

Valla 'Khan'

Uvennis

Backstory & Exaltation

Backstory

Born in the village of Gehenna, deep in the outskirts of the realm, Valla was born into the perfect rural household. A loving mother, a strong and caring father – Valla had everything he would ever need in that one village. Picturesque. Ideal. A target.

Though far from being helpless, what with the number of well-built adults and basic weaponry available, Gehenna had no protection to rely on from any nearby large towns or garrisons. "We don't need it. We can take care of our own." was the attitude taken by the town – a stance justified by the village's heritage.

Myths and tales, told to children to entertain their minds on dark evenings, spoke of guardians and heroes of the village, strong men who rose to fight back the encroaching darkness. Fables and fantasy, of course. Valla had never seen a monster in or near the village, or any heroes, clad in their shining armour.

Time passed, Valla lived his life in peace. Often he would work with his father, cutting lumber or tending the fields. Fourteen now, Valla was taking his steps into adulthood. In the coming months he would turn fifteen, and be able to take a bride. He knew who he wanted.

They knew who they wanted. Dark shadows crept through Gehenna, watching the people, observing them. As she slept, the dark tendrils of evil wove their magics. The village was awakened by a piercing howl, a vicious banshee cry that ripped the night. Men grabbed axes and hoes, torches in hand, converging on the noise. Valla stood next to his father, fear and anger rising. Aesila lived here with her family. If something had happened to her...

Encroaching, the crowd gathered around the house, men calling to those inside the house. Valla took one glance at his father, then recklessly darted forward. "Forget this! They might be in trouble!". Voices called after him, telling him to

stop, but he paid them no heed. Striking the door with his axe, Valla forced his way inside the house.

Echoing maliciously from upstairs, Valla began ascending toward the noise. Wicked shadows licked at the walls, a feral monster depicted in ragged fur, claws feasting upon the ground. Fury rising, Valla stormed around the corner, a battle cry raging in his throat. He stopped short of the door. Ahead of him, kneeling peacefully on the ground was a girl – his girl. Aesila.

Almost ethereal, she slowly turned to look at him. Her hair was a stark white, falling softly around her shoulders. She wore a dress of pure silken white, strange faintly glowing jewels adorning it. A chain tiara graced her forehead, a crimson red stone contrasting with the shade. At her feet, her mother and father, dead on the ground. She stared at Valla.

"Aesila?" Valla spoke, the words almost walking their own way out of his mouth. Her head inclined slightly, the whisper of a smile playing around her lips. Stepping through the doorway, Valla lowered his axe. Her gaze remained fixed on his. "Valla, what-" With blistering speed, Aesila pounced on Valla, knocking him down to the floor, her hands viced around his arms.

Pinned, Valla strained against her hold. Aesila lay fully on top of him, her legs pinning his, her arms pinning his. She edged her face closer to his, her smile slowly breaking into a snarl, her teeth still stained red with blood. Raging in his inability to break her grasp, Valla helplessly pushed against her. Her head moved closer and closer to his, until their noses were practically touching. Her teeth parted in a wolf-like grin. Her eyes boring into his, Valla stared furiously back at her. "Valla." Her breath whispered over his lips.

Crack! The sound of wood slapping against flesh filled Valla's ears, blood splashing across his face, the pinning force lifting and disappearing. "Valla! Get up! This is no time for-" Valla rolled to his knees, wiping the blood from his eyes. Blurred, he could see his father swinging wildly at Aesila, but the ethereal figure simply swayed and weaved through his attacks, unnatural speed and grace – almost beautiful to behold.

"Valla!" his father called again, shocking him from his reverie. Rising, Valla took hold of his axe once again and charged Aesila. She wasn't there as his axe swung through her form. Darting forward,

Aesila drove her hands deep into his father's chest, splaying the ribcage apart and open, gore spilling to the ground in waves. His father's eyes were wide, locked in a death stare of bewildered fear and pain. Aesila threw Valla's father across the room, the form slumping into an unintelligible heap on the floor.

No more. No more. "No More!" cried Valla, his blood roaring, pulse pounding.

Outside, the crowd continued to watch. The house remained silent for long moments, darkness and shadow consuming the minutes. Eventually, a figure emerged from the doorway, a bulky figure like a mish-mash of bodies. The men at the front readied their axes in preparation for what was coming. "Hold." Called the elder, raising a hand to ward off their weapons. Valla stepped through the doorway to the house. In one arm he carried the gore-ridden remains of his father. In the other, a stark white banshee of a girl.

Setting the bodies down, Valla simply remained silent against the questioning of the people. He was being torn inside, he could feel it. His eyes squinted against the throb in his head. "Have no fear Valla. The darkness will provide." His eyes flew open, boring down into her crimson gaze. Frozen, his heart seemed to stop in that moment. She smiled at him. With a whipping of darkness, her body was consumed into shadows that danced and flickered away through the night.

The monsters started coming from that night. At first they were merely beast and animals, attacking people in the fields. Then there were humanoid figures, twisted and warped. Finally, the monsters and aberrations of legend drifted their way into Gehenna.

From that night, Valla swore he would never forget. From that night, Valla swore that he would let the darkness go no further. From that night, Valla took up the axe of his father. Disregarding the lumber and the fields, Valla took the axe as if it were his brother. He would meet the darkness head on. Regardless of dark fiend came forth, he would fight it back. He swore on his father, on Aesila, on his axe.

Exaltation

After the tragedy of that night in Gehenna, years of suffering followed. The dark forces that sought to pervert and corrupt Aesila continued their assault. The elders could place no finger on the root of the evil, what did it want? Gehenna had no magical ley-lines, no tactical position, no powerful mages or warriors, that would often attract such forces. The persistent nature of the assault – not to mention the increasingly vicious nature of the creatures being sent forth – was taxing the village heavily.

Wolves, centaurs, wights, strange oozes that swallowed cattle whole; but a few of the earlier monsters sent forth. At first only the livelihood of the village was threatened, fields spoilt, water tainted, livestock consumed or left mangled in the fields. It was barely one week later, when the second human life was taken. The people became more wary after that. A vigil was struck at all times, blacksmiths began forging swords and military weapons, a watchpost was built and torches placed to illuminate the streets at night.

Throughout all of this, Valla never forgot his promise. Each night he would be roused from his bed, her pale eyes and flowing white hair still dancing in his mind. Each night he would meet with the next abomination, axe in hand, fury in heart. Months passed, Valla met each monster with barbaric fortitude. Years passed, Valla became an adult, clad in iron armour, wielding a great axe, forged for his deeds in protecting the village.

Five years passed to the day. Tomorrow, Valla would turn twenty. Each time this day rolled round, Valla simply sat in her old house, in that room. He watched the dark corners of the room and waited. Each morning he would leave, haggard and tired. So he found himself again, five years since the day, sitting in the room where the two people he cared most for had died, staring into the darkness. Two dots of light danced before his vision. Blinking, Valla shook himself out of his reverie and focused.

The eyes watched him for a moment, he could almost see the tilting of the head, like a cat watching in curiosity. Then she stepped out of the darkness and into the room, flowing like silk through a smoky mirror. Her form solidified, losing its ghostly opacity. Valla stood, observing her as she observed him. She had grown beautiful. He

hair was long, but she was a fully formed woman now, her hips and breasts accentuated by the white silk she wore. Her eyes were still pale, hair still white, lips still caught in that space between a smile and a sneer.

"Valla." she said. He was caught off-guard. Every night he had heard her whispering his name that final time, that to hear her say his name loudly, clearly, was chilling. Stepping forward into the moonlight from the window, Aesila continued to regard him. For some reason, Valla couldn't feel the grip of his axe or the plates of his armour, despite their weight. He stood dumbly, shifting between one foot and the other. *What are you doing? Slay her, slay the monster that took her and started this all!* His mind raged, his body ignored the pain. Valla's mouth silently spoke, the words failing to even form.

"Valla." she said again, reaching an arm out to him slowly.

"It's alright now, I've come to bring you home. Make us whole again." Gently, almost reverently, her hand brushed against his shoulder. Valla's entire form twitched, caught between action and her chilling touch. He knew that his axe was right there, he could feel it now, his hand digging into the haft, shaking with the pressure and desire. She took another step forward, more confident now, more brazen. Her other arm came to rest on his hand, and slowly she prised it from the haft of his axe, until their fingers were intertwined.

"Valla." She whispered again, as she pressed herself against him.

Crash! The axe slammed down onto the floor, the wood protesting loudly as the edge bore into the timber. But he could not hear it, all he could see was her face, all he could feel was her. She intertwined with him, and he with her.

The sun-struck roof burst into vision. He blinked. Shadows of trees danced on the roof, cast by the morning sun. Valla blinked again. Suddenly he felt his limbs return, and they snapped up, clenched in fists. What had happened? Lying naked in the bed, pieces of armour scattered across the room, Valla searched his mind for the answer. He had been there, on vigil as ever. She had been there. A tingle ran across his chest and he reflexively raised a hand and looked down. His finger traced a dark mark on his chest, like the scar of a handprint above his heart. *She was there* he

thought, the icy tingle of her touch returning in memory.

"**Valla! Valla! Quickly, find him!**" The cry from outside broke the chill he could feel consuming him. Almost snarling he dressed and armoured himself, sparing his axe only a moment to wrench it from the floor. Bursting out of the door and onto the street, armour still half-hanging off, Valla ran to the square where the villagers were gathered. The crowd was agitated, they were gathered around something, or someone. Parting at his approach, Valla spotted the elder and a tired looking man, hunched over, panting hard.

"Tell him. Tell Valla what you just told me." spoke the elder.

"A- a monster, bigger than anything we've seen - a giant!" At this, the crowd became further agitated, murmuring loudly amongst themselves.

"Quiet, quiet!" called the elder, waving his hands for the people to fall silent. "Valla, this is dire news indeed. If these dark forces seek to pit a giant against us, we will have no choice but to flee." The chill rose again through Valla but he shook it away, covering it in a blanket of self-anger.

"Where is the giant? How many days away?" asked Valla sharply.

"I spotted it two-day ago, I ran clean through the night to warn the elders. By now... a day away at most." panted the man.

"Very well. You should be commended for your service to Gehenna, friend." Valla turned to the elder. "I shall go to meet this giant." A buzz ran through the crowd. Insanity, madness, foolishness, they called. Valla ignored them.

"Valla, we need you here to help protect the village, we can't have you throw your life away fighting a battle you simply cannot win." Valla turned from him, from them all, staring across the hills.

"I swore to protect Gehenna. This giant will simply destroy the village, then there will be nothing to protect. No more. Not one more. **Not one more, do you hear me?**" he spoke, turning sharply to the elder.

"Then you are a fool, and you will die like one." Snarled the elder back at him.

Wasting no time, Valla packed and departed Gehenna. Some people were distraught, others bode him well with a warriors clasp, most were too busy packing their lives up to notice. Across the hills and through the forests, past brooks and rivers, steep drops and cliffs, Valla trekked as fast as he dared. He came to a great plane, eight hours out from the village, where the grass could be seen stretching to the misty horizon. There, carving a great trench of waste through the twisted woodland at the other edge, bore a giant. Twice as high as the tallest tree, wider and stronger than any man Valla had ever seen. The giant wore great ragged sheets of cloth as clothing and bore, over one shoulder, the trunk of a huge tree as a club.

Valla gawped at the sight. Slimes, man-scorpions, ghouls, dire-wolves – these are things he could fight on his own scale, but this? This giant? *Impossible* was the word that almost escaped his lips. Impossible was the fire he felt surge in his soul as he tightened his grip on the haft of his axe.

“I’m glad I finally have you alone, here together.” A female voice flashed through his mind, images of pale blue forms in the moonlight, tense, pulses racing. He twitched his head to one side, trying to focus on the grass and the trees, pushing the images back, away from his mind.

“You are the one, Valla, we want you with us.” Her caress, skin touching, a kiss, a hard grip, hearts together as one.

“No! Begone foul spectre!” Valla cried at the sky, the visions racing away like a dream in the morning. A long, low *hmm?* Sound echoed through the valley. Standing now outside of the twisted wood, the giant raised one hand, gazing in Valla’s direction.

“Fleshling come to play with Kurn? Kurn promise, fleshling won’t die, too quickly.” With an impressive surge, the giant dropped his meandering stroll and broke into an impending march, heading directly across the plain toward Valla.

This is it then. This is how it shall be. Valla closed his eyes, relaxing his grip on the axe and breathing deeply out. He felt the chill there, inside of him, her ethereal touch as part of him, her hand forever burnt onto his heart. *This is how it shall be.*

“Come then, foul creature! Come and meet your end!” cried Valla, eyes flaring open, charging across the plain toward the giant. A minute stood between Valla and the giant, his scream of rage tore across the plain and died out in echo as he ran. Air surged past his ears, the footsteps of the giant become louder, shaking the very earth. The trees and the grass whispered their secrets and fell silent as the pair met in the middle.

The earth exploded in front of Valla, as a tree trunk embedded itself in the ground, throwing a cloud of dirt into the air. Ducking to the side and around, Valla felt the surge of hope – the giant was exposed, yanking his club out of the ground. Roaring, he swung his axe with the full fury at his disposal, embedding it deep into the giant’s ankle.

“Aaaargh!” cried out the giant, roaring in pain. Valla felt his feet slip off the earth as the giant stomped one massive foot. Unbalanced, he could do nothing but watch as the giant reared his foot back, and kicked Valla directly in the chest. Stars burst, the darkness seemed to flicker on and off as both space and time were lost, sailing through the air. With a crash of leaves, Valla felt the branches of the wood catch him, then break before his path.

Spluttering, Valla hit hard upon the ground, trying to catch some air between hacking coughs. As he lay upon the ground, he could feel the giant’s approach, the sound of trees protesting against the giant’s wake, birds calling out in alarm. Clutching one arm to his chest, Valla staggered to his feet and ran, picking his way between the trees. Bushes and vines seemed to part before his wake, roots retracted underfoot, the earth level and hard. Glancing back, the path was filled with vines and gnarled brambles, branches and snares reaching out hopelessly against the path behind him.

Valla’s path was cut short, as he stopped paces from a high stone cliff, reaching above him. To the left and the right, the cliff stretched on through the twisted woodland.

“There you are, fleshling!” called a deep voice. Barely leaping to one side in time, Valla threw himself down as a tree impacted against the cliff-side. Scrambling away before the tree fell upon him, Valla looked up the giant, now moments away. He could scurry away into the woodland, keep running, stay ahead of its path. But for how

long? He turned and looked desperately again at the cliff. There, where the tree had hit it, a giant crack had split the wall, leading into some dark cave.

Not even stopping to think about it, Valla broke for the entrance, slipping inside before the giant had time to stop him. The giant shouted something after him, but the words were lost over Valla's desperate scrambling through the narrow passage. An eternity seemed to pass through that pitch-black tunnel, his fingers pawing desperately over the stone walls, feet kicking out, scattering rocks and stones beneath him. Where was he? Where was he going? What if the passage doesn't go anywhere? Would he even be able to find his way back in the darkness? Squelching the fear before it had a chance to get a foothold, Valla pushed on relentlessly. There had to be a way. There needed to be one.

A single glimmer of light sparkled ahead of him. The walls began to recede and even out, the floor smoothing beneath him. There was a chamber ahead with some light, a way outside! Down to a broken walk, Valla stumbled into the cave. There ahead of him was a well of some form, and he dropped to his knees and drank deeply of the water. He knelt there for a long time, his breath coming roughly, then evening out until it came normally to him. Sweat dripped from his forehead into the pool, his hands braced on either side of the well.

"What you must become." Her hand, like silk, brushed his cheek, her face close to his as that first time. Her eyes sparkled in their chilling white glow, skin pale and yet full of colour. She leaned in to kiss him.

"What you must become." she whispered again. Valla's eyes opened and fixed on his reflection in the pool, skin pale white, eyes gleaming pearl. *No!* he backed away in horror, his hand reflexively touching the mark on his heart. Valla sat back from the pool for a long time. *No.* He thought, the icy chill consuming him. He daren't rise, daren't risk catching his own reflection in the pool. Anger started to rise once again. It was just like the night before. His incapability at his own actions burning like a fire.

"**No!**" he screamed, and he plunged his fist into the pool of water, the surface shattering in its wake. His hand hit something down there, something cool and metallic. He reached down

and grasped it, drawing it upward and out of the pool. A long shaft of gleaming dark metal emerged from the pool, silver in colour. Holding the pole with both hands, Valla brought it completely out, a great axe head rising from the water.

He simply stood there, holding the great-axe for a long moment. Water beaded and dripped from the metal rapidly, the edge of the blade sparkling sharply. Something was engraved onto the hilt of the great-axe, Valla traced his finger across the markings. 'Valliana'. He weighed the great-axe in his hands. It felt... right.

Looking back down into the pool, Valla gazed down through the water. His reflection taunted him, but Valla only had eyes for the faintly glimmering metal, deep below the surface. It was quite a way down, he certainly wouldn't be able to reach it from here...

Foolishly checking to make sure nobody was watching him in the darkness, Valla stripped and stepped up onto the edge of the pool. Gazing down once again, he guessed how far down the metal glimmer must be. The handprint scar gleamed a ghostly blue in his reflection, and as he gazed down, Valla despised what he saw. He would find her. He would make her undo what she had done.

"Tiny fleshlings! Burrowing in the dark like worms!" came a booming voice from above. The cave rocked, soil spilling down into Valla's eyes. He flinched, raising his arms to protect himself, unbalancing his stance on the edge of the pool. With a splash, he fell into the pool, gasping only a brief amount of air. Disoriented, he flung out his arms to stop the spinning. There, directly beneath him lay a dark silver helm, its empty shell gazing back at him. *What you must become.*

Kurn ripped the roof of the cave apart, his huge fingers shovelling mounds of earth at a time. He gazed down into the cave, certain he had heard the man only moments before. Quickly spotting the discarded clothed and axe, Kurn looked down into the pool of water.

"Quick fishies, dart nimbly though fingers?" he mused down into the water. The surface of water began to bubble. Flinching back, Kurn observed as the entire well began to boil and spill over – a dark figure began to emerge from the turbulent storm. Water rained from the dark metal, raising

slowly. The pool emptied itself upon the floor of the cave. Valla stood upon the base of the well, feeling the base rise like a plunger, back to the surface. Looking up, he glared at Kurn. Flexing his plate-mailed glove, Valla reached down toward Valliana.

"Come to me, for today we fulfil our promise." The great-axe twitched then took to the air, flying to Valla's hand as if by magnetism.

"Fleshing in tin, make harder to eat – but no less tasty!" Kurn observed openly to Valla, raising one hand high in the air. Swinging the great-axe with both hands, Valla met the giant's fist head on. The axe bit deeply into the giant's hand, halting the punch and forcing Kurn to retract his arm, yelling in pain.

"For all those that died by your hand, I end thee!" Valla cried, raising the axe high. A glaringly bright light shone forth from both Valla and Valliana, and at that moment a golden stag reared its antlers. Feeling the power surging through him, at his command, Valla cleft the axe down low, rending the air with golden energy. The stag charged forth in a wave of sparkling power, the air sighing at its passage. Kurn raised a hand to shield the light from his eyes, before the wave struck him. As the giant bore a wake through the twisted woodland, the gold beam of energy tore like a knife through the earth, leaving a deep scarred crevice in its path.

Climbing out of the cave, Valla slowly began the trek back to the Gehenna.

Arriving half a day later, Valla was greeted by the sight of caravans and horses, loaded and ready to depart. The people were gathered in the square, talking, debating. A wave of silence followed the heavily armoured figure through the village as Valla approached the square. His heavy footsteps seemed to command their attention as he neared the elder, whose expression seemed to drop, and then become steeled with resignation.

"Whoever you are, begone from this place. We harbour no evils here!" a murmur of agreement rippled through the men, but nobody moved.

"I am glad to hear that has not changed in my absence, Elder." Valla spoke softly.

"Valla? Is that- Is that you?" the elder's eyes widened. "What happened? What of the giant?"

"Kurn the giant is dead. Slain by my hand." Valla looked off to one side for a moment, then back at the elder. "They were after me, Elder. All this time, they wanted me. I must leave."

The elder looked blank for a moment, then frowned as he realised what had just been said. "Leave? What nonsense is this? We need you Valla, we need your protection!"

"No, you don't! Don't you see? I swore an oath to protect this village. If I leave, the darkness leaves with me." Valla turned to address the crowd at large, who flinched back at his presence. "Do you hear me!? Valla Uvennis, is dead! I... I am Khan. And now I must leave."