

Tales of Solei: Daunted

It was dark. Quiet. Cool. The same feeling for years, decades even. Yet the figure captive held no fear or discomfort. Scaled skin of gray rested upon the throne of shaped petals. Her once strong tail, with shark-like fin upon the tip, sat motionless. Dust clung to her form in a layer so thick it mottled her dark spots gray. The whole of her form rested without movement save for the occasional flicker of her eyes beneath lids drawn closed. It was dark. Quiet. Cool.

Beneath the gray lids closed tight, Zanara didn't see darkness. She didn't hear the quiet. Coolness escaped her. A lifetime of adventure, love, and companionship swept beneath her closed gaze. A world of mirth and conflict. Passion filled her at the start. Eagerness carried her through the obstacles. But they wouldn't stop. None would stop. Zanara's brow quivered slightly. The torrent of memories bled within her mind into a painting of despair and at the center of it all was but one name. Her eyes peeled open with a fright, dulled gold upon bloodshot white sclera. Her hushed gasps quieted. What was that name?

There were no answers here. No advisors to satiate her question. No followers to flaunt her name. Nothing but the old and decayed ruins of a temple long fallen and forgotten. Zanara didn't forget. She chose not to remember. Her gray eyes slid shut, the dull gold slipping to darkness. Her body did not stir the stillness of the shattered throne room. Her gaze did not take in the dark. She returned to the world within and told herself it was more real than the reality her body occupied. What whimsy...

In the cool, quiet of the dark temple's sepulchre a shape stirred. From the very shadows, black tendrils inked their way along a column. The goddess had not seen its shaded, amorphous form. Or maybe she had and simply didn't care. She cared of nothing new beyond the nothingness she knew. No adventure. No food. No sex. And the amorphous blob persisted alongside the goddess, the jester to the fallen queen. But a hunger gnawed throughout the decades all the same.

Vibrations against the column wrought a spastic response from the elastic blob. Triangular ears shot up from the form, pivoting toward a scratching sound from elsewhere in the temple. Garnet eyes by the dozen snapped open. They wildly wheeled about, searching for the source of sound but it was not here. The blob coiled and curled its way down the column. It sloshed over the rocks and ruins into the cobwebbed halls.

From time to time an adventurer would come. The final home of a goddess resigned made a tempting target for thrill seekers and treasure gazers alike. Food, the blob thought. The glow of light reflected from a side passage and the dark, shifting shadow flesh of tendrils and eyes paused. Her tendrils leached out and lingered at the corners of the door. Triple mouths watered with need. The need to feed.

Deri panted softly, the coolness of the temple bringing a faint fog to her breath. Her amber eyes reflected the light of her torch as she gazed at the worn frescos on the walls. A story older than the temple's residents. Shaking her head, the wolf woman continued, her hand tightening on the edge of her explorer's vest as she flicked the light ahead. The main hall to the sepulcher was just up ahead. Taking a deep breath, Deri continued on. There was a strange tension in the air. Her tall, triangular ears flicked across her braided black and gray hair. Amber eyes on orange sclera blinked the edge of tears away. Something was in the air. Something else.

Turning the corner, her breath shivered as the flashlight in her hand bathed the hall in a brilliance of light. Only emptiness hung in the hall. It didn't feel empty, not to Deri. Her beige trousers rustled with every step, her long fluffy tail wagging with apprehension. Beyond a veil of vines ahead was the antechamber to the temple's sepulcher.

The wolf woman's hands gripped the machete hanging from thick leather and with a single clean motion, parted the vines. Her eyes widened with mute awe. The antechamber was shockingly preserved and quite large. A statue, but a pair of standing legs at this point, dominated the center. Deep gouges were tugged from the stone work pedestal. Long, deep claw marks. Deri's chest tightened. Her ear pivoted as the sound of falling stones pulled her gaze to the corner.

Shadowy flesh blended and melded with the colors of the stonework. The light passed over the flattened bob. The hunger was real and she was still unseen. In the darkness, shadow flesh morphed. It shifted and twisted. The ooze took shape. Two legs. A torso. A tail. Two arms, one shortened significantly to the other. And atop the black furred shoulders a fox's head emerged. Long black hair cascaded behind the shapeshifter. Penny's garnet hued eyes opened. Penny... that was her name. Gaze down at her stump arm, the fox-woman felt a pang of pain. It was an old wound and yet the pain was not there. It was inside. Scattering hisses escaped the fox-woman as she serpented up the columns.

Something inside was missing. Something that stayed her hunger. Penny looked down at the wolf within her den. She licked her lips, her large clawed hand stretched and gripping the column. Penny wanted to eat. She wanted to devour that which she'd been denied for so long. Was that not her nature?

With a fluid like elasticity, the shapeshifting fox skirted over the ceiling. Her leg gripped the stonework, seeping into the cracks for anchorage. Red garnets gazed downward. Penny's body trembled. Something else needed this feeding. Her body wicked downward like a stretching strand of saliva. Her mouth watered. Drool dripped toward the wolf below.

Deri paused. Something was here. Something real. Her hand pivoted the flashlight, scanning for that which made her fur bristle. A brush against her shoulder. Wetness. Her eyes looked at the

dripping drops before following them to the source. A maw hung over her head. Rows of teeth and an inky black gullet poised to swallow her whole. Deri's chest tightened, her mind frozen in fear. Her body, though, knew exactly what to do. The flashlight dropped. Gloved hands gripped the black and orange grip of the pistol tucked in her trousers. The large bore barrel lifted upward, Deri pulled the ring trigger.

A satisfying 'oomph' belched from the gun as a ball of burning fire roared upward. It struck and delved deep in the shadowy mass, hissing and tearing at the flesh. Flames erupted over the creature that would doom Deri so easily. The wolf woman dove to the side as the pained 'thing' landed in a heap of snapping fury. Rolling roughly, Deri held the spent flaregun in her left hand. Her eyes tightened on the shifting shape of shadow flesh. The flames were weakening under its thrashing.

Its not dead... She thought and her right hand gripped the worn wood pistol grip of her coach gun. The sawed off, 12-gauge double barrels leveled on the amorphous mass morphing back into some creature.

A fox... Deri thought. Her eyes rested for a moment on the stump arm of the shapeshifter. Her finger tightened and twin blasts kicked the gun up in her hand. The coachgun kicked her arm back, the concussive pain resonating through Deri's muscles as the gunsmoke wafted out the spent barrels. And yet, the fox simply stood, unbleeding and unharmed. Deri's eyes widened with brief panic as deep garnet eyes stared out at her.

"I... hate... fire," Penny hissed, her tongue singed and soured by the flaming ball the wolf put in her. Tendrils tipped in clawed paws stretched out and slashed the temple's stonework.

Those same claw marks Deri had seen earlier. The wolfwoman braced as the fox stepped closer. No... this wouldn't do. Taking a deep breath, her grip tightened on the grips of her weapon. Her tail stiffened. She sized up the fox as every ounce of her chest burst. This was something else. This was a monster. Panic set in and with all her strength, the wolf pitched the flaregun at the fox before turning.

"Fuck this," She panted under her breath, still holding 'Loudmouth' tight in her other hand. Fluffy lupine tail swished against the back of her thighs with every step. Deri hazarded a look over her shoulder. The fox was standing. Staring.

Her chest quivered with every heavy beat of her heart. Closing her eyes she turned forward but as they opened again, the fox now stood before her, as though teleported. Deri skidded to a stop, panting shallow breaths.

"W...what are you..." Deri's voice gravelled in growing terror. Before the fox could answer, she was already running along the halls. Was she getting out? Going deeper? The wolf woman

couldn't tell. Another sheet of vines and overgrowth lined the doorway ahead. The walls were narrowing toward the end of this passageway. The sepulcher. Maybe there would be another way out through there. Deri looked behind her and all she saw was a foaming mist of tendrils and teeth. It was enough to add extra cadence to her step.

She hit the wall of overgrowth and vines, struggling to push through in panic. The plant life clung to the wolf woman's gray and black furred body. Thorns cut into her beige trousers and scraped against her vest's pockets. The sound of snapping jaws drew closer and closer. Deri pushed with frantic aggression, even biting her jaws on the vines that clung to her face. Something gave way, something inside releasing. Deri plunged deep sepulcher. This room was massive but Deri didn't have time to appreciate its splendor.

She pushed off the ground, running as fast as she could. She could feel the growling closing in now. Deri could see a faint light within the center of the huge hall. If she could just make it there, maybe she could make some kind of stand. A tightness gripped her arm. More tightness at her ankle and around her hips. Constriction gripped her and down she fell, with her heart and hopes sallying equally into the abyss. The tendrils turned her over. They crept up her arms and down her legs. Beneath her blouse and between her knees. Deri stabbed her toe against the little knotch inside her boot and a knife tip slipped up. She kicked at the fox, the silvery blade slashing at the shadow flesh with little avail.

"Ssssstill," Penny hissed, her rage fading. Her gaze tightened on the wolf woman's amber eyes. Eyes of the sun. Penny shut hers and turned away. She needed to eat. She could not persist like the fish. Her tendrils tightened as the wolf woman let out a whimper. There was no time for teasing twisted tastings. She needed it now. Her maw peeled back, sharp teeth glistening in the dimness of the sepulcher. Deri flinched, her ears folded back. This wasn't how she was supposed to go. She needed more booze. More bitches. More bling. The air in her breath stifled as it was crushed from her lungs. She threw her head back, eyes squeezed shut at first. But as the pressure suffocated her further she gazed out with pleading, hopeless orbs. She could barely see as darkness closed in.

"What are you doing in here..." A voice broke into Deri's fading consciousness. The pressure released suddenly. She gasped sharply, the world spinning back into bleary focus. The fox had recoiled and hissed but stood her ground. Deri looked between her legs at the bitter black furred woman before her gaze pitched up. A woman... the tip of a thresher shark's tail tapped Deri's chest harshly. Heavily

"She's not supposed to be here and neither are you, abomination," Zanara's voice spoke with cold callousness to the beast she could not shake. Two sides of the same sad coin, around each other they would spin. The fox would not go. And neither would Zanara. Still, there were boundaries to this dynamic. Stepping over the mortal wolf with little worry, the sharkwoman placed herself between Penny and her prey.

"You have one job, Penny. You keep the world out," Zanara's arms crossed as she enforced her will.

Deri's ear flicked. Penny... such an innocuous name for something so bloodthirsty. Still, with the moment's respite, the wolf slowly rose. Her heart thud steadily beneath her bloused breasts.

"I keep, I keep," Penny answered with enthusiasm. She'd not seen the shark rise in so long. So so long. Her tail thrashed left and right as she dropped onto all fours and yipped, "I keep and I eat!"

"Not in here... you'll make a mess of my floor," Zanara scoffed and crossed her arms. She'd forgotten just how annoying the fox was. Her brow furrowed as a weight sucked the breath from her chest. Turning, gold hued eyes stared with forlorn intensity into the amber orange eyes of the wolf. She'd known wolves before. A trifling bunch.

"What is your business in this temple?"

The sharkwoman's voice, though disused for so long, carried a weight that smothered Deri. The lupine woman froze. This... woman, whoever she was, she didn't seem to play. That which commanded the monster also commanded respect, Deri thought. She swallowed the lump in her throat and spoke, "I'm here for an artifact. A.. uh... a chalice.. You know? A cup?"

"There was no dinnerware here when we arrived," said Zanara. Her head tilting to the fox beside her she continued. "Penny, was there?"

"No!," The fox yipped and her tendrils swayed like tails with glee. Deri's heart sank.

"No... no it has to be here," Deri answered. Her head craned around the circular chamber. The stone throne in the center was the only furniture. Shattered and cracked stonework scattered the floor. No altar. Nothing that was promised.

"Maybe some other flippant beast came and took it," Zanara's hand raised the idea as she spoke it before clapping firmly back against her other arm. Her gold eyes glared back to the fox and Penny withered into the shadows with a cackle.

Deri's cheeks burned beneath gray and white fur. Her gaze fell from shark and fox to the ground. This wasn't right. The thought of a 'set-up' crept into her mind. Her eyes searched the room again for clues. She knew her brother was often on the wrong end of his debts. He rarely hung around the right crowd.

"There has to be something," Deri said, her voice gravelled by disbelief. Deri's orange eyes danced across the sharkwoman. She had a jewel on her neck. An ancient bracelet. Both of those had to be worth some value.

"Well, there isn't so it is ti-" A familiar, threatening click interrupted Zanara. The sharkwoman's eyes turned toward the wolf and narrowed upon the archaic looking rifle in the lupine's furred hands. It had been a long time since anyone thought to threaten her. It was almost amusing.

"What do you think you're doing," Zanara asked, her body half turned toward the wolf. The long finned tail behind her swayed with curious menace and faint sparkles luminesced from Zanara's dark spots.

Deri maintained her focus.

"I can't leave here without something. Something of value," She said, tilting her head as her gaze shifted to the brilliant green blue emerald embedded in Zanara's collar. Deri hoped the woman relented. She didn't want to have to kill anyone. She could kill this woman, right? The doubt crept in behind her cool orange gaze. The wolf wouldn't let it show. She tightened her focus as the shark turned to face her. Her breath stilled. The seconds drew out. The woman was going to make a move. Deri had been behind a rifle long enough to know when someone wasn't backing down. That alone told her this shark was dangerous.

Deri's eyes twitched as she stared. The glossy orange surfaces watered at the edges. She wanted to blink. She needed to blink. The lids of her eyes twitched and at last gave in. Her vision shuddered toward darkness and in the fading sight she could see the shark making her move.

Shit, she's fast, Deri thought as her eyes slid shut. Her finger depressed the trigger and the gun kicked. Her eyes flitted open to the shower of sparks from her bullet upon the sharkwoman's wrist. Deri didn't have time to actuate the lever for another round. Her mind was still processing how the woman dodged the bullet. She stepped back, keeping her rifle aimed but there was nowhere to retreat to.

Zanara's hand reached out and gripped the barrel of the rifle. She pushed it to the side and seized the lupine's furred neck. Drawing Deri close, Zanara flashed a brilliant grin, revealing the small triangular razors that lined her mouth. She drew the woman's face close to hers. Gold eyes stared deep into the orange orbs of the wolf.

"Empty handed... fool, I nearly allowed you to leave with your life," Zanara mocked. Her hand tremored slightly as the faint moments of anger faded from her form. She had the pup now. Metal pressed against her stomach, another click following the echoes of her words. Zanara drew back slightly, looking down at the hefty revolver pressed against her gut.

"I'm sorry, lady, but right now, there's more than my life at play. So I ain't gonna ask again," Deri's breath trembled under the weight constricting her throat. Her voice was hoarse. She didn't

care. She drove the Autorevolver's barrel into the shark's abdomen for emphasis. She put as much fury as she could behind her gaze. Her brother's life depended on it.

Zanara's gaze darkened. Her brow furrowed. A tickle tugged at the back of her throat. A rush of air forced through her rounded nose.

"Huh... ha. Ah ha. Hahaha," laughter tore from the shark. Zanara released the wolf as the mirth of the moment took hold. To think someone so minuscule could hope to press her. It truly was laughable.

"What in all of the stars would compel you to chase treasure as foolishly as you are feverish for it," she asked, stepping back from the wolf. Even Deri's mighty hand cannon was like an acorn to Zanara's divine durability, though one that might tickle.

"My brother. He got in bad with some assholes and now, if I don't bring them something good, they'll hurt him. Hurt him bad," Deri swallowed, her hand vaguely keeping the pistol pointed toward the shark. There was something strange about the woman. Unmistakably powerful, but just as dangerous as the fox from earlier. Her brow's arched as an idea filled her mind.

"Maybe you can help me? Or your pet monster? I mean it's only fifty... sixty guys," The words spilling from her mouth sounded foolish and naive but still she tried. She continued, "I could make it worth your while. There's got to be something in the galaxy you need?"

"You lack the power, prestige, and ability to grant what I need. And nothing in the cosmos will ever compare," Zanara said sourly. She turned her back on the wolf woman, glaring toward the stone petals of her throne. The raw edge of pain in her voice tore down that early overconfidence and bittered the curiosity of this creature. Slowly, Zanara started for her place of rest.

Deri's wolf eyes flicked over Zanara's slumped shoulders. She soaked in the sharpness of the powerful being's words before swallowing. Holstering her pistol, Deri stepped toward Zanara. Her orange eyes lowered, watering at the edges as she recognized the possibility her brother might die if these people wouldn't help her.

"Please lady... Miss. Please, he's my only family. All I got between these cold stars. He's an idiot, but... he means everything to me," As she spoke, Deri braced against the emotional storm in her chest. She hated that she hurt. She hated hurting in front of this stranger. Her eyes, cast toward the ground, lifted upward. To her surprise, she found Zanara had stopped.

"Everything..." Zanara repeated the wolf's words. Her soul bled to those words. There was once an everything for her, all in a singular individual. She knew what it was to lose. Should this

woman's loss be trivial, would that not also make her own loss trivial? Zanara's brow furrowed in thought.

From the corner, Penny watched with curiosity. What would the shark decide? The shapeshifter desperately hoped they would leave. It would be good to breathe fresh air and eat fresh people. The temple had long lost its allure, after all.

Zanara's head lowered and at last she let out a sigh. Her slender, ears scaled gray, lowered. She had to accept her loss was not trivial, and in doing so, she felt the absence of warmth that once occupied her side. She turned and gazed into Deri's eyes.

"Very well, my pet will handle the rescue and I shall supervise. You will take us there at once and when we are done, you will take me somewhere where I shall not be disturbed again. Is that clear?"

Zanara's voice boomed like the thunderous decree of a god. Deri stared, awestruck for a moment by the torrent of emotions flooding her furred form.

"I uh... yeah, thank you," She said, letting out the bottled tension in a long rush of air. The lupine woman took another step forward and offered her hand. It was customary, after all, to seal the deal. The shark stared at her hand for a moment before giving it a firm claps.

As they shook hands, giggles of glee erupted from the corners, cascading with menacing hisses across the stonework. Deri swallowed the tinge of nervousness as she looked over the shark. She seemed sad beneath her otherwise muted stoicism.

"I don't think I caught your name," she said, figuring this was the best time as any to get the introductions properly out of the way.

"I am Zanara Solei'anna of the Salt, and you?"

Deri released Zanara's hand and flashed the shark her signature finger guns.

"Derringer Steele, at your service, Miss Zanara."