

The Midnight Dilemma

Revised Version

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His heart beat a little faster. Hands trembled, and eyes raced from tree to tree - Eradaan wanted blood shed. Wanting nothing more than to bring pain to one of the most elite members of the Elven race, this would be his best opportunity. He cared not for fame, but rather the feeling of knowing somebody else feels what he felt. Nobody knows why they snap, an uncontrollable urge to enact revenge becomes a natural instinct. The bows carved from the trees in the elven forest were too pure for his mischief, but those that lay west of the forest were a perfect culmination of deathly curses and twisted rot. Somewhere away from this elven forest had to be home to the vilest and susceptible to curses.

Among the elven forest, a group of elves gathered wood for the higher order. The most pristine, unique, and sturdy bow was to be fashioned in the case a conflict were to arise, and these men were there to bring the request to fruition.

“Where in the hell is Eradaan?” questioned one of the elves as if this was not the first time Eradaan had been missing from his sight.

“Who knows where that stupid elf would be,” another elf said sarcastically, “he is probably hiding from work like he usually does.”

The elf they mocked had a deep down affinity to get back at those who choose to hurt him, but he had always lacked one thing until now, the right moment. Eradaan ran through the brightly colored forest, tall trees surrounding, stinging shrubs poking at his bare feet. This was his moment to strike disruption in the land. The density of the forest made it complicated to know which path to take for any typical human, but the Elven ability to separate colors guides well through lush environments and the combative nature of archery. One must quickly identify friend from foe, and the eyesight of an elf is no match for those who challenged an elf in combat.

On the outskirts of the elven forest, Eradaan rested his eyes along a bare, decrepit, tree showing all signs of age and impurity.

“I don’t understand, I’m working as fast as I can,” Eradaan said with a heavy sigh.

“No you’re not Eradaan! You’ve been goofing off and I’ve seen you!”

“But, I –“

“Quiet! Either you follow the orders or we’ll be playing painful games all day. Your orders are to –“

Torn bark from its trunk spiraled up toward seemingly leafless branches, despite a single leaf falling, twirling, and doing a graceful dance to land alongside his naked feet. The tree did not look like the others; it looked like it was dying. His mind raced. He was tired of being on the receiving end of the work that nobody else wanted to do. He was tired of being put in pain with every command that ordered away segments of his soul. This had to be the one. With a few quick and sturdy chops, enough wood was collected and brought back to be processed.

“All accounted for?” questioned one of the elves in the enchanted forest.

“Eradaan is still missing.”

“No, you fool. I’m right here,” Eradaan noted while holding a stack of wood.

“Listen, elf. I don’t know where you were sleeping or how you gathered that wood, but you have one last shot at not disobeying the orders handed down by the superiors. You piss them off; they will have your head. Let’s go, they need this bow as soon as possible.”

He would have no more of being treated like an outcast. He would curse the bow and slip it with the rest of the batch of wood. Who he hurt, didn’t matter. To have somebody feel his pain would be pleasure in itself.

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The most pristine, unique, and sturdy bows were assembled from the wood gathered from the forest. The men selected the best from the batch to be sent to the higher order. The best happened to be Eradaan's for no other reason than the unique appeal which guided eyes across easily. Red wood, twisting into an arch formed a beautiful piece of archery that produced a faint red gleam. This was nothing like anything they seen before. They were certain the higher order would be pleased.

The higher order consisted of the leadership ranks among the elves. Promoted through gallantry and having a keen sense of leadership, they oversee the land and issue orders that must be filled. One member, Lanodh, the leader of the higher order, summoned one of the members of the gathering party. He wore a dark green hooded cloak with a large yellow insignia depicting the leaders of the Elves. On it rested an image of a crescent moon with an arrow slicing through the center signified brighter and dangerous days ahead.

“Is this the bow that your men crafted and selected from the enchanted forest,” questioned Lanodh.

“Sir, the bow is one of the most unique bows that I've ever laid my eyes upon. This will serve the Elven order well for future adventures.”

“Send thanks to your men. You all have done an impeccable job, and I will see to it that you are rewarded for your efforts. For now, I need you to find Ethaneal. He will be the elf whom will wield this magnificent bow and he needs to be properly trained. This certainly is no bow he is used to, even for an elf of his ability.”

Meanwhile, Ethaneal and his sister Celia from the Trueshot family played out in the meadow. The Trueshot family had a legacy of having a premier fighting ability. Considered a rare breed among elves, they carried their bows on an entirely different level than the rest.

Large blossoming flowers filled through a vast landscape among beautiful blades of grass - the colors of everything, vibrant, the sounds of the birds chirping, charming. The days felt like they lasted forever. The two loved spending their time together when Ethaneal was not busy during an adventure. They never wanted to let go of their fond childhood memories, and to this day, nobody would ever guess they were one hundred-twenty Elven years old, thirty-two in human. They promised each other to remain forever young. Life was too short to get caught in all of the serious matters of everything. Have fun, they thought.

“Catch me and I won’t put bugs in your bed tonight,” laughed Celia, while running off behind a tree.

“Celia, you know that thin tree doesn’t hide you very well!”

“You are calling me fat? I can’t believe you! If mom were alive, she would have you by those huge pointy ears in a heartbeat.”

“No! I wasn’t calling you fat! Just the tree is skinny... Wait, did you just make fun of my ears?”

“You will have bugs in your bed tonight. I hope you sleep extra wiggly.”

“Tag, you’re it!” Ethaneal yelled. He turned around and ran off through the meadow. He rounded a few trees in effort to lose Celia, but instead ran against something sturdy.

“Easy there, little one, you could get hurt if you’re not careful.”

“I know, dad, I know. I’m just trying to hide from Celia. I’m going to hide in the box over in the corner. Don’t tell her!”

Celia ran around the doorway and crashed into her dad's leg.

"Well, well. Are you trying to hurt yourself, too?"

"Hi, daddy, so that means you seen Ethaneal! Where is he hiding?"

"The light guides you and your brother well, dear. I'm confident that you will sense what to do. He pointed in the general direction where the box rested."

Celia ran to the box and opened it to find that it was empty. She turned to her father and mother standing with Ethaneal.

"Let's go son. We need to introduce you to battle today."

"Ethaneal Trueshot, you have been summoned by the higher order for an adventure. You must report to Lanodh immediately," a guard said.

Celia ran after Ethaneal, turning the same corner, and slamming straight into him, knocking both to the ground.

"Ouch," Celia moaned, while placing her hand against her back, "What are you doing Ethaneal?"

"I'm sorry; I've got something to take care of."

His sister let out a heavyhearted sigh. She knew one of these days her brother may not return from one of these adventures, and that set her heart into a slight panic. After losing their mother and father in battle, she did not want her brother to leave her alone in this world. As seemingly happy as life is, it would not be anything without her brother.

"I'll be back as soon as possible. I promise."

Ethaneal abandoned his sister once again to attend to his duty as a skilled archery master. Wielding a bow, his senses combined to make a lethal fighting machine. It was quite surprising how skilled he was to people who were unfamiliar to his bloodline, but it explains why he has

lived as long as he has. The ruthless nature of the woods do not lend well to those who ignore polishing their combative skills. He inherited the bold fighting style from his father, whom was a little older than he when the final dagger laid him to rest.

Standing amidst the leader of the elves with surrounding guards was a different experience to Ethaneal. He typically received his orders from one of the lower tiered guards and sensed this was going to be a much more dangerous adventure. Two guards carrying a large wooden chest approached from behind with boots clanking heavily against ground as they moved closer. Resting the old chest gently, hoods removed, they slid their hands to the front of the chest pressing two locks that flanked each side. A loud thump from the locks banged against the side of the chest which echoed through the room as the guards stood to attention.

“Ethaneal, we are going to need your assistance in the near future. You are the brightest, most agile fighter we have. Your mastery in the art of the bow has not gone unnoticed, and we feel that it is your duty to assist us in this great time of need. Please, take this bow, and for now head to the archery range. In time we will bring you to speed with the destiny we have chosen for you.”

“But, sir, with all due respect, I have been training my entire life. I’m more than willing to wield the bow I’ve used all my life. I don’t need training.”

“The challenge you will face will need a much more stable and precise weapon. The bow will take a short time to get used to and we cannot simply risk you learning when your life hinges on the brink of death.”

The guards pulled opened the chest to uncover a bow Ethaneal had never come close to seeing. The glowing tint simply mesmerized his eyes. Reaching down to pick up the bow gave a

feeling of attraction, as if the two were designed to be together. A skilled archer, trained in the art of fighting, and a bow that blended the art into a protector of something greater than himself.

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“Ethaneal! What are you doing,” Celia questioned.

“Well, I’ve got a new adventure,” he paused, “it involves training with this bow.”

Celia laughed as if he was joking with her, “Train? They do know you are the best when it comes to wielding those arced masterpie-,” Celia paused, “What is that? That’s not your bow!”

“They gave me a new bow. I hope it shoots as good as it looks.”

“No kidding! Why in the world does it have a tint like that? Where did they find this?”

“I really don’t know anything. They wouldn’t tell me anything more than to come out here to get used to it.”

Celia sat against a tree watching her brother and writing in her journal of the day’s events. She loved writing and reflecting. It was a great way for her to relieve stress. She still could not get over the new adventure her brother would be undertaking. She could not remember a time that he showed concern when his duties came from the higher order.

Reaching behind his shoulder blade, Ethaneal grasped onto one of the arrows from the quiver that rested on his back which held about twenty. Feeling the small green ribbon that Celia wrapped around all of his arrows, a form of pride, he slid the front of the arrow into the center of the arc while resting the feathery end along the line of glimmering string. Gently, he pulled the string, creating what he would expect to be rough tension between his strength and the bow. The arrow slid back ever-so-lightly, as if no energy was expended. He looked at the arrow, scanning his eyesight along the shaft, past the head, and toward the center point of the target. Released, a screaming projectile flew toward its victim.

“A FIVE,” yelled his sister.

“Are you blind? You can’t get better than that. That deserves a 10!”

“Not in my world. You’re my brother and I hold you to a better standard than that!”

Ethaneal moved into the night practicing. One by one, the arrows slid from the bow as easy as it was drawn from the quiver. He was amazed at the accuracy, and the ease of it all. This bow was simply the best he had ever used. He questioned if this bow was filled with some sort of magic. But he couldn’t imagine that the sort of magic would simplify everything, otherwise the Elven forces would easily dominate the lands from evil. Something was drastically different, but there was no time to ponder. He continued training throughout the night. His sister silently slept near him, not able to leave him alone. He admired her passion for protection, if only he could somehow repay her for her faithfulness. More often than not, he had to leave her alone to deal with adventures. He could not bear the thought of dying and leaving her alone in this world.

“What are you doing,” Celia questioned with sleep in her eyes.

“Just watching the sunrise, it is beautiful isn’t it?”

Celia continued to lay on the ground, looking into the sky. “Yes, it’s beautiful. The forest can be such a calm and peaceful place at times.”

Ethaneal took the last remaining arrow from his quiver and placed it into his bow, pulling back, and releasing it toward the sun which come just above the horizon.

“What are you doing? I think the sun is too far for even you, Ethaneal.”

“I can’t wrap my head around this bow. I don’t understand the sort of magic that it could possibly possess. I’ve been training throughout the entire night and I’m not tired.”

“That should be a good thing. It will give you much more endurance in battle. But all things do come with a price.”

Ethaneal rested on the ground alongside his sister. His body fell to the ground as he looked into the sky for a possible answer. As he did, he heard the most frightful scream in his life. He turned his head to face Celia and witnessed an arrow with his green ribbon. It was extruding from her chest.

“Celia... CELIA!” Shaking her body, he looked into her glazed eyes which remained open, seemingly staring into a void. He rose from her body, arching his back, and screamed his sister’s name one last time into the clear blue sky.

Ethaneal fell to the ground, eyes closed. As his mind went to complete shock, he fainted.

“Watch it, boy!”

“I’m sorry, dad; I didn’t mean to get in the way.”

“Stand back and watch exactly how this is done. Your quiver is stocked with roughly twenty arrows; you must take good care of these arrows. Use only when you know that they will claim your enemy.”

“Listen to your father, hon. Watch how we do this.”

Ethaneal’s father and mother sent arrows screaming from their bows into the field of battle that day. One by one, enemies fell. He saw their faces filled with emotion. He noted their skill and accuracy. He watched as one by one, enemies were pierced with their deadly arrows. One day he knew he would become just as good as them as it was in his destiny. The moment of glory is not always chosen by the individual, rather the moment selects you.

“No! NO, NO,” Ethaneal screamed as he ran toward his parents bodies, pierced with arrows. He shook his father’s body and peered into his glazed eyes. He fell to the ground as the guards from the higher order picked him up to return him to his home.

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Lanodh sent a group of men to retrieve Ethaneal. One of those men, Eradaan, kicked Ethaneal to wake him up.

Ethaneal opened his eyes, looking around, “Where’s Celia?”

“Celia is gone, Ethaneal. Don’t you remember? We found you lying near her body and could not wake you,” Eradaan said, “But we don’t have time to worry about that.”

“I don’t understand. How? Who shot that arrow?”

“Ethaneal. The arrow belonged to you. You shot the arrow.”

“No. I mean, yes. I shot an arrow, but it wasn’t toward her. It couldn’t have been the same arrow.”

“Ethaneal. You are the only archer with this style of arrow, and it even has the ribbon that your sister ties to each one. We don’t have time-“

“Yes, we have time. This is my sister. She is all-“

“Quiet!” Lanodh yelled. “We have no time for this. Eradaan, get out of here. We have a serious matter that you must attend to Ethaneal. We need you. The land needs you. The rest of you get out.”

Lanodh explained what the new adventure required of Ethaneal, but it all had been a blur, fragmenting in his mind. The midnight crystal was placed to rest in a nearby house of worship for safety. The crystal, while not in its resting place, produced detrimental effects against those on the land. It held no mercy even to those criminal enough to capture it. Once the clock struck midnight of the first full moon, since it was stolen, the affects begin to spread. Every day, a random individual on the land was instantly put to rest as a magical force would withdrawal the soul and feed the crystal. Whoever was in control of this crystal could proceed to withdrawal the energy from it, improving their strength and magic, creating a very powerful persona.

“We simply cannot allow this crystal to be misplaced any longer. I will send you and a specific group of men to hunt the enemies who guard the crystal. We have word that it is located to the north-east of us.” Lanodh explained. “You need to...” Lanodh began to fade out of Ethaneal’s mind.

All Ethaneal could think about was the loss of his only lasting family member. Lanodh removed himself from the room, leaving Ethaneal standing alone physically and mentally. He walked outside and closed his eyes as he felt the cold brisk breeze brush against his face. An elf wearing a golden cloak came up to his shoulders in height stared at him curiously.

“What are you staring at?” Ethaneal snapped, peering through his half-open eyelid.

“I understand that your sister has passed, and I’m sorry for that. I do bring relatively good news. I know that this is the last member in your family hierarchy to fall. My name is Anian. I am a cleric, specializing in the discipline of resurrection.”

Anian continued to provide details of a Vial of Life that is attainable by the last surviving member in a family which gives the ability to resurrect the recently perished member. This needs to be done within twenty-four hours succeeding the death and can only be done once.

“Wait. That only gives me until midnight tonight.” Ethaneal said.

“That is true, Ethaneal. Though, I’m afraid it is a little more complicated than that. Tonight, there will be a full moon, and as I overheard, you have quite a dilemma on your hands. You have five hours.”

Ethaneal paused to try and grasp the perplexity of the situation - to select between equally undesirable alternatives. In one hand, he could lose his sister forever. In the other, innocent people perish.

“Where is the vial? I can get the vial, return, and continue on with the assigned adventure.”

“I’m afraid there is no time for both. A blood stained Lyka leaf is the last ingredient needed. It is a rare leaf that grows in a region two hours south of us. You will need to decide which is more important: your sister, or the lives of others.”

“I cannot live my life knowing that I killed my sister. I’ll do whatever I need to do to save her.”

“The midnight crystal can potentially take your life. It holds no bias. You possess the strength and endurance to carry out the adventure to retrieve it, nobody else. You are a unique hero. If you die, we all die. Above all, who knows what Lanodh will do to you if you fail.”

“If I don’t recover my sister, I have no reason to live. Just guide me to the leaf.”

Anian gave a map and the vial to Ethaneal. He traveled through the forest toward the location hoping that obstacles could be avoided.

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Ethaneal arrived in the location where the Lyka leaf should be according to the map. The scene looked familiar – a lush forest consumed by tall trees, and nothing distinct. He explored the area and noticed an outcrop of exposed surface rock. Crawling on the top, he came to where a sole leaf rested.

One damn leaf, he thought to himself.

He cautiously plucked the Lyka leaf from the rock while withdrawing a short blade from his side. He made a small incision across his finger, exposing a small pool of blood. Droplets of red blood fell from his finger, onto the leaf, soaking only into the once green veins.

The smell of blood rapidly consumed the air, and four-legged beasts that roamed the area smelled a fresh taste of their next meal.

Ethaneal pushed the blood-soaked leaf into the vial, and begin churning it with a stick, which turned the contents of the vial into a paste of reddish-green substance. He looked toward three wolves, which came just above his waistline, closing in on him. He stood and slowly pulled an arrow from his quiver. Taking out the wolves was hardly a feat, but more of an annoyance. As fast as he sent the arrows into their bodies, he went to gather them from the fresh kills. While cleaning off the blood from the arrows, he noticed the pack leader – an evil, dire wolf. Black and mottled with gray this beast was easily eight hundred pounds, and about nine feet long. Burly, with squatty legs, Ethaneal was no match for the size and speed.

What the hell is that evil piece of work doing in a jungle like this, Ethaneal thought, wondering how he could take this thing down.

The dire wolf noticed Ethaneal and began to charge. Seeing as his one hundred and fifty pound body would not for much of a challenge for a beast of that size, he maneuvered through the trees, hiding from the wolf. Within the tree, Ethaneal pulled an arrow from his quiver and aimed it toward the back of the beast's skull. He released, sending the arrow streaming through the air, gliding right past the wolf and into the ground.

A miss? How in the hell did I miss?

Ethaneal fired off several arrows which seemed to glide right past the wolf. The wolf, staring at Ethaneal's bow with a fixed eye, began to walk away, leaving Ethaneal confused. He climbed out of the tree and noticed that the position of the moon indicated that he had less than three hours to save his sister; he had no time to think about the why.

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“Ethaneal, what took you so long,” yelled Anian. “We do not have much longer. Do you have the vial?”

Ethaneal reached into his pack and brought out a vial that containing the potion. He set it on the table while Anian prepared to administer the resurrection. Ethaneal, worn out from the exhausting run, rested his bow against the table, and sat. He watched as Anian placed a cold watered-down cloth over Celia’s eyes and a piece of golden cloth over her entire body, exposing only her mouth.

“Give me the vial,” Anian said. Anian mixed a few more ingredients and slightly heated the vial which turned the paste into a smooth liquid. He opened Celia’s mouth and poured in the concoction.

Moments passed as the two patiently waited. Lanodh came through the door.

“Ethaneal. The midnight crystal,” Lanodh said in a disheartened tone.

“I didn’t. I just couldn’t do it knowing that I could be at fault for permanently ending Celia’s life.”

A loud crash echoed throughout the room. Pain screeched from Anian’s last breath, clutching his chest with one arm, and raising the other to the sky. He fell victim as the first soul was drained from a random body to feed the midnight crystal. The curse was fully exposed. As one body rises, another falls.

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Eradaan sat in the woods where the wood was collected for the bow. The death of the hero’s sister was merely a distraction for something much larger. A dual threat curse exists within the land, and, still, Ethaneal still did not know he is holding such chaos that will rain further pain in the future. And now, the midnight crystal was exposed.

While Eradaan's eyes glistened, his mouth began to salivate. His heart beat faster as he began thinking evil thoughts. His hands shook, and his legs fidgeted. His mind began to race. It was him that started it and nobody knows. The mischief he wanted was now unleashed.