" Ghaton alluded to something bad but was interrupted by Sadok.

"This must be handled with the utmost care."

“What should we do then?” Janus whispered. “We can’t chase her away. Imagine how much good she could do.”

“Perhaps her secret should remain our burden.” Sadok’s voice sounded like an officer commanding troops. “For the time being, no one speaks of what transpired here. No one lets slip a single word about Opal or her powers outside this home. Understood?”

“Of course,” Janus replied.

“Agreed,” Ghaton responded soundly.

Opal relaxed back onto her cot, relieved that there was no trouble to be had. *No one will discover my secret now.* Yet the more she thought on it, the more she realized that in order to remain safe, she could not take credit for the miracles her abilities provided. After she retrieved the dagger she kept in her boot, Opal stared at its polished shininess. How similar her situation was to this weapon, Opal realized. *This challenge is akin to a double edged blade. It cuts equally deep on either side.*

“What’s all the commotion, my love?” Janus whispered from the bedroom, a four-pronged candlestick in her left hand. “What is the alarm?”

“A dispatch forms,” Ghaton stated. “More rogues, no doubt.”

“I thought I heard guards relaying commands... something about us,” Opal revealed.

“If there are wounded you can be sure they will come—” Ghaton started to say until a solid knock on the door interrupted him.

When Ghaton opened the door, he was startled to find so many soldiers outside. Opal counted them as her employer greeted the group—twenty armed and heavily armored men. She could feel the energy of their excitement, a crackle of static in the air; *these men are well-ready for combat.*

Opal listened with a keen ear. She took heed of what occurred as told by the one man lucky enough to escape: a trader. The skinny man with long legs said he made a coward's decision and ran at first sight of danger. Covered in sweat and dirt, he repeated his story.

"Our supply wagons were attacked on the road just outside of your borders. Joa'Ta sent four of its finest soldiers along with my caravan for protection, but even those men of skill were quickly cut down. I-I heard them dying! I ran." He shook his head. "Gods almighty, I ran."

Weiden's Rise night guard, a group of men known throughout the kingdom to be rowdy thrill-seekers, formed a squad twenty men strong but would not depart before beseeching the aid of the healer.

"There'll be no time to return the wounded to your tables, healer. You must ride with us."

"What of the raiders?" Ghaton asked.

"Once I was clear, I turned and hid in the trees," the panicked man said. "I saw eight in light armor. Such a gutless ambush... I'm sure they've cleared out all of the wealth they could carry by now."

"Probably fled to their camp weighted down with loot—easy prey for twenty of Weiden's finest. Right, men?"

"Strength to Weiden's Rise!" the men cheered.

"You'll be safe, healer. I personally guarantee it."

Ghaton looked back at his wife for approval.

"I'm coming too," Opal called out from the shadows of the healer's cabin.

"Good," answered the ranking soldier. "Bring your assistant, healer. Her arms will free up those of one of my men. We leave shortly. Make haste."

Ghaton addressed Opal's willingness to go once the door was shut. She knew he would be concerned, and she knew why.

"Promise me, Opal, if you use your magic tonight, do so with the greatest subterfuge. Out in public, in front of these fanatics of all people, you don't want to be discovered."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes!"

Opal raised her voice. She did not mean to snap at her boss and mentor and could hardly believe she allowed herself to do so. After a brief apology, she gathered her packs and then rushed back to her room to change.

The night guard was led by Captain Alkurik. A man that was no stranger to Opal and Ghaton. His face was decorated with battle scars. He and his men often found themselves injured after weekend-long competitions. Fist fighting, tree climbing, games of pain endurance; the side effects were no matter to them: broken bones, bloodied lips, black eyes. The thrill of the moment was all they cared about.

Captain Alkurik had commanded his men to travel light. Instead of heavy plate armor, which was standard for the night guard, he ordered them to change into their thick leathers. Rogues, he announced to the group, were nothing but untrained children. Opal considered the words of his speech as she approached the gates where he stood. In her fourteen months of service, she had seen many of these men wounded in combat, but never seriously. *Perhaps he's right*, she thought. *The night guard are lifelong soldiers and skilled combatants. Perhaps the Gods favor these men over others.*

"Ready?" he asked Ghaton.

"Yes. Let us hurry."

“Mount up!”

Alkurik boasted how he had bribed the stable boy with a handful of coins. He promised to return the horses, meant only for the cavalry, long before daylight. Opal guessed this was not the first time he had borrowed the war steeds. *Strong and fast, these sturdy horses will make short work of the distance to the ambush site.*

The road where the attack had occurred was tightly squeezed between two rows of tall pine trees. *An obvious spot*, Opal thought. *Perfectly draped in shadows and so thick with trees that an easy getaway could be made.* From a hundred paces away, the glow from the golden moonlight that fell from the heavens revealed the destruction delivered upon the supply wagons. From fifty paces, the bodies strewn about the grass and pebbles became evident.

“Slowly!” the captain ordered; his open hand as a signal to his troops.

“Such barbarism! These people, they look—” a lieutenant started to say.

“Hush!” The captain did not allow him to finish his assumption. “Spread out. Team one, follow the road. Look for tracks. Call out if you find any survivors.”

“Yes sir!”

“Team two, break into two squads. I want each to take a side of the road. Clear it fifty paces into the forest then backtrack.”

“Sir!”

Captain Alkurik paused a moment. Opal watched him as his men snapped to. His look of concern transformed into a smirk.

“Larus, stay here with me and the healers. Arm your crossbow.”

“Of course, sir.”

Opal hopped down from her horse and walked directly to the captain. His smile captivated her. She needed to know what was so amusing in this moment of wretchedness. As she drew closer, she heard her mentor curse. None of these people were alive, he said. They had all been slaughtered.

“What’s so funny?” Opal asked.

“Oh, sorry. Was I laughing?”

“No, but you wear a smile while surrounded by slain men and women.”

“I mean no disrespect, I just thought—”

“Gods no!” Ghaton elevated his voice, nearly screaming in shock.

“Larus, torch!”

The captain and his man Larus rushed to Ghaton who had tumbled back onto his seat away from the body he knelt by.

“What is it?”

“This woman,” Ghaton said as he pointed to her stomach. “She died of a sword wound to the belly, but here... look at her leg.”

Of the three bodies present, Opal stared at one, a girl not much older than her. The girl’s leg was severed below the knee, however not cleanly, it appeared torn.

“Bitten off?” the captain guessed.

“Yes, and I wager in one bite.”

Opal listened to Ghaton’s words, yet at the same time her eyes locked onto another body laying face-first in the dirt alongside the pebbles of the road. This man, dressed in a patchwork of light leather armor looked to Opal to be one of the rogues, not a soldier or a traveling tradesman. Fallen into the shrubbery head first, all that could be seen was his

waist down to his legs; his feet missing. Just like the girl who Ghaton and the captain stood over, this man's limbs appeared to have been gnawed off. Suddenly, it dawned on her.

"Wait, I think the ambushers..." Opal could not believe her own words. "...were ambushed."

"What?"

"Look." Opal pointed to the rogue-armor-clad body, but before the captain turned to look, the body was suddenly jerked into the barberry bushes. Opal jumped back and screamed in fright.

"What? What's wrong?" Captain Alkurik responded instantly.

"The body, it's gone!" she said through hurried breaths. "It was pulled into the barberry bushes!"

"Pulled? Into the bushes?"

Opal could see it on the captain's face; it dawned on him as he spoke. He shared her concern; the enemy was closer than anyone had expected. Opal followed his eyes as he took a long look around. *No. No. No.* It became so painfully clear to her. The bodies of both rogue and soldier could be seen.

"Larus, signal the others to return," the captain whispered. "Soft signal."

"Why?"

"Just do it, damn you!"

Opal looked into the darkness, a pitch black spot where she thought she had heard something. *Hissing? Is that hissing?* New sounds emerged from all sides; the enemy was there, they were surrounded, and to the surprise of all, their foes were not human.

Larus waved his torch and blew a wooden whistle, but the response was all wrong. There were shouts and screams of terror. A howl of pain-laced fear emerged from the

darkness of the tree line. Opal heart dropped as she looked at Captain Alkurik. *This was not supposed to happen*, she told himself. *The night guard are unstoppable.*

“No!” another voice cried out from the dark path ahead. “Please! No!”

The captain pointed his sword in the direction of the road toward the sounds of combat.

“Fall back,” he shouted. “Everyone, fall back!”

Out from the shadows of the tree line, to the captain’s right, stumbled one of the night guard. It was a man Opal recognized by the name of Andreas. He wobbled with each step and grasped his left shoulder.

When Ghaton illuminated the man with his torch, he screeched, “Gods no!”

Ghaton’s scream froze Opal with fright. She wanted to move, to run even, but her body would not heed her commands.

“What is it old friend? Who do we face? What happened to you?”

Opal traded looks between Captain Alkurik and Andreas, as the man moved closer to the group. The way Andreas mumbled, and meandered forward, hinted that something was direly wrong. However, Opal was still not prepared for what she saw the moment the torchlight fully revealed the scene.

“Oh no,” Opal gasped.

Gripped tight in Andreas’s hand was the stump of his other arm. Blood squirted from the wound through the man’s clenched fingers; the arm had been severed above the elbow.

“What happened to you?” Ghaton asked.

“Ambushed. Li-li-lizard men,” Andreas mumbled.

“How is this possible?” Larus shook his head in denial. “There are no—”

“There’s been no report of lizard men in the area,” Captain Alkurik finished Larus’s statement.

“Hissing. All the hissing... Too many of them...” The wounded man tumbled down to his knees.

“Isn’t this report enough?” Ghaton asked.

“Captain, what are your orders? Larus added.

Opal broke her promise to her mentor and herself the moment she summoned her healing magic. When her hands erupted into two balls of red light, the night guardsmen gasped in disbelief.

“You...you’re a mage?” Larus stammered. “How did you? Where did you... What is that?”

“Never mind all that, Larus!” the captain ordered his friend as he shook the chaos from him with both hands. “We must retreat. Summon the men back; full retreat. We must go now!”

Ghaton pinned the wounded man’s shoulders to the pebble road while Opal cast a healing spell that would stop the bleeding and seal his wounds. She concentrated on Andreas’s arm as she ran her hand over the bloody stump. The glow of her power created a warm barrier between his and her skin. *It’s working*, she thought. *It’s working*.

“The hurt... it recedes,” the soldier whispered as he opened eyes.

“You’re going to be fine.”

Opal nodded to Ghaton; it was okay to release the man.

“It tingles.” Andreas smiled at Opal as he sat up.

“That tingle you feel, it’s your missing arm.” Opal turned her gaze to her mentor as she finished her thought. “I-I’m not sure, but I think it might grow back.”

“Grow back? That’s impossible.” Ghaton looked her square in the eye. “You don’t have command of such power... do you?”

Opal shook her head. She knew so little of her powers. Larus sounded the retreat: a blow to a hollowed out ram’s horn that’s loudness made Opal grimace with discomfort.

“Mount up! As soon as we can, we double-time it back to the castle.” Captain Alkurik’s voice was full of dread. “No one wins a fight against lizard men at night. It’s suicide.”

Opal gazed once more over her shoulder at the barberry bush where she had seen the body disappear into. *This was all a trap*, she thought while she aided Andreas. Once she had helped him mount his horse, she shifted her gaze forward. There was a rumble, like that of a coming thunderstorm. *The night guard squads, of course they survived...*

“Hand me your torch, Larus.” The captain’s voice was monotone.

The moment the torch was in his possession, he tossed it down the path. The firelight instantly opened the shadows.

“That’s not your men,” Ghaton said with a gasp.

A dozen or more lizard men approached in steady advance. In their talon-adorned hands, they carried the severed limbs and decapitated heads of the Weiden’s Rise night guard. The clank of blood-covered shields and damaged helmets against their primitive stone weapons, not only masked the lizard men’s hissing, but also made it sound just like the accelerated march of human soldiers.

Opal swallowed hard. “They tricked us.”

She had only ever seen drawings before, but the tales of lizard men were amazingly accurate. The beasts truly had the head of an alligator over a hunched bipedal body covered in scales. Opal cringed as she made eye contact with one. *Those eyes... Nestled back on each side of its long snout... They’re the most evil eyes I’ve ever seen. So soulless. So soulless and hungry.*

All of a sudden, the bushes and trees alongside the road to Joa'Ta came alive. A dozen or more yellow eyes pierced the night as dull-green, scaly skin shimmered under the moonlight. Opal choked loudly. Panic had torn the scream from her mouth.

“G-ghaton?”

She spun around on her tiptoes like a court dancer. She tried to count the enemy. *They're on all sides of us. We're surrounded.*

“This is my fate? To be ensnared by a savage lizard man trap?” the captain said under his breath.

“Not me!” Larus shouted. “I refuse to be eaten like some sort of woodland rabbit.”

Larus reared his horse and aimed it at the group of lizard men on the path. He kicked and shouted as his horse pierced the first wave of enemies with ease, but was halted by the next. Opal watched in horror as Larus was pulled down to the road, and in a matter of seconds, torn to pieces by the razor-sharp, teeth-filled mouths of five lizard men.

“Mount your horse, Opal,” Ghaton commanded. “Mount it now!”

“Yes, quickly! Try and escape while they feed! I will do my best to hold them off you!” the captain commanded, rose his sword above his head, and released a battle shout.

Opal stepped her right foot up into the saddle, but before she could lift herself, her boot slipped and she slid down to the ground. Her ears filled with hissing and the thump of feet on the ground all around her. *Why? she wondered. Why now? Why stumble now?*

Opal could feel a buildup of magical energy rising from her feet. She had never experienced her powers swell like this. Normally they originated from her core—yet this peculiar sensation was different and much, much stronger. The energy inside her surged and she found herself standing fully upright, arms out. The magical force had filled her so greatly that she felt as if she would burst. Every point of her body tingled; from the tips of her fingers and toes, to the end of her nose.

Opal looked to Ghaton for answers. She could see his mouth move, however could not hear the words he spoke. Hissing—not the sound but the force of breath through a closed mouth touched her skin. She knew in her heart that at any moment she would be struck down, two dozen or more teeth piercing her flesh. *It's too late.*

Opal did not scream. All she did was think of her father as the swell of magical energy overflowed and erupted from her body in a wave that shot out in every direction. Opal watched the fiery-orange, vaporous energy strike Ghaton's horse. It threw him several feet up and away, off into the shadowy tree line across from her. Simultaneously, she heard the sound of her arcane fire as it struck the lizard men behind her.

Opal spun around in time to watch the spell travel away from her in an ever-expanding circle. She gasped in awe. Her magical flames charred the skin of every lizard man it touched, until their once green, shiny scales were nothing more than dull grey ash. In fact, her spell burned everything and everyone it came in contact with, including her allies.

"W-what have I done?"

Captain Alkurik's horse lay roasted in the middle of the pebble road, right where she had seen it last. The captain himself, still upon the steed, was almost unrecognizable, his leather armor and skin equally blackened. The sword in his hand glowed with the resonate heat of her spell. He never even had a chance to swing it.

The trees on either side of the road ignited like candles, and crackled with puffs of smoke. *My spell. Entirely undiminished; it still spreads and burns everything. Everything...*

"No!" Opal screamed. "Stop!"

There was a clap of thunder. Rain fell upon her warm cheek and increased steadily by the moment. Opal heard a moan. *Do lizard men sound as such when injured?* She wondered, until she heard her name called.

"Ghaton!" She rushed to where she had seen him thrown from his horse.

Ghaton was on his back. His skin, and what remained of his clothes, were as black as the trees and soil that surrounded him. He mumbled something through heat-melted lips. It was a sight that made Opal want to vomit and cry.

“Oh no, no, no,” she whispered as she fell to her knees beside him.

“What... what did you do?” It took all his effort to form the words. “What did you do?”

“I—”

“She did what she had to, to survive.”

A man’s voice appeared from behind her. A new smell of smoke, not like that of burnt wood or flesh, overcame her senses. *This smoke smells clean... like magic.*

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” Opal addressed the elderly man who stood freshly dressed in fancy robes, a carved ornamental wooden staff in hand.

“I am Malek, Sorcerer of the High Council of Mages.” The old man introduced himself with a tiny bow.

Opal looked back at her mentor, who gasped for air with shallow breaths. *He’s dying.*

“High Council?” Opal shook her head. “I told you all before, I’m not interested in training with—”

“Oh yes. I know of your rejection, but that was before your powers, well... before you did this.” He motioned around himself.

“I didn’t—”

“Were you aware there were survivors out there, just down the road? Soldier’s from your kingdom. They were wounded, yet trying their best to escape the lizard men.”

Malek had her full attention now.

“Survivors?”

“Yes. Men with families and you killed them all.”

“What? No...”

“Your powers destroyed them all: the soldiers, the lizard men, the deer, and even a family of little squirrel who call this forest their home. All dead, and why? Because you, dear fledgling, *do not* have the proper training.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Yes, yes, yes. That’s what they all say. How do you think your mentor’s wife will feel when you return home to tell her you killed the man she loved?”

Opal returned her gaze to Ghaton. He had passed—his eyes turned up into his skull. Opal thought she would cry, but where grief should have settled only anger grew.

“I say once more: join the High Council of Mages and allow us to train you.”

He’s right. The arrogant old man is right. Opal knew it; she had destroyed her last chance at a normal life. The night guard would hold a formal investigation; Janus herself would have dozens of questions. There was no way to explain what happened here to the people of Weiden’s Rise without some form of accountability.

It might have broke her heart to admit it, but everyone knew, including herself, that you can’t trust a mage.

“Fine. I will join you.”

THE END

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