

SAGA OF THE SENTENIAL BOOK ONE
CAULDRON OF TROUBLE
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Banishment

Ghorrif Aryl stumbled on the hard, cold, stone floor, his weary old bones aching with age and torment, the audible cracks lingering like a testament to the pain he endured, and had suffered for so long. His pallid skin lacked the vigour of a life he now remembered only with an abstract agony. His heart felt the weight of his despair mirrored so perfectly in the dull grey colour of eyes that had lost the lustre of life. The regret consumed him. The misfortunes of his prolonged existence made his shoulders sag; his frail form betrayed a weariness that made his progress all the more difficult. The wheezing rasp of his breath carried like a grim cry as his lungs heaved against the tainted air. He coughed and gagged and fought to exert some control over his decrepit form, struggling, failing, and forcing his deteriorating body to take the last long and lonely walk into a nightmare that had seen him diminished and his brethren consumed in the wake of a transgression that had soaked up the living and the light.

The flickering torchlight cast gloomy shadows against the worn ornamentation of once finely crafted walls, each stone pressed into place by a living hand that had been inspired to give the impression of wonder. The faded, benevolent scenes and inscriptions were alive again with the passing shadow of this old man; more alive perhaps than he himself appeared. The dedication of his brethren still retained an impression of the history of a home, and a sanctuary, and a place of wonder.

Ghorrif Aryl could scarcely see beyond the memory of his life. Even now he could no longer decipher the depictions with any degree of certainty. They were woven in shadow, corrupted and defiled, a faint facsimile of lost innocence. The odour that lingered here made his failing breath all the more difficult to maintain. The vile stench made his eyes water, adding to his malady. He hobbled across the chamber dragging some object cloaked in a blanket of unnatural darkness, the shadow invoked by a will that did not have the presence of mind to mask the sound. His concentration was beginning to waver, and it took all of his strength just to keep him from falling again. The metallic wail grinding against the stone betrayed his presence with more venom than his appearance or his desperation. *Ominous.* A piercing wail resounded as it scraped along the ancient stone, the metal grinding like the cry of lost souls pushed even further on the edge of despair. The old man staggered as if he were drunk, and fell to his knees, knocking them painfully on the harsh, uncaring floor. Blood stained his already dreadfully tarnished robe; the dirt caked to the brown cloth unable to mask his decay or his fall from grace. His ragged and pale features were a testament to how close he was to greeting death, or perhaps a fate worse than death. He was deeply wrinkled from years of worry, and no longer had any wish to live. The lines that crossed his face were so severely engraved as to make it impossible to imagine how he may have looked when the years had been kinder, before any semblance of youth had fled. He was still alive, but the vestiges of life were so remote as to make him appear more like a corpse that had fled its resting place to walk the halls in a macabre dance that offered only the faintest emulation of a living soul. He had no right to thoughts of living, when he alone was responsible for so much suffering and death. The pain of the memories seemed to press with an almost unbearable pressure on the head of Ghorrif Aryl, flashes of abstract madness welling up from a time that would soon be forgotten. His spirit fought on though his body had all but given up, lifting his thin frame of bone and flesh to take the last few steps that might see him delivered from the agony of his existence. His eyes had grown so dim with time but he knew well the path he had chosen. He passed from the long and lofty outer hallway, through an archway in the south wall and into the antechamber of his desecrated home.

Ghorrif Aryl was afraid. His heart pounded in his chest. Fear would not cause him to fail now. The air was tainted with the smell of musk, blood, and something far more distressing. The odour clung to his skin, filled his mouth, and drenched him in the malodorous stink that made every step all the more difficult. Each breath produced a sharp pain in the old man's chest as his body heaved with empty retching that he fought to control. The chamber before him lay deep in shadow. He had walked this way many times in the past, though never in dread. The shadows receded to the amber glow of naked flames burning curiously in curved receptacles of tarnished brass. The flames burned constant and without the traces of the smoke one would expect. Nothing visibly fuelled the fire. The receptacles were an incantation, but they were a twisted perversion of something that had once been used as a fragrant tool of convenience and warmth. The flame was cold now, as empty as the oppressive shadows that soaked away the affection of a gift that had been consumed in the wake of oppression.

Ghorrif Aryl proceeded from the antechamber to the defiled altar chamber straining against the urge to give in to his rising apprehension. He ignored the pain as much as he could. He coughed and tried desperately to form some moisture in his mouth that might offer even the smallest semblance of relief to his parched throat, or the burning sensation that reached inside his lungs, closing them even further to the hope of drawing breath. Every moment, every step, threatened to drive him to the floor to lie down and give into the solace of an end that would at least provide some relief.

The old man's eyes filled with hatred when he saw the daemon that had pushed him to the edge of desperation and depravity. The stark emotion provided him with the resolve he needed. The daemon sat in the shadows, his smooth skin glistening in the eerie light cast from foul smelling lanterns irregularly placed about his resting place. Corruption hung heavy in the air, more tangible in its impression than any that had come before. The contrast to the memories that lived only in the mind of Ghorrif Aryl disturbed him to his core. Perhaps that was the purpose of the varying vessels of light. Perhaps it was just the presence of the daemon.

Norith-Saer had once been a beautiful and vital place, with lavish white marble floors, expertly crafted furnishings of polished oak, a wonderful altar of a strange translucent substance whose origin was thought to be of a miraculous nature, brilliantly constructed and scintillating. So many had given their lives in dedication to making this a home to the community of the future preserved in the past. Norith-Saer, the learning place. A finer age. A finer time. So much joy. People gathered together, sharing and learning. Now he was here!

Hatred also burned in the eyes of the other, but the daemon's hatred was for all things and made Aryl's appear petty and insignificant.

For a moment both the daemon and the old man regarded each other. The daemon's glare was tainted with suspicion, renewing the fear in the old man's heart. However, the fiend rested in the composure of a creature who was less concerned with the presence of the old man beyond a trace of faint amusement.

A piercing chill violently traced Aryl's spine, tearing to shreds both heart and soul, trying to pervert his will, twisting to break the guards about his troubled soul as something scarcely defined reached out and played with this tormented spirit.

Finally, the old man spoke in fitful anger, the failing raspy breath inadequate to fill the void of the lofty chamber.

'Mastk....' he cried, but the words failed him.

The daemon's eyes widened, but he made no attempt to approach Aryl.

'Does the little master come to play?' spat Mastk with an air of arrogance, not overly eager to participate in any recognition of the old man who had once been the benefactor of his very existence. The loftiness of the chamber added unnecessary strength to the daemon's voice in direct contrast to the way it served to diminish any declaration that Ghorrif Aryl might be disposed to make.

Tears welled up in Aryl's eyes. Amid sobs and wheezing breaths he mumbled.

'I have failed... you have tainted all that was pure and good... defeated the purpose for which you were made... destroyed what took centuries to build...'

Aryl bowed his head in shame, the pain of remembering pressing on his mind.

Mastk's temper flared, as even the mildest attempt at resisting his will, his dominance, provoked some reaction. Like a spoiled child, he demanded absolute attention. He roared venomously. The very walls shook to the beasts imposing growl.

'You are a fool to have come here, old man,' he laughed, regaining his least violent demeanour. 'I have merely restructured to suit my own artistic tastes and temperament. Change... is inevitable.'

Memories flooded Ghorrif Aryl's mind, and tears rolled down his cheeks caressing the ravines of his ravaged features that permitted the rivulets of moisture to follow an exacting course without deviation.

'You are a fiend. A spiteful oppression the lands have never seen before. Soon I will die, but with my death I invoke the right of command.'

The words were said, though the daemon showed no sign of understanding. He stood to his full height of over eight feet, stretching savagely in his conceit. To the stooped and terrified form of Ghorrif Aryl, it seemed more. The giant daemon's ebony features and twisted smile incited a soul wrenching fear. The teeth protruded as the slick mouth curved in a malicious smile. He was too confident. He didn't know.

Aryl could barely stop himself from betraying his relief but he held his outward edginess. There was hope, but he would have to work fast.

The old sage did not fail before the piercing stare of Mastk. Cold sweat and pain tortured him, but he stood steadfast and brazenly held his ground. Mastk's blood red eyes and furious malevolence dwarfed him, as the old man knew it would. The daemon's stature would have been enough to deter even the bravest of men, right down to the hooked nails on his wiry claws.

Ghorrif Aryl, however, was not just any man. He was Mastk's creator and had come before the daemon with a purpose. Penance for his tortured soul – retribution for his heinous crime.

Mastk sprung forward and stood near the old sage, his gait extremely agile despite his size. Aryl struggled to remain upright.

'Fool! Do you think that you alone have the power to oppose me? I, who have wiped from the lands the associates of your foolish whims. I will crush you as I did them. Even now, my brood hunt the last of your brethren. Your precious lands will bow before me, and I will slay them all.'

The impure energies burning within Mastk expelled a sudden and intense heat, which further tainted every breath the old sage took. The daemon's malicious declaration stabbed deep into his heart, but he drew strength from his resolve. He was no fool, and had not come here to watch that happen. Mastk had underestimated him and he thanked the Gods. The daemon was blinded by his conceit and heedless rage. Ghorrif Aryl was prepared.

'I invoke the right of command!' repeated Aryl, his voice rising in dominance.

The daemon smiled, but that smile quickly faded as the danger of his plight sparked a hint of understanding.

'I bind you for all eternity within the vessel of your own making... the cauldron!'

*Nar serri cuzouril del Mastk
binde vour mikas mour
four san doome al timde.*

The words of magic rang in Mastk's mind. The daemon realised too late the mistake he had made, the danger he had been in.

'No – fool!' he roared.

The old sage tensed as the daemon swung out, striking only foul, fetid air.

'No!' he screamed, as a jagged lightning rose from the vessel at Ghorrif Aryl's feet and whiplashed about the chamber, spiralling around Mastk, ensnaring him in a net of mystic intensity. His material form became intangible, ethereal. The suddenness of the transition and the shock left the daemon reeling. A vortex created, it began to suck and drag him into the cauldron. The walls of the altar chamber began to crumble, as Mastk was torn inch by inch, to banishment. Mastk struggled to hold on, to force some solidity into his depreciating form, and failed. The moment seemed to linger longer as the old sage held his failing breath, but it was over sooner than he realised. He had already fallen to the floor but his eyes remained locked on the object of his most desperate gamble.

'Curse you old man... Cuuurrsssee yyyooouuuuu!' came the daemon's last fading cry.

The ordeal was over. All was calm.

Ghorrif Aryl lay on his back and could feel the power of the cauldron withdraw, drain away, and fade through the ancient stone he had once walked in joy. Blood trickled from his mouth. He sighed his last breath away. His eyes closed and he lay still.

The old sage was dead. The cauldron was given life!