

A New Assignment

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Khasmius hated the sea.

He held tightly to the side rail as *The Warbringer* rocked back and forth against the constant motion of the sea. The ship was a smaller vessel, never travelling too far from land. But in *Death Row*, despite the safety of land on both sides, the waters themselves were anything but sheltered.

A normal voyage would be doomed to fail here, for *Death Row* was filled with sirens and raging monsters, like the lasthrian. Many vessels had faced the perilous pass between Dragon's Fall and Darthian Dales, only to find themselves submerged in the icy waters, moments before joining Veillala in her kingdom of dead.

The Warbringer never made normal voyages, facing the perilous black waters time and time again. This ship was constantly moving precious cargo, newly formed Revenant from the western lands. On this particular journey, four newly created corpses were milling about below decks, their souls selected by Veillala to fight one last time, should they so choose. These Revenant, a mix of elven and human dead, were on a journey to decide whether they would truly answer the call.

The importance of the Revenant meant they had to survive Death's Row, which required a sustained magic only a Feyldra could maintain. Unfortunately, that meant Khasmius was once again forced to fair the rocky waters with such responsibility.

Red knuckles gripped the sides as Khasmius leaned forward along the rails, his tail wrapped around as well for added support. His horns felt heavier than normal atop his head, his black hair falling in soggy matted curls around his hard-red skin as he released another heave of air over the side. His lunch had been lost long ago, leaving his stomach empty though still turning. He had tried reaching out for some magical assistance, but even the demon blood running through him was powerless in face of the raging waters. The gods may have gifted his kind with demi-god like power, yet they could not give him so blasted sea legs.

“Khasmius, my what a sight,” a voice laughed out from behind him. “You look paler than the corpses we’ve got aboard. Heck, if I didn’t know you, I may have mistaken you for one of them.”

“Watch how you address your superiors, captain,” Khasmius tried to sound commanding, but that was hard when simply opening his mouth made him feel like the world was spinning.

The captain of this ship, *The Warbringer*, was a blue orc from the Frost Fang Caverns named Karloc. Orcs were incredible warriors, but they lacked a certain civility that was deserved of a Feyldra like Khasmius. Instead of referring to him as ‘lord,’ the orc brute treated him like some novice sailor, like another member of the crew. It was horribly irritating. Such audacity should have been punished. Had it not been for Karloc’s reputation as a sailor, Khasmius may have taught him such a lesson in proper decorum.

“So many journeys, and you still haven’t found your sea legs,” the orc laughed, leaning against the rail as well. “The fact that you haven’t thrown yourself overboard after all these decades is astonishing.”

“We all serve a higher power captain,” Khasmius mumbled through gritted teeth. “Who am I to judge the will of our gods themselves?”

“The gods did not put on this boat, your so called ‘friends’ did.”

“Watch how you speak of the Magistrate,” Khasmius hissed. “She speaks for the gods, and should be treated as such!”

This got a hearty laugh from Karloc, which only further infuriated Khasmius. The other races in the Resolute, they just did not understand. They were young. Too young to remember the days when Gods roamed the world they built, side by side with their creations and subjects. They were too young to remember why the gods had to leave, the treachery that drove them all away. To these less beings, these mortal infestations, it was all legends and myths, from an age of heroes and magic never to come again.

But Khasmius, he knew better. He and the other Feyldra had been there. They had seen the Gods themselves. They had watched dragons burn away the lands, the humans rise under Alduin and steel the plains and forests. They had felt their powers drain away when the gods left, then fought for centuries to regain their position as harbingers of true magical energy. They had not fought and struggled through centuries of endless war, just to serve on a bloody boat in blackened waters.

Yes, mortality and its short memory would have been nice, for immortality brought with it the curse of memories, of knowing what was and what is. Knowing it never got better.

“Black Deep ahead, captain!” the watchmen called from his post on the main mast.

“Alright crew, let’s prepare ourselves for landing!” the captain called out, leaving Khasmius to brood alone on the rail.

Khasmius let the captain go, preferring the solitary company of his own genius. He felt his stomach tumble again, with little more than air and pain coming up. All around him, the crew

worked tirelessly about, bringing in the sails and adjusting the ship to enter port. But he paid them little mind, just hoping he could be left alone until he got off the foul seas.

Khasmius stepped off the *Warbringer* and released the magic shielding he had maintained around the ship. Immediately, he could feel his energy return, his magic reserves safely replenished inside of him. The docks were still rocky, but the motion was a great relief from days at sea.

Karloc came down with Khasmius, followed behind by the four Revenant clothed in black and gold robes the colors of Veilalla, the goddess that had granted them their second life. They fell in a neat line behind Khasmius. He pulled his shoulders back and straightened out his own robes of purple and silver before beginning their ascent.

“Another successful trip together,” Karloc grinned, one tusk missing from his rotten smile. “I’d say that’s earned us another pint or two. Care to join the crew this time?”

“Enjoy that piss for me will you Captain?” Khasmius dismissed him. “I’d rather not be around your like at this moment. Four days was four too many.”

“Ha! That was one of our shorter ventures!” Karloc laughed. “This ugly mug o’ mine will be waiting here for your return. No doubt some ‘higher power’ will send you back out with me soon enough!”

“I’m sure the Magistrate will send her payment after inspection of our cargo, Captain,” Khasmius said, ignoring Karloc’s banter. “Be sure you have your crew semi-presentable for the lord, would you?”

“Eh, presentable is a relative word now, ain’t it?”

Karlocc gave a hearty pat on Khasmius's back then turned back around to rejoin his crew on board. Khasmius hated the way the captain spoke, looked, and especially smelled. Yet, there was no doubt Khasmius would once again find his way on board that filthy ship.

Khasmius shrugged the thoughts away and pulled back his black hair, tying it into a braid tightly behind his head. He pushed out his purple cloak over his black clothes one last time before motioning for the revenant to follow. They looked at him with blank white eyes, then followed in slow steps. They had been given their second life, but they were still missing purpose, a problem this journey was meant to remedy.

The city of Black Deep was originally a pirate's city, a hide away on the edge of the Darthian Dales. A large black keep had been built into the side of the mountain deep in the bay, with iron doors built to let in pirates and keep out raiders. With the only way to assault by water, it lasted for many years, impenetrable to invaders.

A century before, one pirate had decided, and wisely so, to aid the Resolute and claiming the place, recognizing the value it held to the cause. After a brief fight, the Feyldra and dark elves claimed the city, turning it to the home operations for all naval war and trade in their alliance. Over the past century, homes, shops, and taverns opened up, expanding down to the newly built docks that lay at the bay's edge.

Khasmius led his revenant squad forward, past the sailors and merchants, past guard patrols, and through the crowded streets, to the black keep that overlooked the growing city. The walk was long, winding along a twisted path of stone and dirt that circled buildings that had been built with little organizing. As the crew moved uphill, the smell of fish markets and sweaty sailors was replaced with fresh air, mixed with the smell of sea water carried up by the rolling breeze. A smell that continued to nauseate Khasmius.

The group made their way in silence, to Khasmius's pleasure. Beneath that salty stench, he could just make out the smell of rotting corpses, yet to be completely regenerated. Just another nuisance to this pitiful task.

Arriving at the main gates to the keep, three soldiers stood ready to greet them. As was the case with all guards in Black Deep, they wore simple leather armor, carrying a small buckler and lance. Khasmius felt his heart sink even further as they approached these soldiers. While he did not recognize two of the soldiers, he wished he could forget the one he did.

"Khasmius," the dark elf woman grinned. "Surprised you managed to keep the *Warbringer* from sinking again."

"A pleasure, Syls," Khasmius muttered. He bowed in an exaggerated form, ignoring the incident of many decades ago she had referenced. "I'd say I'm surprised you're still here on guard duty, but then I remember you're too incompetent to be anything more."

Khasmius always despised the arrogance of dark elves. They were faster than the original elves; their strength rivaled the orcs. But that physical prowess came at the expense of magical affinity. Dark Elves could learn proper spells, but it would never compare to anything their cousins, the original elves could muster. It certainly was incomparable to even the most incompetent Feyldra, which Khasmius was not. Still, most of those dark elves were at least tolerable, a sharp wit and respect for rank making them decent in conversation.

Syls was the exception. A small framed woman with a vicious attitude and horrible taste in men, her arrogance drove Khasmius mad with rage. But worst of all, was her taste in men. He should know, considering he had been one himself.

"My, that insult gets better the more you use it. But may I recommend one of these days you should try some fresh material? I mean, you are immortal, so I'd think the monotony of such

trivial comments and boorish routine would have worn you out by now. Then again, I suppose a lack of originality and creativity matches your utterly bland personality doesn't it? Quite the waste of immortality if you ask me."

Khasmius clenched his jaw tightly and turned to one of the other two guards, both of which were leaning lazily against their lances, apparently amused by the little exchange. They were both nightwalkers, the youngest members of the Resolute. Disturbing, half-animal things that smelled like a barn, but spoke like a human. Probably the only thing worse than a dark elf. Except for Syls of course.

"You two, is the Magistrate ready for me?" Khasmius asked through a clenched jaw.

"Probably. She said to bring any revenant to the lower level, to the heart of the keep," one of the nightwalkers, a white half-wolf responded. "I assume you know the way?"

"Thank you, I'll lead our new members at once," Khasmius nodded.

The white half-wolf grunted in response, another individual with complete lack of decorum. He pulled on a lever, causing a loud grinding sound to echo out as the two iron doors opened, revealing the large chamber that lay inside. Khasmius motioned for the Revenant to follow him, then proceeded to enter the keep.

"Be careful Khasmius. It can be very dark down there," Syls called out as he walked through the iron doors. He could feel his blood boiling, but forced all his energy to maintain his posture and presence as he ignored the petty remarks.

The iron doors closed loudly behind them, encapsulating the hall in complete darkness. However, darkness was no trouble for the Resolute, as many of their races could see just fine in the blackness.

The hall itself stretched on for hundreds of yards. The floor was black polished marble, with lines of blue and red dashing through them. Pillars of original rock from the mountain lined the halls on either side. At the end of the hall stood a throne of melted gold and bronze, built to loom over all who would stand before it. This throne was the throne of the pirate king, though no one had used it since Black Deep's falls a century before. Now, it was just decoration, a piece of history.

Breaking off of the main tunnel, past the pillars, were large cavernous entrances to a series of tunnels that wound throughout the mountain. A maze of old and newly crafted tunnels, they led to multiple caverns and levels throughout the mountain keep. The upper levels served as residential chambers and banquet halls, designed for the embassies, military generals, and other guests that blessed these halls. Below the main chamber, the levels were divided up to different spaces for the military. Some were filled with forges, the echo of smith's hammers ringing through the hollow halls. Some held armor and training grounds. Others still were under construction, or had yet to be explored.

The vast maze of halls and complex additions was too great for any one person to truly know. For that reason, members of the keep only learned the destination and movements of the tunnels they used most often. Outsiders, or guests within the halls seeking an audience, had to be guided by members of each tunnel, or potentially lose themselves forever in the black halls.

Khasmius led his four revenants to the farthest tunnel, just beyond the old throne. This particular tunnel had been crafted a few decades prior, designed for the new task given to the town by the Magistrate upon conquering the city. It had been lined with solid grey stone, leading deep below the earth itself, to the lowest levels of the keep.

The party walked along the grey stone tunnel, their steps echoing silently as they made their way deeper into the mountain fortress. The tunnel twisted and turned as the group wound their way downward. The air cooled, the smell of the sea replaced with a musty stench. It was unclear if it was from the revenant's rotting forms or the suffocating dampness of the dirt.

Eventually, the tunnel opened into a much larger chamber, one that glowed a soft purple. Polished stone floors of pure white reflected the intricate array of crystals and stonework around the walls that came together to form the dome like chamber. The room was unfurnished, save the massive purple gem hovering at the chamber's center. This gem was the size of a human, radiating the purple light that illuminated the space around it, including the lone figure who awaited them.

The Magistrate stood dressed in purple and silver robes, similar to Khasmius's attire, though that boasted a grander weaving of embroidery. Her hood was pulled up, hiding her dark face, long silver hair just visible underneath. Horns stuck through two slits in that hood, her wings folded neatly behind her as her tail waved patiently back and forth. She held in her right hand a golden staff, topped by a perfectly proportioned replica of the gem floating beside her.

"Welcome Khasmius," the Magistrate greeted him, extending her arms to either side.

"Greetings all powerful," Khasmius responded, bending to one knee and bowing his head, his right fist clenched against his left shoulder.

"Rise servant of below. Rise now, and speak for those you have brought before me."

"I bring you four new souls, lost but found by her lady, Veillala," Khasmius rose and stepped aside, so the magistrate could look upon the four new Revenant. "Once lost, these wandering souls have been chosen to endure a new form, to continue their war in service of those below. They pray for new purpose, to be granted their second life."

“Come forward,” the magistrate’s soft voice carried throughout the room, and the Revenant obeyed. Their corpses shuffled forward, then fell to their knees in front of the Magistrate.

“You have been chosen,” the magistrate continued, walking among the four. “Your new purpose, your reason for existence, is revenge. Revenge for your wrongs, and revenge for those fallen beside you. The goddess has smiled on your strength and resolve, blessing you with a chance to claim your final vendetta.

“But we cannot bring you to complete those wishes, only show you the path. Nay, this choice must be yours and yours alone. Without this choice, your will would fall away, your soul truly lost forever.” The magistrate touched each of the four with her staff, the purple glow moving to outline each of their forms in turn. “Now embrace the heart of the king, the great Darthos, so that his power may grant strength to the life Veillala has blessed your soul with. Face his embrace, and take the first steps on your path to freedom.”

The Revenant exploded in light, forcing Khasmius to look away. Their screams echoed out in the hall, screams of pain. Screams of hunger. Of resolve. The screams echoed louder, as their forms began to take shape underneath the powerful glow that enveloped them. Rotting flesh became whole. Torn skin and tangled hair came together, creating pale forms with blackened eyes and blackened hair.

When the lights died away, three of the Revenant rose, slightly resembling their elven and human forms from a previous life. The fourth lay rotted away, a pile of dust. That one had refused the gift, choosing demise over vengeance.

“Welcome to your new world,” the magistrate smiled, touching each of them gently on the shoulder as she gave them new names. “Falomir. Diltos. Arnia. You stand now as Revenant,

true soldiers of Veillala, and full members of the Resolute. Return back the way you came and join your brothers and sisters, ready to march on and end the tyranny of the Free Cities.”

The Revenant bowed, then turned back to ascend to the main chamber. Above, fellow Revenant would greet them and begin to acclimate them to their new forms. Despite their new life, they would never truly live again. They never laughed, or spoke, or sang. They simply nodded or shook their heads. And if they were not doing that, they would be fighting, their only duty to seek some past wronging done to them by the Free Cities. True weapons for the gods below, but terrible companions otherwise.

“You’re still unsettled by them, Khasmius,” the magistrate said. It was not a question, simply an amused statement.

“They’re not right, my lady,” Khasmius sighed. “Doesn’t matter how many I make; I always know they’re not really there. Not completely anyways.”

“Well I’ve taken note of your displeasure, and I’ve decided you need a little career change,” the magistrate smiled, moving next to him.

“What would you ask of me my lady?” he eyed her suspiciously. It was no secret he despised his job. He had made it adamantly clear he hated everything about Black Deep and its inhabitants for well over a century. So why the sudden change in position? Why now?

“Well, your gloominess is starting to wear away at my own resolve, and you bring little news when you visit,” the magistrate shrugged. “Oh, and Thamian was slain by some elven raiders outside of Valos, so we have an opening. I’ve decided I’m going to send you and a chosen crew to avenge him, most likely Karloc and his sailors.”

“It would be my pleasure, my lady,” Khasmius bowed. It was no honor, but a simple cat and mouse assignment. Still, he was built, as were all the Feyldra, to channel magic and battle

their enemies. Regardless of how he got there, combat would be a welcome change from the dreadful life of transporting the dead. He would still be stuck upon the open waters, but a new purpose was still a relief.

“Excellent. Now go gather your things. You’ll find I sent one of trusted assassins to join your crew, who is already waiting upon *Warbringer*. Do not fail me, Khasmius. When next I see you, it should be with the head of Thamian’s killer.”

“It shall be done, my lady.”

Khasmius spent the rest of the afternoon gathering his things, though he did not have many possessions. He changed out his robes for a set of black battle armor, worn over a golden chain-mail that had yet to see any real action. He strapped on two swords to his hips, though he intended to rely on his magic as his primary tool in combat. Then he gathered a bottle of whisky from Kharomak, and loaded his pack with rations and a bed roll.

Satisfied with his preparations, Khasmius went down back out into the city. Rain had started to fall, but everything felt a little lighter. With a new purpose and rejuvenated resolve, he made his way to the docks, prepared to join Karloc on conquest worthy of his station.

After centuries of existence, Khasmius was going to show his fellow Feyldras that he was worthy of the magical gifts and immortal existence gifted upon him. He would demonstrate his strength, forged with the power of demons, and will of the Resolute. Glory would be won, and the comforts that came with that would await him on his return. He could taste the fine wines, the feasts for his success, the respect of a man of his rank.

He ignored the stench of fish and salt and stepped aboard *Warbinger*, ready to relay the new assignment. Instead, he froze, his heart sinking in his chest.

“Well, well, well, would you look who my precious comrade for this little run is going to be?” Syl waved to him. “I do love the Magistrate’s humor, though I’ll have to speak with her upon our return about this. I mean this is cruel, even for her.”

“Why the hell are you here?” Khasmius sputtered out.

“Honestly? I’ve been on a thousand raids, met thousands of people, and I’ve won. Every damned time, I walk out of there the victor. You? You’re soft, with shiny new armor that doesn’t know combat,” Syls spat. “But fortunately for you, and dreadfully unfortunate for me, you’re the only Feyldra not already on an assignment. So, you get to keep this ship from sinking, so I can cut me up a few more elf ears.”

“I could do just fine on my own. Any other assassin and- “

“Shut your gods be damned mouth before I shut it permanently,” Syls spat, drawing a blade and forcing it against Khasmius’s throat in a single motion. “No bougie tricks or comments alright. This isn’t your time, it’s mine. I’m here, because I’m the best assassin this side of the continent. I’m here so that when you screw it all up, I can fix it. Now shut-up and follow your superior.”

With no room for response, Syls returned her blade to its hilt, then gave Khasmius a little wink. She turned and made her way to the front of the boat. She passed Karloc as he walked towards Khasmius, smiling and speaking briefly. Karloc broke into a hearty laugh.

“Well Khasmius, I have to say, I love our new companion,” Karloc smiled as he strolled past. “Though I must say, you almost look worse than usual!”

The ship pulled out of the harbor, and Khasmius found himself on the edge of the boat, watching with dread as Black Deep shrank away in the distance, *Wabringer* tossing about in the black waters.

Khasmius hated the sea.