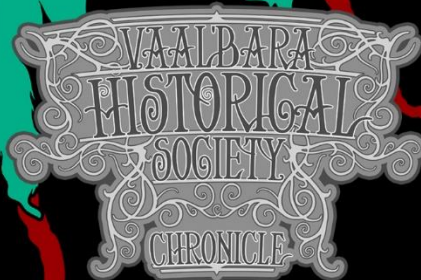




ten years
of
Darkness

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While reading this historical account, you will come upon four symbols, which serve to inform you of specific events:



You are being notified that a period of time, whether it is a few minutes or a few days, has passed without the narrator reporting what has happened.



You are being notified that the narrator has stepped through a portal or has been teleported to an entirely different time or location.



You are being notified that a letter or document has been written, and you are reading or being read what is inside it. It will be accompanied by a second, complimentary symbol marking its end.



You are being notified that the narrator has been thrust into a vision and is experiencing events outside the current timeline. It will be accompanied by a second, complimentary symbol marking its end.



"This had better be worth it!" Laurence yelled, slowly rising to his feet. A large, sandy footprint remained pressed into his chest; he had just been attacked by, and fended off, an ostrich.

Varek grinned as he glanced around at the interior of the cave, which had been painted with ostrich guts. When he had told Laurence to deal with the ostrich, that wasn't quite what he had meant, but it was certainly effective.

"Oh, this is funny, is it?" Laurence said, grimacing.

"You are alive, are you not? And your ostrich friend... has done wonders for the interior of this cavern."

Laurence growled as he passed a hand down his face and robes, reciting the words in his mind for a minor restoration. The dirt and blood vanished, as did several tears. He felt foolish wearing this new outfit, but it closely matched Varek's, and who was he to complain? If this was how a person grew in power, then that's what he would do. As for caves, however... he would pay more attention to what might lay inside from now on.

"And how the hell are there ostriches out here in the desert?"

Varek shrugged. "I believe humans bred and released them for a time, although I suspect that creature might have proven one of the last." He shot Laurence a look, suggesting he could have been the cause of a minor extinction event.

Rubbing his chest, Laurence didn't seem nearly as amused. "What was it we were looking for, again? *Chair on fire from farts*? It's just going to be like the last one."

"Cher'on, Fire of the Heart," Varek corrected, smothering a smile. "And we do not know that. Each artifact we have searched for has been farther from the epicenter of your storm. There may be--"

"I *really* wish you would stop calling it *my* storm," Laurence interjected. "I couldn't even begin to guess how that was created, even after all you've taught me."

"Simply because you have not created it, does not mean it wasn't you who did so."

"Yeah, but that was crazy-me. I'm not going crazy this time. I've already saved your ass once."

Varek rolled his eyes. "I would have caught myself had I gone off that cliff."

"Yeah, I bet," Laurence whispered as he made his way into the cave. Quickly he conjured an orb of light to guide their way.

"As I was saying," Varek continued. "We have traveled a greater distance this time. Can you honestly tell me you're not curious as to whether or not we will find a functional artifact here?"

"Honestly? I don't care as much as *you* do right now. It's hot here, even in this cave; deserts are miserable places. I could be off performing magic shows on a level no one's ever seen before. They'd be blown away."

"Blown away?" Varek snorted. "I've taught you how to perform spells you wouldn't have dreamt of a few years ago, and you're still focused on catering to ignorant humans? You'd turn back right this moment if I gave you the choice?"

Laurence wiped his brow and put his hand on his hip. "No, probably not. But no more ostriches, okay?"

"Yes, I will try my hardest to refrain from sending you into a hive of angry ostriches."

"Ostriches don't live in hives."

"Not the ones from *this* time."

Surprised by the revelation, Laurence spun around, only to see a sly smile on Varek's face. "You know, this is hard enough without you trying to push my buttons all the time."

"Why would I push your buttons, when it's far more entertaining to pull your strings?" Varek countered.

"Don't make me summon another storm," Laurence threatened. He made a strange expression, as if he were losing his mind. "I think I'm finally feeling the crazies coming on!"

Varek stepped forward and placed a hand on Laurence's shoulder. "I am truly terrified," he said in a monotone voice before turning and descending deeper into the cave.

"I can be terrifying if I want to," Laurence called.

"I've already increased my wards accordingly," Varek's voice echoed from the darkness.



Minutes later, the pair began to hear faint popping noises from somewhere ahead. As they proceeded forward cautiously, they could just make out hints of green light, mostly obscured by rock formations.

"What is that?" Laurence whispered.

"Green may not be good," Varek returned. "It could be some residual corrupted Magic from y- from *Laurence*," he corrected.

As they peered around a stalagmite, Varek's eyes widened, and then narrowed. An odd, spiraling object was being torn apart by some sort of all-consuming spellwork, while its remains were whisked toward a small, glowing portal hovering in midair.

"I am not losing another artifact!" Varek growled.

Racing toward the bizarre sight, he cast a series of spells, but they seemed to dissolve, only aiding in the creation of the portal. Just as he reached the artifact, it winked out of existence, stabilizing the small portal.

From within, a mutated, green and black bat launched into the cave, spiraling around haphazardly. Appearing to hone in on Varek, it was repelled by an invisible force, as if he had just slapped it away.

“Ward yourself!” Varek yelled as the bat turned toward Laurence instead.

Laurence reacted just in time. Aiming for his neck, the bat was instead sent careening off into a cave wall. Varek directed a spell toward the creature, but it flapped out of the way directly before impact.

Again, it took aim at Varek, moving far quicker than a typical creature would have. Varek stood in its path, taking careful aim with an extended hand. Sending a bolt of chaotic blue Magic directly into its face, the bat instead appeared to grow in size, which, judging by Varek’s expression, had not been his intent.

As before, the bat was slapped away by an unseen force as it closed in on Varek, but this time it seemed to reconsider its opponents. Altering its course, it flapped for the entrance to the cave instead.

“Don’t let that abomination escape!” Varek yelled.

Laurence was already on its tail, leaping small rock formations while simultaneously casting spells toward the bat. Nothing seemed to faze the creature, however. Any spell which made contact only appeared to bolster its health. Outpacing both the men, it was lost by the time they reached the entrance.

“Damn it all,” Varek growled.

“What was that thing?” Laurence wheezed. “And why aren’t you out of breath?”

Varek gave him an odd look. “You just ran all that way without enhancing your strength?”

Laurence motioned as if he hadn’t known there was another option.

“Mmm,” Varek considered. “I must have forgotten to teach you that one. And you still managed to keep pace with that creature without Magical fortitude.” He shook his head. “I do not care for mistakes - less so when I make them.”

“Where did that bat come from?” Laurence asked, attempting not to repeat himself.

“*Where?*” Varek frowned. “I do not know precisely where, nor do I particularly want to find out, but it has been altered by demonic Magic.”

Laurence’s face managed to pale through his heightened pulse; he clearly did not want to deal with another demonic invasion. “I thought the demons were defeated, though.”

Varek let out a huff of breath. “Time is not kind. Simply because someone has been defeated, does not mean you are free from their machinations. When a spellcaster has access to the timeways, they can send spells to times long passed by, times yet to come, even times they will never live to see. I am not familiar with that creature, but it very well could have been created by the lord of demons, even though he no longer lives.”

“If that is the case, though, that’s good news,” Laurence considered. “Sort of.”

Varek eyed him as if it had been a strange comment to make. “How so?”

“Well, if we kill that thing, there’s no one to make more.”

Varek grinned. “You’re assuming there isn’t a countless number of those pouring out all around the globe right now.”

Again, Laurence paled. “But you’re from the future, and you said-”

Varek raised a hand, silencing him. “Yes, I understand. I never witnessed a legion of bats in that timeline. For all I am aware, this is the only one, and we will be the reason it does not live long enough to cause a problem.” He motioned toward a distant city filled with multi-level, tan buildings. “But we should make our way down there, and quickly. If that creature is capable of what I think it is, we do not want it growing in strength.”



“Where are we?” Laurence muttered as he stared at a sign full of squiggly, foreign writing. “I can’t read any of this.”

“We are near the dead sea in Israel,” Varek responded. “And if you’d have paid attention to our lessons, you’d be reading English right now instead of squinting and muttering to yourself.”

Laurence motioned toward the sign. “Well, care to do me a favor and clarify?”

Varek neglected to respond, instead eyeing a nearby building with overt suspicion. “The creature is in there,” he said with disgust.

“How can you tell?”

Varek’s mouth dipped lower into a frown. “I can tell,” he said, taking a step toward the building.

Inside, the building was pleasant, if sparse, with tan walls closely matching the exterior, and rusty red embellishments on the decorations. As if he had visited the locale several times before, Varek ascended the stairs to his left, moving rapidly. After making their way down a hallway lined with doors, a scream encouraged the pair to hasten their speed.

Reaching what Varek seemed to believe was the correct door, he extended a hand. The door exploded off the hinges and flew into the room. The bat, which had apparently attacked a woman, was struck by the flying door and slapped toward a nearby window like a fly. It shattered the glass and tumbled out of sight.

“Chase the creature. Do not delay,” Varek mouthed. He appeared sickly and out of breath. “Do not let it bite you. I will deal with this woman.”

“Deal with her?” Laurence repeated.

Varek was in no mood to argue. “Go! Now!”

Laurence sprinted toward the window and leapt through it, his wards sending shards of glass tumbling outward and away from his body before they could do any harm. As he landed, he came face to face with a being he did not expect to meet. Nor, judging by his expression, did he expect such a being to exist.

Tall and thin, a female humanoid with literal black skin stood before him. Glowing green eyes and sharpened, talon-like fingers marked her as anything but human. Wearing a tattered, wide-rimmed, red fedora and matching trench coat, she looked like some sort of nightmarish, otherworldly spy.

“Stay out of matters that do not concern you, Xahl’thari,” the creature growled, her sunken cheeks and a set of fangs making the words sound as if she detested him. For all he knew, she did.

“What... *are* you?” Laurence managed, somehow finding himself enraptured by her eyes.

The creature turned and ran before he could even complete his sentence. Despite the stunned expression he wore, Laurence gave chase. He, however, appeared sorely lacking when compared to her skillset. Several fences she had easily vaulted over, combined with an impossible climb over a featureless wall, left him out of breath, and her out of sight.

“Where did that... *where did*...” Laurence didn’t even seem sure of who or what he was dealing with.

A crackling sound nearby drew his attention. Rounding the corner, he spotted the creature just as she leapt through a swirling green portal. As her red jacket slipped through, it rapidly began to close, and before he traversed even half the required distance, it snapped shut.

From behind, a popping noise, followed by a thud, brought his attention to Varek, who lay on the ground, his breathing rapid.

“What did you do with that woman back in the hotel?” Laurence demanded, staring down at the pale wizard.

“I require a moment,” Varek mouthed, trying desperately to catch his breath.

“Why are you so weak?” Laurence asked, kneeling down next to him. “It’s been a long time since we first met. Even some of-”

“Not *some of*. *All* of your abilities are greater than mine. I am beginning to believe I will not recover my stamina. I remain ill. It is something we will have to address at a later date. What did-”

“What did you do with that woman?” Laurence repeated.

Varek sighed as he sat up and dusted himself off. “If you must know, she no longer exists.”

Laurence appeared surprised by his admission. “You killed her?”

“*Killed* is a bit of a misnomer. *No longer exists* is more appropriate.”

“It’s the same thing.”

"It is not," Varek corrected. "She did not die. She simply does not exist."

"Well, from my--"

"It matters not. Did you find the bat?"

"Wouldn't it matter a lot to you?"

"I beg your pardon," Varek said, caught off guard.

"Making her vanish, or whatever you did. Doesn't it matter? Didn't you just change events and cause the future to be different?"

Varek threw up a hand. "Yes, I did. But it had to be done. If you would have witnessed what she was turning into, you would not be arguing. There very well could be changes to the future, or there might not be any at all. At least none that matter. But it was necessary nonetheless. *I* did not change the future; the bat did. Now, before we waste more precious time, did you locate the bat?"

"Yeah, but it got away."

Varek instantly read Laurence's expression. "And what else?"

"You're not going to believe me when I tell you."

Varek scoffed. "Try me."

Laurence scratched his head. "There's a woman... *thing* chasing the bat."

Varek's eyes narrowed. "*Woman thing* means nothing to me. Describe them."

Laurence laughed. "They look like some sort of... post-apocalyptic Carmen Sandiego."

Varek screwed up his face. "I do not understand that reference. What is that?"

"It's a person from a game. She was like a spy or thief or something. They had a red hat and a red jacket. But this person had black skin and green--"

"Damn it all," Varek whispered.

"You... know them?"

Varek shook his head. "I am not aware of their identity, but black skin and green eyes only relate to one race: demons."

"*Demons* are here?" Laurence exclaimed. "I thought they'd be..."

Again, Varek pulled far too much from Laurence's expression. "Less attractive?"

Laurence blushed, knowing he had indeed found himself captured in her gaze despite everything inside him denying that possibility.

Varek motioned toward Laurence. "And this jacket-toting demon left you alive? *Why?*"

Laurence paled slightly. "I... she left me alive?"

"A demon lives only to consume," Varek responded, only furthering Laurence's discomfort.

Laurence's eyes widened. "Um, she said I was meddling in something I shouldn't be."

Varek shook his head. "It did *not* say that." He pressed a finger to Laurence's temple. "You must be sharper than you are, more focused than you are." He took his finger away. "It told you to stay out of matters that do not concern you."

"How..." Laurence closed his mouth, knowing full well how Varek had done so: he hadn't bothered to ward his memories. In fact, he regularly left his mind unlocked. It was a habit he was determined to break.

Varek let a puff of air out through his nostrils. "I have now seen what you have seen, and that creature is indeed an enigma to me. I do not know what to make of its presence here. That was not a fully-formed demon either. At first I thought it might have been someone..." He dismissed the thought. "It is clearly following the bat, as we are, but as to why, I cannot comprehend."

"So what do we do now?"

"We follow it."

"Do you have a spell that can track her?"

"I can tell where it's gone."

Laurence was silent. He had taken note that Varek could identify where nearby creatures with a demonic taint had gone; he did not, however, know why.



The two appeared in another district of what was likely the same city, Varek falling to his knees.

"You can't keep doing this," Laurence said, kneeling to check on him.

"We have no choice," Varek growled, gritting his teeth as he stood up. "We-" He paused, glancing around cautiously.

"What is it?"

Varek's eyes narrowed. "We're being watched. I suspect your *friend* is here with us."

Laurence stared at the ground in front of him. "Are they looking at me? Should I act like I don't know they're here?"

Varek made a face. "If I know they're here, they're aware of my presence, too."

Laurence shrugged, indicating he was confused. "So--"

"Drop!" Varek yelled.

Laurence immediately fell to his knees as Varek summoned a blade formed from wind. It collided with the demon as she shimmered into existence before them, but having been created weaker than he intended, it only knocked her backward into a crate rather than cutting into her.

Growling, the demon climbed out of the debris as the two advanced on her. "Get back, Xahl'thari! You do not know what you are doing!"

"I know enough of what you are to put an end to your machinations, demon," Varek countered.

"You know *nothing!*" the demon yelled. She pointed toward Laurence and gave Varek a look that appeared to convey far more than it should have.

Turning, the demon sprinted away. Laurence prepared to chase after, but Varek grabbed his shoulder, stopping him.

"So now we're letting her go?" Laurence asked, giving him an exasperated expression.

Varek shook his head. "We're dealing with a creature from a potential future - a *dark* future."

"And that should bother me?"

Varek's face was impassive, emotionless. "It should trouble you, yes. It knows who you are."

Laurence's eyes grew. "*What?*"

"I know as little as you, but I suspect it is not our enemy, not precisely."

"But you said she's a demon. We're going to ally with demons, now?"

Varek grabbed Laurence by the robe and yanked him forward. For the briefest of moments, incredible power flashed in his eyes. "We will *never* ally with demons. Do you understand that!"

"Yeah," Laurence said in a low voice. "That was... that was my point. I thought they were the enemy. That's all I was saying."

Varek let him go and backed up a step. "They *are*. But this one has a motive which coincides with ours, at least for the time being. Once our paths diverge, we must be ready to destroy it."

"Make sure she no longer exists," Laurence clarified.

Varek shook his head. "No. There will be no mercy for a demon. It will be destroyed."



The pair caught up with the demon as she burst through a doorway, shattering the wooden panels with a blast of green light. Flapping just inches from her claws, the disgusting mutant bat took to the air, its leathery skin smoking from whatever spellwork the demon had used.

Summoning all the strength he could muster, Varek began to channel a spell toward the bat, but just as he appeared ready to complete it, the bat vanished in a pop of green Magic.

“Agh!” the demon roared. Reaching forward, she summoned a swirling, sickly green portal and ran through.

Varek and Laurence sprinted toward the portal, but it began to close before they reached it. Pointing at a pile of building supplies, Varek motioned toward the vortex, launching a metal rod into its depths. The portal snapped shut onto the rod, pinning it in mid-air, as if it were hovering in place.

“Ha!” Laurence said as he came to a skidding halt in front of the rod. Cautiously he inspected the artifact, watching it tremble ever so slightly.

Summoning something from within his mind, Varek’s eyes appeared to flash with an upwelling of power, and he cast a spell on the rod. Immediately it grew in diameter until it was the size of an oil barrel, possibly larger.

“Do we... push it through?” Laurence asked.

Varek smirked. “If we did that, the portal would snap shut. And I’m not about to attempt to alter a demonic spell.”

He extended a hand and flicked the center of the metal round with his finger. Ripples formed, and the solid mass began to hollow. In seconds, it had turned into a tube. On the other end, a completely new location awaited them.

“After you,” Varek said, motioning toward the impromptu tunnel.



On the other side, the demon had disappeared, along with the bat, but that didn’t seem to bother Varek. He sprinted off toward a destination only he seemed capable of sensing. They had arrived in a desert filled with large chasms. While still in a similar geographical area, it was impossible for Laurence to determine precisely where.

“What now?” he called as they ran.

“Are you aware you ask me that every time our plans are dashed to pieces?”

“Maybe if we planned on having our plans ruined, I wouldn’t be so lost all the time!”

“Fair enough. The next time we arrive, and that wretched bat does something I cannot predict, assume I’ve come up with another plan that will fail, bringing us to an identical situation as this one.”

Laurence grinned. It was clear Varek had no idea what they would do, or even what they would find around the next bend. However, the time for another unknown confrontation came more quickly than anticipated. In the distance, flashes of green could be seen from a chasm.

The pair came to a halt at the rim of a narrow canyon, which cut through a lower lying area ahead. They could still make out blasts of green Magic as the demon wound her way through the serpentine formation, chasing the bat.

“Come on!” yelled Varek, taking off into a sprint alongside the channel. “We can catch up more quickly this way!”

Sure enough, their straight path proved far more efficient than the winding one below. Through gaps open to the sky, they could see the demon leaping and weaving, her coat flapping wildly behind her, her talons sending bursts of spellwork toward the bat, which was frantically weaving its way through the rock, searching for anywhere to hide. While around humans, it had been aggressive, but when faced with a demon, the urge to preserve its life had clearly come to the forefront of its mind.

As the demon sent balls of twirling green fire into walls, rocks, and stalagmites, one would occasionally connect with the bat. The moment it impacted, its trail solidified into a channel of foul Magic, drawing back to the demon herself. The effect was clear: the life or power of the bat was being siphoned off. For every foot the bat slowed, however, the demon also lost a step. One might have been losing strength, the other gaining, but both appeared equally disrupted by the effect.

“That is why you can’t trust a demon!” Varek yelled.

“I don’t know. She seems quite focused on destroying that thing,” Laurence countered.

“Spells like that aren’t meant to exist, stripping the Magic from our very souls. When that bat’s gone, you’d best watch yourself.”

Laurence didn’t appear as confident, but he nodded anyway.

Sending a spell of his own into the distance, Varek targeted a tall rock formation. Again, a blade made of wind swept forward at incredible speed. What at first appeared ineffective as it passed through the stone instead proved deadly as the rock began to slide, completely bisected with surgical precision. Seconds later, it collapsed.

The landslide would have crushed the bat had it not blinked forward a dozen yards, winking in and out of existence with a green flash of light. However, the effort had cost the corrupted creature, and it began to flounder in the sky.

The demon glanced up at Varek, a disturbed scowl on her face, but she continued on, summoning a portal directly through the rock. On the other side, a large blast of green Magic could be seen, which shook the earth enough to send the fallen rock further crumbling into the chasm.

Nearing the collapse, Varek and Laurence levitated downward, only to find charred stone and fizzling patches of green Magic. Behind the next rock formation, however, they came face to face with the demon herself. Sitting on an outcropping, she had removed her hat and coat, revealing a rough, black leather-like outfit. Out in the hot desert heat, her satin black skin beaded with discolored sweat. Without the hat, it was revealed that she did in fact have deep crimson hair and small horns - a detail that was not lost upon Laurence.

“You have horns!” he exclaimed before anyone could say another word.

The demon’s burning eyes grew wide, and she reached up, grabbing them with both taloned hands. “Say it isn’t so!”

The strange creature’s attempt at humor only served to further unhinge Laurence. He stood there, his mouth hanging open, looking as dull as he likely felt, while Varek only scowled.

“Not what you were expecting from a demon, hmm?” she finally said.

