

... THE AWAKENED WORLD ...

Rosa coughed, the acrid smell of gunpowder burning her lungs. Another burst of gunfire rattled the dumpster behind her, echoing through the alley as the bullets ricocheted out of the empty metal box.

"Rosa!" She looked over to see Radio scramble out from the next dumpster. He grabbed Doc's coat where the sammy had fallen, pulling him back behind cover. "Rosa!" Radio yelled.

Crimson smeared the ground, marking the surfaces Doc's body had slid along. The vivid red made her stomach twist. She broke out in a sweat despite the chill night air. She tried to speak, but her voice wouldn't come.

"Answer me, damn it!" Radio was really pissed off. He never yelled. His hands were the same color red as the concrete.

Rosa blinked, and shook her head to clear it. She took a deep breath and tried again. "How bad is it?" she yelled, straining to be heard over the gunfire.

"Hammer's keeping them off on the other side, Doc's hurt bad. We are out of time. If we can't get that troll, it's over." Another burst of gunfire spat across both dumpsters, and Radio ducked to the side.

Rosa crept to the corner and peeked around. The heavily armored troll was the leader of the three man merc team. The good thing was, he hadn't taken cover. He didn't seem to see the need—bullets bounced off him like so many pebbles. The bad thing was, he didn't have a scratch on him.

As she looked, he saw her and grinned, baring his tusks. "Come on out, girlie," he said, casually strolling her way. She ducked back behind the dumpster again just before another hail of bullets peppered her hiding place. She was shaking.

"One shot ... only get one shot ..." she muttered to herself while mentally reviewing her spells. She focused on her lightning bolt spell. Only chance to take out this bastard is to overcast. It's going to hurt—a lot—but I don't think it'll kill me. The troll, on the other hand ...

Rosa shut her eyes tightly and chanted softly, letting the incantation help her build the framework for the energy to inhabit. The rush was euphoric. Lightning flew between her fingertips and in her hair. Her eyes glowed blue-white, and thunder rumbled in her ears as she chanted.

As she passed the point where she'd normally release the spell, the sensations changed. She felt the strain as she actively strove to keep control of the power. The ecstatic high turned hyper-intensive, crossing the border into pain. She fought to keep her voice steady as the power burned through her skin. Tears ran down her face. It was too much. Just a bit ... longer ... oh God, it hurts ...

With a scream, she rolled into the space between the dumpsters, the troll directly in her line of sight. Through a haze of pain, she saw his expression change to one of terror, right before she released the spell.

Inhuman screams filled the alley, hers and his. The scent of burning flesh mingled with the smoke from the ammunition. For her own private eternity, the lightning coursed through her and into the troll's body, even after he dropped to the ground.

Fatigue numbed the pain from the magic and her burned hands. As the last of the power faded, she no longer had the strength to keep her head and hands raised. Her forehead came to rest on the cold asphalt.

From a long way away, she heard Radio's voice. "You got him, Rosa. Good work."