

The Stonekiller

Jenna Helland

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The pebble was a hazy green, like the eye of a dead fish. Like the eyes of the girl in the village yesterday.

"Runt," the green-eye girl had said. At first, Lia had no idea who the girl was talking about. And then she saw those fishy eyes looking straight into her own. "Worthless runt."

Even girls she thought of as friends joined in to mock Lia: "No one wants you here... your fingers are freakish... Are you stupid *and* lame?"

It was true, her fingers were curled like claws. Try as she might, Lia couldn't straighten them completely. Even her mother, who was the village healer, couldn't fix them. Lia had never cared, at least not until yesterday. She balanced the pebble on her knuckle. She didn't even know who the green-eyed girl was. She'd just asked to join their skipping game. *Stupid fingers. Stupid runt.*

Lia dug her toes into the sandy riverbank and stared hard at the sparkling river. Today was the first time her parents let her play by herself near the water. Her father and older brother were just over the rise in the field, but she couldn't see them, so she *felt* alone. Lia stared at the pebble. *Make the green-eyed girl disappear*. Instead, there was a popping noise, and the pebble crumbled on her knuckle. Despite herself, Lia smiled as the green dust swirled away in the warm summer breeze.



Unfortunately, she didn't have the power to make the girl disappear. She could make rocks crumble, and that was it. Mages were rare in her village, and none of the other children had any casting abilities. Her mother said it was a gift. Lia wasn't sure; it wasn't like the world needed any more dust. But her mother insisted she was special. *All great mages started somewhere, and pebbles are as fine a place as any.*

The village was about a mile away from Lia's family farm, and her mother was tending people there again today. Usually Lia went along, but not after what happened with the girls yesterday. *I'll never go there again.* The village was a ragtag collection of houses and shops built among the ruins of a castle. Before the Conflux came and remade the landscape, the castle had been one of the jewels of the Bant.

Lia was too young to remember the hellish years of torment and war that followed the merging of Alara, but she often wished she could have seen the castle in its glory days. All that was left was its high tower and the four corners of its outer wall. The elders said they were blessed because the village was in a region that was much like the old Bant. Only the southern horizon had changed during the upheaval. An unnatural mountain range had clawed its way out of the earth and forever blocked passage to the sea.



Bant had been a vast realm. A beautiful land of floating castles, seas of lush grass, and the bluest skies you can imagine. Lia loved the elders' stories about old Bant, especially about brave knights fighting hordes of undead monsters. Suddenly, she resolved not to waste any more time thinking about the green-eyed girl. Instead, she leaped to her feet and searched for sticks, which could serve as Grixis hordes. With a fistful of twigs, Lia recited the story in her mind: It was a crisp autumn day when Eos Castle was besieged by creatures too horrible to imagine.



Lia mounded up sand for a castle, and then smashed it with her fist. The stick hordes poured into the courtyard! *They broke through the wall! Knight Aran fought valiantly atop his horse!* She was just about to unleash the ballista when something moved in one of the trees on the other side of the river. The sunlight glinting off the water made her squint, but she glimpsed someone perched on a tree branch, hidden among the leaves. Just then, a gust of wind rattled the branches, and Lia saw her watcher. Its body was covered in spotted fur. Pointed ears stuck up from its head, and its face was more animal than human.

“Mami!” Lia screamed, even though her mother was far away. When Lia looked back, the creature was gone.



Usually, Lia's family ate together and then told stories until bedtime. But two of the village hunters were missing, and her father and brother joined a search party. Lia ate her stew alone on the little stool by the iron stove while her mother comforted the young wife of one of the missing hunters.

Lia knew better than to interrupt, although she desperately wanted to tell someone about the thing she'd seen in the tree.

"...strange signs on the road to the mountains," her mother was saying to Cele, as the young woman nervously twisted the end of her braid.

"They were tracking a herd that way," Cele said, her eyes were brimming with tears. "Maybe they went up into the mid-lands."

Her mother noticed Lia was watching them and motioned her over. As the firelight danced across the rafters, her mother slipped an arm around Lia and pulled her close.



“Did you have fun by the river today?” her mother asked. “It was such a pretty day.”

Lia nodded. “Are there cats who walk like people?”

Her mother’s brow furrowed. “In other lands, Lia. Why do you ask?”

“I saw a thing that had a cat face but a body like us,” Lia said, half-expecting her mother wouldn’t believe her. “In the trees along the river.”

Cele’s eyes grew enormous and suddenly her mother was saying how late it was and bundling Lia off to bed. And maybe they could have sweet bread for breakfast? Lia fell asleep and dreamed of girls with pebbles for eyes and floating sand castles.

The next morning, her father’s eyes were sunken with tiredness. He hugged Lia and wanted to hear her story from the day before. People were trying to act normal, but Lia could tell something was very wrong. Everyone’s faces seemed pinched too tight and she heard them whispering about the missing hunters.

At mid-day, Lia’s mother sent her outside after she promised not to wander beyond the shadow of the cottage. But she grew tired of playing by herself under the eaves and decided to run circles around the house. *The eagle flew over Eos Castle* ...With her arms outstretched like wings, Lia ran around the corner and bashed into something. She stumbled backward and was caught by strong hands. As a dark bag fell across her eyes, she glimpsed a cat-like face. They’d been waiting for her behind the cottage, where there were no windows or doors, and no one to see her disappear.



That night, the demon came to the village.

He came while the hunters' wives were weeping for their husbands. He came while Lia's parents frantically searched for their daughter. Just as the crimson sun disappeared behind the unnatural mountains, the demon seemed to materialize in the starry sky. His presence immediately afflicted the villagers. They became weak and ill and fell to their knees. A ring of black-clad servants encircled the village, and as the noose closed around them, none had the strength to raise their hands in defense.



By morning, a sickly wind blew through the open door of Lia's cottage, which was as empty as the rest of the village.

The Sculptor surveyed his work with a critical eye. To the uninitiated, it must look like chaos. But to him, every clink and jangle of bone was a perfect harmony to the breathing of his master, Nefarox, who slumbered in the tunnels below the arena.

It was early morning, the servants still in their cages. Seventeen minutes until sunrise, and then the supervisors would have them working again. But for a few precious moments, the world was wonderfully peaceful. The hum of locusts in the trees on the ridges that surrounded the worksite was the loudest sound. For once there was no screaming, no wailing, no scraping of bloody meat off bone.



His worksite had once been a massive *Matca* arena where Nayan humans fought for sport. Everything in Alara had a former life. Even him. He had crafted bodies from etherium in Esper before he realized his work had been a perverted lie. The Sculptor sighed, angry at his misspent youth. Now, he was an old man, but at least the master had given him a purpose, a reason to keep on living.

He took a deep breath and placed one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. Time to tally the signs. The ritual could only begin when the numbers aligned. If something was one tick off, the project would fail. The Sculptor felt a ripple of panic at the thought of disappointing his master. If he failed, it would be better to cut his own throat than face punishment.

The Sculptor counted the rungs as he climbed. Seventy-six steps, and he was at the top. From this vantage point, he could assess how his great work was progressing from a bird-eye view. Months ago, the Sculptor had removed the stone benches that encircled the arena—five-hundred sixty-six benches. The servants dug deep pits to hold the carcasses before they were skinned. One-hundred forty-two pits. Most were now brimming with discarded meat.

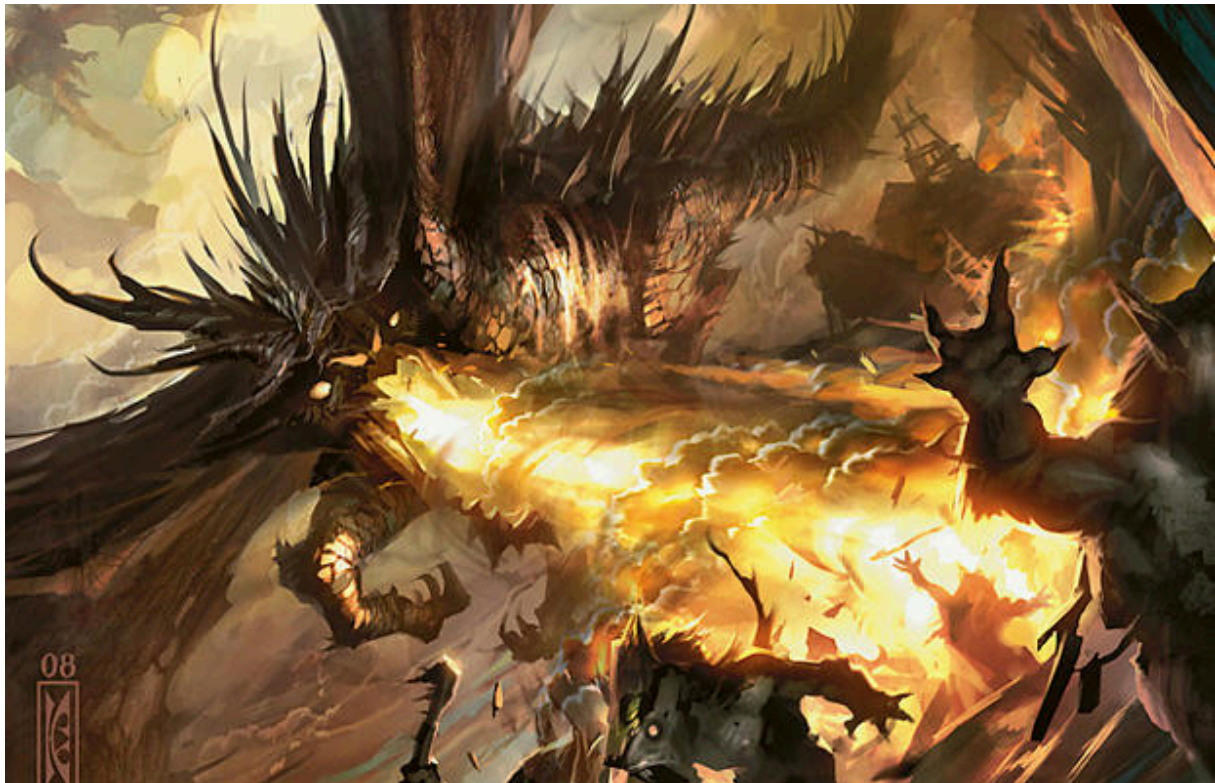
Ninety-two. The number of knife strokes to skin a behemoth.



Feeling very kingly, Sculptor eased himself onto the walkway, which creaked and shifted under his weight. It was constructed from the bones of a hellkite the master had slaughtered in the high peaks. The dragon's beautiful corpse had moved the Sculptor to tears. Indeed, it was the seed of inspiration for the entire project. Etherium had no life inside of it. But bone? Bone was imbued with blood and power—energy he would harness for his master.

The servants had carried the skeleton down precarious mountain paths. Once installed, the ribs branched out and down to form a cage around the arena floor. The spine was the walkway on which he now stood. When he bent down and touched the bones, he could still feel the immense power of the hellkite pulsing through the marrow.

One-hundred twelve. Number of total hands needed to move the hellkite's corpse. Three fingers lost.



The Sculptor enjoyed a gust of wind. It brought a scent of honeysuckle from the golden lowlands. The warm air rattled the bones hanging from ropes beneath his feet. Seven-hundred sixty-nine silk ropes. Seven-hundred sixty-nine bones. Sometimes he wished he were a puppet master and could make those bones dance like marionettes. But that would be the master's pleasure. And all the power derived from the ritual? That was the master's reward.

An abrasive metallic screech tore the Sculptor away from his reverie. The twisted metal gate swung open, and new recruits filed into the arena. Bant humans from the grasslands, probably that miserable little village near the ruined castle. They were bound together with rope, and the Sculptor counted carefully as they passed under the hellkite's spine.

Forty-seven bodies. Plus the two hunters they'd caught spying on them earlier. Forty-nine bodies.

The Sculptor's breathing quickened. Frantically, he tallied the figures in his mind again. Was it possible? Yes, all the numbers aligned.

It was perfect. And after such a long wait, it would be tonight.

The Sculptor dug his fingernails into the hellkite's ribs and prayed that the master liked his gift.