

THE WITCHES OF AENID

By

Sahith S. Tiger

It was the witches, the soldiers whispered to each other. It had to be the witches.

Who else could make their former General so afraid that he would come out of hiding and seek protection from the king? Who else would have the king himself so worried that he would provide said protection, letting General Aram hole up in the most secure dungeon in the land? Why else had all the female soldiers been removed from the general's protection detail?

It was the witches, they said. It had to be the witches. They were coming to kill him.

After all, the coven never forgets.

By the time Captain Garveth arrived at the keep, rumors were already flying out of control among the men. The witches were going to attack from the sky, throwing fireballs down at them to destroy the keep and the dungeon. The witches could turn invisible, and would cut everyone's throat in their sleep. The witches could breathe poison, and would kill everyone just by coming near the camp. They were invulnerable. No, no, they could suck the life out of you and use it to keep themselves young. They had houses with giant chicken legs that could walk right up and fire cannons out the windows. They could turn you into toads. Make you become a monster that no woman would ever look at again...

And so it went. Gar was greeted with all this and more even before he and his company of wizards were riding in through the gate. The magicians listened with what he suspected was growing amusement; they'd already warned him that the coven relied on their exaggerated legends to spread fear. Their chief warlock was a clean shaven, calm, serene man with a quiet voice; contrary to the popular image of the long-bearded old man. He was as wise as any, though; and he simply smiled to himself and shook his head. Garveth, on the other hand, was angry even before he'd dismounted.

"I want to make some things clear," He said a few minutes later, having assembled most of the men in the yard, "One: You see these men behind me?" - he gestured towards the four mages, who were armed with swords and magical staffs, ready for battle - "they're the most powerful warlocks that the Wizard's Council could spare. While they're here, not only is no witch any match for us, but they can even sense any magic that so much as comes a mile near these walls. They are also very, *very* amused by your stupidity. I am not.

"Two: The secrets of magic, as has been repeatedly made clear, are a closely guarded secret kept by the Council. They are not in the habit of sharing their powers without care, meaning that the tall tales of the witches' powers are exactly that: tales, meant to make soldiers behave the way you are behaving right now. Third: I do not care how terrified you are or how much you believe in the myths of the coven; you are soldiers of His majesty, and while you are under my command, you will behave as such or I *will* see you hanged. Are we clear?"

There was a murmur of assent. Gar wasn't pleased.

"I said," He growled, "*Are we clear?*"

"Yes, Sir!" The men snapped to attention.

The "clarity" of the situation proved somewhat murky, though. It turned out that several of the men had brought in magical artifacts (most were fake, but a few real) for protection against the imagined threat. Less than an hour later Gar was looking at a number of assorted talismans, amulets, charms and such, spread out across a table in front of him. Opposite him, Ioren Azkar was rubbing his head, already looking tired.

"None of this is dangerous?" Gar stressed.

"Not directly, no. In fact, most of these give off very little magical energy. It's snake oil nonsense. This one, for instance," - he picked up a small package wrapped in white clothing - "the leaves of a rat-tree, plucked under moonlight I think, and boiled, dried, powdered and wrapped in linen. Of course, that's only half the recipe; to get any magic out of it the mixture must be kept under the noon sun for an hour every day for six months, then the powder released into distilled water and mixed with an herbal oil that bring out the - well, you get the picture. It's harmless, but foolish."

Gar spent the next hour sorting out amulets and talismans that the magicians detected, and vented his frustration by yelling at the idiots responsible. It was almost two hours later that he was even able to meet General Aram face to face.

"General." He saluted, having known from experience that even ex-servicemen liked to be treated as soldiers.

"Captain." The man returned the salute, but it was half-hearted and apprehensive. He was thin and frail, and seemed a tired old man more than anything.

"General, this is Ioren Azkar, he's the Chief Warlock of the unit sent to oversee the security detail." Ioren bowed, serene and calm.

"What, no beard?" Aram managed a smile as he extended a hand. Ioren shook it, smiling. "Everyone asks that," He replied. "I refuse to bow to stereotyping; so I've used a spell to keep myself beard-free."

"I meant no offense."

"And you have given none. I've discovered it serves as a good conversation starter, as well." Both men laughed, and Gar could sense Aram relaxing a bit.

"Drink with me." The General suggested to them both, pointing at a full jug of wine sitting on the table. "They've brought me the finest Neruvian vintage, but I'm loath to drink alone."

The wine was indeed fine; even Gar could tell a great vintage just by the beautiful aroma that filled the air as the cask was opened. They sat down around a table, where the general had been reading a book - he pushed it aside as a servant brought glasses, and they raised a toast.

"To the end of the witch menace." Said the general.

"To keeping the secrets of magic away from the coven." Said the magician.

"To you both," said Gar, "for being the harbingers of those two things." And they drank.

The liquor was strong and burned sweetly just right as it went down, and the three men relaxed. "So, Captain." said Aram with a smile, "How are the rumors among the soldiers?"

Gar grunted. "I think Azkar is very amused by them." - the magician smiled - "I, on the other hand - "

"I remember. The coven has always relied on superstition, even when I was fighting them. All nonsense, of course. In all my years I've never met a witch who could fly or throw fireballs or any of that hogwash. They are *outstanding* assassins, I'll grant you that much, and the battle-witches are hardened fighters in combat, but that's just about it."

"Magic is a discipline not easily learned - or shared, for that matter. We have female wizards and warlocks, of course, but when the coven was formed and started gaining its reputation, the Council chose to distance itself from them. Very wisely, I might add."

"I was there, you know." Aram's eyes went out of focus as he remembered. "I was in the second war - I witnessed the Dark Times - plague, drought, and famine, all together. Many thought we would never make it past them."

"Magic is also a dangerous discipline, General. The witches were messing around in things they did not understand, and that was the result."

The general sighed. "And we, the hunters, we put an end to them. We followed orders to the end, without question. And when the time came, they called *us* monsters and tossed us aside like dogs. We, who did their work for them. We, whose hands were red with blood so theirs could be clean."

"Not all have forgotten that you served your nation in a time of great peril, general. The guards may be superstitious, but there are still many who volunteered for this assignment. To keep you safe. Your life will be guarded – that much I can promise, one soldier to another." He raised his glass to the general, who nodded in silent gratitude.

"They will still try, you realize." Magicians had never been the most tactful lot, and Azkar wasn't an exception, it turned out. "It would be foolish to think otherwise. There *will* be an attempt on your life, sir. Whether that happens today or five years from now, I cannot say. Assassination is a patient line of work, and the witches have developed an extraordinary patience for it over the last century."

"I cannot stay here five years. I will not cower in a cave like an animal."

"You would be risking life, limb, and perhaps worse if you abandon the king's protection. The coven has ways of dealing death that make hanging seem like a pleasant, quiet end."

"And what would you suggest?"

"Go back into retirement, general. The Council has helped hide you before, and we can do so once again. You will not be found."

"That is what was said the last time, and yet here we are. Not only have I been found, but there has been a direct declaration of threat against my life."

"I can offer no excuses, but only the confidence that we are better today than we were when you retired all those years ago. You have not been abandoned, sir. As the captain said, not all have forgotten that you served your nation. I am older than I look, general, and I was there – I have witnessed many of the same things you have seen. You and men such as you brought us through the Dark Times, and we have not forgotten."

"I – thank you, I do not know what to say."

"You need not say anything. But you must excuse me, for I must check on my warlocks."

Gar drained his glass as the wizard left. "I must go as well, general." He said. "Security and all that."

"You may stay. At least someone has to be here inside the room if – if they make it this far."

Gar tried to keep his smile out of his voice as he answered, "It is possible that you are being overly paranoid. I can assure you – "

"Regardless. If know of your reputation. I would have a great fighter such as yourself at my side, if I am to die, blade in hand."

"I can assure you again, general, if I am by your side, you will never need to draw a blade to fight off an assassin."

Aram nodded his gratitude. "Stay, then."

"All right. More wine, then?" He raised his glass to the old soldier. "To you. For seeing this nation through its darkest hour." And they drank.

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How exactly the Dark Times had come about was a question historians still debated over. The war had played a role, of course, but the plague and the famine hadn't helped. During the war, for the first time in Aenidian history, women had been admitted into the military; the dwarven war machines were terrifying; and they simply didn't have the numbers to fight them. The tactic had worked - nearly overnight, almost a hundred thousand female soldiers were added to the might of Aenid's forces, and a year later, the war was won: it wasn't a clean victory, but it was a victory nonetheless.

Sometime during the war, however, the witches emerged.

Many believed that they had always existed, had simply chosen the chaos to come out into the open. Others thought they were a blessing, since they fought *with* the army and against the dwarves. No one knew the truth. The battle-witches were the most prominent, strong, Amazonian warriors who had extraordinary resilience to pain and injuries. However, soon hushed whispers spoke of assassins and potion-mistresses, those that worked behind doors unseen, bringing about deaths of prominent dwarven leaders and traitors within the Aenidian nation itself. By the end of the war, The Witches Coven had become a legend.

But it didn't end there.

After the war, with the army decimated and most of the reserve forces gone, guardsmen missing from cities and towns alike, bandits and highwaymen ran amok in the land. Some were ordinary gangs, thriving by preying on smaller villages and extortion, others were small armies, strong enough to fight off any posses and militia that went against them. But none of them compared to the Coven. They were the strongest and the craftiest, the most powerful and the most feared. They'd gone from the stuff of legends to become nightmares. Nearly every gang in the country gave them a cut of their profits; nearly everyone was terrified of them. Their enemies died of everything from mysterious causes to a blade struck in broad daylight; in the aftermath of the war, with thousands of women coming home trained in the ways of battle, recruitment had gone way up - at some point, according to speculation, they were at least fifty thousand strong and in control every bandit gang in the realm. They became the thing that mothers scared their children with.

Then, one day – and on this part all accounts agreed – some wizards tried to stop them. The coven had been attempting a dark ritual in a tower out in the moors at the borders, and the Council of Magic, as luck would have it, got wind of the event. The resultant battle of spells and curses was seen for miles around, and by the end the tower was no more – not destroyed, but *no more* – and instead was a charred land, black as night, around the area. Who survived, no one knew. Nothing grew there from then on. Except the plague.

It was no coincidence that the first sick were found nearest to the scene of the battle. Within a month half the country was sick, dying from bleeding and diarrhea. In a year, famine and drought joined the curse of Aenid, the king himself was dead and replaced by his young (and inexperienced) son, and the Dark Times were upon them.

Then, finally, the witch hunters arrived. The less was said about them the better, but there was no question that the problem itself was solved soon after. They knew how to fight back, how to use the coven's own tricks against them. The few open battles that took place were short yet bloody, leaving fields of bodies behind. Any attempt at negotiating a peace was rejected.

Slowly, the army had reformed, and was finally bringing order back. The plague subsided, the famine went away, droughts replaced by rain and calm climes. And the coven was hunted to the ends of the earth.

The most ruthless of the hunters had been General Aram, the slayer of witches. He had formed the new army, led them, stopped the bandits, and helped put the new Regent in place. And then, once Aenid had begun to recover, he promptly disappeared. For fear of the witches, some said – a rumor that had now been confirmed to be true – for while it no longer had the power it once held, the coven was still out there, and the witches did not forget.

And now, thirty years later, a dagger and a piece of parchment with a drop of blood had arrived at his doorstep, on the farm that he had now chosen to call home. Somehow they had found him.

More importantly, they wanted him to know they were coming. And if they did, Gar might just be only thing that stood between the greatest general of their time and the greatest assassins Aenid had ever seen.

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When night fell, Gar made another round of security checks. He yelled some more at a few of the men to keep them awake and on their toes. He met the wizards to make sure they were staying awake in turns. He made sure all the torches were lit so no one would be able to sneak in using the cover of darkness.

When he returned to the dungeon, Aram had woken up, having fallen asleep at some point in the evening. He rang a bell and ordered food for the general and himself, and sat down to pour some more wine for the two of them. There was no point in letting good Neruvian vintage go to waste, now that it had been opened.

When the food arrived, Gar began eating hungrily, but the general stared at it as though mesmerized, lost in the thought.

"Eat, sir." Gar reminded him. "Please, there's no point in starving yourself and doing the witches' work for them." He was happy to see a smile in response.

"I am sorry to have been so much trouble, Captain."

"Nonsense. I am honored be your bodyguard."

"You may not feel that way when the time comes."

"No one is going to get at you here in -"

"No place is completely secure. You and I both know this. Did you know that all the officers that I served with are dead? Every one of them. Most died from "natural" causes. I am the only one left."

"And you will still be, when we can relocate you once again. For now, you must eat."

"We were the elite, you know." His eyes glazed over as his mind wandered, "We were the heroes that stopped the monsters, and look how we are rewarded."

"Please, general. You are not helping yourself."

The man sighed. "You're right. Pour me some more wine."

"There we go." Gar obliged. "Times have changed since you fought the coven. I have faced them in battle twice - I'm sure you know this already, since you requested me to protect you - and survived, so I can assure you, you are safe."

"The coven is an abomination, Captain. Do not underestimate them."

"I do not underestimate their capacity for horror, general. They recruit the greatest filth that the Gods have put on this earth. Did you know, for example, that the witches buy hermaphrodite children from their mothers nowadays?"

"No, I did not. Why? Hermaphrodites should be killed on birth, isn't that the way?"

"It is. But as you said - abominations. Who knows why they do such things?"

They ate in silence for a while. A minute later, the general coughed, reached for his wine, and froze. He tried to move, but couldn't. He then tried screaming, but realized he couldn't do *that*, either. His body convulsed, and he fell, seizing up, from the chair.

"W-wine." He wheezed. "C-Captain, the w-w..."

"It was in the glass, not the wine."

Captain Garveth continued eating his food, and in the darkness, the light of the torches reflected eerily in his eyes. He kept eating, calmly. The general tried to scream again, to no avail.

"It's the poison." The man who called himself Garveth explained. "Paralyzes your throat first, so there's no way to scream. No one is coming to help you." He smiled, "Oh, and to answer your question," He added, "It is easier for a hermaphrodite abomination such as myself to pass for a man, and we need some who can do that, since most of the coven are women."

Gar reached out and poured himself another cup.

There really was no point in wasting good Neruvian wine.

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The historians had gotten one thing and only one thing right - no one *did* know for sure what had caused the Great Peril. The witches, however, knew that they *hadn't*.

Unbeknownst to many, the war's greatest strength had been the coven, which, contrary to any known theories, had been formed by the military, and was not some thousand-year old secret organization. When women had begun joining the military, an elite unit was formed; with the specific purpose of "unconventional warfare" in mind. They were the ones who had experimented on themselves using the wizards' formulas to create battle-witches. They were the ones who became shadows and tricks in the light, to sneak behind enemy lines and cut throats and disappear. They were poison-tasters, mixing with antidotes on a daily basis so their bodies turned venomous, able to kill a man just by sleeping with him. They'd become spies and informants, consorts and prostitutes who traded in information. They were the ones who had studied potionmaking, illusions, and other intricacies of magic, the little-known fields that had nothing to do with explosions and fireballs. They were the ones who became assassins, not out of need or want, but because they were ordered to.

And then the war was over, and there was no one to impose order upon the land.

The king's army was decimated and in shambles, and whoever was left had been ordered to the capital. The nation's economy had become dependent on the war, and the rising taxes had left most of the realm stricken in poverty. Many a soldier came home to find their families dead, dirt poor, or homeless. Some fought to keep things together - others turned to looting and joined the bandits. The Coven, now ordered to join the army at the capital, then decided to split off from the Regency and make an attempt to fight the growing bandit menace. An enraged king was helpless, at least then, to do anything about it.

The witches' numbers, once again contrary to popular belief, had been tiny by comparison. At its height it had less than a thousand women, and a few men, all who had known and trained in nothing but making war from the shadows for the past three years. And that was exactly what they did.

Rumor and myth became their greatest weapon. An already growing legend was encouraged and actively escalated, vastly putting their numbers and capabilities beyond the truth. Instead of attempting to exterminate the bandits - which would've been impossible given their numbers - they controlled them. The most notorious of the looters died in the numerous different ways the coven knew of, and the rest of them eventually chose to cooperate. What could've been an age of chaos was averted, instead an organized reconstruction began slowly emerging, with banditry becoming less and less profitable and more and more likely to end with you dead. Slowly, Aenid began to recover.

Then the battle of the Black Tower happened.

The Council Of Wizards hadn't been happy with the coven - they had helped create it, and now it was running amok without taking orders. When skirmishes began between the two organizations, no one expected it to become an all-out war, but that's exactly how it played out. Blood feuds are difficult to end, and this one was no exception. At the Black Tower, their biggest battle yet left both sides with heavy losses. It was another unforeseen factor, and yet another one emerged again when the plague hit.

Plagues had always been associated with superstition, and now that order was falling apart once again, the Regency needed someone to blame.

A scapegoat. Ripe for slaughter.

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"You knew." Gar said with a smile. "One of the elite, wasn't it? The top level witch hunters knew the truth. But you started killing us anyway."

The general made no reply - his gaze was fixed somewhere on the ceiling with a look of horror on his face.

"No need to worry about that." The hermaphrodite's smile grew even wider. "Hallucinations are a side effect of the poison. So is the pain in your chest. You won't last long now, it's all right. Not like all the women you burned to death, general. You'll get a better death than them. Did you even know that the coven *disbanded* after the plague hit? What was left of us became doctors and nurses, trying to fight something we had no idea how to stop. Most of those who died by your hands were innocents – who never had any idea why it was happening to them. But we came together once again, when men like you began hunting us – because we knew the day would come when we would be able to hunt you back. And here we are."

A wheezing noise informed the witch that the paralysis had spread to Aram's lungs. Not long now. Only a few more moments, with only his killer and the illusions of his worst nightmares for company.

"In case you're wondering," Gar said to him as if simply to make conversation, "Ioren Azkar was right – we *aren't* that proficient in magic. Very few of us study the art. We've always preferred the simpler methods of assassination. Captain Garveth, for example, when you requested him for your security, you asked for a man whose face no one in this camp had ever seen. The rest was easy."

The wheezing grew louder. There was a struggle, as if to move, to run, but the paralysis made him unable to do anything. A moment later, General Aram, Slayer of Witches, was dead.

Captain Garveth poured out the rest of his wine and raised the glass. "To you." He said, "For dying as well as we planned." and he drained the last of the Neruvian. Captain Garveth then left the dungeon, gave orders that the general was not to be disturbed, and retired to his tent. Captain Garveth was never seen again.

Hours later, a servant came by to check on the old soldier, and screamed. No one knew how it had happened.

It was the witches, the soldiers whispered to one another. It had to be the witches.

After all, the coven never forgets.

