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The Demon's Trial

Book 2 of the Lost Child Series

By

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Prologue

Syldra would kill him.

If Daelin was not already dead by someone else's hand, she would do it herself. No human should have been this much trouble, and no one should ever get a rouse from her. Yet here she was, soaking and bleeding in the pouring rain as thunder echoed certain doom in the distance.

"How much longer can we wait?" Avara asked. "If the rain is here, it won't be long before-"

"I know damn well how the storms work," Syldra spat. "I can hear the thunder just as well as you can."

"I'm not trying to start something," Avara replied. "I'm just saying, we really can't wait."

"No one else followed us out of the city. No one is stupid enough to be out in a storm like this. We have all the time we need to wait."

"We're out in the storm..." Avara grumbled as she scanned the city walls.

Syldra ignored the other woman, keeping her gaze fixated on the city gates. Storm was growing irritated under his two riders, neighing, and scraping his hooves. She ignored the beast as well, watching for Daelin and her own horse to break out onto the plains somehow alive. Yet

with each passing second, the likelihood either one of the beasts would make it out of the city seemed to wane...

Another few minutes passed, and Syltra began to think it was time to cut their losses and ride west. They were battered and bruised and still had a way to ride if they were to find any shelter. More likely, they would try riding as swiftly as they could, only to be fried by some stray lightning strike in the middle of a field.

Despite her growing fears, Syltra hadn't the heart to give up on Daelin just yet. Of all the experimental companions, he topped the list as the worst of them all. Yet she was not prepared to let him go, not after he managed to stick around longer than any of the others. Maybe it was the lost look in his eyes, or perhaps the demon blood running through his veins. Whatever it was, Syltra could not help but see herself in that man...

"I really think we need to get moving," Avara urged. "I don't know about you, but I'd prefer not to be killed by some freak storm!"

"Then take the gods damn horse and go," Syltra spat. "I'll jump right off and you can take your chances without me."

Avara huffed and continued to watch the gate. They both knew she could not take the horse. She barely managed to stay atop the beast when Syltra led them twisting and turning around the during their escape.

A sudden boom ripped through the sky, close enough to shake great horse the two women sat upon. The worst of the storm was just minutes away now. They were out of time, and Daelin was still nowhere to be seen.

"Syltra..."

"For fucks sake woman, I know! We can-"

Syldra's voice caught in her throat as she turned around.

Daelin had appeared, as if by magic. He lay limp atop Orlean, tied down to the saddle so he could not slide off. However, he was not alone. A hooded rider sat on the saddle, holding Daelin's magic sword glowing bright blue in his hand.

"I suppose I have you to thank for bringing me my horse." Syldra called over.

"Your horse and idiot companion," Gorm grumbled.

"What the hell happened?" Syldra asked as she leapt from Storm's back. She rushed to Daelin's side and checked for signs of life. His body was cold to the touch, yet he still managed to breathe, if just barely.

"I'll share stories later! We're still in a huge load of danger, unless you've forgotten."

"Well, we're not much safer with you around, are we?" Syldra spat back.

"Gods, you're insufferable!"

"I'm insufferable? Me? I'm not the one who—"

A flash of purple signaled the coming of lightning. The explosion was close, cutting out the sound of Syldra's words. The rain intensified, growing into a wall of torrential rains that made it almost impossible to see.

"Shit," Gorm cursed. "Grab hold of me! Then grab the horse!"

Avara obeyed and grabbed Storm's reigns, pulling him rather clumsily to stand beside Gorm. Syldra followed, despite her reluctance, and grabbed a hold of the master sorcerer's outstretched arm.

"Are you sure about this?" Syldra shouted over the sound of the storm. "Can you even move this many people?"

"I have to!"

He closed his eyes and his brow lined in a deep furrow as he summoned a massive amount of arcane energy. The magic intensified until it manifested in a ray of light that lept across his arms and surrounded them all: four humans and two horses all glowing a soft blue. Syldra felt the hairs on the back of her neck begin to tingle, but it was not from the spell.

She looked up as a purple strike came hurdling straight at them.

PART I

Departure

Chapter 1: A Warning

My head was pounding. Endless tapping echoed through my skull, blocked out only by the sudden burst of an even greater explosion that shook my very core.

Only after what felt like hours of pain, did I realize the sound was no inside my head. It was the sound of rain, tapping endlessly against the window. The explosions were thunderclaps.

I managed to open my eyes, but they failed to focus in the dark of the night, a blackness broken only by the purple flashes of lightning. I turned my head slightly and took stock of the room as my eyes continued to adjust to the darkness. It lay bare save two beds: the one I lay in, and the one beside me, occupied by someone sound asleep. I realized that the shadow looming over me was sitting in some stool, though they too were motionless, likely asleep as well.

I moved slowly and pushed myself up as I tried to avoid stirring the sleeping figure. This proved a difficult task. My chest was throbbing, and my legs felt heavy. After a long struggle, I managed to remove myself from the blanket that lay over me. My feet struck the wooden floor, and I went to stand, but my legs protested under my weight. I collapsed to the side, my body crashing into the wall before sliding down. I lay slumped over on the floor, unable to move any further, despite my best efforts to rise again.

I looked over my bare chest as I sat there. Bruises were painted over my skin from the countless blows of Andorath's hammer. A place seemed particularly swollen, the pain likely from bruises to my bones and muscles underneath. Fatigue rolled over my body while sweat pooled over my skin. I felt my body temperature rising as fear began to take hold. In a final effort, I tried moving again, only to collapse face first on the floor.

"You idiot," I heard a familiar voice yawn behind me. "On the brink of death, laying cold and knocked out for two days, and the first thing you do is try running away. It's a miracle you even managed to get out of bed in your state."

My response was a singular groan.

"Honestly, if you hadn't already got your ass kicked the other day, I'd kick it myself," Syldra huffed. As she spoke, she walked over beside me and brought me back to my bed. She mostly carried me, as my legs offered her little assistance. She sat beside me and lay the blanket back over me. I could just make out a smile of hers in the darkness as one of her hands stroked the hair out of my face. "Truth be told, I'm just glad you're alright."

"Thank... you..." I barely formed the words, but I could tell she understood.

"You've been out for two solid days now," Syldra whispered. "Just, let yourself rest alright? Then in the morning, we can get back to discussing how badly you've ruined everything."

I groaned and turned my head, looking at the storm.

"Don't worry too much about that. It's been storming since we left the city, so there's no chance anyone could have followed us. Just rest a bit longer."

Syldra's presence put me at peace. I drifted back into sleep as fatigue overtook me.

The world went dark, and I fell weightless into some unknown abyss. The black surrounding me became darker until my free fall finally stopped, as if floating over nothing.

Wherever I was, I was not alone.

In the distance, I heard what sounded like the muffled murmurs of people. It sounded almost like whispers, and they seemed to be calling to me, pressing me to step closer. I closed my eyes and listened closely, trying to find the origin of the sound, but it came from all around me. Without any direction, I began to step forward, allowing myself to be taken in by the strange sounds...

“I wouldn’t step much further,” a familiar voice said. “It would be a shame to lose yourself down here.”

I turned abruptly and stood face to face with a demon. It stood like an elf, except red scales covered its body. Its hair was pure white, tied back behind two large obsidian-like horns protruding from its forehead. Black plate armor covered its arms, legs, and wrists, while black wings were folded behind him, like a cape. It smiled a wicked smile, white teeth shining despite the shadows that engulfed us.

“I know you...” I whispered.

“No, you only know part of me,” the demon laughed. “There is much to our tale you have yet to uncover!”

“You’re using me,” I spat.

“Well, in a sense, you’re correct,” the demon said. “Afterall, you’re the only reason we managed to survive this long. I suppose I owe you my thanks for that. Yet, I am using you as much as you are using me. We rely on each other to the extent I would say we’re practically one in the same now!”

“We’re not the same.”

“No, that would be too simple an explanation I suppose. And yet, our fates are now undoubtedly inseparable! Where you go, I will ever follow, until death do us part. Though we’ve already cheated that mistress more than once over the years...”

He let the words hang there, his snakelike tongue licking his lips as his eyes stared over me. I shuddered under his gaze and turned away.

“Come now, don’t be so afraid,” the demon hissed. “We’re finally meeting face to face. This is good! This gives us time to really cement the bonds that make us powerful!”

“I’m not interested.”

“Fortunately, that doesn’t matter. You have no choice!” he hissed as a wicked grin crossed his face. “You were always bound by someone else’s will. You were sentenced to die! Only by my hand have you cheated such fate! You live because of the gifts and power I have lent you. The magic that courses through your veins is my gift to you!”

The blackness around us suddenly shifted to a red fog that grew hot.

“Where are we?”

“We’re in your soul! What you feel, I feel! What you see, I see! But should you drift far enough, you will leave the confines of your physical body and wonder endlessly as a specter forever!”

“And if I banished you instead?” I turned on the demon, feeling my anger rising. “What then?”

“Then I drag you down to the hells with me.” The demon sighed, waving his hand in the air. “Come now, enough of this silly banter. I have more pressing reasons for dragging you down here.

“You have been asleep for too long. Two days have passed, and powers I have not felt in ages are beginning to resurface.” The demon’s voice was scared, the urgency echoing through me as I felt everything he described. “Hunters from another realm have come to find me; in turn they are after you. You and everyone you have decided to travel with are in perilous danger! When the time comes, do not hesitate to release me again. I may be the only chance we have of surviving in the future. Do not let ego overshadow necessity. Otherwise, the ones you have come to love may be the ones who suffer most of all.”

A clap of thunder echoed in the infinite darkness, followed immediately after by another loud crack.

“I see our little meeting is over,” the demon grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to visit you again very soon.”

Chapter 2: Planning

I awoke drenched in sweat. There was no accompanying fever, nor did I feel particularly sick. I managed to stand, despite my shaking limbs, and attempted to step forward. The step was painful, but I managed it well enough.

Syldra was nowhere to be seen; I was alone in the room. I noted a set of clothes folded neatly by the foot of the bed: a pair of black trousers, a black leather tunic, and a simple traveler's shirt, all beside a pair of black boots that were a near match to my old pair. I knew not who's wardrobe these items originally belonged in, but I put them on anyways. They fit almost perfectly, though they sagged a bit around my shoulders.

Outside the rain still pattered and flashes of purple illuminated the room, but the rolling sound of thunder was distant. No sounds came from the hall outside, so I went out in search of my companions.

The hall was longer than I anticipated, with many of the doors crammed beside one another, with a candlelit staircase at the opposite end. The dull roar of conversation made its way up the stairs, though this level was silent, save the occasional creaking of boards behind closed doors.

I reached out around me in search of magic and felt a strange sensation emanating from the end of the steps. A distinguished arcane presence radiated upwards. It was like walking through an invisible wall, passing from emptiness into the domain of the strange presence. I immediately thought of the demon's warning and tried to silence my steps, moving slowly down the stairs. I was unarmed, and I feared my magic would be useless against such power, yet I progressed forward all the same.

As I rounded the bottom stair, I froze. The tavern room was relatively empty with only a handful of travelers dispersed across various tables. They drank in small groups of no more than four, laughing and barking about their travels and business exploits. At the far end of the tavern, two women sat with their backs to the window. Syldra wore her usual stoic expression, though I could see the distrust in her eyes darting from person to person, no doubt taking stock of the weapons each man kept hidden. Beside her, I was pleasantly surprised to see Avara chugging away at an ale, despite what I assumed was an early hour of the morning. However, their third companion shocked me, an old face that caught me completely off guard.

Oh, this is just perfect, the demon groaned in my head. Quick, turn back now before he sees us!

I ignored the voice and walked forward, now at ease. The arcane presence around me now felt more of comfort than forbearance. I went to a fourth chair at the table, set between Syldra and the third companion. I nodded to Syldra as I took my seat, then turned a shy eye to the man who sat to my left.

“Bout time you woke up,” Gorm grumbled.

“Nice to see you too,” I sighed.

“You should show a little more appreciation for the man who saved your life,” Gorm hissed. “I should have left you there to face judgement for your buffoonery, yet here I am. In the middle of a cheap bar drinking with the strangest bunch I’ve had the unpleasantries of meeting.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m-”

“Don’t,” Gorm raised a finger to cut me off. “I don’t want to hear excuses, or apologies, or any of it. Let’s just focus on moving forward.”

“For once, I agree with the old man,” Syldra chimed in at a whisper, forcing the rest of us to lean in closer so our heads were huddled together over the table. “We’re not exactly free of the Enclave just yet. It would take them just a few days to reach us from the city, and that’s much too close for my comfort.”

“Excuse me folks,” a large woman interrupted our conversation as she stepped up to the table. “But I’ve been trying to get your attention for a while now. Would you be wanting anything to eat this morning? Cuz if not, I’d prefer to give the table to someone who will take advantage of the space.”

“Water,” Gorm grumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Water,” he repeated.

“Ok, well you can all take water in your rooms, no needs for tables and such.”

“Fine. Four cups of your strongest morning brews, and a shit load of eggs and bacon for the lot of us. That should earn us a spot at the table.”

“Sure thing, sir,” the woman spat before turning to go in a huff.

“Fucking taverns,” Gorm mumbled, crossing his arms, and falling back in his chair.

“Anyways, we should start discussing our next move, right?” Avara asked. “I mean I don’t know about you all, but I sure as hell didn’t come along to sit chatting in a tavern.”

It was still a miracle to me that Avara had decided to join us, but I was grateful she did. Looking at her now, she seemed unhurt from our escape of Elysium. Her hair was tied back in a single braid of black that draped over her right shoulder. She wore a white tunic with a brown leather vest strapped over it, boasting a wide array of knives. Her cheeks had turned red from drinking, but her eyes shown as intense as ever.

“I’m convinced you’re actually a liability,” Syldra hissed. “So, if you’re not satisfied with how we’re running things, feel free to head your own way.”

“Sorry, you know I’m not trying to stir up a fuss,” Avara chuckled.

“We need to go to the Floating City. We need to avoid the Enclave that will likely be following us. And we need to leave soon,” Syldra rolled her eyes at the woman. “You know that’s the plan. But please, unless you plan on contributing to the details, I’d appreciate a level of silence and decorum.”

Avara shrugged and took another sip of her beer, giving me a little wink as she did.

“Old man, you’ve had some experience travelling the continent. What’s our best move?”

“Oh, you want my help now?” Gorm raised an eyebrow at Syldra.

“Not if you’re going to be an ass about it,” Syldra glowered.

“Gorm please,” I spoke before the situation worsened. “I don’t know what your intention is with coming this far, but I doubt it’s just to turn back now. If you plan to join us, we are going to rely on the skills you bring with you. Right now, that includes a knowledge of the continent the rest of us are severely lacking.”

Gorm stared at me, then placed his cup down with a sigh. “Damn. Alright travel isn’t all that difficult through the plains. Yes, there are storms that are going to cause us serious delays, but if we keep following the southern road as we are now, it’ll eventually turn westward towards the mountains. There, we can take the Summer Pass to Eastwood. Then we’ll just have to dance our way through forest and swamp until we reach Pirate’s Bay.”

“Pirate’s bay?” Avara nearly choked on her drink as she laughed. “Is that seriously what they call my home?”

“Under normal circumstances, this travel would be straightforward and simple,” Gorm continued, ignoring Avara’s outburst. “Thing is, no one has heard from the monarchy in Eastwood in well over a decade now. Edinrow has been on the rise recently and filled the vacuum of power in the king’s absence, which is never a good thing. No doubt other groups will be vying for political prominence in the disarray, which could lead to bandits, robbers, and rogue soldiers all through the kingdom. As for the Summer Pass, we have to recruit the aid of dwarven guide to navigate those tunnels. That means we need to play nice with them, otherwise you can just hand yourselves over to the Enclave now.”

“Eastwood is that broken?” Syltra asked. “The merchants in Elysium seemed to continue coming through just fine.”

“You haven’t been paying attention to all the signs then,” Gorm shook his head. “Those with money always manage to keep their business going, because money speaks regardless of who holds the power. But believe me, I’ve friends in high places. If they say things have collapsed, then it’s no joke. Politics amongst humans have always been fragile.”

“It sounds like we don’t have much choice though,” I said. “When the storm clears, we should make by the southern roads anyways. We can change course if we find the mountains impassible, but it seems like that’s really all we can do.”

“We can’t just go to the mountains,” Syltra countered. “We only have two horses and barely enough supplies for three people. Now we’re adding a fourth. By the gods, we shouldn’t have even made it this far.”

“There are tons of little villages scattered around the plains. Maybe we don’t have to use the road. We can use villages as checkpoints. I’m sure the monasteries won’t turn us away.”

“Are you sure you should be going back to villages?” Gorm asked.

I stared at Gorm and then closed my eyes. I tried to see the demon again and find his own thoughts. But as was the case in the city, he seemed to disappear anytime Gorm was present.

“I’ll manage,” I said. “It’s the best option we have.”

“Great!” Avara clapped her hands with a grin. “Now that this is settled, I’m going to find out where the hell our food is!”

When Avara left, Gorm and Syltra locked eyes. They were silent, but seemed to say enough between the two. She rose and left Gorm and I alone at the table.

“You let the demon out again.”

“I know. It wasn’t like at the Red Lust,” I admitted. “It was out of desperation. But I took a hold again when he began to burn...”

“No need to explain; I watched the whole thing,” Gorm sounded tired, his body suddenly sagging against his chair. “You’ve got heart kid, but I hate to admit I’m worried about you. That demon inside seems to grow stronger with you. You’re feeding off the same magical energy and

same physical body, and that's a dangerous game to play. I can't train you to be stronger without fueling him as well."

"So, you're saying I should stop practicing magic?"

"Hardly," Gorm huffed. "I simple mean we need to be smart about it. It'll be less about power and more about control and discipline."

He turned to his side and reached for a bundle wrapped in a black cloth I previously failed to miss. He passed it to me, the weight familiar in my hands. I unwrapped the cloth and was met with a silver blade that immediately filled my mind and soul with rejuvenated gusto.

"You will obey Elysaer's wish and keep that on you at all times," Gorm commanded. "She thinks the magic from the blade is enough to keep the demon at bay, and I'm inclined to believe that theory until I see otherwise."

"I understand," I nodded and strapped the hilt to the belt of my pants that was now clearly designed to hold the blade. "I suppose I have you to thank for the clothes then?"

"Shut up." Gorm pointed a finger at me. "Just understand this, if you lose that blade one more time, I'm going to beat the living hells out of you with it. Clear?"

"Of course," I nodded.

He leaned back in his chair and returned to his coffee, just as the women returned with our much-needed meal.

"Ok, so we still have one issue we've yet to settle," Syldra said as she sat down. "We have two horses and four riders. Do we really intend to outrun a bunch of paladins while sharing saddles?"

I frowned until I noticed a stable outside the window butted against the road.

"Don't worry. I have a way to fix that."

#

Growing up on the plains, one learns to recognize the breaking of the storm. The lightning was far off in the west, where it would eventually dissipate. Around the inn, the torrential rains still fell. While most of the travelers here would remain indoors, the harmful phase of the storm had passed.

We wasted little time. We agreed on my plan and broke from our meeting in a hurry. Most of things were already packed, including new supplies Avara had apparently won off some merchants in a game of cards. Despite the new luggage, we travelled extremely light. I carried nothing but the clothes on my back, the elven dagger, and Aelandria's sword.

We dared not leave through the tavern's main floor. We used our room's window, hoping to avoid attracting unwanted attention. Opening the glass panes unleashed the battering wind and rain that awaited outside, drenching us in mere seconds. Undeterred, we leapt from the window in turn, landing softly in the muddy road that awaited below. We sank to our ankles and lost precious seconds as we struggled to release ourselves from the muck. Syldra was the least burdened, simply shadow phasing to the stable doors in a single instant.

We joined shortly after. I scanned the tavern windows as we crept inside but saw no signs we had been noticed. The hay and dirt stuck to our boots and cloaks as we closed the stable doors and surveyed our options. Orlean and Storm perked their heads up and immediately began fidgeting, now restless and ready to leave. The other horses stared at us with indifference.

"Alright, everyone mount up," Syldra commanded.

Syldra went to Orlean and calmed her with a gentle touch upon the beast's snout. She opened the stall and mounted the horse in a single bound. I went to Storm and placed a saddle

upon his back. My effort was clumsy, but I managed to clammer atop the horse, who seemed pleased to have a rider again.

“I know, it’s been a while,” I whispered as I pet the horse’s neck.

“The hell are you doing?” Syl dra hissed.

I turned to see Avara staring at the horses. The color drained from her face, and she stood frozen with her hands clenched in tight fists.

“Avara, you need to mount up,” I encouraged her. “It’ll be ok.”

“I don’t think...” Avara hesitated. She reached a tentative hand to one of the nearer horses, but lept back when the animal released an audible huff. “You guys you should just go ahead. Or maybe we could walk? Or perhaps a boat? There’s a river somewhere...”

“We don’t have time for this,” Syl dra groaned.

She kicked her horse out of the stables and into the storm. Gorm shook his head but followed immediately after, having mounted a young black stallion in one of the first stalls.

“Come on Avara, we need to go,” I said. “Just choose one with a saddle. You’ll be fine, trust me!”

“I really don’t think I can...”

A new sound came through the pattering of the rain. There were shouts and the sound of door slamming shut. There was a faint orange glow, like torchlight, emanating from outdoors, and it was coming closer.

With little option, I pushed Storm forward and reached a hand down to Avara.

“Get on,” I commanded.

“I don’t know, last time we were on a horse-”

“Now!” I reached a hand down, pleading. Thankfully, Avara grabbed my hand and, somewhat awkwardly, managed to climb up behind me on Storm’s saddle.

“Oi! The fuck is going on?”

Two men stood in front of the stable doors, drenched and infuriated. I snapped the reigns on Storm and rushed them. They lunged out of the way, barely avoiding a painful trampling. A few more men stood at the tavern doors and started shouting, rushing towards us.

The rain was thick and blurred my vision, but I was able to make out horse tracks in the ground. Without hesitation, I turned Storm south, following the tracks off the road and into the open plains. Behind me, Avara leaned forward, her arms clenched tightly about my waist. In mere minutes, we closed on Syltra and Gorm, leaving the inn and its angered patrons behind.

Chapter 3: Lessons on Magic

By nightfall, the rain slowed to a light drizzle. We rode straight through, pushing our horses to their limit. We had yet to pass a village, and it was growing dark.

“We should stop,” I called out. Avara would not admit it, but I could feel her arms growing slack behind me. She was exhausted and all too ready to dismount.

“I concur,” Gorm replied. “I want to put space between us and Elysium as quickly as possible, but our horses can’t keep this pace.”

Syldra stopped Orlean and dismounted wordlessly. She scanned the horizon then pointed a short distance off. “The grass has a small break. There’s likely a stream or pond there the horses can use for water.”

Gorm dismounted and helped Avara off Storm’s back. I dismounted and followed the others. The grass grew longer around us, until we disappeared into the thicket. While our horses’ heads still peered over the top, the rest of us were submerged in the overgrowth, until it broke suddenly around a small pond. Its water was still, and I could just make out the dirt beneath the surface. Storm approached the water and drank deeply; the other horses followed his lead.

Gorm closed his eyes and drew a sword from what seemed to be thin air. He turned to face the long grass and began cutting the blades down. As the blades fell, they seemed to line up with one another in neat rows, forming four distinct piles. The sword disappeared, and the old man touched each of the piles in turn, whispering words I did not recognize. A faint magical aura emanated briefly from the ground. Then, the piles of grass began to weave themselves together, forming four small tent-like structures.

“That was incredible,” Avara whistled beside me. “I’ve seen magic before, but nothing compared to that!”

“It’s a simple trick,” Gorm shrugged. “I merely casted a simple transmutation over the grass, nothing more.”

“Can you teach me?” I asked.

“No,” Gorm shook his head. “You’re a vile of *arlsin*, just one wrong move away from exploding. Your lessons are already planned, and this isn’t one of them.”

Gorm ended the discussion there and crawled into one of the tents. He snapped his fingers and the grass blades closed, sealing him inside.

“Show off,” Syldra huffed. She crouched over by the stream, drinking water from her bare hands.

“Show off or not, I’m impressed,” Avara said through a yawn. “Anyways, I’m about ready to call it a night. I’ll see you two in the morning.”

She crawled underneath the second tent and curled up ready to sleep. The tent flaps closed around her, and I could hear her laugh quietly inside.

“Here,” Syldra called over as she tossed me a bed roll. “Those two can sleep in filth if they want. I certainly intend to sleep with some semblance of comfort.”

“Thanks,” I said. I caught the bedroll and made for the tent, then stopped in front of it.

“What now?” Syldra asked. She stood beside me, ready to enter her adjacent tent.

“It’s nothing,” I sighed. “Just, thank you. For everything.”

Syldra’s face was difficult to see in the dark of night, but I could see the faintest line of a smile cross her face. She wordlessly nodded, then entered the enchanted tent, where she was sealed inside.

I took one last look around at the little camp and sighed. Just a few days earlier, we were living comfortably in one of the greatest cities in the world. Now, we were sleeping in mud. And it was all my fault.

I entered the tent and adjusted myself atop my bedroll. Despite the added layer. It did little to aid me as I fell into a restless sleep.

#

“Oh good. I was wondering when we’d get a chance to speak again,” the demon said.

We were back in what he called my soul, surrounded by fog and darkness. The demon was little more than a shadow now, its features completely hidden save his glaring eyes.

“You’ve been quiet,” I replied. “You’re afraid of Master Gorm, aren’t you?”

“Obviously,” the demon laughed. “If you were smart, you’d fear him too. Truth be told, I wish we could leave them all behind. Except Syldra of course. That woman is something fine, not to mention her-”

“Why am I here?” I demanded, already exasperated with the creature’s rambling.

“Well, you’re here because I can’t be up there,” the demon gestured with what appeared to be an arm at his head. “That sword of yours is cutting me off. I brought you here to tell you to ditch the blade now, before it’s too late.”

“I don’t think so. That blade is going to be strapped on real tight from now on.”

“Oh, come now, no need to play hero! It won’t change what we did,” a wicked grin began to appear beneath the dark shadows, revealing shining red teeth. “Don’t look so dejected my dear boy! But face it, you and I are intertwined. Your sins are my sins!”

I closed my eyes and thought of waking up. I could see my sleeping body through the darkness. I tried to wake myself and return to the material realm, leaving this nightmare far behind.

“Alright, go! Leave me once again in the darkness of your soul,” the demon laughed. “Just remember who we really are! And please, say hi to that little she-devil for me.”

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“Get up!” Gorm’s voice roared.

I shot up and found myself covered in grass. The tent had completely vanished; overhead was clear blue sky. Gorm stood over me, sporting a less than comforting scowl.

“Stop staring and move!” Gorm commanded. “We’ve got a long day of travel, not to mention your lessons for today. Well stop looking at me, and let’s move!”

I quickly packed up the bedroll on Storm’s saddle and through my cloak over the leather traveling gear I slept in. I grabbed Aelandria’s sword from the ground and reattached it to my hip. A short distance off, Syltra and Avara sipped some type of morning brew they crafted over a small fire. Some cooked meat, and fruits and nuts laid to the side. Presuming it was left for me, I stepped over to take it.

Gorm placed a firm hand on my chest, stopping me mid stride.

“You don’t eat until your morning routine is complete,” he growled. “Now let’s move!”

Without another word, he turned and ran. I cursed under my breath and ran after him. He led me on a long sprint, leaving the clearing almost invisible behind us. Then, when my legs began to protest, he turned and sprinted back. I continued to follow, though I lagged further and further behind.

When the running finally ended, I began to walk over to the campsite. Syldra and Avara already put the fire out, but the food was still ready on the plate. I made for it, but Gorm cut me off again, this time with a wooden training sword.

“I didn’t give you permission to eat.” He handed me one of the training swords then backed away ten paces. “Begin!”

“Shit,” I whispered. I raised my sword to contest his strike, but he knocked it aside and held the point of his weapon at my throat in one single motion.

“Gods damn it boy,” He growled, “You’re getting sloppy!”

We repeated the exercise again, only this time he disarmed me. He smacked my arm and head with the flat of his wooden blade before allowing me to reclaim my weapon. “Your lack of skill is worrisome. Have you already forgotten everything we worked on?”

We continued for the next hour. I dropped my sword thrice more before managing to fend for myself. I still could not parry all his blows, nor did I ever manage any form of counterattack, but I managed to keep the blade ready, avoiding yet another killing blow.

“Fine.” Gorm snapped his fingers, and the wooden swords fell apart in our hands, changing back to blades of grass that fell back to the earth below. “You can eat. But we’re not finished for today.”

I immediately raced for the food and downed it ravenously. I barely finished when the others mounted up. Strangely, Syldra and Avara took Storm, leaving Orlean riderless.

“You’ll ride my horse today,” Syldra explained. “Apparently the old man has some intense lessons that would be easier if you weren’t worried about a second rider.”

She did not wait for my reply, instead turning Storm to the southwest and riding off. I rushed to mount Orlean and hurried after them. Gorm fell in behind me, and the three horses were soon travelling together at brisk pace over the plains.

“What lesson do you intend me to complete?” I shouted.

“I want you to create a magical barrier,” Gorm barked.

“Seriously?”

“I wasn’t finished. I want you to create it and sustain it until nightfall.”

“Understood,” I nodded. This task was simple. I created barriers often enough, drawing on the arcane energy to block out magical attacks and hammers, though to varying degrees of success. Still, I should have no problem conjuring some magic, especially outside of combat.

Gorm slowed his horse and pulled up our rear while Syldra and Avara continued to lead. The sun was already high and hot overhead, and the plains around us appeared practically abandoned. For miles on end, the world was flat, the only movement a slight breeze that washed over the fields. I watched the fields and focused on riding, when I felt a sudden sting hit my back. Then another.

I turned in time to duck as Gorm tossed another small rock. He drew another from his saddlebag and threw it at me once more.

“What the hell?” I shouted.

“I thought you were placing a barrier around you?” Gorm mocked as he threw another rock.

I groaned and rolled my eyes and placed a barrier up. The next rock bounced off an invisible wall that created a ripple in the air, before falling harmlessly to the ground below. I boasted a confident grin, until a rock suddenly hit me in the chest.

I turned to see Syldra staring over Avara's shoulder. She gave me a wink before tossing another rock into the air which I rode straight into.

"You too?" I called out.

"Surround yourself boy and keep your focus!" Gorm shouted.

"This is absurd!" I groaned, extending the barrier to completely encompass me.

"This is practicing control," Gorm laughed as more rocks bounced off my invisible magic. "Now keep that sustained until nightfall!"

#

Nightfall could not come fast enough.

I maintained the magical barrier, though it grew increasingly difficult. The mental strain from holding magic that long wore me down. By the time the sun had nearly set, my head was pounding, and my throat dried up, regardless of how much water I consumed.

We passed a single village during that first day of riding. It was barely visible on the horizon, like a small black mark against the setting sun. We avoided it, wanting to avoid eyes that may see us at all costs. A few farmers in the fields may have noticed us, but such things were unavoidable.

The sun finally set, and only when the moon rose high overhead, did we stop for the night. My legs wobbled as I dismounted Orlean. The inside of my legs felt hot, and I relied on the horse to keep me standing as strength slowly returned to my legs. Avara fared much worse, collapsing to a seat on the ground. She let her legs spread out in front of her and simply sat there.

Meanwhile, Gorm and Syltra seemed fine; they lept from their horses and walked about as if they had been sleeping away most of the day.

As before, Gorm cut away at the grass and transformed them into tents. As before, his sword dissipated in the air as he turned to the rest of us.

“Sleep now while you still can,” Gorm commanded. “Tomorrow will be much of the same.”

“No shit,” Syltra muttered.

Gorm ignored her and entered the tent. Before he closed himself off, he looked at me and pointed. “You especially get your rest. I intend for you to undergo the same spell control tomorrow, and you’ll need to be refreshed if your will can withhold that magic.”

The tent closed, and that was the end of it.

“I don’t know if I can do that again,” Avara muttered, still slumped on the ground.

“You’ll get used to it,” Syltra replied. “It’s that or be left behind.”

I walked over and helped Avara to her feet. She leaned against me with two hands holding my arms to steady herself.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“Just get her to bed, and she’ll recover just fine.” Syltra said, rolling her eyes.

“She’s right you know,” Avara chuckled. “I’ll be good, just need a little rest.”

She pushed my hands back and limped over to one of the tents. She slid down onto all fours and crawled inside, the tent closing around her shortly after.

“If I were you, I’d get your head straight and focus on your magic,” Syltra said as she tossed me a bed roll.

“I am. I do think you can be nicer to her though.”

“Whatever you say, Daelin,” Syltra shook her head and crawled into her tent, the flaps closing behind her.

“Good night, Syltra.” I sighed.

Chapter 4: Illusions

We were lucky those first three days of travel. The skies remained clear, the sun rising and falling without so much as the tiniest glimpse of a storm.

Gorm woke me earlier and earlier each day, cutting further into my sleep and in turn my recovery time. The routine remained the same: run through the plains, spar with our sword, scarf down food, and ride. During my time on Orlean, I would be forced to maintain the magical barrier. Meanwhile, Gorm and Syltra would randomly release a barrage of rocks. Each day the rocks became slightly bigger and were launched with increased frequency. I was forced to adjust my barrier each time, placing more strain on my body as I fought harder to maintain the arcane energy. Despite the challenge, I managed to maintain hold of my horse, and we continued to make excellent time as we went.

Unfortunately, our luck was about to run out.

In the middle of the third night, the storm began to form in the east. It must have started shortly after we turned in, for we awoke to a distant echoes of thunder and an ominous wall of rain rushing closer.

Gorm was the first awake and awoke the rest of us by collapsing the tents. The sudden falling of grass forced us up. Avara leapt to her feet with a dagger ready in her hand; Syldra phased to her horse; I sat up with a start.

“Let’s move! Storms coming; we need to get inside!” Gorm shouted as he mounted his horse and forced him forward.

The rest of us wasted little time and were quick follow. Syldra, already mounted on Orlean, sent the horse forward at a brazen pace. Avara ignored her fear and allowed me to hoist her atop Storm, and we rode off after them.

“Head to the main road!” I shouted. “We can probably find a village close by!”

“Better hope you’re right!” Syldra called out.

The three of us steered our horses to the northwest until we reached the road running east to west. We followed the path away from the storm, though we knew we would not out run it. We had barely made it to the dirt path when the wall of rain passed over us. Thanks to the enchantments on our cloaks, we managed to stay dry for a short while. That is, until the winds whipped pass, sending our cloaks fluttering about, allowing the rain to soak us through.

“There!” Avara shouted, pointing a hand over my shoulder.

I followed her arm to the horizon. Through the downpour and darkness, I could just make out the spire of a large tower. It was barely visible, and I was impressed she saw it through the rain. I urged Storm forward, surpassing Gorm and Syldra, and led them off road toward the tower. Whether they saw why I changed course I could not tell, but they followed anyways.

The tower became increasingly clear in the darkness, as well as a smattering of huts around its base. This place was a small village, yet instead of a monastery at its heart, there was a mage’s tower. It closely resembled Elfie’s own home. I saw no seams in the stone that made up

the exterior, though there appeared to be windows scattered about, all dark. The huts were dark as well, the village turned in for the night. I cursed myself for not being quicker to sense the storm in the air, as these villagers must have known one brewed in the east.

We navigated through the thick mud that now lay between the huts and stopped at the base of the mage's tower. There were no doors, as there never seemed to be. Gorm dismounted, walked to the base of the tower, and proceeded to slam his fists against the walls. He enhanced his strikes; they echoed louder than thunder as he pounded on the wall.

Eventually, the wall split open to reveal a doorway. Standing in the doorway was a young man with dark hair cut short atop his head and a clean-shaven face. Judging by his appearance, he could have been younger than myself. He dressed in long purple robes covered in gold and silver embroidery and boasted a silver chain around his neck. He carried with him an oversized staff with a false diamond at its point. The staff glowed like fire, but I could feel no heat.

"Who dares knock at the tower of Fordlin the Wise?" The man shouted, slamming his staff as he said the word 'wise.'

"Drop the act," Gorm growled. "We need a place to stay the night."

"Fordlin suggests you watch your tone!" The wizard pointed his staff at Gorm as he spoke. "I do not take guests; I am not an inn! Should you wish to find lodging, seek elsewhere!"

"Your tower will do just fine," Gorm countered. "The horses need a place too, but I'm sure you can manage to accommodate them as well?"

"Listen old man, you are a fool to speak so plainly to a master wizard such as-"

Gorm snapped his finger, and the illusion on Fordlin's staff blinked out. He snapped once more, and a terrible gust of wind swept around us and into the mage's tower, sending books and

papers flying. Before Fordlin could react, Gorm grabbed the man's coat and pulled him close, while conjuring up a medallion in his other hand.

"Listen, Fordlin," Gorm growled. "There's a storm coming, and I'd prefer not to die out here. Quit your act. You're know master, and you should stop pretending to be one in front of one of the six! Now, as I said before: we need a place to stay. Your tower will do nicely. Understood?"

Fordlin dropped the staff from his hands and raised them in front of his face. "I'm sorry, Master Gorm! I apologize I didn't recognize you sooner! You know with bandits and the like, you can never be too careful..."

"Gods boy, quit the groveling. It's pathetic." Gorm released the man.

The man stood up and brushed off his robes, then bowed lowed, moving aside to let us in. "Right of course, well, uhm... may I offer you stay in my home? The tower is not as nice as what you experienced in Elysium, but I can guarantee your comfort as my esteemed guests!"

"How courteous," Gorm grunted.

We filed in past Fordlin, into an interior that took me aback. We entered a large chamber with a domed ceiling. There were six doors of various sizes and materials that branched out of this chamber, including the one we passed through, arranged like a star. Above, a few balls of fire hovered in the air, casting an orange light that danced off the golden walls and cast strange shadows.

"Right, if you will give me your horses, I'll take them to the stable," Fordlin reached a hand to be beckoning for the reins. I handed them over and, after a brief resistance from Storm, watched Fordlin lead the horses to the largest of the six doors immediately to our right. He led them through, before the wooden doors slammed shut behind them.

“This is ridiculous,” Gorm muttered.

“Agreed,” Syldra scoffed, crossing her arms as she stared around the place.

“This man is everything I hate about the Spire,” Gorm continued to rant. “Some spoiled pompous kid wasting his magic conjuring up a bunch of nothing.”

Fordlin returned after a short while after, his feet echoing around the chamber. He could not have weighed enough to cause such sound, however.

“I take it our horses are properly tended to?”

“Of course, master,” the man bowed low. “They will be more than comfortable for the duration of the storm. Now if you will be so kind as to follow me, I can show you all to your chambers for the evening?”

“Yes, that’s what we need,” Gorm nodded.

“Excellent. This way please.”

He led us to the door on our immediate left. It was an iron door with no visible handle and a silver dragon forged right at eye-level. The dragon’s eyes lit up as we walked forward, and Fordlin muttered a few words in elvish to the dragon. As he did, Gorm leaned back and whispered to me.

“Don’t be fooled by his words,” he said. “That entire door is an illusion. We could walk right on through it, but he’s trying to keep up his little act.”

Syldra knew this as well and lost patience. She stepped forward past Fordlin and walked right through the door. As she did, the illusion rippled before vanishing completely. Fordlin turned bright red, his mouth hanging open as he searched for words.

“Don’t,” Gorm laughed as he shoved past the man and up the stairs.

I allowed Fordlin to follow after Gorm before following. We ascended a set of long stone staircase that spiraled as we went. There were no handholds, and our host seemed ready to trip and tumble down on his robes more than a few times. This slowed our pace, but we eventually reached the top. The stairs leveled off into a much too small hall with two doors on the left and right, a massive golden door at the far end.

“There are two rooms that I may offer you,” Fordlin gestured towards the first two doors. “The others are storage. Master Gorm, I would be honored to house you in my private suite with me. The rest of you will find beds and baths in the other two rooms.”

“Master suite you say?” Gorm rolled his eyes. “Lead on.”

Fordlin bowed low to the rest of us, then led Gorm through the golden door. A white light blinded Syldra, Avara, and me before the golden shut with a loud thud, echoing down the hall and stairs.

“Well, I for one, would prefer my one bed if that’s alright,” Avara spoke up first. “Of course, I’ll defer to you two, but I just want to make that clear. Unless you’d care to join me?”

She nudged Syldra as she spoke, giving her a quick wink.

“I’ll gladly pass on such an offer,” Syldra shook her head. “Daelin and I have spent enough time together as it is; we’ll be fine to share a room.”

“Fine, as you wish,” Avara shrugged then turned to the door on the left. “Good night you two. Sleep well.” With one final wink, she stepped into the bed chamber and closed the door.

“She’s a real character,” Syldra shook her head as we entered the opposite bed chamber. “I’m so thankful you decided to bring her along.”

“You were with me when it was decided,” I countered. “You could have said no.”

“I did.”

The bed chamber we came into was small but lavish in decoration. The far wall boasted a singular window, decorated with stain glass portrayal of two dragons above what I thought was an ocean. There was a bed, dresser, and side table all made of a maroon wood, adorned with bronze handles and other decorative embroidery. There was a mirror above the dresser, enchanted to glow a soft silver. The light in the room came from a fire in a small hearth carved into one of the walls. Opposite the hearth, an open archway led into a circular room with a white marble floor and a massive round tub at its center.

“This is...”

“Pretentious,” Syldra laughed beside me. “At the water looks inviting.”

“I suggest you use it,” I jested. “You smell like a horse.”

“Well, that makes two of us.” We shared a smirk before her face went red and she looked away. “I suppose I’ll go first then. Unless of course, you want it...”

“No, it’s alright,” I whispered. “I can wait.”

“Right... thanks...”

I stared at the fire in the hearth, as if it were the most interesting thing in the entire world. I heard soft footsteps behind me, followed by the sound of leather armor sliding to the floor. I heard a small splash of water, before she let out a hearty laugh.

“What, what is it?” I asked.

“The water isn’t hot! The steam in hear isn’t even real!”

I reached out towards the fire in the hearth and realized that it too was a mere illusion.

“Same with the hearth’s fire!” I shouted back.

“Gods be damned,” She spat. “Daelin, would you mind heating this up for me?”

“Of course!”

I turned around and headed into the bath chamber. Syldra stood on the opposite end of the tub, her waist hidden by the white stone. However, I could see her pale skin, covered in bruises, and scars I failed to notice before. Her arms were crossed over her chest to cover herself, and her hair fell behind her, save one wave that fell over her eye.

“What?” she spoke softly, her face turning pink.

“Sorry,” I said, quickly turning away from my prolonged staring. “I must just be tired.”

“Right, of course...”

“I would take a step back for a second,” I instructed.

Syldra took a step away from the tub, and I placed my hands on the edges. I imagined fire coursing through my veins, then focused solely on its heat. I closed my eyes and channeled that heat outward, covering the stone. I could feel get hot to the touch, then felt steam begin to rise into the air and touch my face.

“There,” I whispered, backing away from the tub. “You’re all set.”

“Thank you,” Syldra nodded. “I’ll be ok from here.”

I nodded and rushed out of the room; my eyes kept low. In the open bed chamber, I sighed and stared at the hearth, releasing the rest of the fire that still coursed within me. Immediately, smoke filled the top of the room, shadows dancing about in the orange glow. Still, it was warm and comforting. I dropped my weapons along the dresser, only to regret that decision a short while after.

I have to say boy, you’re a god damned fool, the demon’s voice sounded in my head.

I’d prefer you shut up.

I’d prefer you lose the sword and let me play with Syldra. I guess neither one of us will be getting what we want today huh?

I didn't respond, but I spared a glance at Syldra. Her back was to me; her hair draped over the side in as vibrant a red as I had ever seen it. Even with her back to me, I felt my face begin to flush, my heart pounding a little harder.

Despite how annoying that demon could be, he was right about one thing: I was a fool.

Chapter 5: Syltra

Despite her exhaustion, Syltra found she could not sleep.

She should have fallen asleep by now, lost in dreams of her own. She should be resting and reinvigorating her magic. Hells, she could even be meditating, or studying, or something.

Instead, she stared at a false stone roof, no doubt some timber behind an illusion a single fire away from collapsing. She watched some final remnants of smoke against the conjured ceiling shrink with each passing second, like the end of a storm on the plains. She had been watching it for several hours now and had shrunk to be barely visible in the darkness of the night.

Get it together, Syltra.

Beside her, Daelin was fast asleep. He muttered in his sleep, and constantly twitched. His head was drenched in sweat, but when Syltra placed a hand on the back of his neck, he lacked a fever. No doubt he was lost in his soul again, likely meeting with that accursed demon.

Syltra did not know why it bothered her so much. A man with demon magic running through his veins should have delighted her. Yet all it did was terrify her. She knew the damage

that lay under the surface, waiting at a moment's notice of weakness to take hold and strike. She had witnessed its destructive nature firsthand; she wished never to see it again.

With a heavy sigh, Syltra removed herself from bed. The cold floor met her bare feet as she stood up, pulling her shirt tight around her. She wore only her under shirt, as she wished to be rid of her travelling armor, if only for a single night. She could still see the blush that filled Daelin's face when she walked in, his eyes dashing away, but always returning to her. It was frustrating they were like this when they had gone nearly a year together without issues or tension before.

She shook her head again and decided to change back into her armor. She pulled her leather vest over her shirt, tucking the edges into her pants. She placed the overcoat and belt over all of that and hid a knife in either one of her boots. She felt confident in this armor; she knew she looked dangerous. Even in the underworld of Elysium, the worst crooks who saw her fully armed thought twice before attacking.

She decided to let her hair down and noticed the deep red in its color. She could not remember the last time it looked so vibrant. She turned to Daelin, a smile beginning to cross her lips...

She turned without a second glance and parted, letting the door slam shut behind her.

Out in the hall she had nowhere to go but back the way they came. She returned down the steps to the main hall; the illusionary door at the bottom of the steps had yet to be restored. The other doors maintained their magic, but even those she knew were nothing more than tricks. She closed her eyes and searched beyond each door, checking for magical signatures, life forms, or anything else. But no doors hid any secrets, the only life being the three heartbeats of their horses stored safely in some sort of stable.

Satisfied no one was near, she walked to the middle of the great hall and knelt. She closed her eyes, placed her hands on her knees, and focused her energy. She felt her body warm and her heartbeat slow. Pain slowly began to sear against her back, the red tattoo becoming apparent to anyone who would have happened upon her. Her magic flowed freely through her body, and she allowed it to reinvigorate her. She slept poorly, but magic could easily rectify the drowsiness that threatened to overtake her.

As she meditated, she felt herself lifted from her body, weightless. The sensation was that of falling inward as she left her physical form behind. In this state, her body was vulnerable, but her awareness sharply increased. Her magic flowed freely, and she began to map out all the spells she knew shadow phasing, arcane blasts, seduction, memory wipe, and more.

Falling deeper into her state of meditation, she began to form stronger bonds with the demonic magic rushing inside her, creating a home that would house her curse without breaking her. The line between planes began to meld, and she felt the power at its fullest. It refreshed her, like cold water in the middle of a desert. She inhaled physically, and mentally; the magic brightened like a light all around her.

In this state of awareness, she was shocked to feel a disturbance.

A shockwave of astronomical proportion rippled through the planes and knocked her out of her state of meditation. She was forced into her body and flew backwards across the room, landing with a heavy crash against the far wall. For a moment, the tattoo on her back burned red, burning with an agonizing sharpness she had not experienced since accepting the mark. She bent over in agony, doing everything she could to keep from screaming out. Her insides boiled, and she felt like she was being torn apart...

#

Syldra knew not when nor how she lost consciousness. When she came to, Gorm was standing over her. They were still in the first chamber. She leaned against the back of a cold iron door, head still spinning, while Gorm rested a steady hand on her shoulder, holding a red gem that glowed in his other.

“How do you feel?” he asked bluntly.

“I’m fine,” Syldra lied. She tried not to move, for she felt she may hurl if she did. She simply lay still, allowing Gorm to continue the flow of magic. She realized then the gem possessed some sort of demonic magic, her magic, that was being controlled to refresh her own magical abilities. This in turn stabilized her curse.

“Thank you,” she managed to mutter.

“Let’s not dwell on it too much,” Gorm grunted. “I did only what I needed to do.”

“Still, I’m surprised you made any effort at all,” She replied.

He shrugged and handed her a cup he conjured out of the air. The cup tasted bile, but she felt it quell her nausea as she drank it.

As the two sat there, Fordlin came rushing down the steps, his feet echoing with the obnoxious clapping throughout the chamber.

“In the heavens above, what is happening down here?” he shrieked. “I had no idea I invited witches and demons into my-”

A blast of magic from Gorm dazed Fordlin, knocking him out cold instantly.

“He won’t be happy when he wakes up,” Syldra noted.

“Good. I haven’t been happy since the moment we met him.”

The two sat in silence for a long while. Syl dra thought back to her moment of meditation and the shockwave of raw power that hit her. It was unlike anything she had felt before, and it most certainly was not of the material world.

“Gorm, I was meditating, when...”

“No need to explain, I felt it to,” He nodded. “The paladins just became the least of our worries.”

“Should we tell Daelin he’s being hunted?” Syl dra asked.

“No need. I’m sure his...friend already knows.”

Chapter 6: Demons

I woke with a great sense of dread weighing me down.

I pushed my way to a sitting position, my body shivering from an unseen breeze blowing over me. The room was empty and dark; there was no draft. Yet I could not shake the feeling that I was being watched.

It's happening, the demon whispered in my head. The rift has been broken. We're in horrible danger.

The evil you warned me about then. It's come?

It hasn't found us yet, but it has our scent, that much I'm certain of. The demon paused for a moment before continuing. *If the storm has abated even the slightest bit, we'd do best to take to the road. Keep Gorm and Syldra close to you, and, while I hate to admit it, always carry the sword. All three of those magical forces may be enough to mask our presence.*

And if it doesn't?

Well frankly I don't think it will work at all, the demon said with a sickening cackle. *So be ready for the fight of your life.*

I steadied my breathing, though my heart continued to pound in my chest, and quickly dressed back in my travelling armor. I strapped Aelandria's sword to my hip, holding the hilt of the blade to take in the goddess's magic. The terror subsided, and the imaginary eyes I felt watching me disappeared. However, I still felt uneasy as I went to find the others.

I came down the stairs to the main chamber and, to little surprise, found Fordlin knocked out on the stone floor. He snored as I stepped over his body, wondering if it were Syldra or Gorm who did the deed.

Scanning the chamber, I saw the third door on the left, made of wood and decorated with iron embellishments, wide open. The smell of food and fire, carried out in a small pillar of smoke, seeped through the opening. Hushed voices came from within though, they stopped as I drew near. I entered the room and found Syldra and Gorm enjoying a cup of morning brew, while a regular old fire burned between them. The room appeared to be a kitchen and lounge hybrid. The center featured a fire pit with a spit, surrounded by a circle of small tables. The room was then split in half: one side lay a hearth and many luxurious chairs; on the other lay pots, pans, a sink, and several storage cabinets for food.

"Should I ask why Fordlin is passed out in the chamber?" I asked.

"He had it coming," Gorm shrugged.

"Morning brew?" Syldra asked, offering me a cup.

I nodded and took the cup, taking a seat beside her. She seemed different since last night. Her hair was still lustrous, and her skin seemed radiant, yet her eyes and demeanor gave her away. Something terrible had befallen her. However, knowing how she was, I decided not to ask for further details.

"What's our plan then?"

“Same plan it’s always been,” Gorm grunted at me. “We grab the horses and follow the road southwest until we reach the Storm Pass.”

“Do we know if the storm has passed?” I asked.

“Its force has dropped considerably,” Syldra responded first. “I peeked out when I was exploring the tower, and it looks like the lightning strikes have moved further west. A few more hours and we should be safe to travel.”

“Shit,” I sighed.

“What?”

“Well, if the storm is already subsiding, after half a day, it means we’re about to be served a storm straight out of hell.” Syldra and Gorm looked at me as if we were speaking different languages, so I elaborated further. “In the villages, we call the short storms like this ‘Sunsets.’ A storm this short is usually followed by a storm straight out of hell, or what we like to call ‘Nightmares.’ Absolutely brutal stuff.”

“Ok, well how much time before this Nightmare hits?” Gorm asked.

“Not long. We’ll be lucky if we get a full day before the next storm comes. Once the Nightmare hits, we’ll be looking at seven to ten days of straight downpours and lightning.”

Gorm and Syldra were silent, then Gorm rose from his seat. “Well, you two best get the horses ready. I’ll wake Avara.”

“Are you sure we should risk it?” I asked. “We may not have time to make it anywhere else...”

“It doesn’t matter; I’m willing to take that risk.” Gorm spat as he hurried out. “I ain’t staying ten days with Fordlin as our damned host!”

We heard Gorm's footsteps stomp off up the chamber, then decided to follow after him. Syldra and I went through the massive double doors back in the central chamber and found our horses. They were in an artificial field of some sort, with a stream running through. They were rather pleased with themselves it seemed. A single post was next to the door, and it held our saddle bags and remaining supplies in a jumbled mess.

"This is impressive," I whistled.

"Not magic either," Syldra remarked. "This is the real deal. I would bet money an elf made this entire thing for our idiotic host."

I nodded in agreement as we untangled our gear and through the saddles over the horses. Storm seemed rather pleased with his environment, but I could see the hunger behind his eyes. A horse like him belonged on the open road, and he was ready to be out on the road, charging over open fields and wild roads.

"Get ready Storm," I whispered to the beast. "We're about to run like hell."

We led the horses out at the same time Avara and Gorm came down the steps. Avara was still wiping the sleep from her eyes, though she was fully dressed and armed.

Fordlin began to come to as we gathered our things together at the main entrance. He sprang to his feet and backed away, literally shaking in his boots, as he began muttering to himself. A sudden array of light sprang up in front of him, outlining the holy star used by the church.

"Get back, all of you!" he screeched. "You're devils! Witches! I saw the dark magic; you've broken our world! You're bringing something evil here!"

"Would you quite the drama!" Gorm shouted. "We're not fucking devils, and we're not..." He paused and looked at Syldra. "Well, we're not devils!"

“You’re lying! You’ve brought something evil into my home! You’ve-”

Fordling suddenly crumpled to the floor, once again unconscious. Syldra stood behind him, fist raised in the air with the final ripples of arcane magic dispersing in the sky.

“What? Did we want him to finish?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Gorm spat and kicked the door open, leading his horse outside.

“Can you wipe his memory you think?” I asked Syldra.

“I can block his memory of two of us, not more than that,” She admitted.

“Remove you and Gorm from his mind then. Let him forget the people who absolutely clobbered him.”

Syldra nodded and bent over Fordlin, casting her spell into his mind. As she completed her spell, I led Storm and Avara outside. The sky overhead showed a setting sun, and I could already feel the dampness in the air. Far off in the east, I could just make out the faintest color grey on the horizon.

“We don’t have long. Maybe half a day,” I said.

“Well then we need a destination, fast,” Gorm spat.

I left the rest of my group and ran over to the nearest hut. I slammed on the door several times, before a middle-aged man answered the door. He had a black mustache on his face, and long grey hairs on his head. His boasted a beer gut, but his body was strong from decades spent working the fields. His eyes were dark and unkind, and he growled at me as he spoke.

“What do you want? And who the hell are you?”

“I’m a traveler, a messenger from Elysium,” I lied. “We stayed with Fordlin this past evening, but we have to be off. We need to know the nearest destination we can get to by horse.”

“You were with Fordlin? Then ask the lousy rat of a wizard yerself! I ain’t helping strangers, not when demons are running about!”

“Sir, we’re in a bit of a hurry-”

“Bah! We’re all in a hurry kid! Now get lost, before something bad falls upon us. There are strange demons out. You heard of Windhelm? Place all but disappeared in a cloud of ash! If I were you, I’d go back to Fordlin!”

“Sir, I understand your worry...”

“You don’t understand shit!” the man shouted and stepped out of the house, backing me away from the door. “Now get lost before I-”

“Al, that’s enough!” a young girl pushed past the man and out into the street. She had blonde hair tied back in a tight braid, holding a spoon in one hand and a baby in the other. “This man is asking for directions before the Nightmare hits us! Nothing wrong with that!”

“Bah, you don’t know nothing woman!” Al barked. However, he offered no more objection and turned back into the house/

“Sorry about Al there,” the girl said, turning to me with a smile. “Our dad was up in Windhelm the day it turned to ash. The two of us haven’t left here since, and he hasn’t come to trust strangers neither. I can’t blame him though. It was real tough on everyone out on the plains.”

“A tragedy,” I whispered, a knot forming in my stomach. “I’m really sorry for your loss.”

“A tragedy for sure. Who knows where demons may turn up next?” The girl readjusted the baby in her arms before she continued. “But enough of that. You’re looking to ride somewhere before the worst of the storm hits?”

“If there’s somewhere close by, that would be our goal.”

“Well unfortunately, you’re not going to reach any villages before the storm hits,” the girl sighed, staring out over the horizon. She turned back west, her eyes squinting, before a smile danced across her face. “Oh, but you know what? You could reach the House of Syllia! I’m sure they’d be willing to take in a few weary souls!”

“The House of Syllia?” I asked. “As in the goddess?”

“The one and only,” she smiled. “Oh, they are truly wonderful there!”

“Sounds like a good choice then, thank you! How do we reach it?”

“Honestly, you’ll want to leave the main road and head straight west. Keep the setting sun in front of you, and you should reach it just after nightfall. Hopefully that’ll be enough time for you all.”

“Thank you,” I replied. Before going, I removed the elven dagger from hip and handed it to her. “Take this, as a token of my gratitude. I know it isn’t much, but it’s the most valuable thing I have.”

The woman eyed the relic for a second, then laughed and pushed it away “No need for gifts! My dad always said to be kind to others, and kindness will find you. I’m sure fortune will smile on me eventually. You go on your way now!”

“Thank you again,” I fought back tears and returned the dagger to my belt. I lept atop Storm and rode him over to where my three companions waited for me.

“What’s the word boy?” Gorm asked as I returned to the group.

“The House of Syllia. Follow the sun, and we’ll reach it.” I muttered to them, though my eyes never met their gaze.

“What’s the other option?” Gorm pleaded.

“A village three days from here.” I spurred my horse forward and began following the sun, not wishing to speak to anyone further.

I just wanted to rid myself of the village, and leave the entire Plains, far, far behind.

#

As anticipated, the storm overtook us just a few hours into our ride. We were drenched immediately. We urged the horses forward with great haste, and they responded well. They broke into a full sprint across the plains, as their survival instincts kicked in.

As we rode, a dark object began to rise in the horizon. At first, I thought it a stray hut or wizards tower on the plains. However, flashes of purple lightning began off behind us and illuminated the building as we approached. A singular structure, like a pyramid, rose in front of us. The four walls were made of grey stone that rose twenty feet high, before changing suddenly. From there, it appeared there was a glass roof with small veins of silver running through it. The pyramid would have been incredible under the starlight but looked rather ominous now against the black of the storm.

Storm and I raced ahead of the others, urging them to keep pace. The winds were picking up, and the flashes of lightning grew ever closer. The echo of thunder filled the air each time, overpowering the pattering of rain and stomping of hooves. We were less than an hour away from a rather untimely death.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else!” Gorm shouted over the storm, using magic to enhance his voice.

I was not up for debate and simply rode on, hoping the others would understand.

Approaching the pyramid, the ground suddenly rose, as it was built atop a small hill in the middle of the plains. The slopes had become muddy and slick under the rain, and the horses

struggled to reach the top. During the struggle, the lightning fell upon us, and we could hear the crack of its strikes against the ground behind us. The air smelled of smoke and heat, and desperation filled out efforts.

Storm was the first to reach the top of the hill, and I leapt from his back in a single bound. I rushed to a large metal door, as large as the gates to Elysium, and began slamming my fists against it, praying someone would answer.

But there was nothing but silence.

The others were soon behind me, and we crowded against the gate, banging away, hoping someone would let us into the pyramid. But the longer we stood outside, the less time we had before nature took us. Without a word inside, things began looking grim.

MOVE!

The demon's voice suddenly blasted in my head. He must be desperate to break through the protection Aelandria's sword provided, so I dove to the right side. As I was in the air, a blast of lightning landed where I once stood. While the lightning missed, the force was enough to send me and all three of my companions flying. I landed in a heap and slid away from the pyramid, now covered in mud and rain.

AS I look up, I saw a single light in one of the pyramid's windows. A silhouette appeared in the window. Thinking to grab this stranger's attention, I drew Aelandria's sword and channeled its magic. It suddenly erupted in a bright blue light. The silhouette in turn disappeared.

"What the hells are you doing boy?" Gorm shouted.

"I think I just saved our lives!" I shouted back, rushing back to the door as another bolt of lightning struck where I once stood, as if it were targeting me.

"You better be right!" Gorm shouted.

Avara and Syldra rushed over quickly behind us, and the four of us crowded the door. WE did not bang against it again, having found the effort futile. We simply waited as our horses grew ever more uneasy as the worst of the storm fell upon us. The cacophony of rain and blasts of thunder broke our spirits, and the bursts of lightning were close enough to singe our attire.

As I began praying to the goddess, the door behind us suddenly creaked open. A small woman, shorter than both Avara and Syldra, peaked her head through.

“Which one of you has the sword?” she asked.

“Here!” I turned and handed her the blade. She took it and looked it over, then slammed the gate shut again.

“You moron!” Gorm smacked me upside the head as another last of thunder sounded. “You’ve just gotten us killed and lost the weapon you were meant to *never* let leave your sights!”

Before I could respond, both gates swung open, and the small woman ushered us inside. “Hurry! Get in before I change my mind!”

We needed no further encouragement. Our horses followed us in gladly, and we slammed the doors shut behind us, leaving the horror and threat of the storm behind.

Chapter 7: The House of Syllia

We stood in a vast courtyard filled with steam. Hot baths were everywhere, surrounded by exotic plants with massive green leaves and colorful flowers I had never seen before. Trails of stone wound their way through this exotic oasis. Lining all four sides of the pyramid, rising to the level of stone we saw outside, were what appeared to be apartments. The upper levels had windows and balconies, while the lower level were solid stone walls. We stood in the center of it all under a massive golden archway with a carving of the goddess Syllia looking over all of us with a smile that, even though made of stone, made my heart feel warm inside. The glass pyramid rose to its point above the oasis underneath, emitting a warm energy that was likely a magic source for the building.

Now that we were inside, I could see the woman who saved us clearly. She was older than I by a few years I thought, with piercing sky-blue eyes and straight blonde hair that fell to the small of her back. She wore a thin white robe that revealed her undergarments through the silk. She clutched the sword in her hands, elegant against the slim frame of her physique.

“Please wait here,” she instructed. “I must seek out the head of our house.”

She disappeared into the oasis, leaving the rest of us, battered in muddy, sitting by the main gate. Orlean and the other horses were beginning to grow easy as their stress from the storm disappeared. However, Sylдра and Gorm were contrastingly stressed.

“What’s wrong with you two?” I asked.

“I don’t like it here. There’s something strange in the air, and it’s making me uneasy,” Sylдра hissed.

“It’s the presence of a goddess,” Gorm sighed. “This blasted place is a gift. Those hot baths were supposedly left by Syllia herself when gods still walked among us.”

“I feel it, and I love it,” Avara chimed in, taking in a deep breath. “This type of energy really has me all fired up!”

“Well, we’ll see if you feel the same by the time this all over,” Gorm muttered.

The blonde woman returned with a procession behind her. Two other women wore similar white silk robes over white under garments. They were young as well, though taller than the blonde. They all followed one woman who towered over them. This woman was tall, with dark skin like chocolate. Her hair was cut short to her scalp, and she wore a more traditional red robe over her body. Her expression was fierce, and she seemed rather unamused as she approached.

“Who are you, and what business do such strangers have in the house of Syllia?” the woman’s voice commanded our immediate attention. “We would not expect visitors at such a late hour, especially when the storm rages. What do you want?”

“We’re here to seek refuge,” I replied. “The storm would have killed us if your priestess had not saved us.”

“Yet that explains very little,” the woman frowned. “That does not tell me where you are from, nor does it tell me why you dare to wield a holy artifact of such renown! This belongs in a church, not with strange folk!”

“Lady, you wouldn’t believe us if we tried,” Gorm grunted.

“I suggest you try, for this place does not welcome strangers, especially armed ones, without some form of explanation,” she replied. “I am patient, but only to a point. These are dark times, and many shadows lurk in the world. Four horsemen are a troubling omen indeed...”

“We’re running from Elysium,” I admit, stepping forward. “We’re running because the Lady of the Spire has tasked us with guarding that sword.”

“Doubtful, child,” the cleric glared at me with impatience as she spoke. “The Lady of the Spire never sends others on errands, and she would never deal with holy relics. Such things are gifts from gods that should only be handled by the churches. This is an obvious rouse, and I will not tolerate such falsehood in a goddess’s house!”

“Alright woman, now you’re spitting a load of bullshit,” Gorm stepped forward, a magic aura suddenly surrounding him. “You church folk are all the same, declaring magic and religion two separate things. But you’re all fools for speaking such nonsense. Magic is from Aelandria and the rest of the gods, whether above or below. Religion and magic are entwined; that’s why the head church and the Spire are in the same damned city. Surely you feel the energy in the air. Sure, it’s your goddess, but it’s her magic that you feel.”

“Well, in any case, this sword-”

“This sword is none of your gods be damned business! It belonged in Windhelm. Windhelm is no more. Now, who do you think will protect this blade better, an obvious troop of holy bucket heads, or a group of skilled magic users, led by one of the nine?”

“You are one of the nine?”

“Yes, and I’m running errands, as you so like to call them, for the Lady of the Spire. This boy you’re scolding? The sword chose him. Now if that isn’t some holy mission, I’m not sure what is. But that’s enough on the sword. Will you let us stay, or shall you explain to the Lady of the Spire why one of her nine is a fried corpse in the middle of the plains?”

The priestess furrowed her brow and looked over the crew. Behind her, I could see the blonde woman staring at me, still clutching the blade in her hand. Her eyes were focused, a side-effect from the blade’s magic no doubt, and I swear she was blushing.

“You are strange folk. However, I will not deny you asylum in this house, as the goddess wills it.”

“Thanks, you’re too kind,” Gorm grumbled, giving a lazy bow.

“Oh, do not act so glib, for you are no longer in the Spire. This storm will be long, that much is certain. As such, we shall have to force you all to abide our laws,” The woman cleared her throat and raised her hand. The two initiates who had been silent stepped forward and stood before us. “As our house is an asylum for love and peace, you must all hand over your weapons and armor. There will be no debating this.”

She glared at Syldra as she said the words, causing Syldra to comply despite the scowl crossing her face.

We all undid our armor and weapons, handing them over to the two initiates. Outside of the sword which had already been taken, I merely had the dagger and leather armor. Once taken, I was left standing shirtless with just my boots and britches. Beside me. Gorm remained fully dressed and handed over no weapons, while Avara kept most of her clothes, though her daggers filled one woman’s arms entirely. Syldra carried the most, and she too, like me, wore little now.

“Now, with your weapons gone, we need to dress you properly. However, we will not grant you sanctioned robes unless you have been properly bathed and blessed in the goddess’s waters. For that, we shall take you all down one at a time. For now, we shall bring you to your chambers. Master of the Nine, if you would be so kind as to follow me, I will show you to a special suite we keep for esteemed guests.”

“How wonderful,” Gorm mumbled with another half bow, then followed the snickering priestess. That left the three of us with the three initiates.

“Good sir, may I ask your name?” the blonde-haired woman asked.

“Daelin,” I replied with a sheepish grin.

“Daelin... a lovely name,” the woman offered me a cute little smile in return. “My name is Ariel, and I will be your host as you preside here with us. Come, follow me to your rooms.”

“Happily,” I smiled and gave a true bow, which I noticed sparked a rolling of the eyes from Syltra, before following Ariel. As we walked, I heard the remaining initiates walk through a similar talk with Avara and Syltra before they disappeared in opposite directions.

“Are we all going to opposite ends of the house?” I asked Ariel.

“No, not exactly. We will bring everyone to separate rooms until you have been bathed. Afterwards, there will be a few remaining rituals before you are permitted to roam around the premise. However, there are forbidden areas. For example, you are not allowed into the women’s sanctum, or the priestesses’ quarters, unless you are invited and then escorted to a private room by the occupant.”

“I see. And the same for my room then?”

“Of course! Oh, and there will only be allowed one occupant of a room, unless they are acting on the goddess’s blessings!”

“And what would that be?” I asked, failing to connect the dots.

“If you do not know, then you will not need to worry,” She giggled.

I looked around and realized we had travelled along the edge of the courtyard to the rightmost side. Here, the walls came down and were lined with golden doors, each decorated with a rose. The path was stone, and different baths emitted steam along the opposite end of the pathway. We stopped roughly in the center of it all at one of the smaller baths in the line of water.

“Here you shall bathe and receive a cleansing,” Ariel said. “Now, remove your clothes and step into the healing waters.”

I nodded and obeyed the command, stripping my clothes away to nothing and stepping into the waters. For some reason, I felt no embarrassment in front of this woman, despite her eyes staring over my scars and bruises. If anything, I felt a hint of excitement wash over me as I went deeper into the pool. The water was hot, yet soothing. As more of my body was submerged, the more I felt my mind relax. Once I was entirely into the water, I realized artificial seats had been crafted into the bath. I sat on one, the water now covering everything except my head, and felt my entire body feel relaxed. It was like the feeling Aelandria’s sword gave, only this washed over the body rather than the mind.

I heard a small splash, and I turned to see Ariel, clothes removed, step into the bath behind me. Her eyes were a sweet blue, and her blonde hair fell in perfect waves behind her. Her breasts were just covered by the water, her figure slightly blurred in the steamy waters and

ripples that surrounded her body. I could not deny she was beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful human being I had yet to lay eyes upon.

“You seem troubled,” Ariel said, now standing in the water less than arm’s distance away. Where she stood and I sat, my head was at her chest, and I had to look up at her face smiling down over me. “Is something amiss sir?”

“Uhm.... No?” I whispered, my voice evading me now. My thoughts began to turn cloudy, as Ariel’s presence formed a strange blur in my mind, as if nothing else outside the bath existed.

“You must be fighting the goddess’s will then. No worries, that is what the bath is for, to fully connect you to her gift.” Ariel smiled and walked around me, a bar of soap smelling of some wonderous sweetness appearing in her hand. She stood behind me and scrubbed at my back, tracing her free hand over each scar and bruise as she went. “Tell me, does this feel better? Are you at ease?”

“Uhm... I think so...” I barely managed the words, my scent flooded with the smell, my body overwhelmed by the heat. I couldn’t focus, and felt myself drifting back, my eyes getting heavy...

Ariel placed her hands on the back of my head and allowed me to fall back. My eyes closed, and I was submerged entirely. I held my breath, and felt weightless, before I slowly returned to a sitting position.

When my eyes opened, the world was tinted pink. It was subtle, but I could tell the world had changed. Yet it was not a horrid change, but one of beauty. I was excited to see it and felt myself smile a real smile.

“Do you feel better?” Ariel asked, moving to stand before me.

“I feel wonderful,” I half-laughed as I stared up into her beautiful blue eyes and warm smile.

“Excellent,” she giggled and leaned forward, kissing me gently on the cheek. “Now, let me show you to the rest of the house.”

Chapter 9: Syldra

“Damn this place,” Syldra sighed.

Her body shivered as she stood unarmed in the stone chamber. The initiate had led her here and instructed Syldra to await her return. The others would be bathed first, and apparently isolation for each was necessary to go through a proper ritual.

Syldra of course knew this to be priestess bullshit. They were in a house filled with magic springs left by a goddess. They could all be shoved in one bath together, and each of them would still leave completely entranced by the “blessing” that was left here. That blessing was nothing more than an emotional trick, one that dulled some while enhancing others. Syldra knew such magic well, for her own magic operated under a similar trick.

Annoyed at the predicament, though thankful to be out of the rain, Syldra moved to her bed and took a seat. The bed was soft, too soft. The blankets were warm at least though; she could tell just from the touch. She looked around the room. It was a simple place, though it had no windows. IT was on the first floor, and she was locked behind a silver door that had some fancy rose on the outside. The room itself was empty save the bed and dresser with a mirror. There was a hearth on one wall, though no fire currently burned.

Overall, it was a rather cold environment, a stark contrast from the warmth of the courtyard.

She waited for what felt like hours before a knock sounded on her door. She rose to answer it, but it swung open as she stood. She watched her guest enter, and her heart dropped.

The head priestess stood in the doorway. She was tall and stood well over Syltra. Her face seemed kind for now, but her eyes gave away her weariness. The priestess closed the door softly behind and her stood regarding Syltra. The silence lingered, until Syltra sighed and sat back down on the bed.

“I take it you can sense my powers then.” It was no question, for Syltra knew the answer.

“I felt it the moment you entered the house. The confusing dilemma I saw was the simultaneous presence of your powers and the sword. Such opposite ends of what is supposedly good and evil in such proximity is perplexing.”

“Believe me, it’s not even the half of it,” Syltra scoffed. This was good at least. The woman had sensed Syltra’s magic because it was so akin to the powers of this sanctuary. But she had not sensed Daelin’s ability. Which mean this priestess was not a very powerful magic user, and certainly no threat to Syltra.

“No, I believe there is much more at play here than I, or my initiates, can even begin to comprehend,” the woman nodded slowly as she spoke, then stepped forward. “Nevertheless, I have allowed you entrance into my house, and I believe a few answers are in order.”

Syltra braced herself for some fight. Killing a priestess like this would be trouble, and it would certainly bring about quick judgement. Of course they already had enough to worry over; it would be best not to add to the list.

“You seem troubled,” the priestess said as she sat beside Syltra. A hand was placed against Syltra’s back, causing her whole body to shudder. “Do not worry; I won’t hurt you.”

The priestess ran her hand along Syltra’s exposed back, perfectly outlining the red tattoos that should not have been visible. Syltra shot up then and shadow phased across the room, placing her back to the silver door as sweat began to form on her brow, her breathing suddenly heavy, her heartrate accelerating.

“How did you see that? You shouldn’t see it...”

“The goddess is drawing your magic out. She recognizes it, and she is fighting you on it,” the priestess sighed. “Perhaps you can’t feel it yet, but your kind are not typically welcome in the house, as your powers work in evil ways compared to the blessing of the goddess.”

“Well, I didn’t ask to be here!” Syltra snapped.

“No, you didn’t. Yet here you are,” the priestess rose again, folding her hands as she looked over Syltra. “Tell me, why are you here?”

“Well, we’re delivering the sword-”

“Enough with the falsehood. I did not question a master of the six, but I recognize a lie when I see one. That boyfriend of yours isn’t a very good liar.”

“He’s not-”

“Oh hush, I know,” the priestess waved away Syltra’s objection. “In any event, he travels with the master, and they seem to have a relationship as tutor and student. The pirate girl? I can read her eyes. She didn’t care much for the others, so long as she gets adventure. Those people never make it past their youth, however. But in any event, you are the one I can’t figure out. Why does one with such demonic powers decide to travel with such a strange party?”

“Why I do what I do is no concern of yours!”

“No need to come out with such words of anger, my dear,” The priestess smiled, and Sylдра felt her body relax a slight bit as her arms fell, her fists clenched to turning white opening.

“See? I mean no harm; I simply wish to understand. And I think I have a guess now...”

“I’m not saying a damn word,” Sylдра hissed.

“No, and you don’t have to, I’ve already heard more than enough. Seen more than enough actually.” The priestess walked to Sylдра and took her hand. “Come. I will see to your bathing personally.”

#

Sylдра was shivering in the open air despite the steam from the baths. They were in the heart of the courtyard, and no one could have seen her through the wild roses and flowers growing wild around her. Yet she still felt heavy eyes on her, staring at her back. And she wasn’t referring to the priestess.

“I know you’re tense, but that is because you are fighting a literal goddess,” the priestess explained, calmly coaxing Sylдра into the water. “Just step forward and try to relax. Let your body soothe itself.”

“I get it, I get it,” Sylдра sighed. She took a step forward, and the water stung. It was hot, but that didn’t bother her. The pain emanated like thousands of tiny needles stabbing into her feet as she stepped into the water’s surface. The pain forced her back, and she let out a small gasp.

“IT hurts because you doubt the powers. You still think yourself different when you operate the same. Simply give it a chance.”

The priestess stepped forward as she spoke and placed her hands on Sylдра’s shoulder. All at once, Sylдра stopped shivering and felt her head begin to fog. *Oh shit...* Sylдра knew what was happening. The priestess’s touch amplified the goddess’s magic, and it was now flowing

directly into Syldra. She tried to resist, but that seemed to make the magic work harder, fogging her mind to the point she nearly passed out. The tattoos on her back burned bright red, the light visible on the plants around her.

“Step into the water, Syldra of Emenyial. Step in and embrace the goddess’s magic, the root of the corrupted power flowing inside you.”

Syldra tried to fight back, to scream and strike the priestess, but her arms were numb. Her legs wobbled, struggling to hold her weight, and she half-stumbled, half-stepped into the hot water before her. The jolt of needles stung worse than before, yet she could not scream or back away. She was forced deeper, the water rising to her thigh, then her stomach, then over her chest. Thankfully the water went no deeper, and Syldra could feel her body beginning to regain some of its strength despite her fatigue.

A sudden splash behind her took her off guard. Before she could turn, two strong hands shoved her shoulders, and she collapsed forward, her head submerged in the water.

Everything went black for a moment, and Syldra panicked. She tried moving her arms and scrambling, but she felt weightless. She had no physical body, instead feeling like a cloud, drifting about in a vacuum. There was nothingness, until a pink light appeared. There was no voice or sound, yet Syldra knew she was face to face with something beyond the physical realm; it was no her first time encountering such powers.

The red of her tattoo suddenly appeared before her. The shape changed slightly, and it took on a new symbol, a holy symbol she did not recognize. The pink light turned red, taking on the same color as her markings, before they both turned back to the bright, warm pink.

In that moment, Syldra felt like she was drowning. No, she was drowning.

In an instant she was back in her body, being pulled from the water. She gasped for air and stumbled forward to the back end of her bath, grabbing the edges as oxygen flooded into her lungs. As her vision began to clear and her heartrate steadied, she realized the world now consisted of that pink light, and her back was no longer burning. Instead, it tickled her, a pleasant little toying along her back that made her feel at ease.

“How do you feel?” the priestess asked.

“Like shit,” Syldra chuckled. “I’ve done it haven’t I? I’ve just given in to the goddess...”

“It feels weird, and you hate yourself for it, that much is plain on your face,” the priestess whispered, now standing equally naked beside her. “Yet there is a bliss to it. It was the right decision, and you are now granted free reign throughout the sanctuary.”

“I understand, I think,” Sydra sighed, resting her head against the soft grass at the edge of the hot bath. “For now, though, I need to think...”

“I’m sorry, but I must finish the bath.” The priestess stepped away, then returned behind Syldra. She held a bar of soap that smelled like wood and smoke, like home to Syldra, and began rubbing it across her body. “I see even your tattoo has changed.”

“It’s taken a new perspective, I think,” Syldra chuckled. “I suppose it will be different from now on.”

“Not nearly as different as you think,” the priestess replied. “Love is merely a stronger passion. You know this already. All it did was open a new avenue for your heart and your powers. It sounds corny, I know, but then again, that is the nature of love. That’s why love stories are always so sweet to hear, so satisfying to share. But if you don’t mind my prying, how do you intend to hold on to this love? Or shall you revert to the shallow stares of men and pray that their groping eyes will be enough?”

“Now that secret, is one I haven’t figured out,” Syltra whispered. But that was a lie. She knew where love would be found. She just had to let it in.

Chapter 10: Stay

Despite our freedom to roam the premises, I saw little of my other companions. In fact, it was nearly four days of nothing before even one of the initiates dared to speak with me. Despite the melancholy that had set in, I could feel the storm driving me to the edge, getting restless. On the worst days, the demon's voice would return, and it forced me to take a bath. The goddess's magic in the natural springs was usually enough to drive the voices back, silencing him for the night or day as needed.

That was what my life became in the house. Baths, eating, and mindless sitting. I practiced some magic in secret: sparking candles, lighting the hearth with fire, and shadow phasing about the room. It was mindless work and rather simple magic, as I feared attempting any real powers in this holy place.

In my hours of greatest boredom, I lay on the bed and let my mind wander. It thought of nothing. It thought of Windhelm. It replayed the battle with the paladin. But most of all, it kept thinking of the bath and the touch of that woman...

I was surprised to find how much I missed her. I missed the way her blonde hair fell over her shoulders; the pure power that radiated off of her; the confidence that inspired me. All these thoughts filled my mind, and they were always accompanied by the mocking voice of the demon.

You've fallen for the priestess's tricks mortal, he would laugh. Like any other man, you're powerless to it.

Shut up.

These conversations were brief and always ended with a trip to the baths.

On the fourth day, I rose to head to the baths having been completely overtaken by the thought of the woman, accompanied by pestering from the demon I could not counter. However, as I pulled the door open, I came face to face with Ariel. She stood below me; her figure exposed beneath her sheer gown. Her blonde hair fell in curls this time, and her piercing blue eyes stared up at me with something I could not place. I could smell roses wafting off her as well.

"Oh, uhm, good evening.... esteemed guest," she said with a start. "I have come to...uhm... well I have come to.... Check on you..."

"Thank you for your concern," I said. At the moment my heart sped up, beating almost too loud for me to hear my own words. "I've actually decided that I need a bath currently and was just on my way there."

"OH really? Well perhaps you wish for the company of a priestess then, to get the full experience of the waters?" She turned red as she spoke, though I did not notice it at first.

Someone else did.

Oh look at that cute little face, all red. Not to mention that gorgeous, innocent figure, I could feel the demon's excitement boiling in the back of my mind. We should absolutely accept her invitation!

There is no we; I'm going to the baths to rid myself of you, I snapped internally.

Psh, come yourself boy. You know you only silence me!

“Please, lead the way,” I nodded to the woman, the words spilling from my lips before I could think them over.

“Of course.”

She smiled and took my hand in hers. Her hands were small, her slender fingers locking around my own as she led me into the gardens. Her hair bounced gently as she walked, and I could feel her fragrance flooding my nostrils, overwhelming my senses. I felt funny and giddy and, for reasons I could not explain, allowed her to lead me on.

Oh, how exciting, a bath with a cute little blonde woman. I can sense your excitement!

I swear by the gods I will find a way to kill you, I grumbled internally.

We proceeded deeper into the gardens than I had ever ventured. The fog was thick and felt like warm hands brushing against us. The air was heavy, and my heart was fluttering. Butterflies took flight in my stomach, and my body began to feel heavy. I felt as if the world disappeared, and I was now in a small room alone with Ariel.

Oh, for fucks sake, the demon groaned. *Your damned gods...*

“Ariel,” I whispered her name, my legs losing strength beneath me. I stumbled forward, but her arms caught me. She stepped in front of me and held me upright, and I could feel her arms around me, my chest pressed against hers, our legs tangled...

“Come Daelin, just a bit further,” She said. She faced me now and led me forward, both of her hands holding mine as she walked backwards. Her smile was like a beacon and darkness, and I felt myself drawn forward, following her deeper into the fog...

Eventually the fog cleared rather suddenly. The area was open, and a massive circle of hot water was before us. The steam coming off it was most definitely red, and it pulled at me, begging me to come in. Ariel let go of my hands and let her robe fall, revealing her pale skin underneath. She looked over her shoulder at me, and then turned around completely. She stepped towards me, and I could feel excitement rushing over me, my body responding without subtlety.

“Come Daelin, into the baths with you. The goddess will bestow her blessing on you once more.” Ariel whispered the words as she stepped forward, close enough for me to feel her breath on my neck as she removed my robes. “There, now follow me.”

Her hand took mine and she walked me forward towards the water. Electricity seemed to flood my veins at her touch. My muscles relaxed, and yet I felt tense and uneasy all at once. My palms began to sweat. I don't remember moving my legs, and yet we kept on going forward, until we were just inches away from the water's edge.

You know, I changed my mind. This is far enough! the demon screamed. Let's go back now! Back to the room, Daelin! Leave Ariel here!

“You're fighting a goddess right now,” Ariel whispered as she stepped into the waters. “I suggest you tell the demon to relax; this is one fight he can't win.”

“You know about that?” I could not hide the shock in my voice.

“I knew it from the moment we touched, and yet it never once scared me. If anything, it just made you more... alluring,” She stepped into the water, continuing back to her ankle, then her knee, then her waist, all the while pulling me in behind her. My feet touched the water and found steps. Then another, as I lowered myself further into the water.

Fey'lashti'apeht'tha! The demon screamed, but his voice eventually faded to nothing, as did the rest of the world. Thoughts of anyone else seemed to elude me as I had eyes only for the beautiful blonde woman guiding me forward, until we were both up to our chests in the waters.

“How do you feel?” Ariel asked. She wrapped an arm under mine and stepped forward, so her feet were barely touching mine. Her other hand was on my chest, and her blue eyes looked up at me with concern, and some other hidden secret.

“I feel... alright I suppose,” I whispered, my body barely responding to me as my heart pounded in my chest.

“I must apologize,” Ariel whispered, her lips now just inches away from mine, her body now fully pressed against my own. “We are not supposed to enter the waters after the first bath unless the guest invites us explicitly...”

She stared up at me, her lips seeming so soft and near. Her eyes were like ponds I began losing myself in, as her hand reached under the water.

“It's ok,” I said. “I don't mind.”

“Of course, of course. But perhaps you haven't invited me to stay... so I must be leaving...” She whispered the words, her hands holding me captive, her essence overtaking me.

“No, I want you here with me now,” I found myself saying. The words barely escaped my lips, and I found myself leaning forward, kissing her. It was a gentle and sloppy kiss, as it was my first real kiss, yet it was warm at once. I held it and tried to slip back, but her hand took my head and pulled it down, kissing me harder before she finally released me.

“Thank you.” She whispered, her hands dancing along my chest.

“So...”

“Don’t speak now. Allow me to guide us.” Ariel took my hands and placed them around her hips as she rose in the water, kissing me again, before pushing me back to sit against the bath’s steps. “The pools are filled with healing waters legend says were created by Syllia herself. Here, that magic is strong. As her voice in the mortal world, I know best how to guide those powers. Allow me to show you the pleasant gift she left for us.”

“Ariel, I... before you take me any further, I need to know something...”

“Anything you wish,” She whispered, as she kissed my neck, moving to sit atop my lap as her arms moved around my neck.

“Why did you let us in?” I finally said.

“You were travelers in need,” She replied. “Anyone would have done the same.”

“I don’t believe that. If that were true, I wouldn’t have needed to show my sword. That was when you decided to let us in. Not before. Even when inside, we were questioned by the head priestess and nearly kicked out. The other women here, they stare at us like we don’t belong. And beyond all of that, you know my secret.”

“Come now is not the time for such things,” She whispered, a hand sliding down to seize me again, forcing thoughts from my mind. “You don’t seem to wish to talk much either...”

“Please, just answer the final question...” I whispered, despite the feeling beginning to take hold of me.

“Please, just do it.”

Ariel did not remove her hand but sighed. She held me and moved it ever so slightly as she spoke. “I was granted a vision. In it, I saw a champion with a sword aglow blue. Yet a dark shadow loomed over him, and behind him only a trail of tears and death. But before him? Before him there was some semblance of hope, though it would come at the cost of Syllia’s gift...”

Her legs pressed against mine, and I felt more than her hand begin to graze against me.

“So, you think I’m the man in this... vision?” I could barely get the whispered words out.

“Disciples of our gods often have visions,” she gasped as she moved against me. “Maybe they’re not always completely true, and they’re often surrounded in riddles, but they are real. I truly saw you! Your presence at the doors was no mistake. It was a sign, and a gift I wish not to waste...”

She gasped then; her body fully pressed against mine. I took her in my arms and kissed her, my thoughts becoming harder and harder to keep straight. She moved with a natural ease that took my thoughts away, as I pulled her closer.

“Enough chatter though,” she said between gasps. “Just embrace Syllia’s gift, as you may never feel it again...”

Her words were ominous, yet I did not argue. I simply let my thoughts fade and let her guide me into a state of euphoria.

#

I returned to my room but received no visitors that night, nor the night after. I grew restless, wishing for Ariel to return and visit, but she never came. I went to the baths on several different occasions, hoping to run into her, but I had no such luck.

The storm raged on outside without signs of stopping. The lightning and rain never wavered, and the wind visible bending the grass to its will. Each day I would make my way to the upper levels, finding a viewing platform near the top of the glass pyramid. Every day, I watched for signs of paladins, or something worse, such as a looming shadow of darkness, but nothing ever appeared.

This only increased my anxiety.

The evening of the third day, a knock sounded at the door. I felt my heart flutter a bit, which was rather odd, as I went to open the door. To my relief, I found Ariel standing before me, her warm smile large and her blue eyes glittering. Her robe seemed shorter than usual, her perfect pale legs completely free and visible.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” she giggled and placed a small kiss on my cheek. “May I be granted entry?”

“Of course, I would love your company,” I bowed and let her in, shutting the door and locking it behind us.

“The head cleric has been rather weary of the lot of you, and she has kept a strict maintenance of our schedules. However, she has retired early for the evening, and that leaves me free to wander as I please.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve come by. I admit I’ve grown rather lonely after our last time together.”

The truth comes out, the demon teased in the back of my mind. The boy admits he’s more of a man that we all thought

“I would’ve come sooner, I swear it,” Ariel grinned, taking my hands in hers and pulling me to the bed. “Perhaps I can make up for that lost time...”

She wrapped her arms around me and kissed me gently on the lips. I returned her gesture and rolled over her, so we were in the very center. Her robe had been thrown open a bit, one leg now laid across my own. She kissed me once more before pulling back to rest her head on the pillow.

“It’s sad this is all so short-lived,” she whispered. She placed a hand on my chest under my own robe. It was a soft touch, her hand cold against me.

“Yes, I suppose it is then,” I nodded.

You two are unbelievable, of course this is short-lived, the demon laughed. *Come now, did you think this was romance? No, this is merely a virgin’s first kiss, one you were desperate to have. But romance? Never.*

“Well, let’s not sully our small moment together then,” she whispered, moving to now lay atop me, her lips a hands width from my own. “If darkness is to come, let me give you a moment of light you can hang on too.”

She kissed my lips, then kissed each of my cheeks.

“What if I didn’t leave then?” I asked suddenly. “What if I stayed here? Avoided all the death that you envision in my future?”

“Those who fight to avoid their fate often create tragedies much worse,” she replied sweetly. “Should you run from one path, worse will surely find you here.”

I hate to say it, but this girl is right, the demon concurred. *And would’ve guessed it? A pretty face and a working brain. Humans are always so surprising...*

“But you still speak in riddles. The cost of Syllia’s gift?” I shook my head and turned away from her.

“Come now, don’t worry about the future. It’ll reveal itself in time. For now, just tell me what you wish of me...”

“Stay.” I whispered without hesitation, turning back into her lips and long passionate kiss. She returned the kiss and more, as the evening turned to night, and night turned to morning.

Chapter 11: Heading West

Aggressive knocking forced me awake, but it was not the knocking that gave me cause for worry.

The sun broke through the chambers window. The storm had passed, and we had already lost time as I lay sleeping.

I shot out of bed and scrambled to find my clothes. Ariel stirred a bit as well, but she only pulled the blankets over body closer and rolled over. Somehow, she managed to tune out the furious knocking. I rushed over to the door to answer when it suddenly stopped. Standing at the edge of the door, I could make out the voices outside, and my stomach dropped.

“Listen lady, I don’t give a damn about custom right now,” I could hear Gorm shouting. “Until he’s up and out of that damned room, I’m not going anywhere!”

I swung the door open and nearly took Gorm’s fist to head as he prepared to resume his knocking. The individual unfortunate enough to take the ire of his anger was none other than the head cleric herself. She stood in her formal wear, while Gorm stood completely dressed in his travelling attire. They both shared an expression of resentment and disdain, all of which immediately fell upon me.

“Gods be damned boy! What have you been up to? The storm broke hours ago and...”

He trailed off as his eyes looked past me into the room. I turned back with him to where Ariel was stretching and now sitting up in bed. She made eye contact with Gorm and then the head cleric and gave a tentative wave.

“Shit,” Gorm sighed.

“Ariel?” the head cleric pushed Gorm aside and stared into the room in disgust. “Ariel, what in the heavens are you doing here? You know we don’t fraternize with guests!”

“He invited me in, which makes it perfectly right for us to share in Syllia’s blessings,” she replied, not leaving the bed.

“You are under my instruction and should behave with greater decorum!” The cleric shouted at her. “Go to the baths and cleanse yourself immediately! I know what this boy is, and I’ll have none of his stench corrupting my girls!”

“Now wait just a minute,” Gorm turned on the head cleric. “It’s your goddess’s magic caused this whole debacle in the first place! Don’t go blaming the kids for acting on their urges when they were only listening to your precious goddess!”

“Don’t you dare claim that the goddess’s hand was involved. She’d never condone such acts with a demon!” The priestess snapped.

“Really? You let a demon in and taught her before, what makes him any different?”

The head cleric fell silent, and turned away, her face turning red. I did not understand the reference Gorm made, but it clearly struck a nerve. The cleric turned to me, her eyes filled with rage, but said no further words as she turned to storm off.

“I hope you enjoyed your night, because it’ll be the last time you’ll have such pleasantries I’m sure,” Grom spat. “Get your ass dressed and hurry to the stables. We’ve lost enough daylight as is it is.”

Gorm turned from the door and walked away as well, leaving me to close the door and sigh. As I stood there, Ariel came forward and wrapped her arms around my waist, kissing the back of neck before I turned to face her. She smiled warmly at me but stepped back.

“I suppose I should let you prepare to part then,” She whispered.

“Yes, I believe it is time I got going,” I sighed and readied myself. I grabbed my armor and stripped from the robe, changing back into the attire I wore entering the place. I still did not have my weapons, but they would no doubt be prepared and ready for me along with the horses.

“You’ll be making your way west now, won’t you?”

“Indeed, I will,” I replied to Ariel. I opened the doors and made to leave, and she rushed over, wrapping her arm around mine, as we walked towards the entrance.

“Well, you have a long road ahead, but please, take this with you,” she whispered, and placed a medallion in my arm. I lifted it and saw a silver rose laced into the medal.

“What is it?” I asked.

“That is the sigil of my house, the Roses of Edinrow. If you get past the mountains, show that to any of her patrols, and they can offer you safe passage and comfort at our castle. They’ll know I was the one who blessed your passage and should obey without question.”

I nodded and pocketed the medallion. “Thank you, that was very generous of you. I don’t know how I can repay the hospitality you’ve shown me during our stay.”

“You’ve done quite enough to show your gratitude, do not worry.”

We walked side by side around the courtyard's edge to the main entrance which we once came from. I could hear the voices before I saw them all. The others were already assembled and fully armed once more. The horses were cleaned and refreshed, our saddle bags looking surprisingly fuller than when we arrived. With my companions, a single initiate stood, holding my elven dagger and Aelandria's sword.

That's when I heard the hooves. It sounded like the low rumble of thunder in the distance, but I had ridden a kaldirian horse long enough to know the sound of their hooves. By the sound of it, there were more than one horse, and they were likely just below the hill, coming to this very holy site.

Look who's decided to return for a rematch.

Are you sure it's him? I asked the demon.

I'm sure it wouldn't be if you let me finish him in Elysium...

I quickly strapped the sword to my hip and hid the elven dagger then turned to the others. Based on Gorm's expression, he could hear the hooves as well.

"They're very close..." Gorm groaned.

"Well, we would've had a head start if someone hadn't slept in," Syldra hissed.

"Enough, we don't have time to worry about who slept where," Gorm shot an equally nasty expression Syldra's way, silencing her. "Right now, we have who knows how many paladins on their way, and we're at a major disadvantage here."

If the options are going to hell or fighting, you should let me takeover.

Not now. I hissed internally.

"You said there are paladins on their way here now?" Ariel asked.

"We don't have time to explain it to you," Syldra snapped.

“Well, I don’t need explaining, I can figure out you’re on the run from them well enough,” Ariel retorted.

“Enough! We need to figure out a course of action, fast!” Gorm hollered.

“If those are truly paladins, then the cleric will greet them upon their arrival. She will, of course, hear word of your presence and will be forced to aid them in apprehending you.” Ariel continued. “However, I might be able to hide you long enough to get a head start.”

“How?” I asked, eager to listen to anyone with a plan that didn’t involve ceding control to a demon.

“In the baths. It’s a bit of a gamble, I admit, but it could work. The fog will hide you all, and it will lead everyone like a maze. If Syllia believes your cause worthy, she won’t let you get captured!”

“We’re really going to bank our survival on trusting a goddess?” Sylдра laughed. “Come on, we’re fucking demonic. Not a chance she helps us.”

“Well, she seemed to favor Daelin quite nicely last time we were in the baths,” Ariel replied. “I think she’ll do it again.”

Sylдра’s jaw dropped, and the look she gave me made my heart feel like bursting. I averted her eyes quickly, but I felt them on me still.

As we stood there, footsteps sounded from inside, and the hooves outside were practically at the door. Our options were slim, and time was nearly out.

“I’ll remain here,” Ariel exclaimed. “I’ll keep the horses ready to ride off on, but you have to go into the courtyard now, or it’s all for not!”

“Damn,” Gorm hissed. “Let’s go!”

Without a word, he raised off into the courtyard. As he ran, the fog seemed to thicken and grow, and then he vanished entirely. Syldra and Avara hesitated as well, but I did not wait. I nodded my thanks to Ariel and dashed in after Gorm.

The fog thickened, and the sounds of hooves, footsteps, voices, everything, disappeared. I could not make out my own hand in front of me, and I dared not draw Aelandria's sword should it suddenly glow. I simply walked forward in the silence, letting my feet guide me.

It was a strange sensation, but I did not know for sure where I walked. At some points I felt I was turning, at others going backwards. I knew the courtyard's gardens were large and yet it seemed I walked much further than possible. Time seemed strange, and I could not decipher how long I walked for.

As I meandered about the fog, I heard footsteps approaching. Nervously, I grabbed the elven dagger, and readied it by my waist. I crouched low and stalked onward, hoping to take whoever I came across first before-

A dagger was at my throat, and I froze.

"Oh thank gods," Syldra sighed as she lowered her blade. "I have to say this whole thing is ridiculous. I feel like we've spent hours here, and I have no idea where I am."

"I agree. I'm starting to wonder if we're on the wrong path, or if we're being sent into a trap," I admitted.

"Well then we'll face it together," Syldra replied. "Now let's see if this goddess will lead us out or not."

We began to walk forward again when I felt a strange sensation creeping up my spine. I grabbed Syldra's hand and pulled her to the right suddenly, picking up our pace to nearly a run as I felt something calling to me.

Strangely, the fog began to clear. I could begin to see the pathway at my feet and decipher the shape of bushes and flowers on either side of us. I looked up and saw sunlight breaking through the glass pyramid.

Before long, the fog broke, and we were back at the start of it all, standing at the gates to the house. Gorm and Avara were already on horseback, the two on top of the largest of the paladins' kaldirian horses.

Syldra and I walked out and sighed in relief, and strode forward, eager to see our companions.

"Alright, mount up and let's go, quick!" Gorm shouted and turned his horse out, leaving us behind.

"I see you let Syllia guide you..." Ariel whispered, clasping my hand as I walked to her.

I kissed Ariel gently on the forehead and lept atop Storm. "Thank you, Ariel. I am truly grateful for everything."

"Go Daelin. Head west and remember these moments when the rest of the world is dark."

I waved to her one last time, then urged Storm forward, leaving the House of Syllia and all the memories behind me.

#

Night fell but we never faltered in our rapid pace west.

Avara and Gorm held the lead, followed closely behind by Syldra on Orlean riding side by side with me atop Storm. The horses cut through the grassy plains as the stars watched on overhead. The moons began to rise; we could see for miles around us as they illuminated the plains. The night was cool, calm, and silent.

"You think we'll get a chance to stop?" Avara asked as she began to doze off.

“Doubt it,” I shouted back. “They’re a horse shy, but they could still catch us no problem. Our only chance is building a lead.”

“We could probably make rest to camp though, right? I mean if they’re not even going the right direction, we’d be ok to breathe.”

“We just have to keep riding. The others won’t be ready to stop.”

“No.” Gorm stated bluntly.

As dawn broke and day light began to claim the skies, I saw a change in the horizon. The light outlined dark shadows that rose in jagged peaks. As the mountains became visible, Gorm called for us to slow.

“We turn south now,” Gorm commanded. “We want to head to Southbend. It’s a tiny trading village that lays under the mountains. From there, it’s a straight shot up the road towards Storm Pass.”

“You think the paladins will already be ahead of us?” I asked.

“They very well maybe,” Gorm admitted. “However, they may also be behind us trying to find out trail. Either way, the road from Southbend is the only path that cuts into the mountains towards the gates.”

“We’ll be exiting near Edinrow?”

“Well not exactly. Edinrow will still be many miles away when we exit the mountains, but it is the closest power in Eastwood.”

“We should make for Edinrow then.”

“And since when do you know what we should and shouldn’t do?” Syldra yelled from Orlean. “When have you ever travelled outside the plains? We should follow the mountains south as soon as we pass the other side.”

“Regardless of where we want to be, we still have to get there,” Gorm cut in. “Let’s just focus on getting to the damn mountains. We still have a bunch of zealots who want to showcase your heads outside their Enclave.”

Syldra spared me one last glance of displeasure, but we resumed our ride without further conversation. We turned south and urged our horses onward.

Around midday, the village came into view. Southbend was larger than most villages on the plains, with more buildings and many more people. The main road cut through the middle, with stone buildings spreading well over a mile on either side. Some of these buildings stood two stories high, which was unseen outside of Elysium. Merchants, soldiers, scholars, and more were out and about, exchanging goods and going over travel arrangements, whether for heading into the Storms, or away from them. However, on the main road that wound into the city, we noticed three white horses with soldiers in gleaming armor disappear into the maze of buildings.

The paladins beat us. They now stood between us and our only escape.

Chapter 12: The Chase

We pulled our horses up and watched three white horses enter the town. While I wished that it could have been any random group of three paladins, it was impossible to mistake Andorath's bald head for anyone else. No man stood that large, especially atop a horse.

"Damned horses," Gorm spat. "If I ever get back to the Spire, I'll have a word about our own riding arrangements."

"We really have no other way through the mountain?" I asked. I turned and scanned the mountains we could see, searching for some semblance of trail or pass.

"None I'd risk taking. There are countless beasts, bandits, and disasters in those mountains. Take a wrong step, and it will likely be your last."

"Well, the longer we stand here thinking, the likelier it is they spot us," Syltra chimed in. "We need to get moving. Doesn't matter where we go at this point, as long we're not sitting here waiting to be found."

"I know," Gorm growled. "I'm no idiot."

"We should go around then," I suggested.

“We’re not going around,” Gorm quickly disagreed. “We go around, and we’ll just end up meeting them on the other end. They’ll be ready.”

“We have to try,” Avara said. “Maybe they’ll spend some time looking around the town for us. If they do, we may have enough time...”

“It’s our best bet,” Syltra replied. “We need to gamble and hope we can beat them to the road up to the pass first. It’s that or take them on here and now.”

“We don’t want to start a war,” Gorm sighed. “Remember, they’re not the villains.”

Gorm glanced at me, and I turned my head to avoid his gaze. I ignored the stares and instead investigated our surroundings. While some small hills began to emerge over the landscape, it was still relatively flat terrain between us and the mountains. The only vegetation were endless fields of grass. The horses would have no trouble rushing for the road on the opposite end of the little town and the mountain pass beyond.

“We should go,” I said. I picked up the reins and commanded Storm into a forward gallop. Gorm and Avara were close behind; Syltra kept pace with Orlean beside me.

The wind whistled by as we charged forward. We kept a wide birth from the little town as we circled around. The mountains loomed ever larger as we drew near; their long shadows seemed to reach out as we approached, ready to encompass us in their darkness. My eyes began to water as the air whipped by, and my legs began to protest the hard riding continued from the previous night. Yet we kept moving, soon passing Southbend and arriving at the road to the mountains that lay on the opposite end.

While the road running through the plains consisted mostly of gravel, the road to the mountain pass was made entirely of cut stone. Metal torches lined either side as the road wound its way south through a small valley that began to slowly climb between two massive mountains

before disappearing. There were small caravans and groups of strange travelers on the road, and we did our best to join the small flow of traffic.

We dismounted on the road, as many of the others were walking, and bowed our heads as we guided our mounts towards the mountains. I could see a large archway made entirely of stone reaching across the road before us; dwarves in golden armor and equipped with shining weapons of pure steel walked along its top. They watched the travelers with keen eyes, including us, as we entered the road.

The shadow of the bridge passed over us, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. I felt as if someone were watching me, and the sword on my waist began to grow hot. I looked up at the bridge overhead, scanning for something out of the ordinary, but all I saw were the dwarves standing guard. As soon as we passed out of the bridge's shadow, the sword cooled again, and the sensation left, but I knew something was amiss.

"Great, we're in the mountains," Avara asked. "Now what?"

"We keep following the road until we reach a set of giant iron doors," Gorm replied.

"There, some guides will take us through the tunnels."

"Tunnels?"

"The safest and only way to get to Eastwood from here," Gorm grunted. "I'm sure we could've built roads or something by now, but then the dwarves couldn't collect such heavy payments, now, could they?"

"So we're paying for someone to escort us through underground tunnels?" Syltra laughed. "What a -"

A vaguely familiar voice suddenly screamed, cutting off the rest of Syltra's words.

"That's her! That's the pirate bitch!"

We turned to see the three white horses surrounding a small campfire some way up the ridge on our left. Two paladins were standing watching the crowds while a familiar dwarf woman shrieked and pointed in our direction. I immediately recognized her from the *Red Lust*. But more importantly, I recognized the half-burned face of Andorath with his eyes locked on mine.

“Oh, for fucks sake,” Avara spat. “Of all the things that could’ve made their way out of Elysium, it’s her.”

“Shit, mount up!” Gorm shouted, as he mounted and charged ahead. Syldra was close behind, easily mounting Orlean and breaking into perfect stride together.

I struggled to get myself atop Storm, but with a final heave, managed to rest in the saddle. Behind me however, I realized Avara was left behind. I quickly turned Storm around and hoisted Avara up behind me. She clasped her arms tightly around my waist, and we bolted. I glanced up on the ridge, and the paladins were already on their own horsebacks, heading down the mountain slope to intercept us. Peering ahead, I could just make out the path we needed to carve our way through, but I was beginning to doubt we would outrun the much more adept paladin riders.

“We’re never going to make it,” Syldra shouted.

“You’re right,” Gorm pulled his horse up and turned to face our pursuers. I immediately did the same and went back for him, but he waved me on. “You keep going. I can buy us some time!”

“Shit,” I cursed. I turned Storm back around and resumed my desperate charge. Orlean kept pace for some time, but as fine a horse as she was, she could not keep stride with a kaldirian. Instead of continuing to flee, Syldra turned her horse around and returned to aid Gorm in the fight.

“Syldra!” Avara screamed from behind me. “Syldra what are you doing?”

I turned back to follow but stopped as a shiver ran down my spine. Aelandria’s sword began to burn on my side as the shadows seemed almost to move out of the corner of my eye. Then, the demon’s voice, straining to break past the barriers caused by the sword, sounded faintly in my head.

Don’t stop. Run.

“She’ll be alright,” I told Avara as I turned Storm back. The demon fighting through Aeladnria’s magic was bad news.

Before us, a set of metal doors loomed overhead, and many tents were set up. The others were out of few as I rounded a corner, entering the heart of the campsite, staring up at giant doors that would lead us into the Storm Pass.

But I knew we were not fast enough. I could feel the eyes following me, as the shadows were changing shape eerily around us.

Chapter 13: Sylдра and Gorm

Sylдра wanted to race forward and head straight for the tunnels. She wanted to leave Gorm and his constant, grim, judgment filled staring behind. Yet she could not bring herself to abandon the old fool, despite her misgivings, and found herself on Orlean beside him as the paladins approached.

“You should have kept riding,” Gorm growled.

“Really? Here I am, come to fight beside you, and you’re already turning me away? How ungrateful,” Sylдра hissed.

“I don’t plan on fighting. Your presence complicates things.”

“Well, if you’d rather I left...”

Gorm sighed and nodded his head to Sylдра. “No, stay. I may need your help after all.”

The paladins showed no signs of stopping; the three white mounts created a cloud of dust about them as they galloped closer. Only at the last minute did the riders stop, rearing up the mounts to stare down at their opponents. Now that they were close enough, Sylдра could make out the pursuers. One was easy to place: Andorath was massive and wore no* helm to hide the horrendous burns that scarred his face. He stood to the right of the group. At the left rode an elf.

While fully armored, his ears poked through slits in his helm. The dwarf whose horse rested on the horse behind him, pale faced and shivering.

The middle rider brought her horse ahead of the other two and faced them. This rider was completely armored as well, their body from head to toe covered in shining silver plate and gold embroidery. They held a shield in their left arm emblazoned with a golden scale and sword at its center, the crest of Syldrian. The rider was larger than most humans and unidentifiable under their armor.

“I recognize you,” A female’s voice came from under the rider’s armor. “You’re the head of the Magi-guard in Elysium, aren’t you?”

“Once upon a time, yes,” Gorm replied. “It’s a title I vacated long ago.”

“You choose strange company these days. However, a man of your service and reputation is not one we’re here to quarrel with. You may go now and walk away a free man.”

“I don’t see why I’d walk away,” Gorm snickered. “Afterall, it’s three against two. You don’t have the numbers to match me.”

“Loria, we don’t have time for such discourse,” Andorath shouted. “The demon is not here! They’re nothing more than a distraction!”

“Patience,” Loria raised a hand to silence her companion. “Are you so eager for bloodshed? Our duties are to capture the demon, and we will see that through. But we shall not shed unnecessary blood, not as long as I lead our quest.”

Loria turned back to Gorm, then turned to address Syldra for the first time. The helmed head looked her up and down before the rider spoke. “You seem vaguely familiar. Tell me, have we had the chance to meet?”

“Many times, I’d imagine,” a smirk crossed Syldra’s lips as she spoke. “Though I doubt you’d ever remember them.”

“I see. That must make you the night terror then. A ghost story where victims only remember red and white. Now I understand the red is not blood, but the red of your hair, to radiant even for you to erase from one’s memory. Curious, that red is surely not a natural color...”

“You were there!” Andorath’s voice boomed, filled with undeniable rage. “You attempted murder at the Whitmen Estate!”

“Really, that was such a small thing,” Syldra shrugged. “Of all the crimes I’ve committed, he was the most deserving. A shame you were there to save his life.”

Andorath’s face, the half of it not decimated by burns, became bright red as his lips curled into a snarl. He reached for the massive hammer by his side and clenched its hilt as he shouted his challenge. “It is never a small thing to steal a life! My quarrel is with another, but I will not hesitate to execute you for your crimes here and now! Surrender to me now, and I promise a swift death! If you resist, well... may the gods have mercy on my soul for the things I will do to you!”

“Oh, now you’ve done it,” Gorm huffed.

“We shall not fight here!” Loria commanded. She drew her horse forward, placing herself between the two groups of riders. “While I want nothing more than to see you put on trial, I’d much rather catch the Demon of Windhelm. Our dwarf friend here says you’ve been traveling with him. Let us through, and we’ll allow you a pardon for your past crimes. Stay, and I give Andorath permission to execute you both.”

“As I said before, I like my chances.” Gorm began to draw his hand forward, drawing in large amounts of energy as he finished speaking. He conjured a bright blue light that expanded, growing longer into a javelin of pure arcane energy.

“So be it.” Loria spat. She drew her sword from her belt; Andorath drew out his hammer. Together the two brought their horses side-by-side and charged at the pair.

Syldra prepared a spell of her own, ready to release a blast of energy at Andorath, but Gorm acted first. He threw forth the spear; it was not aimed at the riders but instead struck the ground just ahead of them. It pierced the stone roadway before exploding into a large wall of blue flames that startled the paladins’ horses. The rider’s lost control as the horses’ eyes grew wide in terror, scattering away from the growing wall of blue flames.

“Let’s go!” Gorm shouted as he turned his horse around to retreat while the paladins struggled to regain control of their mounts.

“What are you doing?” Syldra called out as she followed.

“What does it look like? Running!”

“Why? You just said you could take them!”

“I don’t intend to kill them, Syldra,” Gorm shouted. “We kill paladins here, and we bring down the entire dwarven battalion waiting at those gates. Convincing them to let us pass just became quite the challenge...”

“That’s not going to hold them back for long,” Syldra turned back to see the fires already beginning to wane, receding towards its point of origin. “They’re going to outrun us.”

“Well, I’ve the fortitude to pull off that spell one or two more times perhaps...”

“They’ll be ready for it.”

“We’re not fighting them, Syldra. I won’t change my position here.”

Syldra scoffed at Gorm's current moral limitations. They were hunted by armed warriors fully prepared to kill them, yet he was unwilling to do the same. Despite her internal objections, however, followed the old man's lead. She would not engage three paladins alone.

The rolling thunder of hooves sounded behind them as their pursuers resumed the chase. Glancing back, Syldra saw Andorath took lead, though the female was not far behind. The third horse, however, was nowhere to be seen. The dwarf woman must have been thrown off, for she sat in a pile of dirt, struggling to fix her hair and examine the new cuts and scratches that covered her skin.

As Syldra looked back around, she entered under the shadows of the mountains rising on either side. Those shadows spread across the entire ridge and well in front of them. The sun all but disappeared, leaving the world shrouded in darkness. In that darkness, Syldra's ideas began to take shape.

Beside her, Gorm conjured up another tremendous amount of arcane energy, transforming it into a spear of energy just as before. He turned and let loose his spell, flinging the spear to bury itself in the stone once more before bursting in a wall of blue light. It illuminated much of the valley, but the horses rode fast enough to keep the two riders within the remaining shadows.

Syldra's scheme finished, and she took advantage of the blazing distraction. She melded into the shadows and began phasing, mapping her pathway through the shadows to one of the higher ridges, half-way up the mountain. While shadow phasing was normally an easy task, the distance took a toll on her magical reserves, her will and fortitude feeling the exertion. Thankfully, none of the riders noticed her disappearance. They were preoccupied with their horses, rearing once again at the sight of the magical flames.

From her new vantage point, she could make out nearly the entire valley. She looked past the riders at the dwarf woman, sitting crumpled in the dirt all alone, still screaming and brushing dirt from her small frame. In an instant, Syldra disappeared once more.

“Go along with ‘em you said,” the little dwarf wined. “Go along and get some revenge. See the world! Meet a man, maybe. But send ‘em all to hell now! This ain’t worth the trouble! I ain’t cut out for this road life! I should’ve just stayed in Elysium!”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Syldra whispered behind the dwarf. The dwarf thought about screaming, but thought better of it when she felt the point of a dagger pressed against her neck.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!” she whispered, throwing her hands up in surrender. “I’m sorry we followed! Really! I wasn’t a part of it! Oh, gods, please don’t kill me!”

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan on killing you.”

Syldra grabbed the dwarf woman and pulled her into the shadows, phasing back to the ridge. As she parted the shadows, her vision blurred slightly, her head spinning. She was beginning to overexert herself, going beyond her range of power. Still, she needed to make one last phase, or her plan would fail. Focusing her energy, she closed her eyes and followed the mountains shadows, disappearing back into the darkness.

She reappeared, dwarf firmly in hand, on top of Orlean.

Her skin was pale white; her hair shown a few streaks of silver among the faded reds. She barely managed to grasp the reins, leaning heavily against her horse. The dwarf woman sat behind her, silent in fear, and pale as a ghost.

“What happened to no killing?” Gorm growled as he noticed Syldra once again riding just behind him.

“Would you just... let me do my thing...” Sylдра barely managed to speak between gasps of air. The world still spiraled around her, but she was slowly beginning to get her vision back.

“Can you knock lose... a few rocks...maybe?”

“Of course, I can,” Gorm looked back at the paladins then around the valley. “Thing is, there are a lot of people who use this road...”

“It’s that... or they catch us...” Sylдра tried shouting.

Gorm cursed under his breath, but after a moment of hesitation, launched a massive kinetic blast at a colossal stone protruding from a perilous ridge some seventy feet above them. As he released the blast, Sylдра knocked the dwarf woman off the horse, sending her tumbling through the dirt.

The falling debris hurtled towards the valley floor. Normally, the kaldirian horses would have outrun the landslide, if only by the narrowest distance. But the paladins both stopped to grab the dwarf woman and pull her from what would have been a certain death. Their delay caused them to fall back as the massive stones created the perfect barrier, blocking their pursuit.

“Well, that should keep them off our back for a little while,” Gorm said as he overlooked his work. “Not bad-”

He cut-off as he turned to watch Sylдра collapse and topple over in her saddle. He pulled his horse up fast and just managed to catch her before she fell over. He placed a hand on his shoulder and moved her limp body to lean against Orlean’s neck. Sylдра groaned slightly, but otherwise made no effort to resist Gorm’s aid.

“You’re alright,” Gorm whispered to Sylдра. “You’re alright.”

Staying close by, the two managed their way up the path and into the dwarven camp, where even darker threats awaited.

Chapter 14: Shadows on the Mountain

The campsite resembled a town, with tents of various sizes and colors arranged in clusters throughout the stone clearing. A singular “road” led through the camp center directly to the metal doors. Dwarves in full armor mulled about, making small talk and watching the various non-dwarves grouped in little clusters at the outskirts of the campsite. Some unarmed dwarves sat in tables and benches of stones that were formed in rows under a massive pavilion. There they played cards, sharpened weapons, and ate food, but almost all of them were drinking. The smell of ale was impossible to miss, as it mingled heavily in the otherwise open air.

I should have slowed and attempted to act like many of the other non-dwarven travelers, but the sensation crawling along my spine was still present. I could feel a strange sensation in my veins, and sensed fear from the demon deep in the corners of consciousness. I forced Storm to charge headfirst into the camp, stopping only when a group of six dwarves bravely, or stupidly, stepped in front of us. I barely managed to avoid trampling the fools.

Upon halting, the six dwarves formed a ring surrounding us, with drawn axes readied. The dwarf directly in front of us wore golden armor, while his five companions wore silver steel. His face was hidden behind a metal helm that was smooth and flawless, save a single slit for his

eyes. His braided, red beard snuck out the cap and fell to his belt, held together by a black leather band decorated with colorful gemstones

“State yer business charging in ‘ere like a possessed troll!” The dwarf barked. “If ya don’t answer, I’m a hav’ to let me men ‘ack ye to wee bits!”

“We’re seeking passage through the mountains going east,” I said truthfully.

“‘Alf the people ‘ere lookin’ te travel lad,” The dwarf said with a laugh. “We gots a waitin’ o’er by the foreman in the green tent. Ye place yer name down an’ we go ‘bout calling ye when yer at the top o’ the queue! Not before!”

While the dwarf babbled on, I felt the chills intensify, while the sword on my waist glowed bright enough to leak out of its scabbard. But looking about the campsite, I could find nothing but the same foreboding shadows, shifting and twirling about in the corner of my eyes.

Unfortunately, my distracted glances infuriated the dwarf. “The hells ye looking round fer? I’m right ‘ere speaking with ya! Ye don’t look a dwarf in the eye? Ye trying to make enemies? ‘Cause right now, ye ain’t getting no passage anytime soon!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, turning back to the dwarf. “Look, we need to get to the other side and make our way to Edinrow. The longer we wait, the greater the peril you place everyone’s life in.”

“And what’s that supposed ta mean? Ye threatenin’ me?”

Before I could respond, an explosion echoed through the air, followed by the sound of falling rocks. The ground shook as we watched a landslide collapse into the valley just past the entrance to the clearing.

“T’e ‘ells is goin’ on?” The dwarf shouted. He looked to his men and whistled. They tightened the circle, closing in with weapons raised and mistrust in their eyes.

“What’re you doing?” Avara asked as a dwarf grabbed her arm and began tugging her off.

“Ye make threats and collapse an entire valley? Yer no-good demons is what ye are! We’ve ‘eard the stories; I knew ye were no good!” the lead dwarf bellowed.

“We’re not your enemy,” I argued. Thinking to prove my point, I obeyed and dismounted peacefully. “We’re being hunted by those demons you speak of, and if we stay here, they will find us, and they will kill everyone around us.”

“Quit yer jabberin’ and save it fer folks who care!”

Avara did go as easily. She shrieked at the dwarves and called for them to release her, but they ignored her protests. They dragged her from Storm’s back, then proceeded to place her face down in the dirt. Two dwarves placed metal boots on her back, keeping her from rising and running off. I made to help her, but the dwarf in gold armor kicked at my shins, blocking my path to her.

“Don’t move!” the dwarf barked. “I will kill ya!”

My face turned grim, and I could feel the demon’s energy inside me. I let some of it show in my eyes, forcing it forth despite the resistance from Aelandria’s sword. I looked at the dwarf before me and clenched my fists, allowing a bit of fire to begin crawling along my skin.

“If you harm her, I will kill you all.”

The dwarf stepped back, and I could see fear begin to show in his eyes. He had heard stories of the fires alright, and he questioned the wisdom of taking on a demon himself.

Thankfully, before things escalated furth, two new riders broke into the campsite, covered in dust, and sweat. Immediately a group of dwarves surrounded them, drawing their weapons as a captain in similar armor wondered forward to address them. They were too far

away for me to make out what they said, but I recognized Gorm and Syldra. It worried me to see Syldra leaning so heavily on the horse, and I wondered what exertion she had to endure out there.

In my moment of distraction, the dwarf got over his nerves and kicked me a second time in the shin. This time the pain was enough to drive me to my knees, and an axe head was quickly at my neck.

“I’ve seen enough! Ye threaten me, then go ‘bout causing some dark magics! That’s enough, I’m goin’ to arrest ye myself!”

I spat at his feet. “I’m tired of you playing hero. Back up now and let us through the gates. Otherwise, I will be the least of your worries.”

“Well if it’s a challenge, then I like me chances! ‘Tis six on one it is!”

At that moment, the sword on my side burst into light. The blue radiating from the blade shot out like a wave around me, spreading over the camp in a single instance before disappearing. However, the burst of energy was enough for me to see some horrid form lurking in the shadows of two tents. For the briefest moment, the light illuminated its silhouette, a gangly form with wings and a long tail before the shadows hid its entirety once again.

The dwarf captain stepped back in shock, and I wasted no more time. I shadow phased behind him and drew Aelandria’s sword, now glowing bright blue. The light spread over me, and I drove the hilt into the dwarf’s helm. A loud ring let out as the dwarf crumpled over. The other five turned to face me, but hesitated seeing me aglow in blue.

“Away from her. Now.”

The dwarves on top of her stepped back and attempted to charge me. I allowed them to charge, then phased at the last second so I stood beside Avara. I reached a hand down and helped her to her feet, and readied by weapon as the dwarves once gain formed a ring around us.

“Hold all of you! By Mordrian’s beard, show some restraint!”

“Stand down, Daelin,” Grom shouted.

Gorm and Syldra were still atop their mounts as they approached, following the lead of a stout, dark skinned dwarf. He wore pure black armor with a red cape draped over his shoulders. He wore no helm; his bald head burned pink under the sun, with a thick beard of red combed smooth all the way down to his belt. His right eye, his only eye, was locked on me.

“Captain, sir!” One of the dwarfs saluted hastily. “You see, he-”

“He’s radiatin’ a god’s blessing you ninnies!” the dwarf growled. “And ye were set on trying to fight the boy? Shame on all of you!”

“Sir, I know but-” a second of the dwarves attempted to speak, but was cut off by the captain’s snarl.

“We’ll discuss this later. Fer now, get Artob off the ground, and find some corner to hide from me sight!”

“Yes, captain.” The six dwarves helped their fallen comrade, Artrob, off the ground, and scurried away into the throng of tents.

“So, this is your new apprentice, Gorm?” the dwarf asked. “He’s rather impressive.”

“He’s a work in progress,” Gorm shrugged. “What worries me is the glow of that weapon...”

“Well, I don’t know what trouble you brought behind ye, so ye best get yerselfs moving soon,” the captain said. “I’ve got things under control for now, but there’s going to be a lot of angry folks when ye are all entering the mines ahead of schedule.”

“I understand, Belgog, and I thank you for helping us,” Gorm replied.

“Bah, you’re just lucky I still owe you. Now, if you don’t mind waiting here, I need to make sure I get you all a guide and have the payments in order.”

“We can’t wait.” Gorm dismounted and grabbed Balgog’s wrist, preventing him from going off. “That blade doesn’t normally glow like that. If the magic is that intense, there is something evil surrounding us.

“I’m sorry, but I believe I just saved ye some serious trouble,” the dwarf pulled his wrist from Gorm’s grasp. “I don’t really think you’re in a position to be making demands of any sort.”

“There’s something here,” I chimed in. “The sword emitted a massive wave of light I’ve never seen before. When it did, it showed me a shadow unlike anything I’ve ever seen. You’ve heard of the Demon of Windhelm? Well this is much, much worse.”

“Lad, I appreciate yer wild fantasies, but I assure ye nothing could get past me men without us knowing!”

“It already has.”

“That’s enough!” Balgog snapped. “I will not have you all questioning my men! Now wait here, as I commanded, and I’ll come back to bring you away when I’m finished! Not before!”

Balgog turned in a huff and stomped away to the largest tent with red flags hanging above the entrance. He gave a command to a few of his men, who came over and huddled in a group just out of earshot from us.

“Well shit,” Gorm whispered. “You have any idea where that thing is now?”

“It’s been hiding in the shadows,” I whispered. “I haven’t been able to get a good look at it. One second it’s there, the next it disappears.”

“Hmm...” Gorm searched our surroundings, circling us on horseback. Sydra seemed pale and queezy, but I walked up to her and placed a comforting hand on hers.

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

“Fine. Just... spell fatigue is all...” Her voice was a whisper, but as we spoke I could see the red returning to her hair. “I can feel it too though. The tingle in the spine... it’s certainly not of our world.”

“I know. It feels like the demon inside me.” I let go of Sydra’s hand, as the demon’s voice once gain broke through Aelandria’s magic. There was no hiding the desperation in its voice.

The... gate!

I turned just in time to see the shadows spread over the metal doors, covering them completely in darkness. This darkness was unnatural, appearing more like the black of night than a mere shadow.

“The gate!” I shouted pointing the blazing sword ahead at the writhing shadows.

As I pointed, the shadow lept forward. Tendrils grew from the writhing mass, blanketing the entire camp in darkness. As the darkness entrapped us, a massive, lanky figure began to emerge near the gate. The monstrous figure towered over us with long limbs extending to vicious talons. Where its head rested, red eyes of pure fire looked over us. They locked on me as it strode forward.

“*Y’lth Qant!*” It shrieked. “*Yu’re nuf destri mainant!*”

A few dwarves rushed forward to engage the beast. A group drew their crossbows and released a volley of shots, while others launched axes and javelins in rapid succession at the creature. Yet no physical weapon phased the shadows, as they went through it like air, clattering harmlessly against the iron gates. The shadow released a malicious laugh of sorts, then swung one of its arms. The talons tore through the luckiest of the dwarves, skewering them and killing them. Others were caught in the swing and sent hurdling back to land in unconscious heaps thrown about the campsite.

“There weapons won’t hurt it,” Syl dra manged to yell as she struggled to sit upright atop Orlean. “We need to strike it with magic!”

“No shit,” Gorm spat, rearing his horse about to face the massive creature. “Problem is, I don’t know how much magic I have left to muster!”

“Dig deep old man, we don’t have another choice,” Syl dra called out as she moved Orlean forward, facing down the demon.

She placed her hands together and pulled them apart. The air between her hands rippled with dark energy, and she flung the dark energy forward. What appeared to be nothing more than a clouded form of dust and wind collided with the shadows and let out an echoing explosion. The magical energy and sound blasted us all, causing a shockwave to send a few tents over. Unfortunately, when the blast cleared, the shadow seemed unphased. It regarded Syl dra with glee in its eyes. It lifted its hand towards her; his fingers shot out, growing long like a snake as they rushed to surround her. She phased at the last moment, leaving the shadowy figures to wrap around nothing but air.

“Another demon,” The shadow hissed in human. “How interesting...”

As the shadow turned to face Syldra, I could make out the sweat gathering on her skin. She was tired, and I doubted she could phase like that again. Her hair lost its luster, and Orlean was visibly nervous beside me.

I wasted no more time and struck. I conjured a blaze of fire in my hands and attacked the beast. The fire exploded and burned against the shadow as it let out a shriek of pain. One hand beat out the flames, before its red-hot eyes returned to me.

“Change of plans,” it hissed. “I wanted to have my fun, but now you’re just pissing me off. It’s time for-”

Its words were cut off by a blue javelin lodging itself deep in its shoulder. The javelin burst, releasing wild blue flames that silhouetted the demon. The flames were no real fire, as no heat emanated from the inferno, yet the demon shrieked horribly, causing our ears to ring as it struggled to put the magic out.

“Those flames won’t last!” Gorm shouted. “Get to the gates!”

In one quick leap, I mounted Storm and aided Avara mounting up behind me. I sent Storm into a sprint, keeping pace with Gorm. Syldra phased one last time back to Orlean and followed behind a short distance back. I could see her eyes struggling to stay open, her skin pale as a ghost as she wobbled atop her mount.

Behind us, Balgog finally left his tent. He saw the great shadow and began barking orders, having his men form defensive lines. However, he did not send any forward to join the fray, instead sending a group of four dwarves towards the gate. Their small legs carried them miraculously fast, and they began knocking some type of code. Shortly after the iron gates began to creak open, letting out a loud grinding sound of old metal hinges.

The flames died away on the demon, and it resumed its assault. It reached its arm forward as shadowy tendrils came rushing towards me, ready to wrap me up. With Aleandria's sword, I swung at the shadows. The sword's magic intensified once more, and the blue light cut away at the shadows as if they were flesh. Trails of dark smoke sailed into the air as the appendages fell and evaporated before striking the ground.

The shadow let out another painful shriek. The smell of sulfur filled the air as its hand's removed talons began to grow back. Its unharmed hand pulled back, a ball of darkness created in its palm. It flung the ball forward at blistering speeds. The attack fell short of Storm and the other horses, but the impact of the explosion sent us all flying.

We were thrown from the horses, all of us crumbling forward. My head pounded, but Aleandria's sword gave me the focus to keep moving. Avara seemed alright and kept running towards the gate. Gorm and his horse had already passed through. But those behind me were in critical condition, or dead.

The four dwarves that were sent to open the gate had fallen victim to the magic. Their screams filled the air, and I watched their bodies melt and boil as entrails of shadows left the seams of their armor. Storm and Orlean were both down in bloody heaps. I could tell Orlean was already dead. Beside her, Syltra lay in a heap, unmoving.

Miraculously, Storm managed to stand, regaining his feet. I rushed over to Syltra and pulled lifted her as best I could. Storm came to me, and I managed to hoist her body atop the beast. I slapped his rump, and he raced towards the gates, though he was visibly limping.

I heard the roar of the shadows before I turned. I acted on instinct and tried to create a wall of magic. The arcane barrier needed to be strong, and I pushed it forward to counter the strike. The shadows collided with my barrier and shattered it. The explosion was contained

however, and only I was sent reeling. The impact sent me flying through the gates ahead of Storm. I collapsed in a crumpled heap, barely clutching Aelandria's sword.

“Close the gates!” I heard a low voice roar.

Another blast of shadow came flying towards me. I knew I was out of magic and could not withstand another strike. I could make out a slight whimpering in the back of my mind, the demon within resigned to accept this ending...

For the second time, Gorm saved my life. He dismounted his horse and created a barrier of arcane energy. The blast met his own and released a massive explosion. Shadows were sent flying as the blast dissipated, and Gorm's barrier shattered, but it did enough to prevent anymore from falling victim to the demon's powers. I glanced over and watched Gorm collapse on one knee, drenched in sweat, and completely void of his usual magical aura.

He had done enough though. The dwarves managed to close the metal gates, trapping us inside and away from the demon. The doors slammed shut, and an explosion from the outside rang against them like a massive bell. The sound echoed down the dark tunnels; the shockwave shook the earth and sent pieces of rock and dirt crumbling down. For a moment everyone held their breath.

Then everything was still and silent.

We were in the Storm Pass.

End of Part 1

Interlude: Crazy Old Dwarf

Jordin once thought he had seen it all. In over his hundred years of service under the mountains he had battled goblins, witches, trolls, and even a warlock. He met every race in the Free Cities, including a godborn. He even saw a dragon, though no one believed his tale.

None of that prepared him for what he witnessed that day.

He and the other tunnellers, as they called themselves, were hanging about playing cards, restocking supplies, and enjoying a brief nap before the expeditions resumed. They had been given two days' rest, and tomorrow would see a new group of travelers wishing to pass through the mountains. It was a normal day, until the gates were suddenly pushed open. The gates never opened unless expeditions were traveled, which either meant something to celebrate, or something to fear. He knew it to be the latter when, instead of sunlight, an eerie darkness slipped through the gate's cracks and into the cavern.

He barely grabbed his axe from the ground when a human rider burst through the door. There was a strange magical power about the man that put Jordin in awe. No sooner had the rider entered however, and the entire ground shook like the earth itself were falling apart. Rocks rained down, and many of the other dwarves went pale white in fear. A few brief seconds past,

and a woman of copper skin and dark hair stumbled through, covered in bruises and dirt but seemingly alright.

Jordin rushed forward and aided the woman inside. He dared to peak out the doors, and he was horrified by what he saw.

Standing through the crack in the doors, covered in a dying blue flame, stood a massive creature. Its legs were jagged thin things, its arms similar shape. Its head was a wicked thing, with two massive horns and eyes of pure red fire. It looked at the door and let out a heart-stopping shriek that immediately brought sweat and fear over the dwarf. Ahead of him, a white horse was being led forward by a stunned young man. Someone lay limp atop that horse, though Jordin could not see if they were breathing or already dead.

“Close the gates!” he shouted and began shoving one of the massive doors inward. Many of the other dwarves, spurred on by his action, jumped in as well, lining each door and pushing with their full might.

Jordin admitted he felt a pang of guilt come over closing the doors so suddenly. Those two were still out there, and they seemed worse for wear, but he would not risk the lives of his tunnellers for strangers.

A hissing sound began to fill the air, and he saw a blast of shadows hurdling for them. The horse and the two humans would not outrun that blast, and if they did not hurry in closing the doors, they would not last either. That’s when the first rider to breach the tunnel rushed forward and released such a massive amount of arcane energy, it made Jordin’s skin crawl.

A massive explosion filled the air and echoed down the tunnel, but it did enough. Miraculously, the two humans and their horse managed to sneak through the closing doors, just before they slammed shut. Jordin acted fast and locked the gate from the inside, when the entire

door shook. The sounds reverberated down the massive network of tunnels, and for a second, the old dwarf thought the entire tunnels may come down. But eventually, the shaking stopped, and silence reigned once again.

“Help, I need medical help!” the young man shouted as he pulled the woman from the horse.

None of the dwarves moved at first, not until Jordin began barking orders.

“Ye ‘eard the lad! Medics front and center! Builders and engineers, check the tunnels support and make sure we ‘aven’t lost anythin’ important! The rest of ye, back to yer duties until we get an ‘all clear’ from the outside!”

The dwarves were quick to respond. While Jordin was not the highest-ranking dwarf in the tunnels, he was by far the oldest. That carried enough weight to get the young ones moving.

With everything set to work, Jordin drew his water flask out and walked over to the older man, still down on one knee. “Alright, friend, ye mind telling me what shit you’ve done brought to the Storm pass?” he asked as he offered the water. The old man accepted and drank greedily from it before responding.

“We were attacked. Whatever that thing was, it followed us. I can’t say more than that. But I suggest you keep this door shut for a long time.”

Jordin nodded slowly, then turned to regard the young man a few paces off. There was something odd about him, even stranger than the divine aura of his glowing blade. No, there was a darkness to that man, though Jordin could not place it. As he watched, the blade lost its luster and became a piece of rather unremarkable steel. That man stood trying to look past the medics working on the unconscious woman. Jordin decided to have a word with him.

“Oi, laddie. Where ye be off ta?”

“Away from here,” the man replied without turning.

“Listen lad, ye lot look like ye’ve seen ‘ell and more. But I can’t ‘elp ya lest ye give me somet’ing ta work with. More than that, I’m-a need ya te look at me if I try speaking with ya!”

“Edinrow,” the man looked up at the dwarf. “We’re going to Edinrow.”

“There we go, good on ya.” Jordin nodded. “As fer yer friend, don’t fret too much. My boys ‘ill ‘ave ‘er walking in no time!”

Jordin went back to the old man he assumed was in charge and sat on the ground beside him. He offered the man a flask of some dwarven brandy, which the man accepted and took down without so much as a wince. This impressed the old dwarf.

“Alright, I ‘ave to admit, I like yer stuff,” Jordin laughed. “I think yer a lot o’ trouble, you is, but ye smell of adventure! Ye need a trip o’er to Edinrow, and I be the best guide fer the job. No one else ‘ere who’d want to take you and yer crew anywhere, but I’m willin’ to take the job! It’s a long road, and we won’t part fer a day or two if yer lady friends don’t heal well, but I’ll do it!”

“Well, that is quite the offer,” the man grunted. “I’ll tell my crew to be ready. As for the woman, well, if the horse can make it, we’ll put her on their back and set off within the hour.”

“Make it three ‘ours so I can wrap up some bus’ness ‘ere, and then we be off,” Jordin nodded, extending his hand out.

“Done.”

“Congratulaitons,” Jordin winked at the man. “You’ve got yerself a guide! Welcome to the mountains!”

“This offer very well may get you killed,” the man replied.

“Bah, I’ll be takin’ my chances!”

Jordin left the old man and went over to his tent. He shared the tent with a female dwarf named Tilla. She was hefty for a dwarf, but she carried her weight well, holding it all the right places. Jordin and she had become good friends over the years, though a relationship never seemed to blossom outside of their bedrolls.

“And where are ye off to in such a hurry?” Tilla asked.

“Me? I’m takin’ trouble away from the gates and out te Edinrow,” he replied. “Why, are ye gunna miss me?”

“Bah, miss you? Ne’er!” Tilla laughed, though she did rise from the tent and take his hand. “But why go? Ye’re set to retire in a few days, why make the trip?”

“Because Tilla, those folks are peculiar. And I can’t resist the chance of one final story!”

“It ain’t a good story if ye’re dead and can’t share it!”

“Well, they seem ready to carry themselves,” Jordin shrugged. “Besides, what better story than one where I, the great tunneller of Storm Pass, kill a demon!”

At this Tilla simply rolled her eyes. She looked red faced, then did something truly shocking to Jordin. She kissed him on the cheek.

“Promise ye’ll be careful, alright?”

“Aye, Tilla, I’ll be good and come ‘ome. I always do.”

“Good, ye crazy old dwarf. I’d ‘ate te lose ye now after so long.”

“Don’t worry,” Jordin gave one last wink as he hiked up his bag and exited the tent. “I’ll be ‘ome before ye’ll ‘ave time to miss me!”

Interlude: In the Shadows

Syrl'Altire watched the doors close. He released a final blast of magic, hoping it just might reach them, when the old man thwarted the strike. The doors slammed shut, and there was nothing he could.

His prey was sealed inside. Y'lth Qant escaped.

He released a visceral scream as he slammed his fists against the door. He tried to pry open the doors, forcing them in and grabbing at the seam, but he could not force them open. There was magic around these doors, magic from an age long since forgotten. For such power to persist was rare, and yet here it stood.

He turned on the dwarves and considered destroying them all. He would relish in the bloodshed, and it just might appease his disappointment. Yet he knew his master would be displeased. Such violence would only provoke the Enclave to act, and it was not yet time to declare such a war on the mortal realms.

Defeated, at least for the moment, Syrl'Altire accepted his misfortune and withdrew to the shadows. He let the mountain breeze carry his form like smoke into the shadows of some nearby rocks where he disappeared from the mortal eye.

Y'lth Qant was there in his grasp. He saw the demon's essence radiating off the man like a thick cloud of smoke. Something so unnatural did not occur in the mortal realms; the demon knew immediately the man had to be the demon's host. But just when he thought his prey was in his grasp, that magical weapon thwarted his plans. That damned sword bit through his shadows as if they were flesh and blood, no doubt a result of some divine magic.

Syrl'Altire's blood boiled, as mortals would say, and he drew ever closer to considering mass murder as a decent coping mechanism. While the fight would be brief, it would provide him time to think. He imagined the burning flesh and desperate cries from the dwarves and found bliss in those fantasies. The dwarves were still recovering from the attack. Most mortals on Valandria had never seen a true demon. They were things of legend, myths to be used in bedtime stories to scare children. They were frantically counting the wounded, gathering up their weapons, and staring in shocked horror at the smoking remnants of the victims of the Elemyial fires. Syrl'Altire reveled in their ignorance. They were powerless, free toys he could manipulate at will. He lingered on the edge of the camp, preparing to launch his grand attack, when he heard a thunderous pounding.

Three kaldirian horses rode into the camp. Atop one horse was a sturdy fellow with a wicked war hammer drawn and ready. His armor shown like the sun itself. However, Syrl'Altire noted the wicked burns left by Elemyial fires. He must have enjoyed a little spat with Y'lth Qant and lost. Despite the size of the paladin's hammer, Syrl'Altire could tell such a brute would lack finesse or magical prowess and would be easy prey. The second paladin was a scrawny looking elf of little consequence. He seemed to boast a sword and shield, but was otherwise unimpressive.

The third paladin, however, caused the demon to linger in the shadows, staying his hand. The woman had a noble bearing as she examined the camp around her. She radiated with holy power, her light practically burning Syrl'Altire's eyes as he watched her. The god's blessings were strong with such a woman, and she would prove a formidable enemy should they exchange blows fresh as she was.

The demon knew the actions he had undergone here at the camp could not have spread to the Enclave yet, nor could their representatives have arrived so quickly. No, these three were after someone, or something, more. Curious, the demon enhanced his senses to listen in to the trio's conversation.

"By the gods," the elf gasped.

"We were too damned slow!" The giant paladin shouted as he spun his horse around. "It's the inn all over again!"

"The two of you, calm yourselves," the woman commanded. She was unsurprisingly clearly the one in charge. She dismounted her horse, revealing a small dwarven woman S'yril Altire had not seen before.

"Commander," the paladin woman called out to a dwarf in black metal armor.

"Champion," the dwarf nodded slightly to the paladin.

"What happened here?" she asked. "We met combat on our ride here and became delayed in the landslide. What business did we miss?"

"Well, I ain't quite knowin' myself," the dwarf shrugged as he spoke. "Everything went dark, and a large shadowy figure loomed o'er our heads. We wasn't quite sure what to make o' it. Weapons were useless, like a 'lil babe tryin' to fight a bear. Then poof! The thing just disappeared."

“That has to be the demon then,” the elf chimed in. “Nothing else in the world acts or looks like such a thing!”

“That’s not our demon though,” the big one replied. “The one we’ve been chasing looks like anyone else. It’s a man. This is something else.”

“You said this figure was a mass of shadows, or something of the like?” the woman asked the dwarf again. “Can you describe how it fought?”

“Well sure,” the dwarf pointed to the pile of armor in the corner. None of his men had touched it yet, and the purple smoke still rose from the remains. There was a faint hissing sound emanating from the remains, like that of steam escaping a kettle. “There was a blast o’ black and purple, and then my men vanished. Gone in an instant.”

The two paladins on horseback shared glances with one another while the woman walked towards the bodies. She knelt and drew her sword, poking at the armor. The shadows lept forth and began to coil around her blade, until the sword began to emit a white light. The shadows were pushed back, rescinding to the dwarven remains.

“I’ve read about this,” the woman said, sheathing her blade and returning to the others. “This stuff was demon fire, from some realm called Elemenyal. They’re wicked creatures, the worst of the worst, that come from this realm. They’re not usually seen in our world though. Haven’t heard reports of them in nearly three-hundred years, if the records are correct.”

S’yrl Altire was impressed. Not many even among his realm fully understood the powers they possessed, and even though her assessment was crude, it was rather accurate. Factor in her enchanted blade and the divine aura about her, and she would easily be his most formidable foe.

“It seems we may have more than one demon on our hands,” the big man nodded slowly to himself. “Perhaps they are working together then?”

“Doubtful,” the woman replied. “This second is after something else. The fact they are both here is troubling, but they are not allies.”

“Hold just a minute, now,” The dwarf commander stammered. “Ye be telling me there’s more than one o’ these things wandering about?”

“We’re after the Demon of Windhelm,” the big man replied. “We’ve followed him and his companions to the pass here.”

“And was one o’ these companion an older fellow? And maybe one with hair like blood?”

“Yes, those would be his accomplices,” the woman replied to the dwarf.

“Son of a bitch!” The dwarf yelled. “I’ve been played a fool!”

“You know these people?”

“Aye, they were just ‘ere! I let ‘em through the tunnels. They’re on the o’er side o’ the gate now.” The dwarf gestured to the giant metal doors sealed closed in the mountains.

“Well get the damned things open!” The big man commanded. “Open them now, so we may end this little chase!”

“I can’t just open the gate,” the dwarf growled. “My men just got vaporized. I’d rather get them sorted before chasing demons!”

“And you may help your men; we won’t rush you,” the woman raised a hand to silence her companions as she spoke. “However, once you’re prepared, I expect you prepare us an escort so we may catch them in the tunnels. Otherwise, I will be forced to deem you a traitor to the Free Cities and bring you before the Enclave. Then they will determine your fate.”

“Alright, alright, I understand,” the dwarf captain raised his hands and stepped back from the woman as he did. “I didn’t mean no trouble. I’ll get me best tunnellers ready to take you as soon as I can.”

“I expect nothing less,” the woman said, dismissing the dwarf.

The dwarf turned and ran back to the tent. Meanwhile, the dwarf woman who still sat atop the horse rather clumsily dismounted, landing in a heap of dirt and dust before regaining her feet.

“And where do you intend to be off to?” the elven paladin asked.

“I’m getting the hells away from you idiots!” She yelled. “You really think I’m about to let myself be dragged underground with two fucking demons? Not a chance!”

“You swore to aid us, and you’re going to see this through,” the big man replied.

“Besides, you’re being paid handsomely for your trouble...”

“No payment is worth this!” She shrieked. “I’m not taking another step! Good luck on your own. I hope death comes quick for you all!”

With a huff, she turned and started marching out of the clearing, back into the valley towards the plains. The big man made to follow her and scoop her up, but the woman grabbed his arm and stayed him.

“Let her go, Andorath,” she said. “She’ll come back soon enough. There’s nowhere else she can go.”

S’yrl Altire watched the dwarven woman leave the group and disappear around the corner as a plan began to hatch in his brain...

#

Bellma stomped off down the dirt road. She agreed to help the paladins in a moment of rage. That stupid pirate woman had ruined the only home she'd ever known, killed her favorite patrons, and burned away her friends. She wanted to watch Avara's head hoisted on a spike atop the Enclave's walls. But no revenge was worth this.

Her butt was sore from riding horses for hours at a time. She was tired of trying to stay awake late into the night just to wake up early again the next morning to ride for miles and miles. Sleeping on hay or on wooden floors grew tiresome. Worst of all, none of the paladins showed her any love or affection. She was not cut out for life on the road, especially when that road ended with two demons trying to kill each other.

"To hell with 'em all!" She spat as she continued to saunter through the mountain paths. "What do I care anyways? They're all a bunch of *borgorts!*"

She continued to ramble on as she marched over the stone roads, when a noise behind her caused her to pause. No doubt the paladins were coming to scoop her back up and drag her back under the ground.

"Listen, there's no way in hells I'm--"

She turned around and realized there was no one behind her. The road was completely empty. Just the mountains and rocks.

"Must have been an animal then," Bellma assured herself.

She turned back to resume her walk when she saw movement in the corner of her eye. She turned about, but again there was only a shadow. She walked forward, faster than before, when there was another flicker of movement in the shadows. She turned towards it, but still there was nothing.

Bellma felt a strange shiver run down her spine. Her arms and legs began to tingle, and her heart felt heavy in her chest. Her teeth began to chatter as it seemed the sun disappeared; the world became black around her. A sense of urgency and dread overtook her emotion. All she wanted to do was run, yet her legs would not obey. She stood rooted in place, unable to move a single limb as the shadows closed in around her.

The shadows began to form a tall figure before her. The figure took on her form, an exact replica of her body, made of shadows instead of flesh. Red eyes glowed as it stepped closer until it was just inches from her face.

“Who.... What... what are you?” Bellma managed to croak.

“I’m you,” the shadow hissed.

Its hand touched the dwarf, and her skin began to burn. Her insides felt like they were melting as long tentacles seemed to extend from the shadow and wrap around her. She tried to scream, but shadows entered her mouth, asphyxiating her as she drifted off into nothingness...

Part II:

Through Darkness

Chapter 15: Of Different Realms

The initial leg of the journey underground passed with little consequence. The old dwarf, Jordin, proved a reliable and efficient guide. Despite the objections from his fellow tunnellers, we were off within the hour. Gorm, Avara, and I walked along with the dwarf, while Syldra was secured to Storm's back. She didn't wake yet, but her breathing steadied for the moment.

Time seemed nonexistent down in the tunnels. To me, every rock appeared the same as the one before; the carved walls and ceiling all blended into one endless passage. Beside the aching of our legs, it was impossible to know how long or how far we managed to travel. Many of the tunnels were built wide enough for horses, carts, and other cargo to pass through, as the dwarves made a large profit off taxing merchants who used their passageways. However, due to the unrest the horses felt, riding was strictly forbidden.

Occasional conversation came up between us, though not much of it ever lasted beside the banter shared between Jordin and Avara. The old dwarf took a particular interest in all of her stories of the high seas and pillaging. Gorm was content to walk along in silence, no doubt the fights toll weighing heavily on his mind.

I, offered little speech, unable to leave Syldra's side. Occasionally she stirred, and I hoped she may wake, but it never proved to be anything more than some movement in her troubled sleep. Ever since the House of Syllia and our departure, I found myself drawn to her. Seeing her as she was troubled me, but unable to aid her, we simply marched on.

#

Eventually, our guide turned abruptly, taking us through a large crack in the tunnel. The crack was barely wide enough for the horses, and I had to remove Syldra from Storm and carry her, lest she be crushed between the horse and the narrow walls. I thought the stop strange, until we came out the other end.

The seemingly ordinary crack in the wall opened up into a massive underground cavern. Stalagmites of pure white crystals glowed as they sprouted in jagged peaks from the ground. Overhead, stalactites of solid black almost exactly mirrored the stones below, creating a jaw-like appearance. A carved path wound its way through the maze of stones to the heart of the massive opening. There, the strange crystals ended in a perfect circle around flat stone. At its center were two massive holes, one on top and one on the bottom, through which flowed a waterfall of pure, crystal-clear water that plummeted silently to some unknown depth.

"This is incredible," I gasped as I stared about the cavern.

"It's our first stop on our lil' journey!" the dwarf replied. "This 'ere is the Cave o' Balduran. Legend says 'e was fightin' twelve thousand ogres and was on the brink o' death! By some mistake, a troll smashed through the wall, revealin' this wonder! Balduran ran insides and turned to meet 'is doom, but strange t'ing was, none o' the ogres followed! It's been a restin' stop fer us tunnellers ever since."

Our footsteps echoed around the halls, especially the clicking of the horses' hooves. Underneath our feet and surrounding the flowing water were various runes written in a language I had never seen before. They shimmered like glass and reflected the light in a rainbow of colors, all the way to the very center. where a small metal plaque had somehow been bolted into the stone.

We began to settle in, taking places around the clearing at the center. Avara removed her waterskin and began to hold it out towards the strange stream, but the dwarf stopped her. He lept forward and grabbed her arms, pulling them back from the water.

“Don't ye dare do such a thing like that!”

“I just wanted-”

“Ye don't touch the Waters o' Balduran!” Jordin snapped. “There is magic in this water! There's no lake above us, nor any river below. This 'ere ain't from our world, and it'll kill ya if ya drink of it! I've seen it!”

I raised an eyebrow over at Gorm questioningly, and he nodded in response as he walked over to me. He reached his hand and placed it on the ground of rocks. A greenlight travelled from his hand and traced over the runes, then travelled around the cracks. Veins like a tree spread over the entire chamber, stemming from either the top or bottom, before returning to the opposite side.

“This entire place is magic,” Gorm explained. “This is somehow a gateway to another realm, like the realm of elements where Moradrin resides.”

“Aye, the old man speaks true!” The dwarf nodded. “It's a sacred place, and a safe one at that! Enjoy yer peaceful sleep, but don't. Touch. The water!”

Gorm lifted his hand and the magical energy faded away, returning to the strange rock formations.

“Well, all of ye find yerself a good spot ta rest,” the dwarf yelled as he threw his own possession in a clump between two of the crystals. “After ‘ere, we’ve got a solid two-day march without stoppin’!”

#

That night I returned to the shadowy home of the demon, who I now knew to be named Y’lth Qant. As always, the world was shrouded in fog save for the small clearing in which the two of us stood. However, unlike our last few meetings, he seemed disturbed.

“You’re nervous, aren’t you?”

“Nervous? Boy, nervous doesn’t even begin to cover it. I’m absolutely horrified,” he growled. “I suppose I should have known they’d send someone after us, but to think it would be him...”

“I suggest you start filling in the details.”

“Damn, Daelin, I don’t even know where to begin!” the demon chuckled. “We are an accident caused by my own failures. Long story short, we should’ve been dead, and we’re not. Now that those in Elemenyal know, they’re going to try and kill us.”

“I need the long story...”

“If you want the long story, you’re going to have to survive,” The demon shrugged. As he spoke the shadows around us grew darker and felt like they were closing in. “I’m not at liberty to delve into the past when the present presents such pressing matters.”

“If we’re going to face this other demon, then you need to tell me at least part of what the hell is happening!”

“You don’t need information; you need me! Step aside and let me take control!” The demon roared. “Get rid of that blasted sword and give me the reins! I’ll fight the demon and I’ll kick his ass!”

“I can’t do that,” I replied softly but firmly. “I can’t let you take over. Every time you do, people get hurt. Innocent people.”

“Innocent? Please, innocence is some bullshit you mortals created to justify weakness,” The demon snorted. “But you want to talk about people getting hurt? How close were you all to dying the other day? Have you asked Gorm how he’s feeling after taking that blast of Elemenyal fire? Have you asked the dwarves how many men they lost in that fight? Bloody hell, Syltra isn’t even conscious yet! This is just the beginning! That thing won’t stop until he kills us both. He’ll be back.”

“Then tell me who ‘he’ is! Don’t leave me out there fighting blind! If you cared so much about our survival, then damnit, help me survive!”

“You’re so dense,” the demon chuckled. “You’re nagging, not understanding the entire situation. You can’t stop him. You lack the power! I don’t! I know his weakness, his strengths, everything! When he shows again, ditch that damned sword and let me fight him!”

I stared at him in silence. He was staring at me through his veil of shadows, his red eyes still hot and angered. Yet the color in his eyes seemed wrong, as if his fear were manifesting within them. He was desperate.

“Y’lth Qant-”

“Don’t say that name,” The demon flared suddenly growing twice his size. “That is a name abandoned in hell. You won’t utter such words again!”

“Fine,” I said. “Demon possessing my soul, I can’t agree to your terms. And if you won’t help me fight this thing, I’ll figure it out on my own.”

As I finished speaking, a small ray of light broke through above us. I felt like I was falling except I was moving upwards, slowly drifting back into consciousness. Yet as I fell, I heard the demon’s final words.

“You can’t save them...”

Chapter 16: The Dragon's Den

After the caves, the journey grew perilous. Thankfully Syltra awoke and regained consciousness shortly after we left the cavern, but that was the only bright side. Winding tunnels and wide caverns quickly changed to narrow passages and suffocating spaces. Jagged rock formations rose randomly in the “wilds” of the mountain, forcing us to veer down steep declines, through volcanic formations, and around homes of wild beasts lurking in the dark for unknowing travelers. The deeper our travels took us, the heavier the blanket of darkness fell around us. The air was cool and damp; dripping of water, scurrying of creatures, and howls of unknown beasts, echoed about the seemingly endless maze of the underground.

At one point, the air turned hot, and in the distance, I could make out the distinct rattling of chains. “What is that sound?” I asked our guide.

“Those be the chains o’ the one-eyed clan!” he replied. “The deeper we get, the more creatures like ogres we’ll be seeing. They thrive in the darkness and tend to mine their own metals, though their craftsmanship is horrid when compared to us dwarves!”

The sound of ogres continued to grow as we travelled. Caverns and tunnels began to grow larger and formed obscure shapes. A foul stench travelled from these passages, warning us

of the dangers that lay beyond. On more than one occasion, our guide pulled us back as we listened to the sound of ogre's footfalls and their muttered conversations pass by dangerously close before resuming our travels.

While it was impossible to tell exactly how long we travelled through the ogre territory, it had gone on near a few days, as the physical toll was impossible to hide. Avara's steps slowed dramatically, and Gorm relied more and more on his horse to hold his weight. Besides the dwarf leading us, it appeared Syl dra and I were the only ones unphased, which surprised me given the magic fatigue she endured just a few days before. I was surprised to see Gorm so exhausted, but the demon's warning replayed in my head. I could practically feel his snickering grin in the back of my mind as I realized the extent of exertion it took to defy our adversary.

"This isn't great," I whispered to Syl dra. "We're not recovering nearly as well as I would have liked..."

"You're telling me," Syl dra snickered. "I feel my head still pounding, and I don't know I'm ready to even shadow phase just yet. Looking at the crew, I'd say they're not fairing much better, though they'll never admit it..."

"That fight with the demon took more than I realized," I said.

"And if your friend is right, that demon is probably still just behind us. I don't suppose he gave us any useful information recently?"

"Last time we talked in my dreams, he only suggested he take control again..."

"Don't you ever let that happen," She hissed. "No matter his offer, we must avoid another Red Lust or Windhelm catastrophe. We can figure this out without him."

"I know, I know," I whispered. "I need to be stronger. I'm not prepared for this type of fight, not again."

“We could all be stronger, Daelin.”

“Of course, but I have a distinct feeling this is my burden to bear. If it shows again, I need to be the one who stops it; I think I’m the only one who can. If we’re going to stand a chance, I’m going to have to learn to fight fire with fire.”

“What are you trying to get at?” she asked.

“Back in Elysium, before anyone else, you took me under your wing,” I explained. “You mentored me and taught me how to shadow phase. You know more about demonic magic than anyone else does. I need you to teach me again.”

“Oh, just like that?” Syldra snapped. “You really think I’m going to just show you how to use my powers because I did once upon a time? I’m sorry, but a lot has changed since then. You chose your path. Now you can live with the consequences.”

“Syldra...”

“Gods be damned, I get it,” she sighed. “Look, if you truly want to learn, then I’ll work with you. I will. But you’re going to have to convince Gorm to allow you to train with me, and you’ll have to convince him it won’t attract attention from other demons. That won’t be an easy task...”

“Well, I’ll go and talk to him then.”

“Not yet,” she whispered. “I’m not completely ready to use any magic, and no one is particularly ready to talk. Just... have patience, alright?”

Begrudgingly, I nodded and agreed with Syldra, and we continued our journey forward in silence.

#

Later, around what I presumed was night, the caverns leveled out and widened. There was a light at the end of the passageway, and it was a glowing orange of sorts. Heat increased as we approached the opening as did the unmistakable stench of sulfur.

“Brace yerselves and watch yer step,” the dwarf warned. “We’re ‘bout to be in the ‘eart o’ ogre territory. We’ve a bridge we’ll cross o’er, but there ain’t a turnaround once we take our first steps.”

“The horses?” I asked.

“They be fine, so long as they don’t get spooked.”

With that less than encouraging thought, we fell in single file as the dwarf led us through. We all kept our horses firmly in our hands and passed through the exit onto a stone bridge that stretched at least 300 feet over a maze of bridges and stairs. However, those bridges and stairs were not smooth and well formed. They were a collage of irregular rock formations and shapes that looked worn down and unpassable. This vast network traversed perilously over a massive river of lava. The river stretched out on either side for miles before disappearing into entirely new sets of underground caverns.

“Welcome to the Dragon’s Den!” The dwarf shouted over the hissing and bubbling of the lava. “Don’t be afraid though; there ain’t been a real dragon ‘ere in centuries! There may be some ogres though, perhaps a few goblins. They like ta show themselves ‘ere to grab some easy prey on occasion. Be on te look out!”

“What if they’re waiting for us on the other side?” Gorm shouted back.

“Then they’re dead little fuckers!” The dwarf laughed as he replied. “There’s a whole camp o’ dwarves there! It’s the crossroads between the Baldrak Mines, Eastwood, and the plains! Now quit yer yappin’ and let’s move!”

The dwarf led us forward at an easy trot across the bridge. I allowed Storm to guide me more than I guided him and shifted my mental focus downwards. My mind reached out, searching for the source of the lava's power. I imagined it would be like fire, hot and controllable, but when I finally found the surface, I was overwhelmed. The heat flooded over my mental state so unbearably, it manifested physically. My skin turned bright red, and my clothes were quickly soaked through with perspiration. It was not pure energy, as fire had been, but a strange chaotic blend of form and power writhing together in a single mass.

When I pulled my mind back, I could feel myself overheating. A sudden pop, followed by a much larger eruption, echoed through the cavernous space. A plume of lava shot upwards like a geyser before returning to the calm rumbling flow below.

"What in Moradin's beard was that?" The dwarf shouted; weapons drawn as he scanned the bridges below. "I ain't e'er seen the dragon's blood spue like that!"

"No, it certainly wasn't natural..." Gorm's eyes glared at me as he spoke.

"Whate'er it was, it'll be sure to garner some attention!" The dwarf shouted. "Come on, we've got less time than I thought!"

Axes still drawn, the dwarf burst into a sprint as he rushed across the bridge. Gorm cursed under his breath and charged after him, the rest of us close behind. I figured their worrying would be for not, until the first of the ogres appeared below us.

In stories, ogres are supposed to be these massive idiots, bumbling about with wooden clubs and one eye. They are supposed to eat humans, and they only talk in riddled words. Those stories could not be further from the truth.

They were massive brutes, covered from head to toe in a dark grey skin that looked like rocks. Each of them had two eyes and communicated in guttural noises as a form of language.

There were four of them at first, armed with a strange mix of metal pauldrons, helmets, and swords or axes made of jagged edges and rough shapes. They pointed up at us and let out a horrid shout, before one of them turned back down the tunnel entrance. In mere moments, ogres began appearing from holes and bridges all about the cavern. One of the ogres took out a crudely formed bow and released a strange metallic arrow that travelled through the air faster than it had right to. Gorm saw the projectile and placed an arcane barrier up, but the arrow burst through and took a casualty.

Gorm's horse was impaled and went toppling over the edge of the bridge. We barely had time to react to the fallen horse when another arrow whizzed just past our heads. The gust of wind that followed nearly pulled us off the bridge with it.

"Oi, let's move!" The dwarf shouted. "Quit gazin' and run ye idiots!"

We charged forward as another ogre appeared with a bow, adding to the barrage. This time, Gorm did not attempt to create barriers to protect us. We simply prayed their aim remained poor, as the arrows blasted against the rocks whizzed through the air around us. The bridge trembled with each new collision, the constant battering creating cracks in the previously solid earth. I could feel the quaking rock beneath my feet, nearly sending me off balance.

"We're not going to make it," I shouted ahead as I watched small pieces of earth from the bridge fall.

"Damn it," Syl dra swore. She shifted her gaze to the ogres below, her eyes searching the rocks. Then she disappeared, appearing suddenly behind me. "Come on, Daelin. You wanted to train? Now's your chance."

Her fist latched around my arm. In an instant, we were no longer standing on the bridge but staring over the ogres from behind them. We were nuzzled into a small pocket of shadows with two massive boulders looming over either side of us.

“Now what?” I whispered.

“Try to keep up.”

From her hands, she conjured up a massive blast of arcane energy which she propelled forward. The ball of energy rippled as it shot down towards the lava’s surface. The ogres shielded their faces as the magic’s impact shot forth plumes of searing lava and shattered rocks. Grunts and roars turned to screams as the lava burned away at the ogre’s skin. The archers adjusted and focused their attention on the two of us. Arrows clobbered against the boulders on either side of us, shaking the foundation of the bridge we stood upon.

“Move!” Syl dra shouted. She disappeared from my side and reappeared further along the bridge, running under the shadow cast from the lava below.

I followed her lead, focusing on the point of the bridge she chose and phased. I sprinted behind Syl dra and released an attack of my own on the ogres. I conjured a massive ball of fire and hurled it towards the nearest bridge. The crackling of the smoldering flames softened before erupting in an explosion that threw the ogres from their attack positions. The rumbling in the cavern grew louder as more rocks collapsed from the ceiling.

The ogres doubled their efforts as the next barrage assailed us. A bolt of black magic collided with the bridge. The shaking earth and crumbling rocks began to fall away from us as we tumbled forward, just grabbing on to the remains of the rocky structure.

“Again!”

In near unison, we disappeared and reappeared 100 feet below on a new bridge. The arrows wasted little time in following us down, one lodging itself mere inches from my face. Syldra released another blast of arcane energy, sending another group of ogres toppling over the edge. Yet she was unaware of the danger as a shadowbolt rained down up on her.

I conjured up a barrier of arcane power, just as I had been instructed. I added greater power behind the spell, creating the largest wall I ever conjured. The shadow bolt hit the barrier, and for a moment, they were both still. Then they exploded, the shockwave nearly knocking us from our place atop the bridge. But the worst of the magic had been stopped.

“Come on, Daelin,” I heard a voice call out. “One more phase.”

The world around me seemed a blur. I was prone on the ground, my head woozy from the blast. I likely would have died there, had I not felt a familiar presence calling to me. Instinctually, my hand drifted to a metal hilt on my hip. The magic from Aelandria immediately cleared my brain as a flood of energy washed over me. My vision cleared, I turned about to find Syldra no longer beside me, but on the opposite bridge, motioning for me to hurry. Gorm, Avara, the dwarf, and the horses were nowhere to be found.

A spray of rocks and pebbles battered against me as another arrow lodged itself in the bridge. A crack reached out, its long fingers surrounding me as the earth began to fall away. It opened; my body immediately plummeted. Desperation swept over me as I visualized Syldra’s location, praying there were enough shadows to bridge the distance. I managed to shadow phase, but when I exited the shadows, there was no earth that came up to meet me. I flailed about, searching for something to grab hold of as the ceiling above moved further and further away...

A white hand latched onto mine, halting my fall. Above me, a familiar face surrounded in a tumbling red hair pulled me upwards onto the bridge.

“You almost made it,” she said between gasps of air. “You need work, but you were close.”

Before I could respond, the earth below us trembled under the relentless volley of arrows. Cracks continued to grow beneath us as the guttural shouts of ogres rose to challenge us.

“Next time.” I pushed myself to standing position, but my legs failed to hold my weight. I toppled forward, saved from plummeting to my doom by Syltra’s arms at the last moment. She met me in a hug, and we locked eyes. We both blushed and glanced away as she half-dragged my limp body out of the Dragon’s Den.

Chapter 17: Dumbar

After taking a few hours to rest, we had a short walk to the halfway point in our journey: a dwarven outpost known as Dumbar. A quick trip through slender tunnels brought us to a cavern clearing. The space was illuminated by the red glow of dwarven torches hanging from the ceiling and walls. Short stone pathways cut their way through a variety of tents. Conversation and merriment rose to a dull roar as we approached. A group of dwarves squabbled over cards; some dwarves were fetching food and drink; some were staring down dark tunnels that spiderwebbed from the center.

“Ha! If it ain’t Jordin returned again!” A dwarf armed in green leather and a dark blue cloak strode to meet us, a burly grin just visible through his thick red beard. “Ye brought quite te crew wit’ ya!”

“Aye, and they be bringing a load of adventure wit’ ‘em!” Our guide released a hearty laugh and clasped hands with the newcomer. Jordin cleared his throat and stepped aside, waving in our direction. “These folks are travelers from the plains heading o’er to Eastwood!”

“Eastwood, eh?” The dwarf raised an eyebrow as his voice lowered. “You four mad or something?”

“Tired, more like,” Gorm grunted.

“Aye, tired,” Jordin nodded. “Ya see we passed through the Dragon’s Den and met wit’ quite a bit o’ resistance I wasn’t expecting this time o’ year.”

“Well, normally you’d be right to assume you’d be safe,” the dwarf replied. “T’ing is, there’s been some strange ‘appenings down in these tunnels. All the ogres ‘ave been extra aggressive, though they haven’t yet stepped into our territory, thank the gods.”

“What figures, then?” Jordin inquired.

“Well, we ‘ave our suspicions,” The dwarf leaned forward, speaking in a soft whisper. “But rumors ‘ave it that the demons on the plains, the ‘appenings in Eastwood, and now the ogres acting up, they’re all connected to the ‘ells thinking o’ striking at us like they did during the second age.”

“Ha! And I’m going ta suddenly shave ma beard and live with the elves, sippin’ tea instead o’ brandy!” Jordin shouted and broke into a laugh as he sauntered past the other dwarf. “Come, we’ve no time for fairytales! Let’s get some food and real drink afore we ‘ead out!”

We moved to follow our guide, but the second dwarf’s hand latched onto my arm, pulling my head close as I passed.

“Listen ‘ere, lad,” he whispered. “Don’t be a fool like Jordin. Listen well to the advice around ya and be weary of everyt’ing. There’s strange t’ings ‘appening in the world, and ye best be ready for it.”

He released my arm and stormed off without another word.

I hurried over to join the others as we strolled into the thick of the tents. Male and female dwarves alike shared stories, slept, polished armor, or performed a variety of other tasks in preparation for combat. The faint ring of stones on metal blades rang out through the din of

conversation. A few naked dwarfs passed by; their towels were barely big enough to cover their privates as they left behind puddles of water. Yet the smell of rocks and sweat persisted.

“Ah, it’s good te be back!” Jordin let in a giant whiff of air and breathed out heavily, as he led us on.

We eventually came to the very center of the commune where six green tents were erected. The tents each had four cots and small chests in their corners, though they were otherwise empty. They were slightly taller than the other tents, designed for humans, thankfully, and not dwarves.

“You’ll each ‘ave a tent fer yerself!” The dwarf explained. “I’ll check ‘bout the time fer food and festivities, and then I’ll be back for ya then!”

“We don’t have time for festivities,” Syldra replied. “I don’t know if you remember, but there’s a giant thing following us. We should try and keep our head start if we can.”

“Bah, we’re fine ta rest ‘ere a while!” Jordin said, dismissing her. “Besides, we ‘ave to rest up! I can see it in yer walks. None of ya are alright, and there’s no way we can make it t’rough the next phase o’ the journey if ye’re crawling!” He let out a hearty laugh then turned and rushed off, disappearing into the throng.

“Well, we’ve lost any choice in the matter, so we might as well rest up,” Gorm said. “I don’t know about you all, but I’m going to sleep as long as I possibly can.”

Gorm gave a half-hearted wave before limping towards one of the tents. His back slouched forward as he sauntered over. His limbs barely moved as he climbed through one of the flaps and closed it, sealing himself away for the night.

“Well, I think I’m going to head off and do some exploring,” Avara smiled and clapped her hands together. “Either of you care to join?”

“I don’ think so,” Syldra looked away as she spoke. Her hair blocked her face and her arms folded across her body, embracing herself in a half-hug of sorts. “I think maybe I should get some rest too...”

“Of course, of course,” Avara said. “Well, it’s probably for the best to rest up, right? You go ahead and get your strength before dinner. It’s a smart move for sure.”

Syldra nodded and hurried into another tent, closing the flaps quickly behind her.

“Well, I’m all for adventuring,” I replied. “I’ve the energy of two in one body right now, so I can spare a moment for exploring.”

“Excellent!”

She wrapped her arms around mine, and we sauntered out to explore the outpost, which was just one massive campsite miles beneath the surface. The place was built to a dwarf’s height, so it was easy for us to look over the mess and clearly see much of the happenings. The far side, where we entered, consisted of the same tiny white tents all lined up in a grid-like fashion. Another end was filled with sparring dwarves, the clacking of their training weapons broken by the occasional clang of hammers on metal. Opposite those dwarves, rows of tables and chairs were laid out, many carrying large barrels with metal spickets on them. Dwarves drank with fervor, their conversation loud and the clanking of cups even louder.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked her.

“Hell, if I know,” Avara shrugged. “I suppose we just wander about until something strikes us?”

I allowed her to lead us forward. We passed by many tents and other dwarves walking about and chatting, though I could not understand any of their conversations as they spoke exclusively in dwarven. A few gave us strange looks, but no one ever stopped us to converse.

They let us pass with little resistance, some of them even stepping away to give us a wide berth as we passed.

“Oi, what are ye doing?” Jordin’s voice broke through the dull roar. He pushed his way through the throng of dwarves and stepped in front of our walk. “I said I’d come back fer ye when I knew what would be ‘appening!”

“We’re just taking a walk,” Avara spat back. “There’s no harm in that!”

“No ‘arm? This is a finely operated, well-oiled, military outpost!” Jordin snapped. “Ye can’t just wander ‘bout like ye’re in a wee village! There are t’ings going on ye wouldn’t understand!”

“Jordin, enough,” I snapped. “We’re putting up with enough taking this long of a rest here. We’re letting you fancy about and drink like an idiot. You can let us explore just a bit.”

“Oi, ‘ow dare ye accuse me o’ shirking my duties!” Jordin roared, raising a sausage finger up at my chest. “I could leave ye ‘ere and let ye find yer way on yer own! ‘Ow’s that sound? I’m doing ye a favor, and ye accuse me o’ drinking and partying on te job?”

“You’re still holding your mug.”

Jordin’s hand shot behind his back as his face turned red beneath his beard. “Aye, so I am...”

“If you don’t want us exploring that badly, we can just go back,” Avara sighed. “I knew dwarven ale wasn’t that good anyway. Probably not worth our time...”

“Oi! I know ye didn’t just ay dwarven ale ain’t that good!” Jordin hollered. “You’d be a fool to think such nonsense! Come on then, lem’me give ye a tour, then I’ll show ya what real ale is like!”

“Marvelous!” Avara clapped, released my arm, and moved beside Jordin. “Please lead on then!”

“Of course, as you wish m’lady!” the dwarf hollered. He took a little bow then moved on off, finishing his mug and tossing it aside as we went. “Ya know, that we’ve got a minute, how ‘bouts you tell me a bit o’ yerselves, eh? Come on then, where you two be from?”

“Well, I’ve been a few places now, but I’m originally from the ocean,” Avara smiled, then leaned forward in a slightly hushed tone. “I’m actually a pirate princess!”

At this Jordin simply laughed. “I know a lie when I ‘ear it! Ain’t no such thing as pirates or queens o’ the seas! Ridiculous talk!”

Avara turned red, but she offered no response.

“What ‘bouts you, lad? Where’s the place ye call ‘ome?”

I looked at the old dwarf and images of Windhelm flooded my mind. Those images were not of the village I grew up in, but the images of burned buildings and thick black smoke.

“I don’t really come from anywhere,” I said softly. “I guess I’m more of a wanderer...”

“A wanderer, eh?” He whistled. “Well, I know a liar when I see ‘em! But I won’t press ye lad, I can tell it ain’t a pretty past. Turns out you two need a drink much more than I thought!”

The tour was brief and rather unsurprising. Having seen most of the camp by nature of my height, I pieced together most of what the place looked like on my own.

“And t’is ‘ere is our smithy,” Jordin exclaimed. “Ye don’t get better craft than that o’ a dwarf!”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Avara replied.

“Oi! Would ye pay attention?” Jordin kicked me in the shin as he spoke. “I’m givin’ ye the chance o’ a lifetime! Ye know ‘ow many ‘umans see a dwarf workin’? Let me tell ye, it ain’t many!”

We ducked under a low hanging canopy towards the working station. There was an anvil, forge, and hundreds of pieces of blades and armor lining racks underneath. One dwarf shaped a gargantuan, double-sided axe head. His muscles rippled under layers of sweat, and his apron was covered in black soot. His head was completely bald while his long black beard was tucked beneath his apron. He looked up as we walked in and wiped his brow before greeting Jordin.

“Surprised te see ye down ‘ere,” The smith said. “I though ye weren’t taken travelers for a while?”

“Well, things change,” Jordin replied. “This lad ‘ere offered a promise o’ adventure! I’d be a fool te pass up the opportunity!”

“Ye’re a crazy old fool fer taking it!” the smith replied. “What the hell ye brining ‘em down ‘ere for?”

“Te see a master at work!” Jordin exclaimed. “Come now, when else is a ‘uman going te see anything like this again?”

“Never if things keep the way they’re going.” The smith turned to me and looked me up and down. His brow furrowed the longer he stared, until he eventually spoke again. “Alright, I’ll give ye a chance to see me work, but on condition ye show me that blade o’ yers.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” I said.

“Lad, ye don’t ‘ave a choice,” the smith huffed, crossing his arms. “Let me see the blade, or get out o’ here.”

“Well, go on boy,” Jordin insisted. “He won’t take it!”

After much internal deliberation, I drew forth the blade. It shined as if it were brand new, the silver glittering under the glow of the forge's flames. The blue enchantment never showed itself, easing my mind as the smith pried the blade out of my hands.

"Ah, I understand now," the smith nodded. He felt the blade in his hands, testing its balance. He stared up and down the blade, then placed a finger on its edge. He slowly moved it down the side. He let out a sharp gasp and pulled his hand back as a droplet of blood began to fall. He wiped the blood off on his apron and returned the blade to me.

"Ye seem impressed," Jordin raised an eyebrow as he addressed the smith.

"Aye, I am," the smith nodded slowly. "That blades ain't made by humans, nor elves, nor dwarves. And the magic on that thing is much more than I've ever managed in my own work. That's a special piece of history, that is."

"I'm sorry, you said you perform magic on your blades?" I jumped in.

"Well o' course!" The smith snorted. "Ya don't use a bit o' magic, and it ain't special. No, the enchantments I fuse in the runes of me work make 'em much tougher than anything you 'umans can craft."

"Interesting..."

"'Ere, take this fer example," the smith turned and handed me a small dagger. "Now, take out that elven dagger ye 'ave there. Hold 'em up and tell me, what do you notice?"

I held the two blades beside each other, balancing them in my hands. The elven blade felt lighter, yet the dwarven blade felt... better. I could not explain why, but the work done by the dwarf seemed to just fit into my hand better than the curved work of the elven dagger. I explained this to the dwarf, who let out a snort.

“That’s ‘cause me work *is* better,” he laughed. “In me blade, I ‘ave etched out runes that contain a small ‘int o’ magic. Within that magic, the blade is set to balance perfectly, regardless of ‘ow you ‘old it, or where ye swing it! It’s a marvelous lil’ thing I’ve perfected o’er the years, and there ain’t anyone who can compare to it!”

“Aye, that’s enough o’ yer bragging,” Jordin cut in. “He’s good, but don’t let ‘im make ye think ‘e’s the second coming o’ Mordruin ‘imself!”

The two dwarves laughed and shared a few words in dwarvish, when the sound of a bell rang out behind us.

“Well, it’s ‘bout time!” Jordin hollered. “Come on ye two, let’s eat!”

Chapter 18: Syltra

Syltra was exhausted. She tried her best not to show it, but she felt drained. Her head hurt, her body ached, and she could see the streaks of silver becoming all too apparent in her hairs.

She missed it all so much. The luxury of her little estate, with its small garden, open stables, and hot baths. She missed the wine and food, and the practically limitless gold she had earned over the years. She missed the smell of a hot, freshly cooked meal, and the fine silks and dresses she occasionally wore, though she was loath to admit that to anyone.

Instead, she left it all behind to travel the road, trading a bed to sleep in dirt, her clothes for armor, and a rather easy life for one of combat and fear. While she did not regret her decision, she wished Daelin could have controlled himself. That man was trouble, and yet she followed him out of the city anyways. There was no destination, no clear escape, but she followed all the same. And now...

Now she just wanted a moment to herself.

She lay on the cot, tossing about with her arms and legs flailing in awkward positions. Despite the good intentions of the dwarves, they clearly failed to consider what a human or elf

would find comfortable to sleep on. She was contemplating laying on the stone floors as they were larger and more inviting than her rickety old cot, when the tent flaps opened.

To her surprise, and not to her pleasure, entered Gorm. His bald head had begun growing back some hairs on the road; grey stubble grew around his head, though not on top. His face had also grown scruffy, though his hair was colorless and showed his age more than ever. Deep bags were under his eyes as he decided to take a seat on the stone floor.

“Sure, go right ahead,” Syldra rolled her eyes and turned on her backside as he entered.

“Fuck off,” he grunted as he sat down. “You know why I’m here.”

“No, actually. If I’m being completely honest, I’m not sure.” Syldra sat up and stared down at the old man. “Perhaps it’s to suggest we do something new? Perhaps you’re here to complain about how reckless I was in the caverns? Or maybe, you’re here to suggest I’m better off somewhere else, out of harm’s way? Somewhere I can’t cause any more trouble to you and the others perhaps? Is that it? Come now, let me know when I’m getting close.”

“It’s the damned demon,” Gorm growled. “Stop your yammering about the past alright? I’m concerned about our present, and whether we have any real chance at a future!”

“You and me both,” Syldra sighed. “That demon... it was the same one I felt. But its power was even greater than I remembered when it broke into our plane of existence. Its growing stronger the longer it remains here...”

“It’s recovering from its fatigue. It’s regaining all the magic it lost travelling to the physical world from Elemenyal. No doubt the next time we see it, it will be stonger.”

Syldra nodded to herself and let her hair fall over her face. She knew Gorm was right, and it worried her. The demon inside of Daelin burned down entire villages, stone buildings, and far worse. This demon, unencumbered by the restraints of a physical vessel, could, and likely

would, surpass such calamity. When that happened, she was not confident their motley crew could stand up to it.

Without a word, Syltra lay back down in her cot. She let out a heavy sigh, then simply stared up at the green ceiling. "I'm not sure how we come out of this one alive." She admitted.

"Well, we won't at this current rate," Gorm concurred. "I thought I could handle the beast, but even if I had been rested, I doubt my magic would have done much more for us. I'm old. I don't have the stamina for this shit anymore, nor do I want to."

"Well then you should've stayed in that tower of yours, reading books and forgetting about the rest of us." Syltra retorted.

"Each day I wish that more and more, believe me. However, I'm here now, and I intend to attempt surviving. Which means we need somebody to step it up."

"I've done enough," Syltra shot to her feet and looked over the old man. "I had Daelin training just fine until your teachings came into play. Now he wants to play hero, instead of being content with the life we were making! No, I've done more than enough to this point!"

"It's not you we need to do more..."

Gorm looked down and shook his head. Realization donned on her, and she sat back down.

"What can we do then?"

"I don't know," he shrugged and stood up. "But he's not just my student. Like you said, you trained him quite well. Perhaps it's time you began that practice again."

"Oh, really? You're going to allow him to work with me? You know where my magic comes from..."

“I do, and I think it may be our only real chance moving forward. He has the sword, and that will be useful, but the sword is only as good as its wielder, and right now, that wielder is amateurish at best. It’s time we get him working harder. Much harder.”

Gorm left the tent then, leaving Syldra to ponder over his words. She would do it of course. She knew she would not say to him, nor to Daelin. She would train him, for better or worse. With everything so hectic, and death always a few steps away, it would be nice to focus her energy on something.

A bell rang out, and the bustle of dwarves outside the tent told Syldra it was time to eat. She left and joined the masses, eager for what she assumed would be her last hot meal for a long time to come.

Chapter 19: The Greatest Tunneller

The aromas of the dwarven cooking graced the senses before the food came into view. The rush of people towards the food reminded me of the river: strong steady flow that was easy to get pulled off in. Loud pops erupted, followed by the cheering of dwarves and the clinking of cups.

“Ave either of you e’er ‘ad the cooking o’ a real dwarf?” Jordin shouted over the rabble.

“Never,” I shouted back. Avara shook her head, and her eyes were wide with delight. She could not hide the smile lurking across her face.

“Well, ye’re in fer a treat!”

Breaking through the final row of tents, we came to a grid of massive pavilions. The crowds milled about every which direction, filling their plates and mugs. The sight was overwhelming, and the throng of people separated me from Avara and Jordin, the latter disappearing in the crowd. Thankfully, the river of dwarves carried me to the edges, where I saw laid out a massive feast of food. I did not recognize any of the meats or breads spanning endlessly around the clearing, and yet my mouth watered in anticipation. A metal plate suddenly appeared in front of me; I nearly dropped it as I passed by. Before I knew it, I was staring at countless dining options with no idea where to start. A few grumbling dwarves shoved me aside

to get at the feast and proceeded to create a mountain of food on their plates. A finger began to tap away at my shoulder, and I turned around to see a stout dwarf with a greying beard staring up at me.

“Can I let ya in on a little secret?” the dwarf said.

“Sure?”

“All the food is good, lad!” he laughed heartily as he dove past me to gather his own meal. “Just grab anythin’! Ye won’t regret it!”

With that bode of confidence, I quickly grabbed up various items. There was a red and pink piece of meat cut into squares, a mash of what looked like potatoes and some form of pig, a pile of a ground something mixed with onions and a strange green vegetable, and three different forms of bread that smelled of garlic, rosemary, and some unknown scent.

Satisfied with my strange assortment of food, I was forcefully guided towards the seating area. Rows of tables stretched out under large pavilions; atop each table was a massive keg. I watched a pair of dwarves arm-wrestle across a table, surrounding by cheering men and women. A few dwarves were stumbling over each other while shouting out songs and rhymes. Others laughed and barked at one another as they shoveled food into their mouths. The sound reverberated off the walls, making these hundreds of dwarves sound like well over a thousand.

“Come on lad, let’s get you to a seat,” Jordin shouted with a hand on the small of my back. He appeared out of nowhere hands each carrying four massive mugs of ale.

Jordin led me to the outskirts of the pavilion where the crowd thinned. The dwarves here ate and enjoyed mild conversation, though they still stuffed their faces with food and booze as vigorously as the rest of them. None glanced our way as we passed by and took seats near the edge of the camp. The table was sticky, but otherwise clean compared to those around us. To my

surprise, Gorm was already seated, slowly sipping on his mug with a half-eaten plate of food before him.

“Is there some holiday or festival I haven’t heard of?” I asked as we took our seats.

Jordin broke into a hearty laugh, food flying from his gaping mouth. “A ‘oliday? Lad, this is a tame day fer us down ‘ere! If t’were a ‘oliday, you’d be on the floor already drunk as turdunk! Ha, the old man ‘ere knows!”

Gorm cracked a little smile as he picked away at some grey slop on his plate.

“Ah but enough o’ that! ‘Ere, ‘ave some ale and dive in lad! Enjoy it all!”

I nodded slightly, then turned to the plate I managed to assemble. I was not sure what to start with, so I started with a bite of bread. It crunched on the outside, giving way to a soft core filled with garlic and butter that pulled apart as I tore a piece off. The delicious flavor immediately elevated my mood, and I proceeded to try more food. The various meats were soft and practically melted in my mouth, each one a different experience of spices that left me speechless.

“Alright, mead for the ‘ole crew!” Jordin pronounced. He slammed his mug down and shoved one of them at me, the other at Gorm. We each took a mug and prepared to sip, when Avara came rushing over with a plate and two full mugs of her own.

“Hold now, don’t you dare start drinking without me!” She shouted, taking a seat beside the old dwarf.

As she sat, I noticed Syltra was also with her. I smiled at her and slid over, shoving a random dwarf out of the way so she could sit beside me. She nodded, and her hairs seemed to redden slightly, as she took her seat.

“It’s a great atmosphere, isn’t it?” Avara shouted to all us, raising one of her mugs.

“Aye, it’s the best there is!” Jordin hollered. He clapped his mug against hers, sending bits of beer flying in the air. “Might be the only thing as invigorating as swinging an axe!”

The two proceeded to drink with equal ferocity, slamming their empty mugs down in almost perfect unison.

“Oi, we got a drinker o’ ‘ere! A true lady if e’er I met one!”

“Another round then!” Avara laughed. The dwarf shared the laugh and clapped her handily on the back. They took their extra mugs and repeated their ritual. Jordin laughed again, and went running off, presumably to find more beer. Avara grinned and dove into her plate, eating with nearly the same ferocity as the dwarves at other tables.

“Oh, come on, don’t give me that look,” Avara said through a mouthful of food, pointing a bone stripped of all its meat at me. “I’m with my type of people now! Let me have my fun!”

Syldra rolled her eyes and hunched over her plate, nibbling at little bits and pieces. Avara, meanwhile, looked across at me and pushed my cup towards me with a wink. I sighed and took the mug. I could smell the strength before I tasted it, but when it hit my tongue, I knew it was stronger than I presumed. I choked back on the liquid and felt the warmth rolling down to sit in my stomach.

“Wow, that’s strong,” I muttered, coughing slightly.

“It’s fuckin’ delicious!” Jordin hollered as he reclaimed his seat and handed Avara yet another mug. The two raised their cups and drank again, though they refrained from finishing it in just one gulp this time.

“While I appreciate everyone’s enthusiasm, I think I’ll return to the tent barring any objections,” Syldra said. “It’s been lovely, but I think I’ve had enough.”

I grabbed her hand as she tried to leave, and we locked eyes. “Just, stay a little longer? Maybe we can enjoy this little feast of sorts, and not worry about everything else?”

She seemed ready to object, but Avara cut in first. “Come on Syldra! You’re surrounded by the first moment of legitimate merriment we’ve had in a long ass time. Enjoy it!”

Despite her clear dissidence with our decision, she gave into the pressure and took her seat once more at the table, holding a cup with both hands, though she did not drink from it.

“Well, I might as well tell ye all the news while I ‘ave ye,” Jordin muttered between swigs. “What would you care ta ‘ear first, the good or the bad?”

“I suppose bad,” Syldra sighed.

“Well, the ogres ‘ave been restless and attacked beyond their usual borders,” Jordin explained. “They took our people by surprise and ‘alf our western bound tunnels are blocked off, at least temporarily.”

“That means the road to Eastwood will be blocked,” Gorm concluded.

“Aye, it’ll be a few weeks before travel resumes that way.”

“Please tell me the good news is actually good,” I said, clenching my mug a little tighter than before.

“It is!” Jordin slammed his mug down and stood on the bench. “Ye’re lookin’ at the best tunneller in the ‘istory o’ dwarves! I know every switch back, turn, and cavern, in all the Baldrak mountains, and I’ll take ye’s the long way about on the morn! ‘Ave no fear, we’ll get you lot to Eastwood yet!”

He crossed his arms and wore an impish grin as he looked down at all of us. We stared at him in silence, until he broke his posture and took his seat back.

“I was expectin’ a little more o’ an enthusiastic response,” he grumbled. “A small applause at the very least.”

“Well, how about we raise a glass then?” Avara nudged the dwarf as she spoke and hoisted her cup in the air. “To the best tunneler in the mountains!”

Jordin’s grin returned and he raised his mug; the rest of us followed Avara’s lead, though with much less enthusiasm. The mugs all clanked together, and Avara and Jordin downed their mugs in one go. They turned to me expectantly. Despite my better judgement, I choked down the mead and slammed my empty cup down on the table, just as a massive belch escaped my lips.

“Ha! Just like that the boy becomes a man!” Jordin hollered. “Time for another round!”

“Another then!” Avara laughed as she slapped the dwarf on the back.

“Sure, why not,” I muttered between belches.

Syldra dropped her head into her arms atop the table and groaned loudly, while Gorm shook his head and chuckled. Still, Syldra took a mug of her own, and we all continued to enjoy another round of some pungent dwarven mead.

That is where my memory of the night ended.

Chapter 20: Creatures in the Dark

I awoke the next morning with a pounding headache.

I shook my body out and groaned to myself, then rolled over in my half-sleep, half-awoken state. I reach my arm over and wrapped it around something warm. For a second, I thought it was Ariel, her blonde hair and scent overflowing my sense. I pulled the warm body closer...

My eyes suddenly snapped open, my body sober. I was in one of the green tents, laying on the stone floor. My pants were on, but the rest of my armor had been discarded. I lay beside Syldra, my arm wrapped around her. Not Ariel. Some form of light broke through the crack of the tent, though that meant nothing.

I moved quickly, rolling back to the edge of the tent and onto my cot. My heartbeat raced, and I felt the demon's cackling laughter in the back of my mind. As I lay staring at the ceiling, Syldra stirred beside me and sat up. She wiped the sleep from her eyes, then stared over me with a confused expression.

"Are you doing alright?"

"How long have you been awake?" I asked.

“Just now, if I’m being honest. I’m surprised I didn’t wake sooner though. My dreams were... troubling to say the least. You?”

“Just a few moments,” I replied, rising to my seat. “My head is absolutely killing me though.”

“I’ve never seen you drink so much before. I’m surprised you’re awake at all if I’m being honest.” She laughed as she spoke, but proceeded to rise and dress herself, arming herself in armor once more.

I did the same, when the laughing in my head stopped, the demon’s nuisance changing to actual words. *Good morning you little party fiend!*

Not now! I growled internally. My head pounded, and his presence only made it worse. I dropped the armor I held and began searching the ground for Aelandria’s sword instead.

Slow down buddy! Is this your first devil’s morning? Oh, how cute, I’m so glad I got to be here and share this nauseating feeling with you! You know, I can handle my liquor much better than you are. Perhaps next time, you should just let me drink for you...

I ignored his pestering as something far worse became apparent. I could not find the sword of Aelandria anywhere. I stood up in a panic, and immediately regretted it. My stomach growled at me loudly, and I felt pain shoot all over my body. Instantly, all the alcohol and food from the night prior returned to the world, scattering in a massive puddle in front of me. The taste of mead filled my mouth as the stench filled the green tent.

“Oh my god!” Syltra screamed, just barely avoiding the splutter of vomit. “You really haven’t drunk like that before, have you? Welcome to a real devil’s morning.”

Oh, this is too much fun! First, the devil’s morning, now the devil’s stew? All you have left is the devil’s poo! The demon continued to cackle in the back of my head, drowning out the

pounding drum of my already throbbing cranium. The cacophony felt like my brain had been replaced with rocks rattling around inside my skull.

Syldra and I parted the tents. She walked perfectly straight, while I hobbled beside her, barely managing to lift my feet off the ground.

“Don’t worry about the sword, by the way,” Syldra said as we walked towards the western edge of the camp. “I’m assuming Gorm or someone took it before you went completely black out.”

“Do you remember the evening at all?” I asked.

“Honestly, not really,” she shrugged. “I just remember laughing with you as we left the others at the feast, then waking up this morning. In between that, nothing, really.”

Well I can assure you you’re not missing much, the demon grumbled. Not like the fun I witnessed back with that blonde babe. Ariel wasn’t it? Yes, best we don’t share that bit of information with our fiery friend here. She might be jealous!

I ignored the demon as we met up with Avara. She stood on the edge of the camp with Storm, or only remaining horse, and a few cups of black liquid. She handed me one, and I realized it held freshly brewed coffee.

“How are you feeling?” She asked.

“He’s already vomited,” Syldra answered for me, taking a cup for herself.

“I thought so,” Avara giggled. “You’re just hung over. A little ‘devil’s morning’ as you land folk call it. It’ll pass in time.”

“How come I’m the only one who’s feeling this right now?”

“You’re just inexperienced,” Avara laughed. “We’ll fix that up in no time though!”

“Doubtful,” Gorm huffed as he joined the conversation. “I’m more likely to kill him than let him have another night like that. Now you listen here boy. I get you’re inexperienced with the ways of the world, so let me give you a piece of advice. If a dwarf or pirate ever asks to share a drink with you again, you tell ‘em off. You say no and run the other way! And if you lose this sword again, I swear to the gods, I will send you right back to your maker!”

He swatted my back quickly with the end of the blade before handing it to me. My back immediately screamed in throbbing pain worse than my arm barely held the sword up as he placed it in my hand. I grabbed a hold of the hilt and felt the headache wash away, only to be replaced with utter exhaustion.

“Well, now we’re just missing the dwarf,” Gorm growled. He glared around the camp, searching some of the tent alleys. “Any chance you lot have seen him this morning?”

“Not yet,” I muttered.

“What?” Gorm shouted. “Boy, you have to speak up.”

“Not yet,” I groaned, a hand reaching up to steady my shaking head. “Maybe he’s still sleeping. Maybe I’m not the only one hungover like this.”

Gorm muttered profanities as he stalked off in search of the dwarf.

#

Jordin seemed chipper, bouncing from foot to foot as he led us out of the camp and into dark caverns. Gorm’s tight-set jaw and glaring eyes never strayed far from the dwarf, but whatever objections or troubles bothered him were kept silent. Behind them walked Avara, followed by Syldra and me side by side. I led Storm, our only remaining horse, back into the tunnels.

Our journey down these new caverns and tunnels differed from our earlier experience. These tunnels lacked the same smooth, defined shape. Rocks jutted randomly from the tops and

bottoms, and the sides were rough, littered with strange markings, cracks, and holes. Even the color of the stones changed as we carried on, sometimes consisting of black and grey, other times taking on a reddish earth tone. The smell of water and mold lingered around us, and the air continued to chill the further we traveled.

A few hours into the journey and Jordin brought us to a halt. From his pack, he gave each of us a perfectly cylindrical piece of black wood.

“Smack it twice against the nearest rock, and keep the light ‘eld ‘igh,” he instructed. “It’s going to be too dark soon, and the darkness invites unwanted creatures. Keep the lights up if you wish to live.”

He proceeded to pound the end of his stick against the ground. Sparks erupted on impact, the crack of his stick echoing down the cavernous tunnels. A bright white light erupted from the end, until the entire thing was illuminated. Its light shown bright enough for us to see a few feet before us, but nothing further than that.

“Are you expecting us to run into trouble?” Syldra asked as we resumed our trek.

“Trouble out ‘ere is rare,” Jordin admitted. “Owever, I’ve seen enough beasts and ‘eard enough stories ta know we can’t be too careful.”

As if on cue, a scurrying of feet overhead sent small pieces of rock and dirt crumbling down on top of us. We froze for a moment until the scurrying passed before resuming our voyage, this time with our hands closer to our weapons than before.

Sounds appeared in distant tunnels, on the ceiling of massive caverns, and echoing from miles away in greater frequency the further we travelled. Side tunnels and winding turns became the norm, as did the presence of random fissures that released rancid odors. Sometimes, shrieks or other inhuman noises pierced the air and drowned out our own thoughts.

That first day, or what I perceived to be the first day, we made less progress than we liked. For me, the previous evening's debauchery caught up with me, and my body could take no more. My foot came forward and hit a rock, but rather than stumble, I collapsed forward. The reins slipped from my hand, and I found myself face-first in the dirt. I spit away dirt and managed to sit up. I reached for Aelandria's blade at my waist, but no amount of magical energy could help me now.

"Aw hells," Syldra's whisper reverberated down the tunnel some distant behind me. I heard the footsteps echo against stone as someone came back for me, but my head never turned to see them. My eyes were closed, my efforts focused on just staying awake and slowing my rapid gasps for air.

A pair of arms wrapped around each of my shoulders as I was hoisted back to my feet. Syldra and Avara stood on either side of me and took my weight. They were the only thing keep me from falling forward.

"Gods be damned," Gorm spat. "See? You try drinking with a dwarf, and bad things happen."

"Oh, come on now," Jordin laughed as he looked me over. "Maybe 'e's a little queasy but let 'im walk it off! It'll be fine."

"I don't want to hear another word from you unless it's instructing us to find camp," Gorm growled as he stood over the dwarf. "If you remember, you're the idiot who gave him the brandy."

"Oh, so it's my fault 'e can't 'old 'is own liquor?" Jordin scoffed. "I just be givin' te drinks, I ain't te one takin' 'em!"

“Enough, the two of you,” Avara snapped. “Gorm’s right, we need to find some place to bring up camp.”

“Oh, I’ll ‘ave none of it from ye!” Jordin turned on Avara and placed one of his thick fingers in her face. “Ye were drinkin’ more the lot of ‘em, so don’t go actin’ the innocent one o’er ‘ere!”

“I suggest you step back,” Syldra hissed.

“Or what?” Jordin shouted, drawing his axes. “I’m feelin’ dangerous! Well, come on then! Ye want a fight ‘oney? I’ll give ye a-”

His words were lost as a bestial roar blasted down the tunnel. The walls shook and rocks fell atop our heads as the earth threatened to open beneath us. Storm whinnied and protested, and the rest of us lost our footing, landing in a jumble of limbs in the dirt. Then everything became still, and a long silence overcame us.

“What hellish thing was that?” Avara whispered.

“A belgarirgian worm,” Jordin whispered. “It don’t see at all, but it ‘ears better than anythin’ else to e’er walk the continent o’ Valandria. Mayhap campin’ fer now is the best choice...”

“You’re not worried the thing will come back?”

“Usually it’s not much o’ a problem. They travel one way and don’t do much in the way o’ turning.” Jordin’s voice became softer as he leaned in closer to the rest of us. “But if it does come back, well... at least it’ll be quick ‘bout it.”

“Well let’s be quick about our rest,” Gorm grumbled. “The longer we spend at a campsite, the closer our followers get.”

We were deliberate. We laid down bedrolls in a sort of pentagon shape around a pile of coals I was able to heat well enough to cook on. The “dwarf sticks” as they were called, were placed around the perimeter to ward off whatever creatures may lurk in the dark, waiting to strike. From there, I fell into a deep sleep...

#

“Must you always do this?”

“Quit whining,” the demon said. The fog was darker than normal and the air itself weighed heavily on my shoulders. “I’m not here out of pleasure.”

“Well then get on with it.”

The demon’s shadow began to swirl, its shape morphing as it transformed into a door. Through the door there was nothing but black and red fires with smoke rising out to encompass the entire dreamlike world.

“Enter. Now.”

I stared into the fires but could see nothing. I took a tentative step forward, then another. As I approached, I began to feel a heat emanating from the doorway. It was a dream, yet I felt my body sweating as I stepped a mere inch from the dark portal. I reached a hand forward slowly and barely touched the smoke...

The fires erupted and encompassed me. I became trapped in a ball of black and red and felt myself falling, my body suddenly weightless. My eyes were shrouded in blackness and my head swam around me, until a clawed hand grabbed my shoulder.

The shadows cleared and I was staring down at my own pale white face drenched in a thin layer of sweat. I floated upwards and saw the rest of our little camp laid out below. In the corner, it was Syltra’s turn to take watch. Her head snapped around as she searched the air, her

eyes locking on mine. She squinted and stood up, drawing a dagger. She stepped over to where I lay and placed a hand against my forehead. Her eyes closed; her brow furrowed as she stood there. However, she seemed not to find anything and soon returned to her post, watching out over the dark caverns.

“She’s perceptive, that one,” the demon’s voice sounded beside me. It was barely a whisper, a sound I heard more in my thoughts than through my ears. “Come now, we have little time.”

Before I could respond, we were swept away heading back down the tunnel. We travelled like air itself, gliding over the cavern floors at dizzying speeds. Then the world stood still as we broke into a familiar clearing, decorated with grand pavilions, and filled with the roar of dwarves.

“Why are we here?” I asked.

“Can you not see them?”

It took me a second, but I soon understood. The three paladins were easy to spot, as they towered over the dwarves. Their armor shone bright white and silver, reflecting the torches ringing the campsite. Their faces seemed troubled as they searched the crowds. They stood by the tents we slept in just the night prior.

“They’re closer than I thought.”

“They’ve been close for quite some time, but they don’t concern me,” The demon brought us higher, so we now overlooked the entire sprawling outpost. “Do you feel it?”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Try harder. Close your eyes and think of what seems...out of place.”

I was skeptical of the demon, assuming this was another one of his antics, a ruse to keep me preoccupied on our journey. But after a moment, I noticed something out of the ordinary. The feeling was cold and bottomless. The energy in the room seemed to be pulled towards a void. The strangest part of it all, it seemed to be surrounding the paladins.

“The paladins...”

“They’ve been leading S’yrl Altire right towards us.” The demon hissed. “I can’t find his exact location, but he’s down there, somewhere. He’s been watching them, the same as I.”

“How often have you done this?” I wondered.

“Enough. The point is, our adversary is close, and I doubt you or your companions are prepared for such a fight. You’d be best to get moving and move fast.”

As we hovered, an ungodly shriek echoed through the cavern. The dwarves scattered around and released anguished shouts. Some cowered in their tents, others overturned tables, and more still drew their weapons. The paladins became alert and scoured the campsite, searching in vain for the source of the shriek. They would not find the source, however, as the shadow rose before us. Blazing red eyes pierced through our very guise as the black shadow seemed to grin.

“Y’lth Qant,” it hissed. “I see you’ve brought a friend to die with you today.”

Before either of us could respond, the shadow exploded, long tentacles shooting forward to wrap around us. Despite my strange form, I felt grips slide around my neck and limbs. It began to pull me in, towards a black fire that gave off a frigid air. I thrashed about desperately yet could not break free. As it drew me closer, it released another horrid shriek...

Chapter 21: The Things We Need

“Daelin! Daelin, wake up!”

Hands shook my body and my eyes shot open. I shivered; my clothes stuck to my body from a cold sweat that overtook me. I gasped rapidly for air while my heart pounded. My head felt like it was being split in two. My body was numb, my arms and legs limp and outstretched in obscure positions.

Syldra stood over me and clenched my shoulders. She shook me slightly, her voice loud enough to awaken the others who began to stir around the camp. The horses neighed and scraped their feet against the dirt and the fires seemed dim, their light barely illuminating our small space in the tunnel.

“What the ‘ell is you jabbering over,” Jordin groaned and rolled over. “I’ve got three ‘ours yet afore I’m to take us back on the road!”

“Someone, pass me a water!” Syldra commanded. She ignored the dwarf’s badgering and rolled me onto my back. She then stepped behind me and raised my head onto her knees, wiping away the sweat on my forehead with her gloved hand.

Avara tossed over her skin of water. Syldra snatched it out of the air and placed it near my lips. I struggled to open my mouth but managed to swallow a few droplets as she poured, though most of it fell out my lips and down my cheeks. After a while, she returned the water to Avara and waited.

“What’s going on?” Gorm asked as he sat up, still wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“Demonic magic,” Syldra said without hesitating. “I’m not sure exactly what kind, but Daelin saw something. You don’t burst into a freezing sweat like this otherwise.”

“Shit,” Gorm was suddenly mobile, packing up his bedrolls and bags. “Avara, help me get everything packed up. Syldra, get him ready to move. And you, get up and get us moving!”

Gorm released a quick kick into Jordin’s side. The dwarf sprang upward and stared with flared nostrils and wild eyes as he clenched his fists, ready for a brawl. But his face changed to worry the longer he stood staring over all of us.

“Ah *vagh*,” the dwarf cursed.

The camp took less than a minute to clean up. Bags were hastily stuffed and strapped on the horses’ saddlebags, boots were clamped on tightly, and everyone was ready to move, besides me. I could wiggle my toes and fingers, but my arms and legs were still useless.

“Come on, Daelin, we need to get moving,” Gorm crouched in front of me. “Say something, let me know you’re all there inside that head of yours.”

“Mhmmh,” I managed to sound between sealed lips. My mouth could open slightly, but I could not move it well enough to form words, nor move my tongue. I felt as if my entire body were severed from my mind. I was racing through the events of my “dream,” if that’s what it could be called, yet could not warn anyone of the danger pursuing us.

“Should we just carry him?” Avara asked.

“That’s a dangerous proposition, that one,” Jordin replied. “We’ve got rough roads and perilous terrain to traverse a’ead, and ‘aving another person sittin’ on yer back will only slow us worse than waitin’ dis out.”

“Fine then,” Gorm grunted as he stood. “Someone, grab his sword, and get his hand around the hilt. I’ll be back.”

“Oh no, not without me ye ain’t!” Jordin growled, drawing his axes out. “Ain’t no one better in these tunnels, and ain’t no one better in a fight than me!”

“Fine. Just keep your mouth shut.”

“Oh, I’ll be quiet as a mouse.”

The two disappeared as the darkness reached out to swallow them. Syldra began to reach for the sword still hung by my waist, then paused and pulled her hand back.

“Avara, grab the sword.”

Avara nodded and crouched down, drawing the sword from its hilt. The darkness pressed back as light emitted from the blade, bathing our entire camp in blue. Avara’s hands delicately raised my right hand to grasp the blade. She folded my fingers over and held them in place as the steel sword lay across my lap. Immediately, a soothing sense filtered through my brain and anchored me to my body. I felt the blood creeping back into my limbs. I managed to clutch the hilt of my own volition and began moving my lips. My heartbeat slowed and my lungs took in much needed oxygen.

“I need a sword like that,” Avara whispered as she knelt beside me.

“We have to move,” I exclaimed through deep breaths. “They’re right behind us. All of them. They’re coming...”

“Who? Slow down and tell us who is coming? The demon? Your demons? Who?”

I dove into my explanation, recounting the events of my... vision. I explained in detail the strange sensation of leaving my body, as well as the true pain that I felt when the strange tentacles grabbed a hold of me. Syltra nodded as I spoke, her expression increasingly troubled, until I finished my explanation. There was a long silence that followed, with both Avara and me looking expectantly towards Syltra.

“Your demon has dream-walking abilities,” she finally said. “Some skilled in clairvoyance can do it, some practiced mages, maybe, and only on rare occasions, demons. He must have learned it out of necessity. As for everything else... well it sounds like this demon is of great strength. He’s likely a general, or something far stronger, from whatever realm of hells he originates. Either way, he’s been using those idiots from the Enclave to follow us. They’ve led him right into the caverns, and now they’re taking him to us.”

“Well, we think we’ve bought ourselves a little time,” Gorm grumbled as he and Jordin reappeared in the light.

“Aye, those tunnels’ll take weeks to clear back out!” he boasted. “Like I said, ain’t no one know these places like I do!”

“That sword is still glowing though...” Gorm scanned the darkness as he spoke. “The threat isn’t gone yet. We need to keep moving. Can you walk now?”

“Maybe if I can stand first...”

Avara stood up, and with Gorm’s help, pulled me to my feet. They provided balance as my legs wobbled underneath my weight. I stumbled a bit, but eventually managed to straighten. I took a tentative step forward and felt a sharp pain ignite from my heel all the way to the base of my spine. I grimaced, bit back the pain, and took another step. I was slow moving, yet I managed to reach the edge of the camp and draw forth one of the dwarf sticks.

“Good enough!” Jordin hollered. “Follow me!”

We followed Jordin at a slow trot through the darkness. While I steadied myself on Storm most of the way, I often lost my footing. More than once, I lost hold of the reins and was unable to stand back up. Syldra never strayed far from me the rest of the day and constantly aided me over the worst of the terrain. We made good time, or so I thought, but no amount of divine energy allowed me to recover from the prior night’s events. One final time, my legs collapsed underneath me. Despite Syldra’s continued help, I was unable to regain any footing.

The faces of my companions showed their displeasure at having to set-up camp after so little progress. Heightening our situation, we were surrounded by various tunnels and caverns. We were at a crossroads in a vulnerable position, with not a single rested soul among us. Jordin did what he could and began hacking away at several of the gaping entrances that led to our position. He used the flat side of his axes and battered them against the rocks like drums. Some caverns gave way under the pounding; others showed more resilience and remained a looming threat.

“A’ight, I can’t do no more,” Jordin huffed. His face was red, and he drank heavily from his pitcher of water. “We’ll keep two on watch, yeah?”

“Fine,” Gorm grunted. “You and I can take the first round.”

“Avara and I will go second,” Syldra concurred. “Meanwhile, let’s let the baggage recover.”

“Aye, let’s ‘ope ‘e’s better in the morn,” Jordin grumbled. “If not, I’m thinking o’ leavin’ ‘im behind!”

I lacked the energy to respond to what I hoped was jest and simply curled up in the rocks. Syldra lay a blanket over me and placed the back of her hand against my forehead. She seemed satisfied and stepped away, moving to set up her own arrangements with Avara.

Sleep came easy that night, but when I drifted off to dream, I returned to the dark fogs that were supposedly the inside of my soul.

The troubling part was that I stood there all alone.

#

I awoke while the rest of the camp still slept. Jordin and Gorm were huddled surprisingly close to one another, their snores echoing down many of the side passages. Even Avara was sprawled out wide, her mouth hung open in a half-snore of her own. Only Syldra stood watch, though her eyes were drifting across the campsite rather than watching what lay beyond.

She noticed me as I shifted to a standing position and walked over to sit beside her. She offered little in the form of greeting, instead averting her gaze back over the sleeping forms in our camp.

“You want a second pair of eyes?” I whispered.

“I preferred the silence,” she replied. She sighed then turned to me with a shake of her head. “Sorry, I supposed I should be more excited to see you walking about again.”

“I know I’ve been trouble...”

“Trouble doesn’t even begin to describe it,” She whispered. “Still, I suppose things could be much worse.”

“If that demon catches us, it might be. Speaking of demons, we seem to be missing one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“In my sleep, I sometimes end up in... my soul.” She raised an eye at that, but did not interrupt. “Last night, when I went there, I was alone. Y’lth Qant was nowhere to be found.”

“He has a name now, huh?” Sylдра scoffed. “I say let him go. Likely the demon managed to kill his soul rather than yours. In which case, good riddance. Maybe he’ll leave us alone now. Better to worry about mortal enemies than those as old as time.”

I peeked down and drew Aleandria’s sword slightly from its scabbard. The blue light persisted still over the steel blade.

“The blade is still glowing,” I whispered. “I don’t think we’re free of it yet.”

“Of course not,” Sylдра almost laughed. “No, that would just be too easy.”

“We can’t stop that thing. That thing’s shadow bombs, its tentacles... it’s an anomaly beyond anything I’ve ever read about. Gorm’s magic barely bought us any time.”

“He’s not meant to fight this type of enemy,” Sylдра said. “What good are enchantments if you can’t hit the thing you’re fighting? No, we won’t be able to rely on him for much. We’re going to have to trust our own skills, like you suggested.”

“Well, maybe it’s time we resumed my studies,” I whispered.

“Take my hand,” she instructed.

I was curious, but I did as I was told. As soon as she had my hand, we shadow phased. We now stood over a hundred yards from the campsite, the glow of the dwarf sticks barely visible against the blanket of darkness that ensnared us.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she replied. “You manage to shadow phase back in to the camp in one go, I’ll teach you.”

Before I could reply, she disappeared, leaving me alone in the darkness.

I was utterly confused. In the cavern, she seemed more than willing, yet now she held reservations. However, the task of shadow phasing should be no trouble. While the distance was further than I had done before, I was confident I could make it there with ease. I focused on the campsite, closed my eyes, and stepped into the shadows. When I stepped out, I wasn't even half-way there yet.

I kicked at some rocks and then phased back to my starting point. I focused again on the point of light and stepped into the shadows. This time proved more disappointing from the first; the camp still stood well further than fifty yards, maybe even further.

I continued to phase, stepping in and out of the shadows. Yet each time, I failed to come close to reaching the camp. I began walking back to my starting point to conserve magical energy. Each successive attempt, I found myself wildly out of place, whether down strange side tunnels, further from the start, or away from the light altogether. At one point, I even managed to step out of the shadows on the ceiling and proceeded to fall ten feet to a painful crash below.

"Come on, Daelin, pull it together!" I hissed. I closed my eyes and placed my hand on Aelandria's sword. I felt the presence clear my mind, flushing away the infuriating hopelessness that began building inside me. I focused my breathing as relief flooded over me. I managed to calm my mind and focused on truly completing the challenge at hand.

Through my introspection, I began to consider how I even learned to shadow phase in the first place. Reaching into the shadows was not like dealing with fire. Fire was tangible in my mind; I could imagine the heat, the size, even the color of a flame. It followed a formula that I subconsciously brought into relating. Shadow phasing felt different. To step into the shadows and move your physical body through space, one had to control the movement, distance, and pathway. I could not just leave the shadows; I had to travel with them, following their natural eb

and flow over the landscape. It was not a matter of controlling them as much as it was cooperating with them.

Opening my eyes, I stared ahead at the campsite. It was several hundred feet away from me, the light marking a noticeably clear end to the darkness. That darkness was one continuous tunnel, branching off in wild directions beyond what I could see. The depth was unfathomable as the darkness made up a single endless shadow, resulting in my constant failures. I needed to visualize more than just the light; I needed to see a pathway through the shadows. I had to see a tree through the forest, in a sense.

I stepped into the shadows and focused on the task at hand. My mind created a pathway that led along the unforeseen trail of shadows. I saw them reach out over the rocky floors, stopping abruptly as some foreign light interrupted its normal travel. I saw the interruption in the shadow's path and grabbed a hold of it, materializing at that exact point.

When I stepped out of the shadows I stood on the edge of our campsite. Yet my triumph was short-lived when I noticed Syltra's eyes wide.

Before I could ask what was wrong, a massive arcane explosion slammed against my chest and propelled me backwards. I flew through the darkness until I landed in a dazed heap among jagged rocks. A lone figure began to walk towards me. Red hair fell as she stared over me. She kneeled next to me and grabbed my hand, helping to sit up straight.

"Are you alright?" she said.

"I'll be fine, but what the hell was that all about?" I muttered.

"You successfully shadow phased right to the edge of camp, which meant you stepped right into the barrier Gorm cast before we went to sleep."

"Well, you could've warned me," I groaned. "How come it didn't get you?"

“I phased into the camp, right past the barrier. It stops physical shapes, but were not really anything in the shadows,” she explained. “When you materialized, you became a physical thing, which in turn triggered his magic.”

“Well, that hurt,” I spat a bit of blood from my mouth, having bit the inside of my cheeks upon some point my collision.

Syldra placed a hand down and helped me to my feet and gave me a smirk as we headed back to camp. I could see Gorm was awake and alert, his face a scowl as he stared at the two of us. He said nothing however, merely standing with crossed arms and a face of clear disappointment.

“He’s not very happy...” I noted.

“Well, you did break his barrier. He’ll have to cast a new one,” Syldra chuckled. “Still, you made it to camp. You have yourself a teacher again. We can start tomorrow morning.”

“I can’t wait to get started,” I muttered.

Before I started anything however, I needed to lay down.

Chapter 22: Scouting Ahead

Syldra decided we should take lead as our groups scouting party. She believed running ahead would provide the most opportunity to practice shadow phasing and casting magic without interruption or distraction.

Jordin objected the moment we told him our plan. He immediately went into a tirade about our ignorance to the underground world. There were forks in the tunnels, nests that belonged to man eating creatures, and countless other enemies we may unknowingly stumble upon. Syldra argued that our shadow phasing made us practically undetectable, but he refused to follow any outsiders so far off the normal path. It was only under Gorm's final persuading that the dwarf relented.

We set out that morning, and Syldra led us forward. I stayed close to her as she began to further my knowledge of shadow magic. She would set up challenges and phase to certain areas, or follow a difficult path, that I would then have to replicate. As the day progressed, I began to better understand the methods behind phasing and managed to replicate most of her movements. Each time I succeeded, she increased the difficulty in her movements until I eventually fell completely behind. When that happened, she would laugh and restart the entire lesson.

We began the day making what I thought was great progress. I was learning how to shadow phase, and the group managed to keep up our pace behind us. We ran into little resistance, and even Jordin had to admit our efforts went better than he anticipated. This success carried into the second day as well, and I felt myself reaching an all time high, thinking that, at such great progress, we may have a chance against our foe.

That was, until I grew greedy in my studies.

On the third day, Syldra and I were crouched in a notch in one of the tunnels. We drank water and took a break for some lunch rations. We were both drenched in sweat despite the heat, and my head was beginning to ache something fierce. We sat mostly in silence, trying to keep our heavy breathing under control. While shadow phasing was not generally taxing, it still wore away at one's ability.

"Syldra," I whispered, handing her back the water skin. "What's next?"

"I'm sorry?"

"What else will you teach me, I mean. I appreciate the work on shadow phasing, but I don't know that'll be enough if the demon catches us."

"Then pray the demon doesn't catch us," she hissed. "There's little I'm willing to risk teaching you down here. Jordin is right, we do not know where we could end up or what we could find. Just keep at the phasing for now, and we can try more later."

"I know you're right," I sighed and leaned back against the tunnel wall. "Still, that thing's tentacles... I can still feel them sometimes when I go to sleep. My limbs start burning, and I'm suddenly gasping for air. It's just dreams, I know, yet they always feel so... real."

"A demon's touch isn't one you soon forget," Syldra turned as she spoke, staring out into the endless darkness of the tunnels. "They're not from our world, obviously, so they're

damage... it goes beyond just the physical. It can drive people mad, to the point they give up completely just to escape it all..."

Her words trailed off, and we watched a light appear some distance behind us. It was a soft glow, like that of the dwarf sticks, coming nearer. It moved slowly, as our three companions made their way over the rock landscape with our horses close in tow. We could just hear the soft echo of the horse's hooves carrying down the tunnels.

"We'll make it out of this," I reassured her. "I don't know how, or why, but we're not supposed to die in these tunnels."

"You're talking about Edinrow?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"Be careful when you listen to visions of the future," Syldra scoffed. "Nothing is ever set in stone, no matter what 'fate' might say. And don't trust some crazy woman you don't even know. They can seem nice, but you'll never know their true motives."

"You were some crazy woman I-"

Syldra cut me off with a quick jab to the arm.

"Don't." She warned. "Now let's go give our report."

I rubbed my arm as Syldra rose to her feet and began to head down the tunnel. I made to follow her but stopped as a warm feeling radiated from my side. I gripped Aelandria's blade and drew it slightly. A soft blue glow immediately leapt into the open tunnel. The light spread like wildfire, bouncing off the walls and rocks as it illuminated everything in the shadows.

"Ah, hells," Syldra spat.

Looming before us, taking up the entire expanse of the tunnel, was a massive creature. It walked on six pointed legs that clicked against the rocky surface of the tunnel. Its belly rose up,

covered in layers of strange slime and thick, black scales. The creature's two arms sprouted off its upraised belly, ending in massive pincers larger than a dwarf. However, its head was the most horrifying part. It had no eyes; its mouth was a gaping hole with four rows of razor teeth lining the perimeter. A single tentacle rose from its back and dangled in front of it like a fishing line, ending in a small globe of faint light.

I shoved the sword back into its sheath and shadow phased some hundred feet away; Syldra did the same. As we moved, a hissing sound filled the tunnel, followed by distinct popping sounds. We could not make out what was happening behind us in the darkness, but the glowing light drew ever closer.

“You think it sees us?”

“It didn't see us, but it definitely knows we're here,” Syldra whispered. “Come on, let's keep moving!”

We phased again, quickly adding another hundred feet between us and the creature. But when we turned back around, it seemed the strange light were getting even closer, as if it were catching up to us.

“That thing is impossibly fast,” Syldra muttered.

I drew Aelandria's sword out fully, illuminating the tunnel. The popping sound was the slime on the creature's body, oozing in front of it. Its legs were no longer out; instead, it was sliding through the cavern. The hissing came from the creature's lips as a strange green gas shot in front of it.

“We're not going to outrun that.”

“I figured that out for myself,” Syldra quipped. “I'm just trying to find some weak point we may be able to exploit.”

“Well, how do you think it’s tracking us?”

“I have no idea. I don’t see ears, or eyes, or anything else.”

As we stood talking, the creature paused. The sounds stopped, the ooze and spray no longer being moved forward. Slowly, the creature’s legs unfolded, and it stood tall again. It began to step forward, it’s long reel swaying slightly as its legs clacked like hooves against the stone floor.

The creature rapidly dove back into its forward slide as Syldra and I took a reflexive step backwards. Its claws began clapping the gas began to spread towards us. It was close enough that our skin made slight contact with the strange vapor. It sent a strange tingling up our spines, followed by an immediate sting.

We shadow phased again, placing distance between us and the creature that continued its advance. The light from the sword showed now extra tunnels to travel down or crevices to hide in. We were trapped.

“Alright, we’re going to try pushing it back,” Syldra said. She locked her feet into place and conjured up a tremendous amount of arcane energy. She launched it forward, the blast exploding against the creature. The walls shook and a few rocks crumbled. The beast staggered and slid down the tunnel, back over the trail of slime behind it. Its legs popped out and released a grating sound, like that of a grindstone.

“Hit him again!”

“You know, this would be a lot easier if you helped me out!”

“I can try attacking with my sword, but I don’t know how useful that will be.”

“Ok fine!” Syldra spat. “Look, just try something!”

Syldra launched another blast of arcane energy that rocketed off the creature. IT staggered, but otherwise seemed unphased, persisting to stalk forward towards its prey.

I resorted to the only magic I knew how to do. I held out my left-hand and conjured up fire. I easily created a glowing ball of bright red flames. I imagined the heat of a campfire condensed in the palm of my hand, then threw it.

The flames did not travel far. I did not reach the creature as the fire seemed to drop down, landing in the earliest part of the sludge. Instantaneously, the fire erupted into a greenish yellow that grew out of control as it raged on, consuming the creature's slime. The fires spread, reaching the beast itself and igniting the creature in a ball of flame.

Yet the creature continued its forward stalk, unphased by the inferno that surrounded it.

“Great, that was helpful,” Syldra hissed. “Now it can cook us before it eats us.”

“I’m sorry, but my magical arsenal is limited!”

“Damn it I know,” Syldra growled as she shot another blast of energy at the beast. “Here, try this! Think of your fireball, but instead of that, just make it arcane! Then throw it!”

She launched another blast then retreated again through the shadows. I followed close behind.

“I need more than that!”

“Come on, you’re holding a magic sword!” Syldra shouted. “It all comes from somewhere, right? Find the magic in the air and condense it! You can find fire, now look for the arcane instead!”

She launched another blast, then phased in a hasty retreat once more.

“Gods, give me a miracle right now,” I whispered. I clutched Aelandria’s blade tightly and closed my eyes. I held out my unincumbered hand and tried to feel something in the air. I thought about magic in the sword and searched for a similar sensation in the air around me.

To my surprise, I found it.

Maybe it was the extra clarity provided from the blade, but somehow, I managed to feel a stray piece of arcane in the air emitting the same sensation as Syldra’s attacks. I focused on that sensation and quickly found it everywhere, scattered about in little bits and pieces that just floated through space. I tried calling it together on my hand and felt the energy build there. The power sent a slight tingle surging through my arm.

With a quick motion, I opened my eyes and hurled the energy forward. However, I was not prepared for the strength of the blast. The sensation proved too much and sent me off balance as I attempted to release the attack. It faltered as it left my hand before exploding mid air. The shockwave sent me tumbling while shaking the entire tunnel. Rocks fell from the ceiling and cracks began to form in the walls. Surprisingly, the creature’s advance stopped as its claws tapped against the walls, its reel swaying uncontrollably from side to side.

“You moron! I said find some energy, not everything in the entire gods damn tunnel!” Syldra shouted as she ran towards me.

But I was not listening to her. Instead, I watched the creature’s movements resume their advance as it rushed towards Syldra’s falling feet.

“Stop moving!” I shouted to Syldra as I shot another blast of arcane at the walls. I tried to make it smaller, but as before, I immediately lost my footing as the magical hurdled forward. IT exploded off a random part of the tunnel again. However, I noticed as the tunnel shook, the creature lots its focus again, pausing as it swayed uncontrollably.

“What are you doing?” Syldra hissed. “Are you trying to bury us!”

“Look at the thing! It can’t find us anymore. I think it’s been tracking our movement...”

Syldra watched the creature, then nodded slowly. Without need of further explanation, she threw one of her arcane bursts just in front of the creature. It hit the ground and shook the tunnel. The creature’s pincers shot forward, impaling the earth where the blast erupted. IT let out a grinding shriek as its claws came up empty handed.

“Now what?” she whispered. “We figure out it needs movement. So, we don’t move, fine. But we can’t get around that... thing.”

“Our cloaks,” I whispered.

Syldra nodded and grabbed the cloak from my back, being careful to keep her feet as still as possible. She removed her own and whispered to the cloaks softly in a language I now recognized as some form of elvish. When she let them go, they fluttered in the air as if on an invisible breeze and travelled back down the tunnel. They wheeled around the creature, floating steadily, until they were out of sight.

“Ok, now release another blast,” Syldra whispered. “When you do, I’ll get us by.”

She grabbed a hold of my right arm holding the blade. With my left, I launched a blast of arcane. The moment the spell hit the tunnel, Syldra released her command word.

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“You saw a what!?” Jordin shouted.

“Well, we don’t know what, but-”

“Oh, shut it lad! I know what ye saw!” Jordin barked. “It was an hydrachnid! Nasty buggers that lot! Miracle ye even survived!”

After Syldra and I phased past the beast, we sat in silence, waiting for the creature to move on. To our relief, the thing continued its forward journey, the two of us seemingly forgotten. Only when the light from the creature faded completely did we dare retrace our steps to meet the others. Hearing our escapades, Jordin was clearly less than pleased. Even Avara seemed upset, brewing silently in the corner glaring at Syldra and I throughout our retelling.

“Will we run into it again?” Gorm asked.

“Indeed, we might!” Jordin roared. “They travel in circles, they do! Tunnels cast like a spider’s web, they real things in with that filthy light o’ theirs! We could be in one right now!”

“If you believed that, we wouldn’t be camping here,” Syldra mumbled.

“Ye watch it lady! I let ye run yer little game, runnin’ bout with yer magic scouting, but it clearly is a horrid idea!” Jordin huffed and stomped to the edge of the camp where he sat himself down and took a swig of the metal flask. “Startin’ tomorrow, we go back te my way! I say where we go and ‘ow far we gunna travel, while the rest of ye keep yer mouth shut and follow!”

For the rest of our times in the tunnels, we did just that.

Chapter 23: The Bear's Mouth

I knew we were close to the surface as the air changed. It felt lighter; a freshness carried on a light draft replaced the dank, damp air that we had grown so accustomed to. The darkness faltered, changing from the black of midnight to the dusk of the late evening. Storm's head carried higher, as he too knew we were approaching the surface.

“Ah, that's a good ole smell that is!” Jordin exclaimed. He took in a deep breath of air and let it fill his lungs, then released it in an exaggerated exhale. “Yessir, signs o' another job well done!”

“I'd ease your sense of accomplishment,” Gorm warned. “The air changed, but I'm still staring at rocks.”

“Bah, ya worry too much!” the dwarf laughed. “Another four hours o' marching and ye'll be baskin' under the sun!”

“Perhaps...”

Gorm turned and stared back down the tunnels. He placed his hands against the walls and felt the earth, his brow furrowed. He stared deep into the darkness, though he remained silent as Jordin resumed our forward trek.

“Daelin, draw your sword,” Gorm instructed.

I drew the sword from its sheath and held it aloft for Gorm to see. The blade seemed normal though the steel seemed to glisten off unforeseen light, and there was no blue to be seen.

“Keep it out and watch it closely,” Gorm said.

“You think we’ve lost our lead?” I asked.

“I don’t know these tunnels well enough to determine,” Gorm admitted. “Just keep your eyes open...”

We resumed our march and Gorm took his usual place beside Jordin. Jordin broke off into some tale of his ventures in past wars with the ogres while Gorm feigned interest. I remained at the rear with my sword ready. I spared long glances back into the dark tunnels behind us, but I saw nothing. Gorm’s caution slowed us considerably. At every echo of sound, he halted our march and forced everyone to remain quiet. We often waited several minutes as he waited for the sound to return, his eyes intense as he watched for trouble. However, when my sword did not glow, he resigned to allow us to continue. Jordin grew consistently agitated at the breaks in our pace. Even Syldra’s expression changed to a scowl at every pause.

Four hours into the journey and we took a sudden turn. The passages closed in around us as we travelled down the narrow path in a single file. The horse’s saddle bags scraped up rocks and dirt, and Storm scratched up his shoulders in some of the tightest turns. Darkness overcame us once more. I felt like we were losing progress. Jordin held the light aloft at the front, but I was blanketed in shadows at the rear, unable to see the light. I used the sound of our footsteps and breathing to guide me along.

To my relief, the tight passage opened into a massive cave. Daylight peaked its way through a large open off to our right as we exited the tunnel, casting long shadows off the strange

rock pillars and carvings that spread sporadically throughout the space. Some of these carvings looked like faces, some like animals, and others covered in strange writing. A faint drip echoed from somewhere deeper in the cavern, beyond the rays of sunlight. The air was warm, and the wind howled through the cave.

“Folks, I present ya with the Bear’s mouth!” Jordin exclaimed. He stepped ahead of us and stood on a rock; his arms spread wide as he stared down at us. “This cave ‘ere isn’t used like she used ta! Used to be an entire tribe o’ dwarves that called this place ‘ome ‘til ‘bout a thousand years ago! Now, it’s my little secret!”

“I admit, you’ve done well,” Gorm grumbled, a small grin crossing his face. Behind him, the horses raised their heads to take in the fresh air, and even Avara’s face lit up.

Those smiles did not last long.

As I stepped into the cavern, Aelandria’s sword glowed blue, and everyone took notice. I sheathed the sword quickly, hoping whatever threat was nearby had not already seen the light. The others crouched low and hid behind rocks. Silence fell over the cavern, save the soft dripping somewhere deeper in, as we all waited.

That’s when there came the soft clinking of armored boots crunching against rock. It was accompanied by the soft jingle of mail and steel plate, as footsteps echoed around the stone cavern. A white light appeared, as if the sun itself entered the cave. Then everything stopped, and the world fell silent for a moment, before a woman’s voice, one we dreaded to hear, echoed down the cavern.

“You can all come out now,” the paladin called out. “We can sense your sword. Something that powerful is hard to hide.”

Despite the invitation, none of us moved. We shared troubled glances but otherwise remained perfectly still.

“Listen, I’m not one for speeches or patience,” the woman’s voice called again. “Come out now, and we can negotiate your surrender. Otherwise, I’ll consider you all hostile.”

Gorm sighed and stood up, stepping into their line of sight.

“I’ll accept your surrender then,” he shouted back.

“We don’t have time for your bullshit old man!” A man’s voice, one I recognized as belonging to Andorath, shouted. His words were followed by the clinking of metal as he stepped forward, before stopping abruptly.

“Calm down,” the woman’s voice said. “Gorm, tell the rest of your people to reveal themselves, and we can be civilized about this.”

“I don’t think so,” Gorm said. From where I stood, I could see his pointed glare at his adversaries. “I believe we have you outnumbered and outmaneuvered in the shadows. You won’t last long in a real fight.”

“Maybe not against you,” the woman admitted. “However, how many of your friends could we cut down? Who could you really manage to save? What’s to stop us from just burying everyone alive in here altogether?”

“Seems dark for supposed champions of the gods. Shouldn’t you be more altruistic?”

“Your friends are demons, Master Gorm. They have long since lost the right to any form of civility I would offer. The fact that we are even speaking is a kindness on my part.”

Gorm’s face changed to a scowl, but he said nothing.

“Choose your next words carefully, Gorm. Or I will make good on my threat.”

“Enough!” I yelled, stepping out from behind a pillar. Gorm gave me an angry glare, but I walked forward to stand beside him anyways.

At the mouth of the cave stood three paladins. Andorath stood a full head above the rest and was marked by the unmistakable scar I... we... left him. Beside him an elf male wore plate armor that seemed oversized for his slender frame. Ahead of them both stood the woman giving commands, her face covered by a solid steel helm. While the elf and Andorath had drawn their weapons, the woman remained empty-handed.

“And you are?” the woman asked.

“The Demon of Windhelm,” I replied, keeping as stern as I possibly could.

“Excellent,” The woman nodded slowly as she spoke. “I’m glad to see some decency among villains. I have to say, you’ve caused us much trouble over these past few years.”

“I’m not proud of it.”

“You’ll face punishment for what you did!” Andorath roared. “As the gods are my witness, I intend to-”

The woman raised a gloved hand to silence the paladin.

“Tell me, demon, why show yourself now? Why run just to surrender so easily?”

“I’m not surrendering; I’m warning you.” I drew forth my sword and allowed the blue glow to shine throughout the cavern. Its light drowned out the white light emanating from the paladin’s, basking them in a blue sheen.

“Impressive blade,” the woman nodded slowly. “But I fail to see how this is a warning unless it is some empty threat, in which case I remind you I have no qualms about burying you.”

“You’re not at all curious why the blade’s light is so intense?” I asked.

“You’re a demon,” she laughed. “Honestly, you expect that the light wouldn’t glow when its being carried by someone of your wickedness?”

“I’ve carried this blade a long time, and it’s never done this.”

“Enough of this chatter!” Andorath charged past the woman, his hammer raised as he lept for me. “By the gods, I shall convene justice!”

I phased out of range of the hammer in an instant and drew the elven dagger. Andorath roared in challenge and lunged at me again, swinging his hammer to kill. As before, I phased, leaving the hammer to crash against the stone that lay behind, sending rocks showering around the cavern entrance as it exploded under the might of his weapon.

It was not long before the entire cavern broke into chaos. While Andorath remained engaged with me, the others entered a brawl of magic and swords. The female paladin drew her sword and made to join Andorath, but she was stopped by Gorm. He conjured up his own swords and began trading blows with her. Their skills matched each other, and flashes of holy white and arcane blue danced around the two of them. I would have stopped to watch their mastery with awe, had I not been furiously engaged in combat of my own.

Beyond that, Avara lept out of hiding and began taunting the elf, tossing rocks at him as she lept from rock to rock. The elf growled but made little moved to advance, instead deflecting the blows with his shield. Jordin remained on the fringes. While he let out hollers here and there, he remained out of the fray his eyes seemingly searching for something.

I continued to shadow phase, dodging blows of the hammer as they smashed against rocks instead. Andorath’s face locked in a grimace. A bestial roar escaped his clenched jaw with each swing, his skin changing to deep red with each miss. I made no attempts to counterattack which seemed only to further infuriate the paladin.

Watch... for...

The sound in the back of my head was faint, but there was no doubt it belonged to Y'tlh Qant. It sounded strained, and I barely made out the words. He was weak, I could tell, but he was alive, and worried.

The surprise at his words showed in my fight. For less than a second, my focus wandered, and Andorath took full advantage. He swung his hammer at my side. I was too slow to phase and instead raised Aelandria's sword to parry the blow. The metal clang filled the cavern, drawing everyone's attention for a moment. The blade held strong, but the vibration made my hands numb. The momentum from the blow sent me skidding backwards, stopped only by a stone pillar. As my back slammed against rock, he advanced again, bringing his hammer down in an arc that surely would have killed me had he made contact. But as earlier, his hammer struck only stone as I phased behind him towards the cavern's entrance.

...dwarf.

Dwarf? Jordin was still where he began the battle, watching with his weapons drawn. Andorath was howling in fury from the corner and seemed ready to rush me again. I did not have time to play at riddles and readied my sword, trying to decide my next move.

That's when I heard footsteps behind me. Turning, I noticed the dwarven woman from Elysium. However, something seemed off. Her eyes were locked on me, but her pupils were missing. Her face was frozen in a tight grin, her lips pulled back in a thin line as she stalked slowly towards me. She whispered something that sounded like a wheezing gasp for air in some language I could not understand.

As I stood staring at the dwarven woman, the light from my sword erupted in a massive wave. Everyone stopped as they turned towards the sword. I did not notice their eyes. I was

transfixed on the blue light as it hovered around the dwarven woman, suddenly making her appear to be a walking shadow.

“Y’lth Qant,” the woman whispered.

The dwarven woman burst into flames as black fires erupted around her, pushing back the holy light from the sword. In seconds, she was replaced with a massive shadow that loomed over the entire cave entrance. Its eyes were a red blaze as it locked its sight on me. Tentacles lept from its form to latch at me. I swung my sword wildly, blue light cutting them apart one by one before they could reach me. The shadow released howls of pain, but was otherwise undeterred, continuing its advance on me.

“I’ve waited long for this,” the shadow’s voice boomed. “There is nowhere for you to run this time!”

It grinned wildly and slashed with its hand. I readied Aelandria’s sword and prepared for the attack, bracing myself for impact...

The hit never came. A barrier of arcane energy appeared to catch the blow. The energy exploded, sending me flailing backwards across the cavern floor; the shadow’s hand rocketed in the opposite direction. A loud shriek followed, sending shivers down my spine. Upon collision, the sword fell from my hand, clattering in the stone beside me.

Let me out! This is my fight!

I ignored Y’lth Qant’s voice and regained the sword. As I scrambled through the dirt, Andorath lept over me and charged the demon. Unlike the dwarven weapons, the paladin’s hammer struck cleanly against the shadow as if it were a physical being. A flash of light erupted with his strike, and the demon staggered briefly. Its response was swift; tentacles too numerous

for the paladin to stop shot forth and wrapped around him, throwing him aside like a ragdoll. He collided with the cavern wall and slumped forward, the back of his head bleeding.

“Gysthree! Get Andorath out of here!” The woman commanded.

The elven paladin ran towards Andorath, but the shadow moved faster. The demon knocked down a massive pillar of stone the elf barely avoided. The female paladin took advantage of the distraction and rushed the shadow, slashing her sword. She cut into the shadow, drawing forth a shriek. The demon turned its attention on her and launched a series of tentacles at the paladin, but she managed to slice through them all as her sword flashed about her in a blur of steel. Yet these were merely distraction, as the shadow’s arm came clobbering down like a club.

Gorm stepped in, rushing to the woman’s side. He stood beside her and released a magical barrier to shield them. The barrier burst against the force of the shadow’s arm. Gorm collapsed to one knee, only to be hoisted back onto his feet by the woman.

This moment marked Jordin’s entrance into the fray. He rushed forward with a dwarven cry and swung his axes. As with the guards by the gate, his weapons flew harmlessly through the shadow. The shadow seemed amused by the dwarf’s display and kicked him aside. Jordin tumbled over himself, stopping in an awkward heap by Gorm’s side.

Give... me....

I shoved the demon’s voice back and stood tall, readying Aelandria’s sword. In a flash, I phased beside the demon and slashed at its leg. The shadow’s followed the blade, erupting like blood from flesh. I swung again to similar effect.

Now I became the victim of the shadow’s ire. It shrieked and simply crashed downwards. I became engulfed in darkness that quickly changed to flames unlike any I had experienced before. Black and red flooded around me, burning away my leather armor. My skin began to

blister underneath. I looked to shadow phase, but I found no escape. The air began to turn hot, burning my throat. I fell to my knees, gasping desperately for air that never came...

Chapter 24: Syltra

As soon as the paladins stepped into the chamber, Syltra jumped into action. She turned briefly and locked eyes with Gorm. A slight nod was all she needed.

The pillars and spires of stones gave her limitless shadows. The paladins did not know it, but the shining enchantments on their armor only added to the maze of darkness she could traverse through. She travelled from shadow to shadow, stopping each time to confirm their adversaries had yet to spot her.

She turned briefly as she heard Gorm begin to speak with the woman. She appreciated the distraction and quickened her pace, bouncing along the shadows. The cavern was massive, and it provided plenty of room for her to lay an ambush. She just needed a little more time to choose the perfect spot. Once in place, she could create enough chaos for them to escape with minimal combat.

Then she saw Daelin jump into the conversation. She cursed under breath, knowing the idiot could ruin her entire plan. She doubled her efforts, causing bits of rock to fall underfoot. She could not wait to see if anyone noticed; she simply jumped one shadow to the next, keeping a wide berth between her and the paladins.

Suddenly, Andorath charged with his hammer raised, and the fighting began.

“Damn it, Daelin,” Syldra spat.

To his credit, Daelin seemed to avoid causing any real damage to the paladin, instead dodging, and weaving his way through the shadows. It was not a bad showing, but Syldra knew it was only a matter of time before the paladin overpowered her friend.

On the opposite side, Gorm handedly dealt with the other two paladins. While Loria fought well with a sword, the old man’s magic and tricks were on full display. There was no question he deserved his rank within the Spire as he easily maneuvered around the woman. His second foe tried in vain to strike but failed to create an offense under the barrage of stones Avara let fall upon him. Jordin seemed amused by it all, watching and hollering without ever swinging an axe.

As the battle raged on, Syldra decided to switch tactics. She began weakening the stones as she travelled, focusing her arcane energy to create tiny explosions against the rock. The sound of her magic was lost beneath the shattering of stone and clanging of metal as the others continued their brawl. Given enough time, she could potentially weaken enough stones to collapse the cave, providing a small window through which the others could escape. It was a dangerous plan, but one she believed would work.

Syldra reached the edge of the cavern. Staring out, she stood just above a tree line of dark green with grey clouds rolling slowly overhead. She marveled at the beauty of the forest as a flock of birds flew by overhead. The grass was darker than the plains, and the dirt was black under her feet. They were so close. If they could just lose the paladins...

A small bit of movement caught her eye as shivers ran down her spine. Her back burned, the tattoo emblems searing her skin. Her daggers were out in a flash as she retreated into the shadows.

She watched as a dwarf woman, the one from the brothel, walked past. Something was off about the dwarf. She limped, her feet barely lifting off the ground. Her eyes fogged over, and her lips curled into a malicious grin as she stepped into the cavern. Turning, Syltra saw Daelin staring at the edge of the cavern, his attention exclusively watching the dwarf woman that approached him. They shared a brief exchange before mass of black flames consumed her.

In her place stood a massive demon.

Before the others could react, the demon attacked, its tentacles launching for Daelin in an obvious distraction. However, Daelin became engrossed in chopping them away, failing to see the massive arm following to clobber him. Even when he noticed, he foolishly braced for impact from a blow that would nearly kill him.

Syltra reacted fast and projected a barrier around Daelin. It sapped a lot of her magical energies, immediately sending her heart racing and head pounding. The barrier exploded against the fist and sent Daelin and the demon's arm flying in opposite directions.

She crouched in the shadows, hidden completely in the darkness, and took a moment to catch her breath. She watched as Andorath was the next to strike, but his brute forth style was useless against a demon of such stature. The man was thrown aside like a ragdoll and crunched against the cavern walls.

The elven paladin charged from the corner to grab Andorath and seemed like he would make it. However, when the demon turned, its arm crashed into one of the pillars Syltra weakened, causing it to topple over and block his path.

“Damn it, Syldra, you’ve gone soft,” she whispered to herself.

She stepped into the shadows and phased to the fallen paladin. Andorath was still breathing, and his heartbeat was steady, but the amount of blood pooling on the rocks behind him was a less than encouraging sight. She knelt beside the man and grabbed hold of his limp arm. She closed her eyes and pulled him into the shadows with her, bringing them both out of the cave to safety.

Her vision wavered as she tried to turn back into the cave. Everything was a blur, but she thought the demon had disappeared. Where it once stood was a strange orb of black and red. As her vision cleared, she saw the inferno of spinning flames, realizing Daelin was trapped inside it.

“Son of a bitch,” she gasped for air.

Gorm was the first to arrive at the scene along with the female paladin. They exchanged words briefly, then Loria stabbed at the flames with her blade. The blade bounced off the surface. She tried again, but her second strike still proved to be as useless as the first. Gorm grabbed the sword from the paladin suddenly and whispered into it. A red halo surrounded the blade, and the old man stabbed downward. At first, the tip sank a few inches into the inferno, but that resulted in a large explosion, sending the sword hurtling from the man’s hands.

Things were desperate, and Syldra realized she was the only one who could possibly save Daelin. An idea began to form in her mind, and the tattoo on her back burned with a fury, as if it were agreeing to take on her reckless plan. She felt a shiver run over as she built up magical energy, then closed her eyes and focused.

She placed her hand down on the ground, and began tracing her way across the web of shadows that spread throughout the cave. She traced its path, searching for a way into the inferno itself. While the shadows there were unnatural, they were still akin to those surrounding the land.

There was little chance for success, but she could just make out Daelin's energy, hidden yet present beneath the flames.

With one final jolt of energy, she phased into the inferno.

The heat immediately overwhelmed her. Her skin crawled, blisters appearing on her exposed hands and face. She felt crushed under the intensity, falling to all fours beside Daelin. There was no air, her lungs screaming for help. Beside her, Daelin was turning pale, his face seemingly stretched as he looked up at her with fogged eyes. In his hands, the holy sword nearly blinded her. Its power was likely the only reason neither of them were already dead.

She grabbed Daelin's shoulder and tried one more time to phase.

When they appeared outside the inferno, Syltra was dismayed to see the cavern exit still several feet away. They were behind Gorm and the female paladin, but still nowhere near the safety she wished for.

A shriek echoed through the cavern, shaking the pillars loose as rocks began to crumble on top of them.

The last thing she saw was Avara rushing towards her, surrounded by a cloud of darkness that soon overcame her...

Chapter 25: Compromise

I took in a deep gasp of air. It was fresh, and I allowed it to fill my lungs. My face was down in the dirt as I lay on my stomach, with two arms wrapped tightly around me. I pushed onto my hands and knees and moved the arms off me gently, as I realized it was Syltra. Her face was pale, and her red hair had streaks of silver cutting through it. She was breathing, but just barely. I lay her down in the dirt, and would have done more to protect her, had a horrendous shriek not captured my attention.

“Move!” Gorm shouted somewhere off in the distance.

I looked ahead and saw Gorm and the female paladin outside in a forest. I would have taken more time to look over the scenery, had a massive shadow not begun looming overhead. Behind me, the demon grew to its full height again. It radiated rage and hatred that made the air feel heavy, almost suffocatingly so.

I knelt down and lifted Syltra. She was unconscious and could not stand, so I tried to carry her. I was weakened, but still managed to successfully hoist her from the dirt. Each step was difficult, but I managed to push my way forward into a near run, trying to put as much distance between me and the demon in the cavern as possible.

“Let me help!” Avara shouted, running to my side. “I can carry her; let me take her!”

“Avara, run!” I shouted. “I’ve got her.”

Avara paused for just a moment, then turned and ran. Gorm grabbed her as she came closer, and the female paladin stood tall, like a shining hero from old stories, defending their retreat. Her shining cast shadows about the trees and rocks, which was just what I needed.

I closed my eyes and focused on the new shadows cast around me. In an instant, I phased with Syltra. We broke into the shadow of the trees, well away from the cavern. I felt lightheaded again and hunched forward. I drew forth Aelandria’s blade and pulled in on its magic, letting it clear my mind and recenter me. I stood and turned, walking slowly to stand beside the paladin as we faced our adversary. I knew the sword’s magic would not last long; I had to make the last moments count.

The shadow stepped forward. It was still a few feet inside the cavern, but its eyes were locked on the group assembled outside. He did not notice Jordin or the elf struggling to make their way through crumbling rocks. The cavern was weakened, I could see that now. So did the dwarf. He locked eyes with me and nodded, a strange smirk crossing his face. He gave a dwarven salute, then roared aloud rushing forward. His distraction was enough to cause the shadow to turn and face the nuisance. The elf watched the dwarf, then looked up at the cavern. He seemed to say a prayer of sorts, then joined the dwarf, fighting back tentacles of darkness that threatened to overwhelm them.

“You’re going to bring the cavern down...” the woman beside me whispered.

“I don’t know we have a better choice,” I replied, the arcane magic already building in my right hand.

“Don’t miss.”

I nodded and prayed that I could control the energy enough to direct the blast. I released the arcane energy, pointing my hands towards the cavern entrance, praying the magic flew straight. I pulled up enough magical energy that the spell sent me backwards, causing me to collapse, the magic of Aelandria's blade all spent. Yet even on my back, I could see the ripple of energy move forward and explode against the cavern's entrance. A massive explosion echoed around the forest as rocks and columns began to shatter, rock crumbling as the cavern disappeared.

I heard hurried footsteps somewhere in the distance, but they did not arrive before I drifted out of consciousness.

#

"You're an idiot."

The demon paced the darkness, his red tail flicking back and forth. The fog around us was bright red and the air felt hot despite us meeting only in our minds.

"I did the best I could," I retorted. "I don't think there's any reason for you to object to any of my actions. We're alive, no thanks to you!"

"Because you refuse to let me handle this myself!" The demon roared. "You're meaningless now! You're nothing compared to his power! We've left behind your petty thievery. We're dealing with immortals that have existed before humans were even an idea in your pathetic god's brain! And yet you still kept me trapped behind that blasted sword! You're a fool!"

"You're a monster that can't be trusted!" I shouted back. "Every time I step outside my own body, I see it all! I watch your rage fueled fights. You do it for sport, burning and killing

just because you can! You really think I'd let you back out into the world after everything you've done? Can you really blame me for wishing you would just leave?"

"Who cares about a few lost souls? They were all going to die someday anyways! Who cares if the timeline gets sped up? Honestly, you're going to get us both killed if you don't put aside your ridiculous sense of right and wrong. There's no place for it anymore."

"It's what makes me human."

"It's what makes you an idiot, and it's what's going to get you killed," the demon laughed. "Don't stand there and tell me being human is a good thing. When we were human, we stomped around a stone church with nowhere to go. We watched lightning outside a window and read books about your precious heroes. Look how that turned out! No, you aren't human, and you should be grateful! I make you powerful! Everything special about you comes from me!"

"You made me a murderer."

"I didn't make you anything. Everything I did, those ideas were all yours first! All I did was make them better! You want to blame me, fine. I hope it lets you sleep at night. But deep down, you can't run from the truth. You're a fucking monster, and we're the same person!"

The fog turned dark and cold and seemed to stop. A breeze, if such a thing could exist where we were, swept past us, carrying the smoke with it. The demon seemed to shrink back as the world grew darker. Finally, it began to rain, lightning cracking overhead as the water flooded over us.

"She's not dead you know," the demon said softly. "I don't know if she'll recover fully, but she hasn't died. She fought the demon and put up a better fight than most ever could. But the toll that takes on someone with her gifts..."

I said nothing. I knew what he meant. I saw it before the darkness came. Her body was cold in my hands, her skin, lips, hair, all losing their usual red luster.

“It’s over.” I whispered.

“It isn’t even close to over,” The demon grunted. “I still feel his presence. He may be trapped for now, but he’s bound to escape. And when he does, he’ll find you as easily as I did...”

I turned with a start and raised an eyebrow at the demon. “You found me?”

“Shit,” He hissed. “Listen, that’s a long story, and we really don’t have time to go into it. It would be too complicated even if I did...”

“Try.”

Before he could reply, thunder erupted overhead, and daylight leaked over us.

“Too bad,” the demon said with a smirk. “Looks like story time will have to wait...”

#

There was smoke in the air.

I smelled it before I opened my eyes: the burning scent of wood. It was coming from a campfire; it was small, with only a few measly logs and sticks providing its fuel. As I came to, I realized my hands were bound together. I tried to wriggle them free, but the strange yellow cloth tied about them held firm. I lay still and took stock of the situation. To my surprise, I realized Aelandria’s sword was still in its sheath by my side.

I turned my head slowly, craning my neck to view the occupants of the campsite. There were three sets of feet that I could see. One wore silver boots with a golden trim and belonged to one of the paladins. The other two were Gorm and Avara. The paladin was the closest too me. Across the fire, there was planted a pure white tent, though what was inside I could only begin to guess.

I waited in silence and watched the others. There was no conversation, all of them inclined to stare silently into the fire. After some time, the paladin rose and walked to the tent, disappearing inside. It was then I rolled over and pushed myself to a sitting position.

“Look who’s decided to join us,” Gorm grunted. “About time you did.”

“Where are we?” I asked.

“What does it look like? We’re in the Dustwind Forest.”

“And we’ve made a truce with the paladin?”

“Not exactly a truce. More of a compromise,” The woman said as she stepped from the tent. Her helm was removed, revealing the face of a middle-aged woman lined with years of battles and heartbreak. Her hair was cut short, sitting neatly atop her head. “As for why you’re here, well, you’re my prisoner.”

I looked at her then turned to Gorm.

“It was a fair compromise,” Gorm sighed, placing his hands up in defeat. “Syldra is in bad shape. Worst case of demonic fatigue I’ve ever seen.”

“I did what I could, but she’ll need a true doctor and a place to rest,” The woman said as she reclaimed her seat. “However, there lays our problem.”

“I told you; we can’t make a trip back to Elysium,” Gorm growled. “You know very damned well that demon is still alive down in those caves. We’d be walking to our deaths.”

“Your friends are set to answer to their crimes, likely with death. To do that, they must be brought before the Enclave. There they will be given a proper hearing and eventual sentencing.”

“Well, that’s not much incentive to take them anywhere then, is it?” Gorm huffed.

“You won’t bring us to Elysium,” Avara chimed in. “You wouldn’t save Syldra’s life just to kill her off. You’ve already figured out what you’re going to do with us.”

“It’s complicated, you’re right,” the woman concurred. “However, my qualms are not with the woman. I merely need the demon. As a means of cooperation, I will aid your group and keep everyone alive to the best of my abilities. In exchange, I expect the Demon of Windhelm to admit his crimes and accept divine judgement.”

Everyone’s eyes turned to me as she finished. “You’re doing all of this, just to have me executed?” I asked, though I wasn’t particularly surprised.

“Never in my lifetime has a demon openly attacked Elysium,” the woman replied. “We’re guarded and fortified, the center of purity and power. And yet we were attacked by evil at our very doorstep, killing hundreds right under our noses. Yes, I am doing this just to get at you. No man has ever eluded us like you have, and no man ever will again.”

“Well, we’re not going with you back to Elysium,” Gorm growled. “Do what you want. Leave the woman to die in the tent. Try killing us all now if you must. But we will not return until our friend gets medical help. I instructed not to kill you all, and she’s the only reason Andorath still breathes. Forget demon’s for now; you owe her anyways.”

The arguing drove on for several minutes. They were talking themselves in circles, neither one willing to give in to the other. As they did, I closed my eyes and reached out, searching for demonic or holy presence. Within the tent, I could feel Andorath. He was weakened but his magical powers were very much alive. Beside him lay a feinter signal. It was subtle, like a drop of water falling in a river, but it was there all the same. And it was dying away fast.

“I’ll go,” I shouted.

All head in the camp turned to me as the conversation ended. The paladin woman wore a smug grin, while Gorm glared at me. Avara said nothing; her eyes said enough.

“I’m sorry, can you say that again?” The woman asked.

“I’ll let you take me to Elysium. I’ll go willingly,” I turned to Gorm, then back to the woman. “But I will not go until Syldra is conscious and awake. If she never wakes, then I’ll make sure Andorath doesn’t either. A fair deal of retribution, one-for-one.”

“Choose your next words carefully,” The woman growled, her hand moving dangerously close to her blade.

“I’ve no more words to give you,” I growled. As I spoke, I released some of the demonic energy inside of me, casting a dark shadow over myself and the camp. My sword stung my hip, but I ignored the burning. “I will allow you to take me back a willing prisoner, but only when I am assured Syldra will live. I can feel her dying light even as we speak. You do to. Would a paladin of your rank let a woman die just to scorn her enemy? Or maybe your vows mean less than you’d have the world believe...”

If looks could kill, I would have died under the stare the woman gave me. Her hand ripped the hilt of her blade as she stared unblinking at me. I held firm and returned the gaze, equally unwavering. After some time, she sighed and glanced to the side, then released a small chuckle.

“Very well, demon,” she said. “I shall take you to seek aid. During our journey, you will remain bound. You shall surrender your horse back to our order for Andorath to ride. Your friend will be secured behind him. You will walk silently beside me. Any words or attempt at escape, and I shall be the only one killing anybody.”

“I accept,” I grunted.

“Good,” the woman smiled as she stood and brushed the dirt from her armor. “Now, someone familiar with the area, tell me where the nearest town is and we’ll head off.”

“It isn’t a town,” I replied. “It’s a castle.”

End of Part II

Interlude: In the Dark

The dust settled and the ground finally stilled. The darkness seemed infinite. The silence was endless, and not a creature stirred.

Jordin never noticed the silence; his ears were ringing too loudly for him to even think. A collapsed pillar rested just inches from his face. Two large-rocks had survived the blast and, by the luck of the gods, caught the massive stone before it could kill the dwarf. He gave out a silent prayer of thanks, as he slowly began to work his way out of the little hole. As he moved, he realized he could no longer feel his legs. Look down, he could just see past his dust-covered beard two legs twisted horribly in the wrong direction, and a pool of dark red had begun to build up against his thighs. Whether he was paralyzed, or in shock, he could not tell. Either way, he knew he would not be using them anytime soon.

He had survived the cave-in just to die in the dark.

“Oh well,” the old dwarf moaned. “S’pose they always said I’d pass in the tunnels. Reckon it’s been a good life it ‘as. Not much doin’ now but wait out the dark and wait for me final breath ta-”

He paused as he heard the faint tinkling of what sounded like metal. Chainmail to be exact. The tinkling grew louder, and suddenly he heard metal plate on rock just moments before a bright white light appeared just off in the distance passed a few rocks. Jordin scrambled around, rummaging through the rubble, but he could not find his axes. He balled his fists and pushed up to balance on his last good leg, ready to go down swinging.

“Well come on then!” he roared. “Let’s get it o’er with it! This dwarf still ‘as a little fight left!”

The clinking of armor moved faster, until to Jordin’s relief, an elven paladin appeared over the highest pile of rubble. He wore a grim scowl through thick cuts and scratches that drenched his face in dried blood. When he saw the dwarf, he charged.

Jordin’s relief turned back to adrenaline and raised his fists. He roared and prepared to take the elf head on, but his leg refused to hold his weight under the sudden movement. A searing pain shot out of his good leg and through his spine and sent him collapsing forward. He barely had time to get his arms under him before he was belly down in the rubble once more. He howled in pain as the elf stopped, standing over the fallen dwarf.

“Well, ‘ave it then,” Jordin coughed. “Go on and make it a swift death! At least the stories will say I went down swinging! Fighting ‘til my last!”

The elf bent down and placed a covered hand over the dwarf’s mouth.

“Would shut up you rock headed imbecile!” The elf hissed.

Jordin groaned under the gauntleted hand and struggled to remove it from his mouth. He grabbed at the elf’s arm, pulling with all his might. He was surprised by the elf’s strength and eventually surrendered to the warrior’s grip.

When Jordin’s struggling ceased, the elf removed his hand.

“Of all the people I could be trapped with, I got stuck with a rocker,” the elf spat.

“Oh, come now twinkles, ye’ re lost down ‘ere,” Jordin laughed. “Ya should be grateful ya ‘ave the best tunneler that e’er lived at yer service!”

“Again, keep your voice down,” the elf emphasized his words with a smack to the back of Jordin’s head. “You keep quiet and listen, and maybe I can fix that leg of yours.”

Jordin hid a nasty scowl under his beard; he did not appreciate the hand to the head. But he offered no further objection as the elf began to look over the leg. After a few moments, the elf sighed and drew his sword. The sword glowed a soft white, illuminating the cavern floor around them.

“Oh, real subtle,” Jordin scoffed.

“Shut up,” the elf replied coldly. “I can’t fix this. The leg has lost all connection to the rest of your body. The soul inside is broken. My only choice is to remove it...”

Jordin stared at the elf, then down at his leg. He looked back at the elf and burst into hysteric laughter.

“Would you stop that?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but ye needed all the fancy magic and ridiculous light, just ta tell me what I already knew? Gods, I could’ve saved ye time and told ye to just lop it off already!”

The elf’s faced turned red as his scowl returned. He stood up and stared at the dwarf, then hoisted his sword above his head. With one quick strike, he removed Jordin’s leg entirely, but the dwarf felt nothing.

“Well, there it is then,” Jordin sighed. “After years o’ surviving ogres and monsters, done in by an elf.”

“You’re not dead yet. Quit moaning, and let’s go.”

“Oh, let’s go ‘e says!” Jordin spat laughing. “Sir, I don’t know if ye noticed, but ye just took my fucking leg!”

“Gods…” the elf rolled his eyes and bent down. “Just get on my back.”

“Get on yer back?” Jordin stroked his beard, then released a heavy sigh. “Fine. But ye don’t tell a word o’ this ta anyone!”

“Believe me, I don’t plan on it.”

Jordin threw his arms onto the elf’s shoulders and pulled, dragging his body up to firmly rest on the elf’s back. The elf stood slowly, then took an uneasy step forward. They tilted with that first step, but the elf corrected his balance before taking another. After a few more slow steps, they managed to start a steady progress forward.

“Well, tell me where I should be going.”

Jordin looked around and listened. Eventually, despite the still persistent ringing in his ears, he heard the slight howl of a wind. There was a faint breeze coming from deeper in the cavern, likely leading to a series of tunnels that would eventually lead to the surface.

“Straight ahead,” Jordin instructed. “We’ll be out o’ ‘ere in no time!”

#

S’yrl Altire watched the paladin and dwarf pair hobbling through the caves. They were incredibly apparent; the dwarf’s stench and gruff roar paired with the ridiculous light of the elf’s armor practically invited the demon forward.

His insides burned. Infuriated, disappointed, embarrassed… it all fueled the demon now, his mind racing with thoughts of death and pain. Staring at the two before him, he wished for nothing more than to pounce. They were unawares and severely outmatched. The dwarf would die quickly. The paladin may get in a couple blows, but he too would easily be consumed. With

the others escaped, S'yrl Altire needed something to ease his frustration, and these two were right there for the taking...

No, he told himself. He would bide his time and wait. Afterall, while he could eventually escape this cavern, it would take him weeks to navigate the tunnels. He could return to Elemenyal, but he knew better. It would be seen as a failure on his part, and his punishment would be long and painful.

For now, the demon quelled his urges and followed the two wanderers, allowing them to lead him back into the open world.

And once he was free of this place, then perhaps he would have his fun...

Interlude: The Northern Patrol

Emelia looked back over the forest. Her keen eyes searched for the movement of horses, but she could only see one horse, and that was some good distance off. She had completely lost them.

As always, her skill on horseback was incomparable. No one could ride faster or longer, and no one ever would. However, that did make leading a patrol particularly difficult. Once again, her patrol was stuck behind her, slogging their way through the forest paths they so often used. All Emelia could do now was sit and wait.

As Emelia sat there, a white horse appeared over the ridgeline a short distance off. There was no mistaking that pure white for anything else out here: there was a Kaldirian horse currently in the Dustwind Forest.

“I’ll be damned,” she whistled.

She dismounted her own horse and led it off their usual path. She tied the horse to a tree and began stalking in the direction of the Kaldirian. It was not unheard of for members of the holy order to frequent the human kingdom, but their presence was usually well broadcasted among the various cities. There was not one expected in this area, not anytime soon. Curiosity compelled Emelia to look into, but she allowed caution and instinct to guide her there.

She kept low as she stalked through the shadow of the trees. The darkness was especially thick under the dark clouds that currently blocked out the sun. The air was damp, a rain likely to fall soon. It was the perfect weather for a sneak in the woods. Based on the path of the horse, she moved towards a place in the road where she would overtake the rider and surprise them. IF they were friend, they would be allowed to pass without knowing Emelia had ever seen them. But if they were foe...

A few startled critters rustled about in the trees and bushes as she continued forward, but they avoided the path, keeping her position hidden. While she had yet to make out any real numbers, she could still see the white of the horse drawing nearer. There were no footsteps nor conversation to be heard; it was likely a lone rider.

Emelia slowly drew her bow out and notched an arrow. She did not honestly believe it would be needed, but one could never be too careful. With Eastwood in such disarray, her mother's patrols were finding more and more trouble out in the woods.

Emelia froze as she made out the distinct crunch of a leaves under the horse's hooves. She crouched as low as she could and moved to the edge of the tree line. She peeked through the shadows and watched the single rider approach. It was a woman, and a small one at that. She wore simple travelers gear, not the armor of a paladin, and wore a thick coat of emerald. It was a familiar color to Emelia. She squinted, trying to make out the sigil on the pin holding the cloak up...

"No way," she whispered.

Emelia returned her bow to her shoulders and stepped out of the tree line. The horse pulled up, startled by the sudden newcomer, and its rider drew forth a crossbow. The rider aimed

to fire but turned it away at the last second. The bolt shot forward and thudded harmlessly into the tree just beside Emelia's head.

"Now is that anyway to greet your sister?" she laughed.

"Gods, I nearly killed you!" Ariel shouted.

"But you didn't," Emelia smiled as she spoke.

Ariel leapt down from her horse and ran to Emelia. They embraced in a quick hug before stepping back from one another.

"You got taller," Emelia noted.

"Not nearly as much as I would've liked," Ariel pouted, looking up at her sister.

"It's alright, you take too much after mom," Emelia walked past and placed a hand on the kaldirian, rubbing it across the majestic beast's neck. "Where did you manage to find a horse like this?"

"Technically, I stole it," Ariel shrugged.

"From a paladin?"

"Well, yes. But they were awful guests, so I don't feel bad about it. Now officially, I found her wandering outside Syllia's House. Unofficially, how she escaped the stables remains a mystery..."

"After all that time in the church, and you haven't changed one bit."

"Frankly, I'm still miffed Daena didn't end up serving time like I did," Ariel groaned.

"After all, the whole thing was her idea!"

"That's what made you two so different. She never got caught. You always do."

"Where is Daena nowadays anyways?"

Emelia grew silent as she contemplated her next words. She turned slowly to face her sister, trying hard to keep the concern from leaking into her words.

“She is at the capital, staying with the royal family,” Emelia croaked. “She’s been there for two years now. I told mother it was a terrible idea, but well... you know how she can be.”

“So, they followed through with the betrothal then?”

“They intended to, but I don’t know if they ever actually got married or not,” Emelia shrugged. “As you know, we haven’t heard word of anything for a long while. The silence has the entire kingdom restless.”

“Then my visions are coming to fruition faster than I would have thought...”

Before Ariel could elaborate further, she felt a chill run down her spine. The chill was familiar, and it filled her stomach with butterflies. Her cheeks turned rose red as she turned about, scanning the woods.

“What?” Emelia whispered. “What is it?”

“I know this feeling...”

Ariel leaped atop the horse and reached a hand down for her sister. Despite the lack of information, Emelia allowed herself to be pulled atop the beast. They turned off the road and jumped into the forest, charging through bushes and brambles as Ariel allowed her guts to lead the way.

As they rode, Emelia noticed a small cloud of smoke rising over the trees. Whoever set up camp wanted to be found. Which either made them stupid... or really dangerous.

“Ariel, maybe you should tell me what we’re riding into?”

“Just trust me,” the younger sister retorted, pressing her mount forward.

They were riding towards a campfire and a strange glow of white light like the sun shining off armor. There was the outline of a white horse: another kaldirian. Before Emelia could express another word of caution, they broke through the clearing into the campsite.

Despite their sudden appearance, the campsite seemed calm in the face of strangers. There were two women and two men. One woman wore the armor of a paladin that gave off the soft light and gave the sisters a stern look. Looking over the four, she realized that one of them was bound by elven gold silk. Only the worst of the worst were bound in such a manner...

“Ariel!” the man shouted, leaping to his feet.

Ariel leaped off the horse and hugged the man in a surprisingly warm welcome.

“You know him?” Emelia asked.

“Of course,” Ariel replied. “He’s the man I... I saw in my visions.”

“Those visions? I thought they were all supposed to be broken and twisted. None of them were meant to be real...”

Ariel ignored her sister as the color drained from Emelia’s face. It was easy enough to pass off her sister as some crazy cleric suffering from nightmares, until those nightmares began to manifest in reality...

“Excuse me, but I suggest you step away from my prisoner. And you,” the female paladin looked up at Emelia. “Get off my horse.”

Emelia dismounted and bowed slightly to the warrior. “I’m sorry. In my defense, I had no idea this horse was yours. She’s a fine creature you know.”

The paladin scoffed and glanced away. Emelia decided to ignore the paladin and walked over to her sister.

“So now what?” She whispered. “I don’t think we’re making any friends here, and we’ve clearly interrupted something.”

“They need to reach Edinrow,” Ariel replied. “And we’re the ones who are going to take them there.”

“I can think of a million reasons that’s a terrible idea.” Emelia hissed.

“I concur,” The old man said, still lounging on his log. “Unfortunately, it isn’t my decision.”

“Who’s is it then?” Emelia asked. She turned from person to person, waiting for someone to speak up, but her looks were met with silence. “Are none of you in charge?”

“It’s not that simple,” the bound man sighed. “Check the tent.”

Emelia eyed the others, but no one made a move. She walked towards the tent and reached for the entrance flap. She paused for one last second before pushing the flap aside.

Inside, she saw two people. One was a man in shining plate armor; he was the largest man Emelia had ever seen. The other was a woman with pale skin and red hair streaked with greys. She could see the man was breathing, but the woman was not, or if she was, just barely. She stepped forward and placed her head against the woman’s chest. There was a heartbeat, but it was nearly inaudible due to its weakness.

She rushed out of the tent and leaped atop the kaldirian her sister had stolen.

“Ariel, stay here and make sure they don’t go anywhere,” Emelia ordered. “I’m going to get my patrol.”

Without waiting for a response, she whipped the horse around and stormed back into the forest and on to the main road. She loved riding and found exhilaration in the moment, but riding

atop a kaldirian did not compare to any horse she had ridden before. If it were not for the dire circumstances, she would have been overcome with elation.

She came upon her patrol back on the hill where she left her horse. They knew now not to strike off looking for her; she always came back to them. The captain saluted her as she approached.

“What news m’lady? Where did you find a horse like that!?” He failed to keep the astonishment from his voice.

“Not now, captain,” she shouted. “We’ve got two people who need immediate medical attention. Follow my lead. Keep your weapons ready. I don’t know what did this to them, but whatever it is, it can’t be too far off.”

The patrol nodded and drew their weapons. They formed up and followed her into the woods, despite the lack of information. They were loyal to a fault, but then so was everyone who served under the Roses of Edinrow.

“Who are we bringing back?” The captain asked as he struggled to keep pace with Emelia.

“I’m not quite sure,” Emelia shouted back. “Whoever they are, it’s best my mother be the one to sort it all out.”

PART III

Judgement

Chapter 26: The Rose Court

I had never seen a true castle before. They appeared in stories, and travelers occasionally referenced such things in their tales, but I had not seen one. There were few on the plains, as no structure could survive the storms without magic. Edinrow was the first real castle I saw, and while it did not stand to the marvel of Elysium, it held wonder in its own way.

The dirt paths we followed turned into cobbled roads and the forest thinned. The land turned uphill for nearly a mile before the first towers poked their way through the tree line. Soon after, we came to the base of a stone wall manned by patrolling archers. The gate itself was made of black iron, and two guards stood watch. Like the soldiers that met us in the woods, these men were armed with silver chainmail and a forest green cloak draped over it. Unlike our escort, these men held shields with a red rose emblazoned in the center.

“Open the gates,” Emelia commanded. “Send word ahead to my mother that her daughters have returned, and they bring with them injured. Get the medics ready to receive two more to their beds. Now!”

One of the guards turned and pressed against a stone. From the inside, the crank of a chain sounded, and the gate rose, allowing us entry. Our procession was led in by the two sisters, while the rest of us, including the paladin woman who had finally introduced herself as Loria, were escorted on foot. Andorath and Syldra, both still unconscious, were secured to the back of Storm.

Inside the gate, there was a small village. The houses were arranged in straight rows, towering in very sizes and shapes. The lot were made of wood, while a few of stone were intermingled among them; they all sported sleight rooves. The smell of animals, baked goods, and booze blended in strange aromas as we passed through the little village. A few people took notice, and they were greeted with waves and smiles from Ariel and Emelia.

“Who are these people?” I whispered to Gorm.

“Villagers of Edinrow,” He replied. “Most people in the Dustwind Forest reside in some commune like this, protected by whatever noble or knight controls the area.”

“Are they always this big?”

“Some are bigger. As far as I know, Edinrow is an average size.”

“Yes, we aren’t the largest,” Emelia smiled as she turned back to us. “But I assure you, outside the king himself, no one is more important than The Roses.”

We passed to the opposite end of the village and came to a second wall. This one was smaller than the first but boasted larger patrols atop the walls and guarding the gate. The gate here was black wood with a silver rose adorning the front.

“You think it still works?” Ariel asked her sister.

“Of course, it does,” Emelia assured her.

Ariel dismounted her horse and approached me. She reached out her hand as she spoke. “I’m going to need the rose I gave you.”

I nodded and fumbled through my pockets; no easy task when my hands were still bound. Emelia gave her sister a sidelong glare as I protruded the rose and handed it to Ariel. She thanked me and approached the door, placing the rose against the larger one. Both metals began to shine bright pink before the light faded away. A creaking sound followed as the door swung inward, revealing the courtyard to the inner castle.

“You gave your rose to a stranger?” Emelia chided her sister.

“I gave it to him assuming he’d arrive before me,” She shrugged in reply. “I did not know we’d all be destined to witness whatever comes next.”

We passed through the second wall and into a massive courtyard. A smoothed stone pathway led from the entrance of the gate towards the main castle, splitting the space in two. On one side, the clang of swords and whistle of arrows accompanied the shouts and orders of the soldiers outside what I assumed was the barracks. On the opposite end, dogs barked, and horses whinnied as trainers tried to get them in line outside the stables. Before us, a massive structure towered overhead. While the tallest tower only rose to half the height of the Spire, it was still a sight to behold. There were three distinct towers rising to form a crown over the main structure below. The only entrance consisted of two wooden doors, each emblazoned with a rose. From there, it was impossible to tell how many side tunnels, rooms, or more, lay inside.

“Captain,” Emelia called out to her right-hand man as she dismounted. “Take the horses to the stables. Then you and your men can take the rest of the day to yourselves. In the morning, we’ll have new orders.”

The captain nodded and gave a quick hand signal to his men. They all dismounted and guided their horses towards the stable.

“What of the other two?” The captain asked.

“I’ll see to them,” Ariel replied. “I still know my way around the place, and I have learned a thing or two about healing in my time on the plains.”

“That’s settled then,” Emelia nodded. She watched her sister part before turning to address the four of us. “As for you four. I’m assuming that, since you’ve cooperated this far, you’ll continue to do so?”

“I have no reason to resist,” the paladin nodded. “I simply wish to see justice done for the crimes of this man.”

“And the rest of you are just going to play along?”

“I’m not much for fighting if I don’t have to,” Gorm grunted.

This seemed to satisfy Emelia. She turned and motioned for us to follow her into the main structure. Ariel paused briefly and kissed my cheek, before whispering in my ear, “Good luck.”

We passed through the main entrance. The grand doors opened soundlessly, revealing a grand hall of marble mosaics and massive columns of pure white rising fifty feet to the lofty dome ceiling. Stain glass windows stood some ten feet above the floor, extended to the ceiling, and wrapped around the far wall and sides. The windows allowed the daylight through in an array of rainbow light that illuminated the darkness inside. A fire burned at the rear wall’s center, casting a long shadow from the throne that lay before it. Our feet echoed off the empty room as we approached.

A lone woman sat on a small ivory throne that had roses carved along the wooden surface. As far as I could see, there were no guards or soldiers anywhere. The woman seemed comparable in age to the paladin, with several lines beginning to pronounce themselves on her face. However, she was undeniably beautiful. Her hair was pure black, tied into a curly wave of hair that fell over her shoulder. She wore a slimming red dress embroidered with silver, silk patterns that ran about the seams. It was low cut, and would have pulled many a man's eyes downward, were they not transfixed with her stare. Her eyes were emerald, and their intensity was captivating. They were a clear warning: this woman was not to be trifled with.

"I see you bring more than just news," she said. Her voice was warm yet threatening.

"For now, they are news," Emelia replied. "Whether they are prisoners, guests, or somewhere in between, has yet to be determined."

"And I suppose you wish me to make such a decision then?" Her mother asked.

Emelia simply bowed and moved to stand beside her mother. As they stood next to each other, I realized how similar they were. They had the same black hair, the same figure, and the same eyes.

"Well, this is an odd bunch of company," the woman mused. "We have a paladin of the High Council, a master wizard, a pirate princess, and a bound stranger. Would any of you care to explain how you came to be together?"

"If I may," the paladin stepped forward. "I am here on official council business. I am to bring the man you see bound here to the Enclave. He is meant to stand trial and face judgement for atrocities and crimes committed in the Storm Plains, and in Elysium itself. The others are of little concern."

“Those others are a master of the spire and a member of the most powerful family on the ocean. I would hardly call that little concern,” the woman replied.

“Their affairs matter little to me,” the paladin scoffed. “If you care to play politics now, enjoy your little game. Just as long as we are clear in understanding that my mission, my business with the demon you see presented before you, are above such petty games.”

“Petty games? Bold words from a guest,” the woman glared at the paladin as she spoke. “I would think a paladin of your reputation would show more... courtesy.”

“A woman of your reputation has little place for such things,” The paladin spat.

“Ah, so you do know me.” A sly grin crossed the woman’s face. “Then you know that you shouldn’t be so eager to dismiss me in my own court. You should also know that I will wish to hear from the others, though perhaps in a more private manner...”

She turned to the side and whispered to her daughter. Emelia replied then left, disappearing behind one of the pillars. Her footsteps vanished, and the sound of a slammed door followed.

“I believe, for now, we can call an end to this little meeting,” The woman rose from her throne and approached. “Loria, Gorm, and Avara, I welcome you as guests in the halls of Edinrow. My daughter will return shortly with guards who will give you tours of the proper. If you are here, I give you freedom to travel among the castle grounds as you wish. You are free to stay or leave as fits your fancy.

“As for you,” She turned to me. “You and I must share a word.”

“Absolutely not,” Loria stepped forward, standing over the woman. “This man is my prisoner, and I will see him placed in appropriate cells until I see fit to bring him-”

The woman raised a hand to the paladin. “I know what you are thinking. This man must be the Demon of Windhelm. Otherwise, why would you be so enthralled in such an ordinary individual? And yet, I have seen no fires, nor heard of any death in many weeks. There is more than just stories and rumors. While your kind may wish to deal in absolutes, there is far more to this tale than you wish to see. Since we are in my court, I will be the one seeking to pass judgement, and I will not do so until I firmly understand the entirety of the situation you have presented to me. If you do not like such accommodation, you can go appeal to your little council back in Elysium. Then, if you return with their decree overriding my rule here, I shall consent. Until then, you have entered my domain and will act accordingly.”

“The gods will not take kindly to this slight,” Loria growled.

“You aren’t a god, Loria,” the woman retorted. “Now take your perceived slight and part. All of you should leave now. I have wasted enough time.”

Loria seemed ready to object, but the sound of doors opening, and the clanking of metal feet filled the hall. Six guards suddenly appeared from behind the pillars. One of them stepped forward and bowed to the woman before addressing the group.

“If you will follow me, I shall bring you to meet your guides for the evening.”

He turned about and stepped forward. Gorm eyed the woman, then turned to the guards and chuckled to himself before following the captain. Avara hurried after him. Loria was the last to part, her displeasure plainly shown in her glare. The doors closed off in the distance and silence once again came over the court.

“You have quite the reputation,” the woman said as she began to walk slowly around me. “The Demon of Windhelm was believed to be some new farmer’s tale, and yet here you stand.”

I remained quiet and bowed my head, sparing only slight glances at the woman.

“I see you’re not very talkative, though I suppose I would not either given the circumstances. People often forget the power of silence.” The woman stopped in front of me and grabbed my hands. She raised them up and removed the bonds that kept my wrists together. “I believe the paladin will be less than pleased with my decision, but I know you will behave yourself while under my roof. Agreed?”

I nodded slowly.

“Good. Now come, let us speak where there are sure to be no wondering ears.”

I followed her around the throne and past the massive fire. It sat in the middle of a round room, leaving the smallest walking path that led to a hidden door. We made our way through this door into a dark corridor with torches providing the faintest light. The corridor was short and led upwards towards a seamless backwall. There, the woman removed her rose emblem, the same one Ariel gave me, and pressed it against the wall. The rose lit up, and a sudden light illuminated a door we passed through. Exiting the corridor, we entered a massive garden. Paths of stone wound their way through a variety of trees and roses. Somewhere off in the distance, birds chirped, and a trickling fountain bubbled. While the sky above was still dark and grey, inside the garden felt like summer: hot and bright.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” The woman said with a smile as she watched me.

“It certainly is,” I agreed.

“My mother started this decades ago when she was first brought to Edinrow,” her eyes stared off in the distance as she spoke. “She used the same magic she once saw in the House of Syllia to create it. Obviously, the work of mortal cannot match that of a goddess, but the work here is brilliantly done. I of course improved as I grew older, and now it is quite the little oasis. It is the only place I truly feel us roses have any peace.

“Everyone calls my daughters and me the Roses of Edinrow,” she continued to explain as we walked onward, down one of the many cobble stone paths. “We are so named for the roses we grow, though few now adays know that. These are the real roses, brought from Thalador, Leeria, Whitepond, or anywhere else a rose may grow. They’ve all made their way here, all in memory of her...”

“But of course, I’m losing myself,” she laughed slightly and fixed her hair as she spoke. “Right now, we must determine the condition of your stay. Come, let’s take a seat, shall we?”

We walked further into the garden, and the greenery blocked out the stone walls of the castle that surrounded us. It grew lush and thick, like a small forest all its own. We came to the center of it all, where a massive fountain adorned with carvings of vines and flowers spued spouts of water that arched in miraculous patterns. The water fell in small waterfalls from the edges, landing gently in the pool below that spread out like roots through the rest of the garden. Around the clearing were several ornate benches of white granite; we took a seat on one of those.

“Well, now that we’re alone, I think it’s best we start with proper introductions,” she said. “I am Adella Durham, Duchess of Edinrow, and Master of Spies to the king, should he still be living. You shall refer to me as Adella during our private conversations, though in court or other public settings, I shall be referred to as- ‘duchess’ or ‘m’lady.’ It is a pleasure to meet someone of your reputation, though I’m sure you have a name other than the one from the wild tales spreading about.”

“My name is Daelin. I was from Windhelm, and I worked under the local priest there.”

“You have no other name? No parents to speak of?”

“Whoever they were, I never got the chance to meet them.”

“Would you want to meet them?”

I stared ahead in silence, not sure how to answer the question. A part of me always wished to know who they were. It would have been nice to see their faces just once. But after everything I had done, I don't think I would want any parent of mine to know what I had become.

"I suppose that's an unfair question on my part," Adella placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Moving on to more important matters, are you truly the Demon of Windhelm? I have a keen sense for noticing people with malicious intent. Frankly, you're too timid to harm anyone willingly, and yet you admit to being the demon. It's a paradox I'd like to unravel."

"I am the Demon of Windhelm, but only half of me." I proceeded to explain how the demon awakened that first time in Windhelm and revealed the calamities I rot across the plains, as I saw no reason to lie to this woman. Throughout my tale, Adella listened with a keen ear, nodding every so often, but otherwise remaining silent. When I finished, she took a moment of contemplation before finally speaking.

"So, this sword of yours keeps the demon at bay?" she asked.

"At times. Recently it's been able to break through the barrier and whisper in my mind. More often though, he takes over my dreams and speaks to me then."

"Fascinating. This is truly interesting..." She rose suddenly and straightened her dress. "Well Daelin, it has been a pleasure to speak with you. You have shed light on many happenings in the world. For now, I must go and decide how best to proceed with your case. No doubt Loria is already standing outside my court, demanding to see you. However, until my decision is made, I think it is best you remain out of sight."

She snapped her fingers, and one of her daughters, Emelia, stepped out from behind one of the rose bushes.

“Emelia, you heard the entire tale. What are your thoughts?”

“I think he’s dangerous,” She spoke slowly as she stared at me. “But I think he doesn’t fully understand his own story. Perhaps he isn’t completely at fault...”

“No, perhaps not,” Adella nodded slowly. “For now, I pass his fate into your hands. Take him to the dungeons through the back roads, or house him in the first tower. Either way, keep him out of sight until we are prepared for the next step.”

“Of course.”

“Good. I bid you a farewell, Daelin. We shall speak again soon.”

Unsure of what else to do, I bowed awkwardly. Adella smirked at my bow and parted, disappearing into the thick of her garden. When she left, I turned to Emelia who was staring me over with her unreadable face.

“So, the dungeon or tower?” I asked.

She looked at me with a raised eyebrow, a small grin spreading across her lips.

“Follow me.”

Chapter 27: A New Accomplice

The tower provided an impressive view. To the east, the mountains loomed, their peaks lost in the clouds in the sky. To the north and south, the forest stretched on for miles and miles before meeting the horizon. Patches appeared in the trees, which Emilia explained to be smaller villages, castles, and fortresses in the area.

“Everything you see is under my mother’s jurisdiction. The only exception is the mountains. The dwarven kingdom begins right on the border of the forest.”

We leaned against the balcony railings together as Emilia pointed out various spots in the forest and the different paths. From here, we could even see parts of the courtyard below, where soldiers were clashing with weapons. I saw none of my companions, nor did I see the paladin. A few times, Ariel walked past below and gave us upward glances, but we were otherwise seemingly in another world.

Emilia no longer had her hair tied, allowing it to flow freely in the open air. It was blacker than night skies and shown despite the grey skies overhead. She wore a simple smile, despite standing beside a man technically standing trial for several crimes and atrocities. Her

bow was still slung over her shoulder, and her sword still hung by her side. Her emerald eyes looked at me, and their intensity transfixed me even more than her mother's.

“What are you staring at?” Emilia raised an eyebrow. “You planning to push me?”

“What? No, nothing like that,” I backed away from the railing. I felt the blood rush to my face as I struggled to find words. “I’m sorry, but I haven’t had a moment like this a long time. It’s a welcome break of sorts.”

“You understand you are here as a criminal, right?”

“Believe me, I have no delusions of being anything else. Still, after so long on the road and constantly fighting things trying to kill me...” I sighed and looked back out over the landscape. “The tower, the castle, the forest... it’s all so new, and yet it feels familiar, I guess. I don’t... I don’t really know what I’m trying to say, but even with a potential death sentence waiting for me, I feel almost free up here.”

“I understand,” Emilia nodded as she spoke and turned to look back out at the forest. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t think my mother intends to kill you. You’ll have some punishment, I’m sure, but it won’t be death. If she honestly thought you were dangerous, you would’ve been bound in chains, not handed to me.”

“That’s a comforting thought, I suppose.”

“Don’t get comfortable,” She warned, whipping around to address me. “My mother has been described in many ways, but generous has never been one. If she spares you, she’ll be expecting something in return. If you live, it is because she believes you’ll be of more use to her alive rather than dead.”

“What about the rest of you?” I asked. “Are you and your sister the same?”

“What my family is or isn’t, is of no one’s concern but ours,” she hissed. “Let this be a lesson for you. If you’re a guest in Edinrow, and don’t ever think of yourself as anything more than a temporary guest, you keep your head down and ears close to the floor. Whatever gossip or rumors travel about, you’re best to forget them. Trust me. You’ll find life is easier that way.”

I nodded. Emilia, satisfied with my silent acceptance, walked back into the chambers. I followed her into the bedchamber, adorned with a mantle and running fire, large fur bed, a dresser, and a table complete with a small shelf stocked with various alcohols. One door to the chamber was open; steam from the warming water of the bath seeped into the room.

She poured two glasses of red wine and offered one to me. I accepted the glass and was immediately greeted with its sweet aroma. Her eyes watched me, scanning me up and down as I stood tentatively sipping at my wine. The taste was sweet, but I barely noticed under her watchful gaze.

“I just can’t figure it out,” she mumbled as she shook her head.

“What?”

“My mother is always multiple moves ahead of everyone else, always,” she explained. “Yet staring at you, I can’t see anything special. You’re unremarkable as far as I can see. Average height, average build, average face... maybe there’s a demon inside of you, but even that seems like a stretch...”

“Well, I assure you the demon is real,” I quipped between sips of wine. “There’s nothing average about that.”

“Maybe...” Emilia rose from her seat and straightened her belt. She redid her hair in a long ponytail behind her then made for the door. “Well stay put and don’t do anything brash

while I'm gone. I'll return for you when my mother requests an audience. In the meantime, I have other matters to attend to besides babysitting."

She slammed the door closed behind her and her footsteps soon faded away down the hall. The only sound was the continuous trickle of water from the bath chamber.

While the steam wafting from the other room was inviting, I decided to wait and enjoy the silence a few moments longer. I stepped back out onto the balcony and looked over the land. I had seen green all my life, yet never anything like this. The green of the plains always seemed empty, but here, the rich, dark greens of the trees were filled with life. The way they towered higher than the castle walls; the bristling of their branches as the wind swept over them; their steady climb up the mountain sides. It was all overwhelming and yet calming.

I leaned against the balcony and watched what I could below. The village outside the main castle continued their movements bustling about in the streets, selling, and haggling as normal. The echoes of swords rang out from the sparring in the courtyard, as well as the sauntering of horses' hooves as patrols entered and exited the castle in impeccable order. The entire operation seemed flawless, a stark contrast from the chaos of Elysium, or the monotony of Windhelm.

I stepped back from the balcony and began to undress my armor. I held on to Aelandria's sword until it was the last item left to remove. I clutched to the hilt a minute longer before finally releasing the blade, letting it fall gently atop the bed.

Well, it's about time! The demon's voice sounded immediately in my head. *Do you know how long you've kept me couped up? And I still had so much to say!*

I ignored the voice and lumbered into the bath chamber. Steam and water blurred the details on the intricate mosaic running along the floor, while torches barely illuminated the

space. Other than the mosaic, the room was made entirely of grey stone that was uninterrupted by windows on all sides. The center of the room dipped into a circular basin below the floor's surface, slightly overflowing with water still running from a golden faucet on the opposite end.

You know, it's a shame we only get to speak when you're on the verge of death, or completely naked. I feel our conversations would be much more productive if you ditched the sword and allowed me time during our journeys.

"That sword isn't going anywhere," I audibly growled as I stepped slowly into the water. I waded across the basin and stopped the faucet, then allowed myself to lounge against the stairs as my body fell deep into the water. Laying there, I began to shut my eyes...

Really? After all our time without speaking and you're just going to doze off? Come now, we need to discuss our plans!

"There's no plan," I hissed. "Now shut up."

Really, must we go over this again? We're two separate entities in spirit only. Otherwise, we share a mind, magical powers, and your excuse of a body. So please, accept that we have to work together, and we are all the same and we-

"Enough!" I snapped. "Whatever you have to say, get on with it!"

My, aren't we touchy today?

I groaned and splashed water over my face, trying to clear my head before the second headache began.

All jokes aside, as I said before, the demon isn't dead. He's going to hunt us down and will stop at nothing until he kills us.

We're traveling with two paladins, a wizard, a pirate, and currently reside as prisoners in a fortified castle, I countered. We're probably not worth the trouble.

That's not how hell works, the demon laughed. Whatever threat you think you can conjure up on this mortal plane fails to compare to the torment and doom awaiting us when we fail.

I take it you're speaking from experience?

I don't think that's relevant to our conversation...

I noted the demon's change in tone and decided not to press further. Still, it seemed to be worth exploring in the future...

I can still see your thoughts, and I suggest you let the subject drop, the demon growled. Focus idiot. We are on the verge of another calamitous fight unless you accept a simple truth: you need me.

I don't need anybody.

You say that but look what happened to your precious friend! It could be worse next time, and yet you're still going to stubbornly pretend you can match the might of the hunter? Please, you're a fucking joke compared to this being. You don't stand a chance.

We'll figure it out...

That's the problem! This isn't a situation where we try to figure it out! It's a situation where we need it solved yesterday! And as of right now, I am the only gods be damned to hell solution you have!

"I can't let you do it!" I screamed then, shooting from the water, and grabbing my head in my hands. The images of Windhelm, the inn, Andorath's face, they all came flooding back in that instant. The tears came as silent cries overtook me.

You're pathetic, the demon hissed one final time. No wonder you were abandoned...

The demon's voice faded to absolute silence when Emelia's sounded from the door.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she whispered, just peeking through. “But my mother has requested you return for the audience...”

I straightened my back and cleared my throat, rubbing the last of the moisture from my eyes.

“I’ll be down shortly,” I croaked.

“I have to escort you down, actually,” Emelia’s voice was soft as she spoke. “But if you need some time to collect yourself, I can wait outside.”

“No, it’s ok...”

“Well, I’m going to wait outside all the same...”

I heard her steps fade away, followed by the soft click of the door closing. With a heavy sigh, I left the tub and began to dress myself, preparing for whatever fate the duchess had in store for me. Fully armored, I took one final look at myself in the mirror. Stubble had grown during the journey, but at least the dirt had been washed away. Still, not amount of bath water could wash away the fatigue and pain permanently etched into my face. I sighed and turned away, going to join Emelia out in the hall.

“Ready?” She asked.

“Probably not,” I said with a heavy sigh. “Lead on.”

#

The court was completely changed as Emilia lead me inside. A series of magic torches now hovered around various pillars, illuminating the space in an orange glow. Rows of chairs lined the space between the pillars so various members of the castle could spectate the event. I was led down the center aisle dividing the chairs to the front.

As before, the duchess, Adella, sat upon her throne, though it appeared to have been elevated from before. Of the two chairs to her left, one remained empty; Ariel sat in the other. On Adella's right, two more chairs were occupied. In one directly to the duchess's right was an older warrior, dressed in shining plate with Eidnrow's Rose emblazoned on his chest. Beside him, to my surprise, sat Gorm, now outfitted in regal green robes.

Two wooden tables were at the end of the rows of chairs, directly facing Adella. On one side, Avara watched me proceed down the aisle. She had changed since we entered the castle, dressed in a flowing white shirt and black leather pants. Her hair fell and waves, all remnants of life on the road vanished from her appearance. At the other table, the paladin Loria stood with her back to me in full armor. Beside her, I received a glare from a familiar scarred face I was not expecting to see walking around so soon.

"Is this the accused?" Adella asked as Emilia and I stood at the end of the aisle.

"It is," Emilia shouted. "I bring forward Daelin of Windhelm."

Immediately murmurs swept over the crowd. I could make out the vague whisperings of "demon" and "murderer" sweeping through the assembled onlookers. Adella raised her hand, drawing instant silence from the crowd.

"Daelin of Windhelm," Adella began. "You and your party of misfits, including Syltra of Elysium and Avara of the Southern Swamps, stand accused of murder, theft, and destruction of property. The crimes range everywhere from destruction of the village of Windhelm, the death of all its inhabitants, the theft of goods valued over two million gold pieces, and the destruction of the Red Lust tavern, along with all its inhabitants. Your accusers, represented by Andorath and Loria of the Enclave, have requested your punishment be death."

I swallowed and spared a glance in Gorm's direction, yet he averted his gaze. I turned to Avara, and she shook her head. Emilia led me over to stand beside Avara, as Adella continued her speech.

"There is, however, a dilemma in all of these accusations," She proceeded, staring directly at the paladins as she spoke. "Most of these accusations are from rumors. These tales have whipped across the plains, and while these calamities are surely no fireside tale, the actual perpetrator has never been identified as more than a mysterious demon. Yet before us now are surely no demons, but a plain man and woman, barely past the age to be drinking. What have you to say for this?"

At this, Adella grew silent and watched the paladins. Loria stood up and glared at the duchess, clearly displeased with the course of the trial.

"I say to you that we are here on business given to us by the Enclave's council, under strict assignment from the Prime himself. Such orders are to be heralded as the god's will, as we are their agents of justice and order in all the Free Cities," Loria turned to the crowd as she spoke, proving to be quite the showman. "We come before you with these three individuals because we have met them in battle ourselves. We have seen their power firsthand, power that matches the description of the atrocities that have ravaged our people. Mayhap others have failed to identify them, but that is only because their victims are all dead. Dead men cannot speak for the crimes that have placed upon them; it is our duty to see they did not die without justice being served."

"I see. These are wise words you speak, yet they had in their company a man of the Spire. Surely the Spire and the lady that resides there would not have made error in escorting such a strange combination of companions across the Storm Plains?"

“Duchess Adella, I dare not speak for the Spire or its lady,” Loria’s voice remained cool and collected, but I could see her fists clenching, her jaw set tightly. “I speak only for the duty I am given, and that duty will not tolerate unfair trial given by a mad woman playing at politics with mortals.”

“I do not play at politics,” Adella mused, a smirk crossing her lips. “I serve fair judgement in my court. And as of now, the words stand to be two on two. It seems I cannot wage a fair response without the word of currently indisposed third member of the court.”

“Allow me to add voice for her then,” Emilia spoke suddenly. “As Syldra cannot represent herself, with the accused permission, I will serve as her representative.”

She turned to Avara and me. I stood dumbfounded and turned to Avara, who kept a level head and nodded promptly to the other woman.

“Very well then,” Emilia nodded in acceptance. “Then as the third voice, I must speak up and say that the accused are surely not guilty. I speak as a representative for the accused, and I am willing to serve as their guide and council during this time.

“I believe they are here as allies, and no allies of ours would have donned such atrocities willingly. I believe they have been framed unjustly. The Enclave has proven inadequate in their quest for finding such demons, and they need an enemy. They have chosen easy prey far from home. Truly an unjust act on their part.”

The chamber filled with the murmuring of the spectators. Meanwhile, I could see the smirk slowly crossing Loria’s lips as she strode forward to address the court.

“You have all heard it,” Loria gloated. “They deny all crimes and cannot be given any form of leniency for accountability, as you so liked to call it. They deny it, and thus will face the full wrath of the gods! Judgement shall be swift, as I’m sure this court will find. And now, we

have another member to join their conspiracy. Lying to the court is surely punishment is it not? And let's not forget she is now an accomplice to murder, theft, and destruction that has swept across the land as the representative for these criminals!

“Ladies and gentlemen, I know you have heard all the ramblings!” Loria turned to face the crowds. “The horrid Demon of Windhelm was surely just a myth though? A story weaved to frighten children! Yet here he stands! That man there is the demon himself, the one who scarred my ally for life, and who murdered the entire village that took him in and gave him a home! Today, we have the chance to bring peace to those fallen souls. It is time for us to allow the gods will reign supreme and end this nightmare once and for all. You duchess must acknowledge their crimes. By the end of this, you will have three new heads on your hands. I pray the right decision is made.”

Lorai returned to her spot behind the table and crossed her arms, her smug smirk turning towards us. I leaned in and whispered to Emilia.

“Listen, I appreciate the gesture, but we’re fighting a losing battle.”

“Shut up,” She hissed.

“They’re going to kill you...”

“Not if you stop talking!”

“Are there words you wish to share with the court, Emilia?” Adella interjected.

“None.” Emilia snapped. “I simply wish for the court to allow me to present a piece of evidence we do have as the defense.”

“Proceed then.”

Emilia swallowed and took in a deep breath before stepping forward. She kept her eyes on her mother as she began.

“He stands accused by holy powers. Divine judgement and intervention seem to be the basis for the punishment people wish to make. While I believe we must honor the gods, I believe their place in this court is not as clear as we are led to believe.” She turned to the crowd now, as Loria had, and began weaving her tale. “While two paladins stand there with their heads high, proud as if they have earned a medal, the one they accuse stands with a bowed head. He knows the weight of the world and challenges it presents, and he does not accept such fate lightly. He is a sign of humility and silent confidence the gods wish all of us to aspire to. It is for that reason the gods have favored him, bestowing upon him a great gift.”

At this, Loria’s smug grin began to subside as glares swept across her expression. The entire court seemed to hold its breath as one, waiting for Emilia to continue.

“Daelin, please brandish your sword so the court may see this gift!”

I nodded slowly and reached for my waist. I gripped the hilt, feeling the cleansing rush wash over me, and drew forth the blade. It glittered brighter than steel should have in the orange glow of the chamber. It shown almost pure white as I brandished the blade and held it over my head so the entire court could see.

“It appears to be nothing more than a normal blade,” The knight beside Adella said. “I fail to see how this can be considered a gift.”

“It is just that,” Loria chimed in. “A sword and nothing more.”

“The sword is holy,” Emilia countered. “Bastion, if you would be so kind as to draw your own sword? Step forward and hold it high so we may compare it to Daelin’s.”

The knight turned to Adella, who nodded slowly to the man. He bowed low to the duchess, then strode to stand beside me. He towered over me, rivaled only by Andorath in size. He drew his blade and held it high, so the two blades were now presented side by side for the

court to see. His sword reflected the orange of the lights but failed to match the intense brightness of Aelandria's sword.

"You see? Normal blades made by man do not glow as if in sunlight. Clearly, the blade Daelin holds is special."

"Circumstantial at best," Loria interjected. "Have we elven weapons to compare? Or perhaps dwarven steel to brandish? Could this blade not simply be crafted by someone else?"

"That's enough out of you!" Gorm barked. "I have put up with your snot-nosed arrogance because you seemed genuine, and yet now you openly lie! You know this blade is holy, for you've seen its godly glow! Yet now it does not glow, for Daelin is meant to wield such a thing! Do not act like it is normal steel when you damn well know it means more to the gods than you!"

Shouting and murmuring broke out among the crowd. Loria and Gorm shared insults, the crowd noise rose to a roar, and everywhere chaos took hold. All the while, Emilia wore a small smirk as she watched events unfold.

"That's enough!" Adella yelled, drawing the court to silence. "Obviously, I have much to consider. However, everything to this point is one word against the next. I cannot in good faith pass judgement on either one of your claims at this time."

"You can't do that!" Andorath roared, slamming his fists on to the table as he shot out of his seat. "Look at me! Damnit, look at me! This is by his hand! Let him place it upon my face, and you shall see it's a perfect match! Don't you-"

"That's enough," Adella snapped. "I will not be interrupted by a man with a mouth bigger than his brain. I suggest you allow me to finish, or I will have you removed!"

Andorath's face froze in a snarl as he slowly reclaimed his seat.

“As I was saying, I cannot pass judgement at this time. For that reason, we must settle this under the laws of old. The two sides are both claiming to be marked by the gods, so we shall let the gods choose their champion in a traditional trial by combat. Combat will commence a week from now out on the training grounds. Until that time, the accused will be placed under strict house arrest, locked in the main tower under my watchful eye. The others have free reign of the grounds and will be treated as esteemed guests.”

“You cannot seriously believe that this judgement will be adequate,” Loria shouted. “You allow them to live as kings and queens? You truly will turn your eye on everything presented?”

“What was presented were stories,” Adella spat. “Now I suggest you accept the judgment I have passed, or you may see yourself through the gates and out of my domain. My word is final. You are now all dismissed. Bastion, escort the three accused to their chambers and lock them there.”

She waved her hand and turned dramatically from her throne, stalking away down hidden passages to who knew where in the castle. Everyone else took her lead and parted in short order, all save Andorath. He alone remained in the chamber. His glare never wavered, his eyes burning holes in the back of my head until the doors finally closed between us.

Chapter 28: Night One

We were led back to the tower room I had previously been held in. Avara and I were shoved inside before Emilia walked in behind us.

“Interesting tactic down there,” I replied as I stretched out. “I appreciate your help.”

“You’re welcome, but I have to admit, I didn’t do it for you,” Emilia replied, walking towards the table with various alcohols. “Drink?”

“Whatever you’re having, I’ll take,” Avara replied, already standing beside the table herself. “Frankly, I had no idea what I was getting myself into, and I need a drink to just try processing it all...”

“I’m sorry, Syltra tried to warn you...”

“Oh, don’t pity me Daelin,” She snipped back. “I don’t regret my decision at all. I knew we’d have to face some enemy eventually. Just didn’t think we’d be stuck between the good guys and bad guys.”

As we spoke, Emilia retrieved three short, wide, circular glasses and filled them halfway up with a brown liquid that smelled faintly of honey which she proceeded to hand to each of us.

“I hate to break it to you, but that’s because you’re neither,” Emilia laughed.

“Then why bother helping us?” Avara replied after taking a deep sip.

“I don’t really know myself,” Emilia whispered as she walked towards the bedroom window. “My mother is the one who put all of this in motion. Whatever she is thinking in her head, it all has to do with the fact that she thinks he’s useful.” She pointed towards me as she spoke. “For now, I only know the parts she needs me to know, but believe me, there is certainly more at play than any of us in this room understand.”

“Well, I appreciate what you did,” I sighed. “I was ready to confess to everything, whatever the punishment may be. I was ready to pay...”

“Fuck me,” she chuckled softly. “Here I am set to fight for you, but you never intended to put up much of a fight anyways. I could have been sipping wine in the main halls, feasting away. Instead, my mother has placed all of us under house arrest.”

“Well, to the fools in a tower,” I raised a glass to her.

“Fools in a tower,” she shrugged her head and clinked my glass with hers, as did Avara. The two women finished their drinks in a single go. I tried to finish mine with equal vigor, but the liquid stung my throat and felt hot as it trickled down into my gut.

As we stood drinking, the latch to the door clicked open, and in walked Adella. “I see you’re already taking advantage of the hospitality I’ve provided,” she mused as she strode into the room and sat at the foot of the bed. “I must say that little show of the blades was rather ingenious. You did well, Emilia.”

“Well, I’ve learned from the best.”

“Indeed, there is certainly more of me in you than your sisters,” Adella chuckled before turning to the rest of us. “Still, the circumstances around your current arrest are rather bleak. I admit, I toyed with the idea of releasing you all, or faking your deaths, but logistically, that

would never work with those two paladins up and about. No, they would not be pleased with any decision I made, so I took the one of least resistance. I admit it is not ideal, but it is better than seeing you all dead.”

“What’s in it for you?” Avara was quick to ask.

“Pardon?”

“What do you get out of it?”

Adella looked at Avara with an amused grin before answering. “Well, as of right now, I receive nothing. Perhaps this is merely an act of kindness from my heart?” She paused for a moment and looked around the room at all of us.

“I’m sorry, Adella,” I sighed. “I don’t believe that.”

“Good, it shows you’re learning then. No, I have my suspicions, but I cannot confirm or deny my thoughts yet. To buy myself more time, I need you all to be alive. Thus, a trial by combat. If you truly are marked by gods as Gorm insists you are, then you should win the bout, and the Enclave will not argue the results.”

“And if we lose?”

“If you lose, you will lose without letting my daughter die.”

Her threat was plain and hung in the air as silence overcame us.

“I now must sentence one of my daughters to fight two fully equipped paladins alongside a pirate and a man who barely knows how to wield a sword. I admit, I’m not pleased with the arrangement, and I’m taking a rather large gamble on it. However, I need you two to promise that if all goes wrong, I can ensure my Emilia will survive. If not, then I will eliminate this arrangement before it has a chance to progress any further. So what say you?”

“We’ll do our best,” Avara replied with a sailor’s salute. Adella seemed satisfied, and then all eyes turned on me.

“I agree,” I nodded.

“Excellent,” Adella nodded. “One last thing: The top floor of this tower is an old dwarven arena. We refer to it as the sky dome. You will have free reign of that space to train and should not be disturbed there. I will occasionally have you escorted down to the training grounds for show. Otherwise, enjoy the tower’s security, as you are safer here than you have been in a very long time.”

She stood and turned for the door, opening and waving back to us one last time before latching the door closed behind her.

“Well, dinner should be here soon,” Emilia stood as she spoke and stretched to the side. “I’m going to wash up quick. No peaking or I’ll gut you.”

“I wouldn’t dare, though you did see me in the bath-”

“I did, and I watched you sob like a child,” Emilia snapped, giving me a playful, though forceful, elbow to the gut. “But then, you were my prisoner. Now, we’re prisoners together. To stay sane, we need boundaries. You keep your eyes in this room is rule one. And while we’re about rules, I’ll share rule number two: I get the bed.”

“We get the bed,” Avara chimed in. “Unless of course, you’d prefer to fight me for it?”

Emilia laughed as she looked over the pirate. “No thanks, we can share the bed. Daelin gets the floor.”

“Agreed,” Avara nodded.

“Well, I think we could discuss-”

“Rule three: we’re a team, so we will vote together. The current vote: two on one. You get the floor.” Emilia and Avara shared a quick laugh before they went to wash up, leaving me to pull together whatever I could find and make a bed out of nothing.

Night one, and I already missed sleeping in the dirt.

#

“You look awful,” the demon remarked. “I mean, you’ve never looked good, but you’re particularly crummy tonight.”

“Well, I suppose spending time with you has finally caught up to me.”

“No, that’s not it. If our time together was getting to you, you’d be a much more interesting person, wouldn’t you think? I mean you’d at least have broken down some of that religious bullshit you’ve been carrying around.”

“I’m assuming we’re not here for you to tell me how I should or shouldn’t live my life. So, whatever it is you intend to say, just get on with it.”

“Me? You think I did all of this?” the demon gestured around and chuckled to himself. “You’re quite dull today, aren’t you? No, I have nothing to say to you.”

“Then why am I here?”

“How should I know? It’s your soul!”

The demon crossed his arms and watched, a wicked smirk crossing his face. I frowned and began pacing through the fog, kicking up little bits of it as I rummaged through my thoughts. I began replaying all the events of the past week, until it came back to me.

“How did you find me?”

“That’s quite the question you have there. Be more specific. What do you mean by ‘find’ exactly?”

“You said the demon would find us just as easily as you did the first time. How did you do it all those years ago? What happened to me?”

“Hmmm, I see...” the demon’s shadow seemed to grow darker and smaller as it blended in with the fog. His eyes narrowed as he stared back at me with its red pupils. “That’s a story I don’t believe we need to divulge in.”

“Enough of the avoidance,” I snapped. “We’ve been stuck together apparently my entire life, and yet you say you found me. Well tell me how, so we may avoid another demon copying your methods!”

“It’s hardly that simple,” the demon hissed. “I found you because of who you are, not because of some silly trick or magical assistance. Your damned blood can be smelled from the other planes of existence! He won’t have to work all that hard to follow our steps and appear in these halls again.”

“You mean I’ve been here before?” I gasped.

“What? No, I said no such thing.”

“You said ‘again’...”

“What no, that never... ah shit.” The demon’s shadow disappeared around him, revealing his physical form for only the second time in our discussions. His eyes did not meet mine as he kept his head low, his wings folded behind his back. “Listen kid, I took you away from this same tower over two decades ago. You were barely larger than my hand. So tiny and so easy to just... take. Unfortunately, you weren’t the right kid, and we were sentenced to die. As far as the underworld knew, they killed us both a long time ago.”

I stared at the demon, not knowing where to begin. There was so much information hidden in his words, so many questions I had running through my head.

“Look, there’s a lot to unpack there, I know,” the demon whispered. “But there’s danger in that information. If I were you, I’d keep this to yourself. Go searching for answers, and you may not make it to your little trial.”

“Who wants us dead?”

“Everyone. Paladins, demons, political opponents... the list doesn’t have an ending.”

“But why? Who was I before all of this?”

“You were no one. You were a mistake if you must know. And that mistake nearly killed us both.”

“What about the other child? Who were you supposed to take instead?”

“You’re pushing it,” the demon growled, the shadows growing around his form again. “You caught me off guard for a moment there, a simple slip of the tongue. Don’t expect me to give you anything else. Don’t focus on the past, not now, anyways. You need to survive this trial. Which means it’s time to release the demon!”

“That’s not happening.”

“Have it your way,” the demon cackled. “But don’t expect me to divulge anything else unless I start getting something in return.”

“Something in return? You kidnapped me and almost got me killed, a trend you’ve made all too common. You owe me!”

“I’ve saved your useless life countless times now! I’ve made you relevant! Powerful! Frightening! I made you someone when you would have been nothing without me! I have paid my dues you worthless human! I’m bound to your mortality, and unless you start letting me enjoy the limited time I have left, I will kill you myself!”

I went to reply, but a bright flash of light flooded over us. A distant voice was sounding, and I felt like the ground was shaking.

As I began to fade from the dream, the last thing I saw were the demon's eyes, a glare filled with rage boring right through me.

Chapter 29: Lessons in Magic

When I awoke, Emilia was standing over me, shaking my shoulders and whispering my name.

“I’m awake, I’m awake!” I groaned, raising my arms to remove her hands from my shoulders. She sat beside me on the floor in the middle of the rug. I pushed myself to a sitting position. My entire body felt stiff from the stone floor I slept on. I looked over and noticed the blanket and pillow thrown aside, leaving me shirtless and drenched in a thick sweat in the middle of the floor.

“You were practically screaming,” Emilia said as she handed me a glass of water. “I’ve been trying to wake you for a while now, but you kept muttering and pushing me aside.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I whispered. “Did I say anything you could understand?”

“I wish, but your bumbling was completely indistinguishable.”

I nodded with an ounce of relief. It was better that Emilia knew nothing of the conversation I had with the demon, nor to know anything about our meetings at all.

As I sat there, I realized the room was still dark. There was no light coming from the balcony that led outside. A single candle provided a faint orange glow to the room, causing long

shadows to dance around the walls. Avara remained in bed, somehow sound asleep despite whatever ruckus my sleep caused.

“Any idea what time it is?” I asked.

“Early enough we should be sleeping, but late enough I don’t intend to sleep again,” she said between yawns.

“In that case, would you mind if I started a fire?”

“Please, be my guest.”

I nodded and forced my way onto my feet and dragged my body over to the hearth. There was no wood in the place, but that did not matter. I imagined a bright white fire, lighting up the chamber, and reached my hand out. I conjured it in my hand then placed it in the hearth, where I allowed it to grow larger until it was roared and crackled like a true hearth should.

“That’s incredible,” Emilia whistled behind me.

“Have you not seen magic before?” I asked.

“Come now, I’m the daughter of a duchess. Obviously, I have seen magic. Hell, my sisters and I all know a few tricks,” she walked over and stood next to me staring at the fire. “But I’ve never seen anyone make a fire like this without fuel or anything. How did you do it?”

“I just know what it’s supposed to look like, so I make it appear.” I could feel the blood beginning to return to my face as I spoke.

“Teach me.”

“What?”

“Teach me how to do it.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t really think that’s a great idea...”

“Teach me, and I’ll teach you how to use a bow. It’ll be a fair exchange of skills that will help us both in the long run.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t see how knowing how to use a bow benefits me.”

“Well, when we get through all of this, and we will get through this, I’ll take you out hunting. The woods here are filled with boar, deer, and wolves. Any one of those creatures provides a fun bit of sport I’m sure you’d enjoy.”

I looked at Emilia and caved almost instantly. Her brown eyes were sparkling in the firelight, her dark hair loose falling around her shoulders. There was a confidence in her grin and wonder behind those eyes.

“Bring the candle over,” I sighed. Emilia skipped her way to the bedside, grabbed the lit candle and carried it over. She handed it to me, but I shook my head. “No, the candle is for you to use.”

I stared at the candle and placed my hand a few inches from the flame. I stared at the wick and reached out to feel the candle’s core. I imagined the candle’s flame growing two sizes, and it responded immediately. Emilia released a small gasp as she watched. I could not help but grin slightly as I allowed the candle to return to its original shape.

“So now what?” Emilia asked.

“Well, you’re going to try copying what I just did,” I replied. “Imagine the heart of the flame, at the end of the candle’s wick. You’ll know you’ve found it, believe me. Once you do, just imagine making it a little bigger, growing twice its size. And don’t worry if it takes you a little while to do it. If you’re not accustomed to how-”

I dropped off as I watched the candle flame grow beside her hand, a grin crossing her face as she easily completed my first challenge.

“Right. Ok good...”

“Oh, is that a hint of jealousy I hear?” Emilia teased as she made the candle’s flame grow and shrink near her hand. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ve always been a fast learner.”

“Fine, you’re a fast learner,” I smirked. “Then make the flame light up the room.”

“What, like make it bigger?”

“No, brighter.” I turned to the hearth and imagined daylight. The fire responded, immediately basking the room in light as if the sun were here with us. As quickly as I illuminated the space, I cut the flames away, shrinking it down so darkness crept its way around us again. Avara fumbled about in the bed a bit, but otherwise remained sound asleep.

“Now you try it with the candle.”

“Alright, I’ll do it.”

Emilia’s brow furrowed as she focused on the flame. She stared at it and tried to make it grow brighter, but only made the flame larger. She returned it to its normal size and made another attempt, with the same result. Her jaw locked, and a small vein in her forehead began to pop out as she closed her eyes and continued her attempts, though each one ended with the same results.

Finally, she dropped down onto her knees and placed the candle on the ground in front of her. She closed her eyes and placed her hands on her knees, steadying her breathing. A calm came over her as she focused her energy on the candle.

At first nothing happened. But after a short while, the flame’s light intensified. While she did not reach levels of daylight as I had, it illuminated the space like that of a small campfire.

When she opened her eyes, her concentration left and the candle returned to its feint glow. Yet she wore a grin knowing full well what she had accomplished.

“Impressed yet?” she asked.

“I’ll admit it, I’m impressed,” I sighed shaking my head.

“Well, what do I do next?”

“Honestly? I would work on that until you can do it without closing your eyes and going into full meditation. No point in making yourself a light if your eyes are closed the entire time.”

At this she rolled her eyes and reached out her hand. I helped her to her feet, and she gave me a little wink.

“Well, time for the teacher to become the student.”

#

The top of the tower blew me away. The sheer size of the domed ring was incredible, topped off by the looming cone roof overhead. The ground was made of black stones surrounded by a seven-foot wall. From there, seats rose until they met the roof. There were no windows; everything was illuminated by magical braziers that hovered over the arena floors.

“This is incredible,” I gasped as we entered. We took the stairs up and then passed down a long hallway with various doors that led to seats, private viewing areas, or the tunnels that ran around the arena, allowing combatants, performers, or anyone else to enter in grand fashion.

“According to the old tales, this entire place used to be a dwarven arena,” Emilia explained. “Gladiators fought here until the Age of Heroes when humans began claiming more territory. Edinrow was said to be the name of a human gladiator that amassed enough wealth to eventually buy the property for himself. Everything else was built around this.”

“That’s incredible.”

“It’s the oldest building in the entire kingdom of Eastwood still standing. There’s a bunch of stories and history I could talk about if you’re into that.”

“If we get through this week, I’d love to hear all about it,” I replied.

“*When* we get through this,” Emilia stated. “We can take a couple of stiffs from the church. They’re human, just like us.”

Along the left side of the arena, a series of training dummies and other various devices were laid out. Beside them, weapons racks with practice swords, staves, shields, and several bows and arrows. Emilia immediately grabbed a bow and slung quiver over her back. She then tossed me one which I caught rather clumsily in my arms.

“By the gods,” She sighed. “I thought you were kidding when you said you’d never shot a bow.”

“I’m from the Storm Plains,” I said in defense. “Why would I ever use a bow?”

“Because they’re a great weapon!” She laughed. “No worries, you’ll understand by the end of this. You’ll never go anywhere without one again. Now grab one of those quivers and follow me!”

I slung a quiver over my back, nearly spilling all its arrows in the process, and made my way after Emilia. She brought us towards the dummies lining the wall, roughly twenty feet back. Without a word, she notched her first arrow and released. The arrow flew faster than I could have anticipated and pierced the dummy in the center of what would have been its head.

“The short bow is a powerful tool,” Emilia said as she drew another arrow. “It’s not like the sword or a hammer; it’s not a weapon that responds to fury and rage. It takes a calm, steady presence to properly use such a tool, whether in a hunt or battle.”

She released, placing the second arrow close enough to the first for the feathers on the back of the bow to brush against one another.

“That’s not going to be a problem for you, is it?”

“Calm and steady shouldn’t be much of an issue,” I replied, as I instinctually reached for the blade by my hip.

“Perfect. Let us get started then. Remove the bow from your quiver. Now, notch it against your string, like so,” she demonstrated the process, laying her arrow steady against her bow’s string. “Now before you draw back the arrow, you need to know a few things. First, do not be too tense. Second, keep your arms level to one another. The arrow is a line, so if your line is off, it will not fly straight. Finally, make sure to aim before you let go.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. I nodded in slow understanding and reached my hand down to pull back the arrow. I placed one finger above and two below, just as Emilia did, and pulled the string back. It was taut and harder to draw back than I anticipated. My muscles began to tense, so I reached into the sword’s magic for a little clarity. My body responded immediately, relaxing as I straightened my arms and looked down the arrow’s shaft. I stared at the dummy and Emilia’s arrows, and I released.

The arrow flew straight, and while it wasn’t as pure a shot as Emilia’s, it managed to clip the side of the dummy’s head before rattling harmlessly off the stone wall.

“Well, better than I expected,” Emilia shrugged. “Still, unless you were trying to remove the fellow’s ear, I suggest you remove that stupid grin of yours and keep practicing.”

“Come now, that’s not bad for a first time,” I replied.

“Meh, I’ve seen better. And right now, we need better. So keep trying.”

I frowned but drew another arrow and took aim. I altered my stance and aimed further to the right to compensate for my miss, but when I released the shot, the arrow grazed the other side of the head.

“You overcompensated.”

“I noticed.”

“Well keep practicing then. You’ll figure it all out eventually.” She winked at me and proceeded to draw and release another arrow, all in one quick motion. She had no time to aim, and yet her arrow clumped with her first two, right in the man’s head.

“You’re very good, I’ll give you that,” I said, staring at the arrow. “Though I must say, I’d probably be that good too if I could enchant my arrows.”

“What?”

“I didn’t notice it on the first two, but I definitely noticed it then,” I exclaimed walking towards the dummy. “The thing is, I just don’t understand how you did it.”

“I practiced and got good,” she called, running behind me. “Practice and skill, that’s how I did it!”

“Maybe the first shot, but not the second, and definitely not that last one.” I walked up to the dummy and placed a hand on her first arrow. There was no magical trace. I placed it on the third arrow she released but found none there as well. However, when I gripped the second arrow, I could feel the ever faint presence of an enchantment just beginning to fade.

“I knew it.” I drew out the arrow and examined it, but I was cut short by Emilia’s hand snatching it from my grasp.

“Alright, I enchant the arrows, but not all of them!” She sounded flustered; her face red as she stared at the arrow in her hand. “I am the best archer here, that point can’t be debated. But yeah, sometimes I use a little extra magic. Honestly, I don’t see the big deal...”

“Hey, I’m not here to judge. Quite the contrary; I want to know how you do it.”

“Well to be honest, it’s not much different than your work with fire,” she shrugged, placing the arrow back in her quiver. “The first shot was all me, and so was the second one. The

only difference was on the second arrow, I felt its path and placed a focused magic on the tip of the arrow that would act as a magnet. So even if I were slightly off, I knew it would be pulled towards the head of the first shot. Then all the others would just collect around the second shot as well.”

“Why not enchant the first one then? Why wait for the second?”

“Because if I miss with the first, all my other shots will miss too.” When she spoke, she looked at me as if I had asked a ridiculously stupid question.

“Ok, fine, makes sense, I get it,” I nodded. “But still, why wouldn’t my arrows hit the arrow too?”

“They’re not my arrows.”

“So?”

“Honestly, do I have to explain everything? The enchantment works by tracking my arrows that I have personally touched and placed the marker on. Yours aren’t connected to my spell, so naturally they get deflected.”

“Deflected?” I shouted. “Are you telling me your shots made mine go wide?”

“No, nothing like that,” she chuckled. “You just missed because you suck. If I were you, I’d get back to shooting.”

“Maybe if I knew how to enchant my shot, I’d be better...”

“Sorry Daelin. You must be able to shoot an arrow straight before you can enchant it. Now get back on the line and get back to work!”

Chapter 30: Avara

Avara slept soundly. In her dreams, she was back on the open sea with the smell of salt water and the soft touch of the ocean breeze. She smiled and took in a deep breath as the boat shot forward. There was a slight rocking as the boat rode the waves, but it comforted her as she sat staring in the distance.

She rose from her seat the front of the ship and walked towards the ship's rear. She passed sailors that saluted and bowed their hats, all while clearing the deck for her. The ship was spotless and in perfect order. They were making good course north as they kept the rising sun to their east as a perfect guiding point.

At the ship's rear, a woman was hunched over the rails. Her knuckles had turned white as she slouched forward, her black hair hanging in a tangled mess around her. Avara wore an impish grin as she walked up behind the woman and pretended to push her, shouting aloud as she did.

“Shit!” Emilia gasped, her grip tightening as she whirled on a laughing Avara. “Why the hells would you do that?”

“I’m just having a bit of fun is all,” Avara grinned as she leaned on the rail. “I figured you’d enjoy a little fun to start the morning off right.”

“Your definition of fun continues to astound me,” Emilia huffed as she resumed her hunched posture over the rails. “Honestly, I’m not sure coming aboard was all that good an idea...”

“You just haven’t earned your sea legs yet,” Avara assured her. “Trust me, give it time and you’ll come to love the open waters. The possibilities and freedom out here are endless! I figured you’d enjoy it...”

Emilia reached her pale hand over and wrapped her fingers around Avara’s. “I’ll do my best. I can’t promise anything more than that.”

“That’s all I can ask,” Avara whispered with a smile.

As the two stood there, a darkness suddenly swept over them. Above, massive black clouds began to swirl, forming a spiral in the sky. Suddenly, purple lightning shot down to the deck, shattering the main mast and starting a blaze on the ship.

“Captain, we’re losing her!” a crew member shouted before a massive wave threw him overboard.

Before Avara could react, the hand in hers became cold. She turned in time to watch Emilia’s black hair turn grey and her skin turn pure white. Her hair hid her face as her body slouched over the rail and fell overboard, plummeting into the raging ocean that swallowed her below.

“No!” Avara screamed, reaching a helpless hand downward at empty air.

The sudden clang of metallic boots echoed all around. Pieces of plate clinked against one another as the sound grew louder. Through it, a woman’s voice began shouting: “Guilty!”

Avara turned and drew her daggers, only to watch them crumble to dust in her hands. They blew away in the wind, leaving her defenseless as the paladin emerged from a sudden fog. Her armor glinted silver and gold despite the lack of sun. A sword dragged behind her. Despite the helm that covered her face, Avara knew the paladin wore a wicked grin with teeth like a demon as she approached.

“Guilty!” the paladin shrieked.

With a single motion, she raised the sword above her head. Avara was trapped, unable to move as the blade struck her...

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Her eyes shot open. The room was no longer dark, though the sun had yet to rise. A fire burned in the hearth, clearly conjured up by magic as it silently crackled and warmed the room. The room had grown hot, and her skin shone with a layer of sweat that had beaded over her body.

With a shiver, she removed the blankets covering her and stepped onto the stone floor. Despite the warmth in the room, the stone remained cool to the touch, welcoming for her feet. She stood from the bed and began to wander forward, stretching as she shook off her nightmare. She was alone in an empty room; where Daelin and Emilia had gone, she did not know. Still, she enjoyed the moment of peace and decided to make use of the bathing chamber adjoining the bed chamber.

The bath was empty, with a golden faucet at the end of the basin in the ground. She turned the first knob and water began to spew forward, emitting steam as it was instantly warm. This was no normal bath, clearly aided by some form of magic. It seemed everywhere Avara turned traditional tools were increasingly using magic. The gates, the doors, the baths, even the fires in the room, all created by some wizard or magician of some kind.

“Easy, Avara. We’ll get through this.”

With a heavy sigh, she removed her clothes and stepped into the nearly filled basin, turning the water off as she did. She dove under immediately, allowing her body to completely submerge under the surface. She closed her eyes and held her breath, simply enjoying the peace that came in the simple moment, floating practically weightless just below the surface.

She sat up slowly and leaned against the back of the tub. She pushed her hair back behind her and tried to calm herself. Her dream had been nothing more than that, a dream. Despite the challenges that lay ahead, she needed to remember she would not be fighting alone. While she may not be the magic user those paladins were, she was allied with magic users that just might be able to take them on.

She just needed to stay out of the way.

As she lay in the bath, the door to the chamber creaked open. The footsteps were quiet, not like Emilia nor Daelin. They moved towards the side table, and she heard a metal tray get placed down. The individual seemed to rummage around the room for a bit, before, to Avara’s surprise, they pushed open the bath chamber door.

“Oh, hello. Good morning,” the woman said.

Avara turned her head to see a red-faced blonde woman standing in the doorway.

“Good morning,” Avara replied. “Can I help you?”

“Oh, well... I admit I was looking for my sister, or perhaps Daelin, but I see they are not here.” She spoke. “But seeing you is fine too of course! I brought breakfast for everyone.”

“Thanks that’s very kind of you,” Avara sighed, turning her back on the woman again. “Before you go, tell me, you’re the same person we met at the place on the plains, right? You helped us escape?”

“Yes, my name is Ariel. I’m Emilia’s younger sister.”

“Well, Ariel, thank you.” Avara sighed. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to rest...”

Ariel turned to leave, then stopped. She turned back at Avara and closed the bath chamber door, entering the room. Avara heard the door click and turned with a quizzical look to face her visitor.

“Something is troubling you,” Ariel said. “Normally, I wouldn’t pry, but since my sister’s life is your hands, well I’d like to know what’s bothering you.”

“I’m fine.”

“I don’t believe you. The bags on your eyes say you had a troubled sleep. No one else is here now, so whatever you share will be shared in confidence, I assure you.”

“It’s rather difficult to sleep when you know you’re trapped in a trial you knew nothing about,” Avara shrugged turning away. “There’s nothing more to tell.”

“I can see you’re not really one for speaking, which is fine.” Ariel sat down at the end of the room, her back against the door. “Still, this is all turning out be rather frightening for me as well. I know, I’m not fighting, and I shouldn’t be so worried. But I’ve just... I’ve seen this all play out before in my visions. It’s... worrisome, to say the least.”

Avara rolled her eyes and ignored the ramblings of the woman. She had her fill of magic. The last thing she wanted to hear were murmurings of visions and prophecies.

Sensing Avara’s mistrust, Ariel changed subjects. “I’ve seen Syltra.”

“Oh yeah? Are you caring for her?” Avara asked.

“I’m in charge of most of the medicine that goes on around here, so yes, I’ve seen her. I can’t guarantee when or how she will wake up, but I can assure you she is feeling better. Despite

her unconscious state, the lust of her hair is returning, and her breathing is much less laborious than when she first arrived.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Avara admitted. “How’d you do it?”

“Magic. Specifically magic from my goddess, Sylla. The powers are practically the same. I’ve been giving her part of my magic every hour to replenish her own. Her body is fatigued, but she is receptive to the magic. I believe it will work, though not in time for the trial.”

“It’s for the best, I would say. If she were at the trial, she would be a liability.”

“Perhaps, but that does put more pressure on those of you able to fight,” Ariel sighed. “You need to understand the predicament you now find yourself in. In less than a week, you will have to face off with two paladins trained to kill. You’re outmatched but not outnumbered.”

“I understand the situation just fine, thanks,” Avara snapped.

“But can you handle yourself in combat with holy champions and demons?”

Avara prepared another quip but paused and reconsidered. The truth was, she herself doubted her own abilities in the face of the power she would engage.

“I can’t help you in the ring, and I unfortunately won’t be able to do anything to help my sister either,” Ariel sounded ready to cry as she attempted to keep her voice steady. “All I can do is ease the burden on your minds so you can fight them well, and win. Just, try not to think of anything else. You have a tough challenge ahead... I just want the best for all of you...”

“You don’t think we can win.”

“You’re not the only human who may be in over her head.”

“You’re sister...”

“She’s a good woman, better than most of us.” Ariel turned away as she spoke, her hair falling over her face to hide the tears welling in her eyes. “She always tried more than the rest of

us to be a good ruler, and she always wanted to be the next duchess at Edinrow. She tried avoiding all the games mother played, or at least tried to play them with some sense of morals. But agreeing to step in and fight with you two...”

Avara understood Ariel’s emotion and rose from the bath. She wrapped herself in a towel quickly and walked over to where Ariel sat. She knelt beside the woman and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“I’ll do everything I can to protect your sister. That’s a promise. Just... I guess promise me you’ll get Syldra through this. If we survive, it’ll be a hell of a story to share with her.”

Ariel smiled and nodded. “I promise I’ll get her through this.”

Avara nodded then helped Ariel to her feet.

“Now get the hells out of here,” Avara said, opening the door. “I’ve got work to do.”

Chapter 31: Opportunistic

“One more round.”

I sat against the wall beside a drained waterskin. Sweat drenched through my armor as I pushed myself to my feet again. I stretched, releasing an audible crack from my back before turning to Emilia.

“Come on, one more round before we call it a day,” she said. She stood tall and ready, despite the sweat dripping over her. She bounced from foot to foot as she urged me back into the fray.

“Alright, I’ve got one more in me,” I replied. “What about you?”

“Fuck it, we’re running out of time every day, might as well make the most of it,” Avara sighed, tossing aside her waterskin and grabbing up her daggers. I picked up the training sword and dagger from the ground and walked slowly to the center of the arena. Emilia followed with a sword and shield of her own.

Unlike most days, the arena had gathered a bit of a crowd. While Adella did not have many guests in her castle, she allowed her council and soldiers free reign of her grounds. Word of the trial of combat between paladins and demons spread quickly, and it wasn’t long before

people realized where we trained. The closer we came to the date of the actual trial, the greater the crowds that formed to observe our work. Adella herself was among the onlookers today. She had shown up at the end of our training that first day and seemed fixated on me. Since then, she had observed every one of my fights, as if she were my opponent taking notes on my movement and abilities. I could feel her unbroken gaze follow me throughout the arena.

Today she brought with her a procession of knights. The armor they wore was less functional than it was presentable, designed to show their wealth and station. They shared jokes and stories while watching us, most of them uninterested in our work. Only Adella truly watched us, her expression cold and calculating the entire time.

“I never knew your mother enjoyed fighting so much,” I said as the three of us set up in the center of the ring.

“You and I both know she’s not here to watch us fight,” Emilia laughed as she readied her weapons. “Just try to ignore her and focus on trying to beat me, alright?”

I nodded and took in a heavy breath of air. I lowered myself into my fighting stance, and we slowly began to circle one another. Each deliberate step kept us just out of striking distance, each of us waiting for an opening to lunge. Emilia’s eyes darted across me, glancing from my footwork to my grip, to my own eye motions.

Eventually, her impatience got the better of her she lunged, making a simple strike with her sword. I brought up my dagger to parry and brushed it aside, leaving me an opening to stab. I never thought the blow would land. Sure enough, her shield moved with greater speed than my own, easily deflecting the attack. However, it closed her stance, giving an opportunity to strike at her side while she was off balance. I could hear the faintest sound of wood against chain as she stepped aside.

“I got you there,” I boasted, retreating into my ready position.

“You barely nicked my armor,” she replied as she regathered herself. “In a real fight, neither one of us would have noticed. Besides, you forgot there are three of us.”

As if on cue, Avara kicked me in the back of the knee, forcing me down into the dirt. I whirled around with my sword to force Emilia back and brought my dagger up just in time to stop Avara’s strike.

“You guys are teaming up on me now?”

“I’m opportunistic, that’s all!” Avara shouted, jumping back as I swung my sword at her legs. “You should have learned that much by now!”

As I faced Avara, Emilia rejoined the fray, leading with her shield. I turned again to attempt fending her off, swinging my sword and dagger in wide arcs to keep the two assailants at bay. They allowed the little game to continue, neither one stepping too close, though still taking brief swings here and there when the opportunity arose. Eventually, I grew wary of the game and decided to drop the dagger. I lunged at Emilia with my off hand and latched onto her shield to throw her off balance. She stumbled, taken by surprise, allowing me to swing with my sword. She easily deflected the blow and let the shield fall harmlessly from her arm.

I did not realize it, but I had just lost the fight. Avara struck at that moment, and I barely had time to swing the shield at her like a club to push her back. As I did, Emilia came barreling down, releasing one quick strike after the other. I scrambled to parry her blows, but I was completely outmatched sword to sword. In mere seconds, she overwhelmed my defenses. In one final strike, she knocked my blade aside. Before I knew it, the tip of her wooden sword was against my neck, and I was dead.

“What does that make our fights, six to none now?” she laughed as she lowered her sword. “For a demon who’s killed countless foes, you’re not all that impressive.”

“Give him a break, he has been fighting two on one,” Avara laughed.

“Yes, but we need the practice together,” Emilia concluded. “If we intend to split the fight up, he needs to hold against a paladin one on one, which means he better be able to fend us off one on one.”

“Maybe you’re just better than you thought,” I said.

“Doubtful. I will say, I’m thinking this fight will go much different than I anticipated.” Emilia sighed. “I’m starting to think we don’t actually have a chance to win after all...”

“We’ll figure it out, we still have a few days of preparation,” Avara chimed in. “Come on, let’s call it before we hurt ourselves.”

Let... me... do it!

The demon’s voice was subtle, barely a whisper as he fought to reach me through Aelandria’s spell. I ignored it and resealed the defenses he slipped through, but I was slowly beginning to consider his offer. I lost six times, barely laying a scratch on either one of my opponents. Against paladins in full plate armor, I liked my chances of victory even less. But if I allowed the demon out again, he could win. He had won before; I believed he could do it again. However, the cost of such desperation haunted me...

“Daelin, are you alright?”

I nearly walked into Emilia as she addressed me. I did not realize it, but I had begun wandering towards Adella and the onlookers. Emilia cut me off at the last minute, placing a staying hand on my chest to hold me back.

“I’m sorry, I was just lost for a moment there,” I sighed.

“Right, well let’s keep it together. Do not show anyone anything but complete confidence in yourself. You can lose yourself when we’re back behind closed doors.”

I nodded and followed her back to the weapon’s rack. As we went, I spared a glance at Adella, who’s expression gave nothing away. We locked eyes for a moment, but even then, I could read nothing.

After some time, Avara rose again and made her way to the center of the ring and removed her knives. She began tossing them around, dancing them between her fingers, before releasing them in rapid succession. Each one hit a different dummy with precision that rivaled Emilia’s with a bow. When she finished throwing her last knife, she retrieved them all and resumed her routine.

“Her definition of rest is very different than what you’d expect,” Emilia half laughed before grabbing her bow and joining her in the center.

Before I knew it, the two were trading shots, each one alternating targets and turning about one another as if they had been practicing their whole life. Their competitive fire was unrivaled, and each break in their routine was accompanied by a small roar of applause from various onlookers. I even whistled a few times myself.

“They’re quite impressive. Perhaps you will have a chance after all.”

I turned as Adella approached. Her dress dragged against the dust behind her before rolling off the fine green silk. She stood beside me and watched the women with feigned interest before eventually turning to address me.

“Unfortunately, they won’t win if their partner refuses to unleash his true powers.”

“I’m not sure I like your tone,” I replied as menacingly as I could muster.

“That’s cute dear. Give it more time and you may strike me as threatening. But again, we both know you’re holding back.” She turned to me and leaned in close. “These paladins are here to kill a demon. If I were you, I’d give them more demon than they can possibly handle.”

“The demon doesn’t need to show for us to win. I am just as capable, and I’ve learned plenty. The demon is a monster no one wishes to see.”

“And yet you can’t win without it!” Adella chuckled to herself. “Gorm has been quite forthcoming in our nights together. I have learned a great deal about you and your monstrous powers. The fires in the city. The burn on Andorath’s face. It’s all amazing that such power resides in such a delicate form.”

“If he’s told you the stories, then you should know the demon isn’t to be trifled with. You don’t want it to come out. Not in your castle, and certainly not hundreds of feet above the ground.”

“You don’t know what I want, but that’s of little consequence. What you do know is that my daughter is in this fight. If she dies, it’ll be your head.”

“I have no intention of letting either one of those two come to harm,” I said, turning back to look over at the two continuing their dance in the arena’s center. “They will have to kill me before they can harm her.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” She placed a hand on my shoulder and turned me about, so we were looking at one another. Her eyes squinted as she stared into mine, then all at once turned back around and walked away.

“That’s it?” I called out.

“Yes, that’s all for now. I have matters of my own to attend to,” she waved a hand dismissively as she parted through the entry, disappearing.

I stared after her when a stray arrow whistled by my ear, clipping it just enough to draw a small trickle of blood. I covered it and turned to see Emilia and Avara staring at me with the same sour expression.

“The hells was that for?”

“You’re slacking,” Avara shouted back.

“Let’s go, we’ve got work to do!” Emilia added.

I released a heavy sigh and reclaimed my weapons from the rack. I shook out my shoulders, then rushed to join them back in the center of the ring, our training session only just beginning.

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We were all battered and bruised by the time we finished. Our feet barely held under us, and we had emptied the last of our reserves of water we brought with us.

“Well, that’s enough now,” Emilia said between long drinks of water. “I don’t care what anyone else says, we’ve hit our limit today.”

“Agreed,” Avara nodded.

“Daelin must pick up the pace, though. He’s obviously our weak link.”

I shrugged and stood up, stretching as I did. “I wouldn’t worry about me just yet. I’ve a couple tricks left you haven’t seen yet.”

“As long as it isn’t that demon, I don’t care what it is,” Avara whispered. “That last thing we need is another one of those running loose...”

Without another word, she dropped her skin of water and left.

“She’ll be alright,” I sighed, noting the concern overtaking Emilia’s expression. “I think she’s feeling the weight of losing Syldra more than most.”

“That happens when you lose the one’s you love...”

I looked up at Emilia as her voice trailed off. I followed her gaze to her mother, who returned Emilia’s gaze. The two shared a silent moment, before Emilia broke their connection and parted as well.

“I’m going to wash up, maybe clear my head. I might try talking with Avara too.” she said softly. “Give me some time before you follow me down?”

“I understand. Take your time,” I replied.

She nodded then walked away, leaving me alone in the center of the arena. Looking around, most of the onlookers had parted for the evening. They would be heading back to their homes to enjoy warm cooked meals and soft beds surrounded by loved ones sharing stories and song. Meanwhile, I was going to lay on a stone floor with nothing but the somber company of my comrades.

As I scanned the audience, I realized that, besides Adella, another onlooker remained off in the top row. His face seemed troubled as usual; his arms crossed over his chest as he watched me. I waved to Gorm; he beckoned me to join him.

Noting my escort remained outside the arena, and seeing no other spectators, I walked into the shadow of the arena’s wall. I looked to Gorm, then attempted to shadow phase. It was the first leap I made since our battle with the demon, and I was two rows short of Gorm’s spot. Disgruntled, I clambered my way over the last seating to take my place beside him.

“You’re sloppy,” he grumbled.

“It’ll come back to me,” I assured him.

He turned on me swiftly, a raised finger pointing me down as he broke into his rant.

“It needs to be back now,” he hissed. “Your footwork is slow; the grip of your sword is sporadic; and you look lost with those other two. Beyond that, you haven’t used magic once. That may be your greatest asset, and you’re ignoring it! Get serious out there. You have two days! Tighten up your routine or accept death now.”

He slouched back down and crossed his arms, releasing a heavy sigh as he did. “Fact of the matter is, we may still need you. That demon is surely out there, and when it shows...well... let’s just say I’d rather not have to face it alone.”

I sighed and stared out over the arena. “I get it, and I’m sorry. But I can’t let the paladins know how strong I’ve gotten. Rumors spread quickly around here. It’s better to have some element of surprise-”

“You give yourself too much credit,” Gorm interrupted. “They don’t give a shit about you or your skills. They’re confident they’ll beat you no matter what. They’ve seen you fight countless times. They’ll be ready. You need to be at your peak performance, and that comes through practicing the right way. If you’re sloppy now, you’ll be sloppy then. If you take it seriously now, well maybe you’ll have a chance.”

“Do you think I can do it without... using it.”

Gorm rose from his seat and stared down at the arena for some time before turning to me. In his eyes, I could see all the answer I needed. I released a sigh as my body slouched back, my head hanging low as I watched him walk away.

Adella stood some distance off. I looked up at her, but she quickly turned away and disappeared through the spectator tunnels as soon as I noticed her.

Alone in the arena, I took out Aelandria's sword and clutched it tightly in my hands. I stared at the blade, silver and shining, and allowed myself to get lost in the flow of magic radiating from the blade.

Only after darkness completely settled over us, did I sheath the blade and return to my chambers below.

Chapter 32: Night and Day

The next day, the three of us went up once again to train. As had become the trend, more spectators were here than the previous few days combined. As the actual trial drew near, the anticipation in the castle grew.

Picking up my weapons, I could feel the countless eyes watching me. Some were inspecting me, watching to see how well I could truly fight. Others were curious, intrigued at the idea that a demon could be lurking inside of me. Others still were simply there because it seemed like the popular thing to do.

“Alright, let’s try to ignore the audience and focus,” Emilia instructed. “We’re only going to work for a few hours this morning because we want to be rested before tomorrow. Let’s do our thing and get the hell out of here.”

“Agreed,” Avara chimed in. “I’m not particularly thrilled that a trial to the death has taken on such a spectacle.”

“Oh, come now, don’t act all surprised. Remember, we had gladiator bouts up until just a few centuries ago. Everyone loves the thrill of combat; people just can’t get enough of it.”

Avara snorted and walked to the center of the arena, followed by Emilia. The two inspected their weapons and loosened their muscle before moving straight into their routine. The solid thump of arrows and knives striking their target quickly filled the air. The frequency of strikes increased, until the two were locked in perfect rhythm.

As they moved, I knelt and placed a hand on the hilt of Aelandria's blade. I pulled in a bit of magical energy to clear my thoughts, then I began to focus. I reached out around me and tried to feel the energy surrounding the place. There were slight shutters that I managed to trace; these shutters were faint, like butterfly wings. These were the arrows and knives, cutting through the air at such speed and frequency, they were creating soft ripples of magical energy. I began marking each one and traced their motions in the air. I began to visualize a web of flight paths and managed to lock in on the precise rhythm they moved with. As their dance continued, I attempted to reach out to one of the arrows and enchant its motion at the last minute.

I heard the faint sound of wood striking metal. When I looked over, I saw that one of the knives now lay in the sand as its path to the target had been cut-off by the arrow. In the center, Avara and Emilia raised an eyebrow each, but they never missed a beat as they continued to strike at the targets.

I let a slight smirk cross my face as I looked up to see Gorm staring down at me from the stands. He released a visible huff, but he too wore a slight smirk.

"Hey, what are you all giddy about?" Avara snapped. Sweat already covered her body, and she was breathing heavily. "You plan on joining us?"

"I'll let you two be a while longer," I called back. "I have my own preparations to make."

Avara seemed disappointed, but she resumed her training with Emilia. The two began trading blows, sparring with fierce intensity despite their dulled weapons. Either one seemed

ready to kill the other, despite their alliance. There was no doubt in my mind the two were learning to fight together in perfect unison, like a single weapon. It was incredible to watch, and I would have applauded if I were just a spectator.

I turned from their bout and walked to the edge of the arena, placing myself in the shadows. I stood across from the main pavilion in the stands, where Adella was watching me as usual. The pavilion blocked her from most of the other audience members, but it also encompassed her in a small shadow. She had a few guards armed in full plate accompanying her. Between us was fifty feet of illuminated space.

I stepped into the shadows and began drawing a mental pathway, like a river cutting through the mountains. The shadows wound and turned through the audience, hiding in the unlikeliest of places, until they eventually reached Adella.

In one instant, I vanished.

The guards leapt to their feet when I appeared behind Adella. They scrambled to ready their weapons, each one placing the points of their weapons at my chest. Adella, for her part, seemed rather amused. A small smile crossed her lips.

“And what do I owe this pleasure, demon?” she mused.

“I simply wished to put on a show for you,” I replied. “Afterall, so many people wanted to see the Demon of Windhelm. I figured I’d give them some stories to bring home.”

“Fancy little trick you put on,” Adella remarked. “I can’t say I’ve ever seen any magic user perform such a spectacle.”

“Well, simply put I’m not like most people.”

“No, and yet you seem oh so familiar...”

I bowed low and vanished again, retracing the shadows back to the arena floor below. In the pavilion, the guards stared down at me, fumbling about in their heavy plate. They turned from Adella to me, waiting for her orders. She merely winked at me and waved her guards back to their stations.

“What the hell was that?” Emilia shouted as she and Avara rushed over. “How did you just do that?”

“He shadow phased,” Avara said. “He and Syltra do this all the time. It’s probably their most used trick.”

“You’ve been able to do this the entire time you’ve been here?”

“Well... yes,” I replied.

Emilia punched me in the arm. “You idiot! You’ve been able to pull that, and you haven’t used it in our fights once? How long did you plan on hiding that from me!”

“To be honest I didn’t think-”

“Exactly! You weren’t thinking!”

“That’s enough,” Avara cut in. “Let’s be frustrated later. You know he can phase. So what? How does that change our fight? Frankly, it makes him more elusive, which makes our plan work much, much better.”

The two women shared a look with one another, and I felt my stomach drop. “We? AS in you two have something new to share with me?”

“Look, I know we talked about trying to divide and conquer, but I’m not so sure that’s going to work as we thought. I just don’t think the two of us can handle a warrior dressed fully in plate.” Avara explained, “so we need to be smart. Our assets are our accuracy from afar. If we

can find weak points in their armor, we can unleash a furious ranged barrage without being in harm's way."

"So, what happens when they try to charge you and get close? What if they put up their shields and just close the distance?"

The two shared a look, then looked at me.

"I see..."

"We're sorry, but if we're going to have any chance at this, you'll have to take more than a few hits tomorrow," Emilia said. "That big man, Andorath? He's obsessed with you. You run around and do your little phasing magic, and he'll completely ignore us. It does mean he'll probably beat the shit out of you, but if we do our jobs right, you'll survive the beating."

"I know it's a tough plan, but it's better than going in blind," Avara added.

"Don't worry, I understand." I nodded. "But what about Loria?"

"That's where things get tricky," Avara admitted. "I think she'll be more tactical in her approach. You'll have to fool her into thinking you're a bigger threat and keep on you, not us."

As we spoke, the attention of the crowd turned to the arena's entrance. There grew the sound of metal footsteps against the stone accompanied by white light that stretched down the tunnel's entrance. From that light emerged the two paladins: Lorie with her sword and shield, and Andorath with his massive war hammer. They looked briefly in our direction, then proceeded to the center of the arena.

"I'd say that's a signal for us to part," Emilia whispered.

"I thought they weren't allowed in the arena?" I whispered. "Wasn't this meant to be a private area?"

"Clearly they heard the rumblings and caught on to our little show..."

“It’s alright, maybe we can turn this to our advantage,” Avara replied. “We have a chance to watch them fight. We’ve only faced them once before, and that was interrupted by a demon. Now, we can see them for what they are. Let’s not waste the opportunity.”

Emilia pouted, and I shared her sentiment. Nevertheless, we remained.

The paladins walked to the center of the arena and gave a brief salute to the duchess before turning their attention on each other. They sprung into a routine of flashes: Loria with her sword and shield, and Andorath with his hammer. Their movements were crisp and deliberate; they struck at each other but never landed a blow as they perfectly deflected and dodged each other’s weapons. The grace of their movements and the power of their strikes captivated us. They performed for the audience a wild dance, kicking up a cloud of dirt around them as they went. Their armor continued to shine white, and the metal ringing of their weapons filled with entire place.

Eventually, they came to their finale and halted. His hammer was inches from her face, while her sword poked at his throat, leaving the smallest drop of blood to trickle down his exposed neck. The two breathed heavily and stared at one another for those few moments. Then they nodded and broke from one another.

They turned to Adella, and the woman raised her sword. She pointed at the duchess before sheathing her blade and turning to the crowd that had gathered there.

“I see you are all eager to watch our little bout!” she shouted. “I can understand why. It is a rarity to see holy warriors acting their gods will against the wickedest of creatures around us. For that reason, I propose to make this showing as public as possible!”

A few whispers and murmurs spread through the assembled crowd. Adella was clearly not pleased.

“Tomorrow, we propose moving our trial to this wonderous arena. Let a battle that will surely pass through the history books be held in a historical place worthy of such significance!”

At this, some people began to applaud.

“It is settled then. Tomorrow, the gods’ will shall be done!” She gave a salute to the crowd, while Andorath simply grunted. They turned to leave then, though Loria paused shortly before the three of us.

“Our fight is with you, demon. You other two stay out of the way, and you may find you survive,” she hissed.

“Surrender now, and you may find you can return the Enclave alive,” Avara snapped.

“I appreciate your cunning; unfortunate you fight for the losing side.”

Without another word, the paladins parted, as did much of the crowd. Many of them and more would show tomorrow, but they would not be here to watch a fight. They would come to see a massacre. As they left, it was clear they shared the same thoughts.

The paladins would win, and the three of us didn’t stand a chance.

#

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve never felt worse than this in my life.”

Emilia sat on the bed with a robe thrown over her undergarments. Avara sat beside her, holding a glass for each of them filled with a bit of brandy. They had eaten little and drank more since we returned. The spectacle had not been the advantage they had hoped for, and Avara was struggling to spin a positive out of the display. By now the sun had set, yet sleep continued to elude as we sat in the bed chamber. Despite the luxuries that surrounded us and the inviting comfort of a bath in the doors just beyond, the walls felt more and more like a prison.

“We need to refocus, that’s all.” I managed to say. “They were up there to intimidate us, that’s all. We can’t let them get into our head now...”

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of that? Don’t let the fact that we’re about to face off against fully armored opponents who move faster in plate than I do in my fucking underwear! Don’t let the fact that they wave a hammer around larger than I am! Of course, none of it could possibly rattle me!” Emilia took her drink from Avara as she laughed and collapsed onto the bed.

“I’m just saying, it’s probably going to be fine.”

“Gods, of course you’re saying that; you’re drunk!”

“Emilia, he hasn’t had a single drink,” Avara sighed. “He’s trying to be optimistic, and frankly I agree with him. We should try to act like we’re going to make it through tomorrow.”

“Exactly,” I nodded. “See we’ve fought them before and survived once. We can do it again.”

“You barely escaped with your life, remember? This time is different. You don’t have your master magician, you don’t have your friend, and you can’t run away. We’ll be fighting in the open arena. There’s no hiding in there. This time they just might finish what they’ve been trying to do all along!” She rose from the bed and threw her glass into the fire. Shards of glass exploded, and the blaze turned purple for a moment before subsiding. “What if the third time is the charm for them? What if they do manage to gain the upper hand? I think we’re good, but we’re nothing compared to them. Nothing...”

Avara rose from her seat and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Emilia turned into the embrace and rested her head against Avara’s shoulder, as she was slightly shorter. They stood by the fire, silently praying to whatever god they believed would listen. I stared into the

fire, debating the consequences that lay before me. I could surrender to them and die quickly. That would save the other two. Or I could let the demon out, but then no one would be safe...

"I'm sorry," Emilia broke from Avara's embrace and addressed me. "After seeing them fight, I really don't know what we can do. All this time I figured I had taken some semblance of control, but all I've been doing is riding a storm towards an untimely end."

"I'll figure something out," I whispered. "I don't know how, but I'll find some way out of all of this. No one must die tomorrow. There has to be a way to avoid it..."

I left the two of them near the fire and knocked against our bed chamber door. The guard opened it and peered inside at me. It was a young man, likely stationed here to take the night shift while the older men slept. His eyes were baggy, but he tried to look alert as he addressed me.

"Can I help you? You're supposed to be resting, I believe." His voice cracked slightly as he tried to sound stern.

"Take me to the medical wards." I commanded.

"Sir, I don't think-

"Do it Owain," Emilia shouted from inside. "Just do it."

The guard seemed puzzled, but he did not argue with his superior. He nodded to Emilia, then motioned for me to follow. I knew sleep would not come that night, and I truly worried that tomorrow would be the last breath of air I took in for some time.

Best to say my goodbyes while I still could.

Chapter 33: Deals in the Dark

The guard led me away from the room through the main halls and stairwell. There were no secret tunnels or rooms we passed through, as those were reserved secrets this man, barely older than me, knew nothing about.

Outside, the sun finished its decent overhead, and darkness now lay over the castle. There were a few sentries along the wall and a pair of soldiers making their way over the main ground on patrol. Otherwise, the place slept. The silence of night was always so much different than bustle of the daytime, yet it was always something I found more inviting. I was at peace in the darkness and appreciated the guard's silence. With Aelandria's sword by my hip, I enjoyed the quiet in my head as we entered the barracks.

Inside smelled of sweat and metal We went to the far side and descended a single level into a long hall with several stone entryways marking various rooms. None of these arches had doors. A single priestess seemed to be making the rounds as she went from room to room. We passed her in silence, making our way to the end of the hall where stood the only door on the floor.

“This room is usually reserved for esteemed guests to grant some form of privacy,” Owain explained. “Syltra is inside.”

“Unguarded?”

“Well, the medical rooms are all here in the barracks. If we were attacked, our soldiers would rally soon enough to-”

I raised a hand to silence the man. “Thanks. You can leave us.”

“Sir, I must not let the prisoner be left unsupervised...”

“Can you wait outside, at the very least?” I asked.

Owain seemed troubled, but he succumbed to my wish and nodded. I turned from him then and passed through the doors into a strange room.

The four walls were black stone, and shadows danced around the place. These shadows were the result of glowing red rubies that hovered in a circle above Syltra, casting their red light about the place. She lay in the only bed in the room, uncovered. Her armor had been removed, replaced with a simple robe that fell along her body, exposing much of her pale skin underneath. Her face seemed calm; her body was devoid of physical injury. Still, I could feel her spirit weakened and broken if such things could be felt.

I forced back tears and walked beside her. I knelt and took one hand in mine. It was cold to the touch, but her fingers seemed to wrap around my own, as if she knew I were there, looking over her. Now that I was here, I knew not what I wished to say. So much could have been shared, and so little time had been spent with her. Guilt pained me inside. I should have been by her side more, visiting her more during the week. Instead I stayed away, preoccupied with those I could see, forgetting the ones I could not.

“I’m... gods I’m sorry Syldra,” I croaked. I closed my eyes, but I could no longer hold back the tears that so readily fell from my face. I grabbed her hand and held it close to my head, staining the sheets she lay on as water fell freely from my face. “I should have come here sooner. But there’s the trial tomorrow. We’re expected to fight, even though I’m guilty...”

I sighed and lowered my head, closing my eyes and squeezing her hand. I knew it wasn’t possible, but I could have sworn her hands squeezed back. In that position, knelt beside the bed, I let my mind drift off and slowly began to drift into sleep...

#

The door opening behind me woke me from my shallow sleep. I knew not how long I slept, nor the time of day. The room was still just as dark, besides the red glow from the magical rubies hanging in the air.

“Oh, I’m sorry to disturb you,” a familiar voice said. “I wasn’t expecting anyone else to be here at this time.”

I turned as Ariel walked in. She held in her hand a bucket of cold water with a white towel hanging out the side. She also held in her hand a small vial of red liquid that glowed eerily like the rubies hovering around the room.

“It’s ok, I hadn’t meant to be here for so long. Though I admit, it’s nice to run into you one last time before tomorrow.”

“I’m glad you’re here, but I must care for the patient now,” she said as she closed the door. “I am surprised to find you here with such a long day ahead of you.”

“Is it morning yet?”

“Technically it is, though the sun has yet to break the horizon. Ariel walked past me as she spoke and placed the bucket down beside me. She submerged the towel in it and rang out the water, then began slowly rubbing the cold towel against Syldra’s skin.

“What are you doing?”

“Cleaning her and keeping her cool,” Ariel replied. “What are you doing?”

Before I could answer Ariel laughed and hit me gently with the wet towel. “I’m just messing with you, of course. I know what you’re doing here.”

“And what is that?”

“Saying goodbye.”

I grew silent and stood. I merely watched as Ariel went about her routine. When she finished wiping down Syldra’s exposed skin, she dropped the towel in the bucket and tilted her patient’s head back. Ariel opened the red vial and slowly trickled the contents into Syldra’s mouth. Some liquid leaked out the corners, but most of it went down. As it did, the rubies above glowed birther, as did the liquid inside of Syldra. Her veins suddenly appeared, glowing bright red for a few moments, before the lights dulled and everything returned to normal.

“What was that?” I asked. I could sense the magic still radiating in the room, similar to the powers I had felt before, back on the plains.

“This is water from the spas at Sylla’s House,” Ariel explained. “I brought more than a few vials with me. Normally, they’re used for love-making and other lustful activities. However, in this case, it’s restoring the magical energy inside of her. I just hope that enough of this power will rejuvenate her spirit as well.”

I nodded in feigned understanding as Ariel came to stand beside me. She wrapped an arm around my waist, and leaned her head against my chest. I returned the embrace, allowing my

head to dip, taking in the softness of her hair against my face. It was such a simple thing, yet I wished I could hold the moment forever. But that moment faded when I felt her body tremble slightly as soft sobs escaped her.

“Tomorrow is the day from your visions, isn’t it?” I asked, knowing full well the answer.

“Yes.” She whispered and pulled me tighter.

“Any advice?”

“I don’t know. I suppose don’t die is a good place to start though,” Ariel lifted her head from my chest, so I stared directly into her ice blue eyes. “In the vision, Sylla’s gift vanishes in a blaze of smoke and fire. There is the sound of death and suffering, and at the center of all of it is you. What that means, or how that will play out, I’m not sure. I just... well I won’t be attending the fight. My mother forbids it, not with Emilia already taking part in the bout.”

I nodded in understanding, while my thoughts pondered the future. I knew what would cause such fire, and I knew why I would be at its center. Demons were no doubt entangled in her tale, though whether the demon is mine or not I could not determine.

“Can you just, promise to come back, alright?” she asked, looking up at me. “And if you do comeback, I will ask something of you...”

A knock on the door sounded, and Ariel broke from my arm.

Before I could question her further, the door opened. None other than the duchess herself, Adella, stood now in the doorway. She looked from Ariel, to myself, to Syldra, before turning to me.

“I expected you would have been sleeping,” she said. “I was surprised to find you up and about so early in the morning.”

“I had to say my goodbyes, just in case I-”

“Hush with such foolish talk,” Adella waved a hand to silence me. “Speak like you may die, and you are already accepting fate. Speak as if you intend to survive, and you’ll fight all the harder for it. In any case, I came to search for you. Please, gather yourself and follow me. We have much to discuss before the morning is through.”

Adella did not wait for my reply but turned and left, her footsteps getting feinter as she went back down the long hall. I went to follow when Ariel grabbed my arm. She gave me a gently kiss on the cheek, then let me go. In silence, I turned from her and Syldra, and ran to catch up to the duchess.

Two knights, previously hidden in the archways of the rooms, fell in line behind Adella and me as we parted. Our small procession left the chambers and went out into the courtyard. The sky was just beginning to brighten, a dark blue and subtle orange replacing the blackness of night. A few more guards were out than before, and the sound of the townsfolk beyond the walls beginning to waken grew louder by the hour. Still, it was relatively calm at such an early hour.

“It’s quite peaceful when it’s all quiet, isn’t it?” Adella said. “I find the bustle of the castle can be rather burdensome at times. That’s why you must enjoy the early hours of the morning when everyone is still asleep. Some of my best thoughts come to me at times like this.”

“I’ve always preferred the nights myself.”

“I could’ve guessed considering the stories that preceded your arrival. You have made quite the name for yourself.”

We continued our way to the grand hall. As the first day I entered, the room was empty, and the echoing of our feet filled the space. The guards halted as we approached the throne, leaving only Adella and I to enter the secret entrance behind it.

“Do your guards even know about this entrance?”

“They do, and they know never, ever, to use it.”

Eventually, we came out into the garden, surrounded once again by the rose bushes. We walked past her collection of flowers until we reached the fountain at the garden’s heart. The trickling sound of water was soft and peaceful, casting a calming aura to the place. Unlike the previous time we visited, the stone slabs had been removed. In their stead stood a round table and matching chairs. They were made of intricate white wires curling together in patterns like vines. Atop the table was laid out a small variety of pastries filled with various fruits, nuts, and sweet icings. A pot of tea hovered in the table’s center over a pink fire and released the fragrance of peaches.

“I know it isn’t necessarily a feast, but you can understand why I would be unable to give such a thing to a potential criminal.” Adella took a chair on the far side as she gave me a welcoming smile. “Well please, feel free to sit and enjoy the food.”

“Thank you.” I bowed slightly and took the opposite chair.

Adella waved her hand; the tea pot poured itself into a crystal cup that then floated to rest on the edge of the table in front of me. I nodded a small thanks in her direction and drank the tea. The liquid burned my tongue, but it felt rejuvenating as it flowed down my throat. Any sleep that remained vanished; I was completely alert, filled with jitters.

“What is this stuff?” I asked, taking yet another sip.

“That is a special brew I’ve made myself,” Adella boasted. “I brew peaches from the Lumarian coastline with some of the desert roses I grow here. The blend, when mixed properly, serves to clear the mind, along with a nice little jolt of energy. However, I’d recommend you sip it slowly. Too much at once, and it will make your heart stop.”

I paused mid sip and put the cup down. She shrugged, wearing an impish grin, and took a small sip of her own.

I decided to follow her lead and only drank when she did. In between, I dove into the pastries assembled in front of me, each one more delectable than the last. I continued to eat and drink with little conversation until my stomach protested. Having room for no more, I sat back and stared across the table at Adella. She had yet to take a bite for herself, simply sipping her tea and observing. Her eyes never let me, as if they were searching for something that was not there.

“What is this all about?” I finally asked.

“I simply wished to provide you a nice meal before your fight today,” she said with a smile. “Afterall, it would be such a shame to die without having a proper final meal.”

“Excuse my bluntness, but I think you’re lying to me. What’s the real reason you brought me down here? If it were to enjoy a meal, why not bring me back to the room to eat with Emilia and Avara?”

“Well, let’s just say it’s best we don’t interrupt those two at this moment. They’ll find time for food when they’re ready,” she chuckled softly to herself. “But you’re right, I have my own purpose in bringing you down here. It goes well beyond just a fight with paladins, but everything to do with who I think you are.”

“I hope you intend to elaborate further.”

“Don’t be so brash, Daelin. I’ll explain it all before the morning is through.” She stood and left the table, beckoning for me to follow. We followed a cobbled path of stone towards the east wall while she explained her story.

“You see, I thought you were vaguely familiar, but I could not deduce why you seemed like someone I had known long ago. Afterall, you are nothing more than a strange child of little

consequence from one of the most unassuming parts of the world. And yet the stories speak of a demon with power enough to slay a paladin of the Enclave. I could not believe a random child would possess such power.

“As you sat in the tower, I sent Emilia out searching for answers, but she returned with nothing. Outside of your existence in Windhelm, you are nobody. I thought myself a fool, chasing after leads that never existed.”

We reached the wall at this point, the path stopping abruptly in between two white rose bushes. Adella scanned her surroundings, then positioned her back so I could not see what her hands did. Suddenly, a rumbling sounded, and the stones began to slide apart, revealing a small staircase that descended below the castle grounds.

“Would you be so kind as to provide me with a little light?”

I raised my right hand and conjured a ball of white flame to illuminate the passage. Adella thanked me, then we proceeded forward. Once inside, the passage became black beside the light of my flames, as the door closed softly behind us, leaving the only way out some unseen distance before us. The walls were narrow, and my shoulders brushed against them as we began our descent. We went down a short distance, before the tunnel leveled off and turned abruptly to our right. I could now see that the stairs only went down for a short distance before turning sharply to the right back into the main towers.

“Now, as I was saying, I felt a fool, yet the nagging familiarity your face carried never left” Adella continued. “That’s when I started putting together a theory. You are the same age as Emilia, or close to it at least. Add in your orphaned past and strange powers, and the pieces began to fall into place. Still, it was all just a hunch, a bold prediction that needed more proof. That’s why I watched you intently, studying you to find that last piece of evidence I needed.

“Then yesterday, you did it!” Her voice rose in glee as she spoke, “The paladins entered the arena, and you stared at them as they passed. When you stood there, you looked exactly like him. That’s when I knew, without a doubt, I was right!”

We came to a wooden door at the end of the passage. Again, Adella blocked my view so I could not see her hands. As I tried to catch a glimpse of her actions, the door released a loud hiss of air and opened inwards. We passed through the passage, into another black room.

I intensified the light of my flames, illuminating what appeared to be a round room that served as storage. Boxes and crates were piled around the edges of the wall. Old furniture gathered cobwebs and dust. Blankets lay over random objects and paintings, hiding them from the world. Our own feet left marks in the dust as we walked towards the opposite end.

Adella rummaged about behind one of the crates and reappeared moments later with a large frame. I assumed a painting was held in the frame, though the entire thing was covered in what used to be a white sheet. She lay it down in front of me, pushing up a pile of dust as it landed on the floor. It stood taller than I did.

“Are you ready?” she asked as one hand grabbed the cloth. “This painting is going to change your life forever. If you wish not to see it, you best speak now. Otherwise, brace yourself for the revelation that awaits. Choose now, quickly.”

I stared at Adella and wanted to laugh. Her face seemed brimming with pride as she had cracked some long-lost secret. Part of me wanted nothing more than to rip the sheet aside and find it to be a falsehood, find that her ramblings and hypotheses were all wrong. Being a nobody on the plains would be easier. Yet deep down, my heart pounded. The excitement in Adella’s eyes, the vague riddles left to me by the demon, they all told me my past began, and abruptly ended, here, in Edinrow.

Before I had the chance to reply, she threw back the blanket, revealing a painting. It was a massive portrait held in an ornate golden frame, decorated with entangled webs of lions and flowers. Yet it was the painting that took me aback, causing my heart to skip a beat as I gasped inward

In the painting stood a man and a woman. The woman wore a plain white dress, with golden hair falling in long curls past her shoulders. Her eyes were dark, and her smile seemed forced. Beside her, however, stood a man with familiar green eyes, the same eyes I saw every time I looked in the mirror. In the woman's arms was a bundle of plain white cloth with golden embroidery, the same white cloth Thadi said he found me in decades before. It was a baby, held close in the woman's arms.

"Is that... me?" The words were barely audible as I stepped forward, placing a cautious hand delicately on the painting as I traced the lines of the blanket, following the familiar pattern painted along the folds.

"What you see in this painting is the heir to the entire Eastwood Kingdom." Adella walked to stand beside me and stared at the painting rather fondly. "You see the father there, well that's Prince Andor, the soon to be king once his father passes. The woman is a noblewoman from the north and Andor's wife, Princess Dierdre. This painting was created seventeen years ago, right here in my castle. We were celebrating their child's second birthday at the time, and it was meant to be a joyous occasion."

"You didn't answer the question," I said, "Is that me?"

"Look at Andor, Daelin. You see him in you, I know you do! That's why you were so familiar, for you are truly his son!"

"Maybe he is my father," I ceded, "But that can't be my mother..."

“You’d be right,” Adella clapped her hands. “This is not your mother, nor is that you she’s holding.”

“So, who is my mother then? What the hell is going on?”

“Well, no we’re starting to ask some interesting questions,” Adella mused. “Of course, I don’t have all the answers myself. I do know your mother, however. Better yet, I know she’s still alive!”

“She’s alive?” My heart pounded, and the room was suddenly spinning.

“She’s alive,” Adella smirked. “Would you care to meet her?”

“Meet her...” I swear the room got lighter and my body felt heavy. Meet her? After twenty years of thinking I was alone, thinking I had no family, I come to find my mother was not alive, but within reach. But how do you answer that question? Did I want to meet her? Would it make life better somehow, or just make everything so much worse...?

“Easy, Daelin,” Adella placed a calming hand on my back. “I can manage to make an introduction, but first things first: you must manage to win today. I’d hate to introduce your mother to a corpse.”

“The battle...,” I tried to slow my breathing and steady myself, placing the days revelations out of my mind to focus strictly on the task at hand.

“I will make a promise with you, in exchange for a promise you’ve already made to me. I’ve said it already: I expect you to protect my daughter. If she survives today, and you both walk out of the arena alive, then I will see that you can meet your mother. What you do then will be up to you. Do we have ourselves a deal, Daelin?”

“Why show me this?” My voice was soft as I stared at the painting. “Why tell me all this now? Why not wait to reveal something like this?”

“You needed incentive,” Adella replied. “I have your word to protect Emilia, a word that I believe you’ll keep. However, words are just that. What if you succumb to your inner demons? What if you decide that your life is better served as forfeit to save everyone else? No, it simply wouldn’t do. Maybe you decide tomorrow you don’t want to meet your mother, and this I would understand. But just the thought that maybe, maybe you could meet her, gives you a reason to not only win today, but live!”

She walked to the door opposite the secret entrance and turned to say her parting words. “I need you, Daelin. There are very few people I need, and you are fortunate to find that you are one of them. My daughter is in a fight she can’t win. More than that, I believe she and your friend are building feelings for each other, which is a dangerous thing. The only thing more precious than our own lives are the lives of those we truly care about. They’ll fight for each other before they fight for themselves, and that is a frightful thought. So now, promise me to be my daughter’s champion. Do this, and I will repay you with something you’ve never had before. Good luck, demon.”

Adella opened the door and was greeted by two guards in chainmail and green tabards. One of them immediately took Adella aside and whispered in her ear. She nodded to him then turned to address me one last time.

“I had every intention of escorting you to the arena myself, but it appears we have an unexpected guest awaiting us at the front gate. Apparently a third paladin has shown himself at the gates, claiming he is in search of the Demon of Windhelm. You wouldn’t happen to know who he is, would you?”

“There were three paladins that followed us, but the third was trapped in a cavern. I buried him myself along with...”

“Yes, well it seems he has survived. I will see you above then.”

With a final smile, she turned and left, along with her guards, leaving me alone in the tower, the painting of my father and his royal family covered behind me. I took the blanket off, allowing the hallway lights to leak over them. They seemed so happy, the baby in their arms so warm...

I dropped Aleandria’s sword then, and the demon’s voice sounded in my head.

You know who is waiting at the gates, don’t you?

I do. But that’s not why you’re here.

Oh? And what might be the occasion that you’ve dropped the sword? Do you intend to let me fight for you? A wise decision if-

You meant to take her.

What?

The baby in the painting... I placed my hand along the blanket again, tracing the design. I was a decoy. You came for this child, not me.

Listen, now isn’t-

I grabbed up Aelandria’s sword and stormed from the room, letting it slam closed behind me. I did not give the demon the chance to answer; he didn’t have to. I had heard enough and needed to focus on the task at hand.

This trial was proving to be far more complex than anyone there could imagine. And they were all in grave danger.

Chapter 34: Warning Signs

The dull roar of hundreds of spectators rolled through the stairwell, greeting me before I entered the arena. The knights maintained their stern expression, but I could see the eagerness behind their eyes. The excitement of the day seemed to be infecting everyone; the entire castle awaited a bout between legendary powers. A battle between the holy champions of the Enclave, and a demon from worlds unknown. It sounded more and more like a bad campfire story for children, but this was no story.

This was my life hanging between two powers I wanted nothing to do with.

“Lord Daelin of Windhelm,” one of the guards said, “I have been instructed to offer you any last request before you enter the arena. Are you in need of weapons, armor, or anything else that I can provide you with?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I can take it from here.”

The guard gave a curt nod and turned down one of the side tunnels, heading off to join the other spectators. I took in a deep breath of air and fixed my leather armor, making sure all the straps were properly secured. I removed my dagger and Aelandria’s sword and looked them over. The craftsmanship on each was beyond any other blade I had come across. They belonged

in the hands of a true master, and yet they would likely have never seen the battlefield if not in my possession.

“I’ll do right by you, I swear,” I whispered to the blades.

I sheathed them back and strode forward, passing through the great iron double doors into the arena. As the doors opened, the full roar of the crowd greeted me. It lasted but a moment, as the everyone hushed at once upon my entrance.

Avara and Emilia already stood armed and ready in the center of the arena, standing directly beside Andorath and Loria. None of them spared me a glance, their eyes focused on Adella, who sat in her pavilion watching over the battlefield. She had her usual procession of knights around her, with two extra guests. The first guest was Gorm, dressed in silver robes akin to the ones he wore when I met him in the library. The second guest, however, sent chills down my spine. The elven paladin’s eyes met mine, and I could see through the clouded stare. There was death and anger behind those eyes, a demon lurking and ready to be brought forth. How no one else noticed, especially Gorm who stood so close, baffled me.

I walked to stand beside Emilia and leaned in so only she and Avara could hear me. “We have company. Don’t expect this fight to play out how you anticipated.”

“Are you talking about the elf up there? He just came in this morning, but he’s been deemed too injured to battle,” Emilia said. “Thankfully, we’re still fighting two on three, like we thought.”

“That’s not what I meant. He’s no paladin. Look up at those eyes, can’t you see?”

“He seems normal to me. I’m not sure what you’re look at,” Avara replied. “Let’s not worry about it now, alright? Let’s focus on the trial at hand, and deal with the rest later.”

“Look we can’t ignore-”

“If you’re quite finished exchanging secrets, I believe it is time we commence your trial,”

Adella cut in.

“Agreed,” Loria shouted back. “The charges have been presented, and their fate has been left to the gods to decide! Let us commence with such activity!”

“In short time.” Adella raised a calming hand to the paladin before proceeding with her speech. “However, as is this case with such trials, we must be understanding of all the rules by which you shall be judged.

“As determined in the Court of Roses, as decreed in the laws of the kingdom of Eastwood, Syltra of Elysium, Daelin of Windhelm, Avara of the Floating City, and their representation, stand accused of massacring innocents, theft, and many other crimes. However, without proper evidence, it is clear only divine intervention may determine what is right and wrong today. As such, we place our mortals in position to fight a trial by combat. The accusers, the champions of the Enclave, stand prepared to fight the accused. Are there any objections to the representatives present?”

She turned to the crowd, but none offered any word of objection. Beside us, bits of plate armor shifted together as Andorath raised his hammer to rest readily in his hands.

“With no objection’s forthcoming, the accused and the accusers may turn to their ends of the arena. May the gods shine on the innocent today and punish the wicked.”

Adella paused here and gestured with both hands for us to part. We turned our backs to the paladins and walked towards the far wall. I could feel my heart begin to accel with each step, sweat beginning to bead up under the layers of black armor I wore.

“Relax, we’ll be ok,” Emilia placed a calming hand on my shoulder and kissed me gently on the cheek as we reached the end of the arena. “We’ll get through this.”

I nodded and drew my weapon, as did the other two. That's when I noticed Aelandria's sword glowing bright blue. Any doubt I may have had vanished in that moment. The demon was inhabiting the elf, just waiting for the opportunity to strike. We were going to wear each other out, only to be finished off by the creature. I needed to warn everyone and redirect their attention, but looking across the way, I knew there was no reasoning with our adversaries. Andorath's eyes were locked on me already, his face locked in a scowl. His fingers drummed against his handle, as he bounced from foot to foot, just waiting for the command to strike. Both he and Loria were oblivious to the glowing blade, unaware that some evil waited nearby.

"Now fighters," Adella shouted, "the rules of this match are simple. You may not look to those outside the arena for assistance, nor can you leave the arena until the combat is deemed completed. The fight ends when the accusers yield, or the opposite side is slain. Forfeit on the part of the accused results in execution. Are we clear?"

We all nodded.

"Then you may begin! May the gods watch over you!"

Adella claimed her seat as a still silence fell over the arena. One large collective breath was held as everyone awaited the first move of what they prayed would be a legendary bout.

While we stood frozen and waiting, I risked a glance up at the main pavilion. I locked eyes with the elf again, and those same chills ran through my spine. The sword responded, growing warm in my hands...

"Look out!"

Avara dove into me, knocking me to the ground, as a blast of holy energy rocketed past. It slammed against the arena's wall, cracking the stones and drawing gasps from many of the onlookers.

“Come on, move, move!” Emilia shouted as she dragged Avara off me.

I scrambled to my feet to see the hammer whistling towards me. I flattened against the ground to avoid the strike, only to take a plate boot to the side. The kick jarred the dagger from my grip, but I used it to propel me away from Andorath. I rolled with the kick and sprang to my feet as another hammer strike fell just inches away from me.

The paladin roared and swung again, and I easily stepped away from the blow and swung with my sword. I struck his side hard, but the blade did little as it bounced off his plate. He laughed as he welcomed the hit, just before he smacked me with a vicious backhand that sent my head spinning. I staggered back as he came in for another strike, forcing me to roll away once more.

Behind him, I could see Loria paid little attention to our scuffle. To my surprise, she focused her attention solely on Emilia and Avara. Andorath must have convinced Loria to allow him to slay me himself. I watched the three women trapped in a brawl that the paladin seemed to be winning. I also noted that she seemed to be pulling her blows, careful to avoid any strikes that would kill either one of her opponents. Emilia released shot after shot on the women, but the arrows clattered off shield and armor to fall harmlessly to the ground. Avara meanwhile kept dancing to miraculous effect, dodging every swing of Loria’s sword. Unfortunately, Avara was unable to land a blow herself, and she was slowing down. Each reaction seemed to come a second later than the first, accompanied by increasingly heavy gasps for air.

“Don’t worry about your little friends,” Andorath shouted. “Loria is merely toying with them. Once I kill you, they go free. Afterall, we’re not after thieves; we’re after a demon!”

He emphasized demon with a massive overhand swing. I shadow phased, leaving the hammer to crash into the arena floor where it shattered stone instead of bone. The hammer itself took no damage; its head shone bright and immaculate as he readied it for another attack.

“I’m glad you still have a little fight left in you,” the paladin shouted as he turned to face me. “It would have been so disappointing if you simply allowed me to kill you!”

He took another swing; I ducked under and struck with my sword. Again, it clanged off his armor, and I was forced to shadow phase as the hammer came hurtling down in a rapid follow through.

“Quit with the games! Fight me like you did in Elysium! Where’s your precious demon? Release him so I may slay him!”

Andorath roared, his face trapped in a vicious snarl that made him look more animal than man and charged. Yet again, his hammer swung, but caught nothing but air as I continued to phase away from him. After the last casting of magic however, I felt small beads of sweat pooling on my forehead.

“Oh, I understand!” The paladin laughed as he turned to face me. “You can’t fight me because you lack the skill! You’re playing games until I’m all tired out, is that it? Wait for me to slow to release your friend to kill me? No, that’s not it, your eyes don’t show him lurking anywhere. Have I scared him off? Is he too cowardly to die by my hand?”

Drop... the sword...let... me... KILL!

“Kill” pounded within my head and forced me down to my knee. I felt as if a hammer hit me upside the head, leaving my whole body physically exhausted. The paladin watched my collapse and instead of rushing to finish me, paused and lowered his hammer.

“Ah, the demon is trying to break free,” he mused. “Don’t fight it now when you never have in the past. Let him come! Let me vanquish him as I am meant to do to all evil in this realm! Release him!”

“Fuck off,” I spat through clenched jaws.

“Very well,” the paladin’s voice lowered as he resumed his march towards me. “If you will not allow the demon out, then I will beat him out of you!”

Red overtook Andorath’s face as a visceral roar escaped him. His hammer rose high and swung down hard, swinging through nothing but air. He laughed and whirled around with another strong swing that once again found nothing. I continued my dance in the shadows, hoping to find some opening, but my opponent was too quick, always on the offensive.

I knew what I had to do. On the next swing I phased back to my original spot, barely missing the swing. The paladin’s eyes lit up with excitement as he reached his hand out to grab me. As his hand approached, I swung with my sword and whispered words of enchantment. A metallic ring sounded as gauntlet met blade, followed shortly after by a yelp of pain. When Andorath pulled back, red blood pooled on the arena floor, along with his lost finger.

“You son of a bitch!” he screamed.

He swung the hammer with tremendous speed and greater power. I was unable to register the attack until I felt it connect with my side. No amount of leather armor could protect me from the hit as I went hurtling across the arena’s floor.

He released yet another roar and produced from his hammer a blast of holy light. Caught off guard, I barely had time to produce a magical barrier. The two forces collided and released a wave of energy that shook the arena. Pieces of rock and dirt fell off the ceiling and rained down

upon us. The momentum from the paladin's attack continued crashing through, sending me flying back against the wall, right below Adella's pavilion.

The sword in my hand began to burn and the light flared. I looked up and saw the elf's eyes, and another wave of chills crept through my spine. I glanced at Gorm, but he did not look my way. In fact, his eyes seemed glossed over, almost white, as he began to slouch forward in his seat.

I tried to signal to the others in the pavilion, but they merely laughed, thinking my antics some show or gesture of surrender. With little choice, I regained my feet to face Andorath.

"Andorath, listen to me!" I shouted. "Look at my blade! It's glowing! Don't you see that? We're in danger! That demon is back, and I know who it is! Please you have to--"

Andorath paused originally at the sound of his name, but it lasted merely a second before he resumed his charge. Instead of attacking like normal however, he released his hammer in a wild throw. I ducked and watched it sail overhead to lodge itself into the wall behind me. Rocks sprinkled down as onlookers shielded their eyes from the debris.

"Silence demon! The blade glows because I've nearly brought him out! I am this close to facing the true enemy and vanquishing you both! Nothing will stop me!"

"Damnit, we don't have time for--"

Andorath shot another blast of holy light at me from his hands. It caught me square in the chest, knocking me back to land against the back wall. I felt my ribs crack as they were met with the back end of his war hammer still lodged in the stone behind me. Metallic hands grabbed me then and tossed me aside, causing me to roll across the dirt in a numb heap of flesh.

Dazed, I could just make out the rising hammer overhead...

Chapter 34: Avara

Avara knew Andorath would charge Daelin. What she did not expect was the ferocity with which Loria attacked.

Emilia and Avara intended to keep their distance while hoping Daelin could handle more than a few blows from the paladins. They figured both would charge the “demon,” leaving Avara and Emilia free rein to at least attempt firing their weapons from range. But they had been mistaken.

Andorath took Daelin on one-on-one, while Loria took the other two. She wore a full helm, covering her face, but Avara could feel the glaring eyes drilling into her all the same. The paladin’s sword moved fast. If not for Avara’s dancing experience, she would have been skewered more than a few times. The paladin completely ignored Emilia, focusing all her efforts on Avara instead. Avara managed to dance her way through each new blow well enough, but she never managed to attempt an attack of her own.

Emilia took advantage of the distraction and moved back to where she could safely attack. She drew back her first shot and released the bow, only to watch it clatter off the paladin’s plate and land harmlessly in the dirt. She took another shot, this time finding a split in

the metal plates on Loria's right shoulder. Yet the paladin seemed not to notice, her constant motion of attacks uninterrupted.

Avara was forced to continue her retreat, doing all she could to avoid a cut from the paladin's sword. No words were exchanged as the two danced through the arena, kicking up a pile of dust as they went. The spectators paid little mind to them however, as everyone was transfixed on the alleged demon and the beast of a man he was fighting.

A stray arrow slipped past Loria. It glanced off her shoulder piece and bit Avara's shoulder as it clambered against the stone wall. Her back foot kicked the arrow, and she realized she had been forced against the wall with little room to maneuver around the paladin's rapid succession of attacks.

Avara's reaction was swift. She lunged forward and swung her dagger at the incoming blade to deflect it. Loria countered with the shield, brining it about in a swift sideways motion, but Avara anticipated the blow. She spun off it and kicked backwards, hitting the paladin in the back of the leg, and pushing her into the wall. She lashed out with her daggers, but the shield spun around and caught her blows. She lunged out of reach once more, readying her weapons as the two fighters stared each other down.

"I must say," the paladin called out, "you're rather impressive. You've held your own better than I originally anticipated."

"I don't really plan on dying today." Avara could hear the fatigue in her words.

"No one ever plans on dying," the paladin replied. "But when divine judgement is to be decided, what choice do you really have?"

A flash of light emitted from Loria's shield, blinding Avara. One hand launched up to protect her vision. In that moment, Loria swung her sword, seeking to remove her opponent from

the fight for good. However, a blade met hers, deflecting the blow long enough for Avara to regain her vision.

To her surprise, she saw Emilia had abandoned her ranged strategy. Her bow and arrows were slung over her back as she opted to wield her longsword. However, her arms were quivering, barely contesting the strength of the paladin's blow.

"I was trying to spare you, Emilia," Loria growled. "But you have destroyed any such act of mercy I may have granted. You have sealed your fate. You shall die with the others this day."

Loria spun out of the blow and swung her shield, catching Emilia square in the forehead. Blood fell from torn skin as Emilia staggered back, falling to one knee. Loria then kicked Avara, knocking her back as well, so the two could be picked apart one after the other.

Loria took on Emilia first. Their swords flashed and the clangs of metal rang out. A few onlookers noticed the two women fighting, most notably Adella herself. Her faced turned white as she watched her daughter brawl with the paladin, unable to hide her concern.

Avara managed to reclaim her feet and took stock of the battlefield. Emilia was faring well, keeping pace with the strikes of the paladin. While she was clearly outmatched in terms of strength, her talent and finesse were more than enough to compensate. Meanwhile, on the opposite end, Daelin was getting pummeled. He managed to move about and dodge a few strikes, but he never landed a blow of his own.

Suddenly, Daelin phased and met the paladin head on. Avara watched as Daelin's sword flashed and an item fell from the paladin's hand. Whatever happened received cheers and gasps from the crowd. The big man let out a scream of pain, then swung his hammer faster than Avara could see. Daelin went toppling across the arena floor.

“Shit.” Avara sighed and grabbed her daggers and turned her back on Emilia. She would have to hold out just a little longer while Avara tried to save Daelin.

Her run was cut short. A white light streaked through the arena and collided with a blue wall just in front of Daelin. The two forces exploded, releasing a wave of energy that knocked Avara back and sent her ears ringing. She staggered as she struggled to keep her balance and shake off the wooziness left from the magical collision.

Andorath seemed unphased by the magical energies and stalked forward, until he stood directly over Daelin. A wicked grin crossed the man’s face as his hammer rose above his head. Avara had mere seconds to act. In desperation, she switched her dagger’s grip and launched it from her hands.

Her aim was true; the dagger shot forward straight as an arrow. It bit into a gap in the paladin’s plate, just piercing his chainmail and clipping the back of the paladin’s knee. He roared more in annoyance than pain as he whirled around. When his eyes locked on Avara’s, she saw nothing but rage. The longer the fight ensued, the less holy she found these paladins to be.

“You bitch!” he roared. “I’ll kill you too!”

He ignored Daelin’s fallen body now as his ire redirected towards Avara. She was thankful for the distraction, but she had no intention of trying to face that hammer head on. She scrambled to keep distance between herself and the paladin. He broke into a full charge in pursuit of Avara. He released a beastly roar and did the unthinkable: he threw his hammer.

Avara heard the whistling in the air and turned just in time to watch the massive weapon, spinning end over end, collide with her knee. A bone chilling crack sounded as her knee shattered. In an instant, she collapsed, unable to move her leg as unbearable pain shot through her body. No ounce of adrenaline could douse the pain that crippled the woman now.

“You should have let me kill him,” Andorath said as he came closer. “You’ve traded your life for his. I hope it’s worth it!”

He bent over and lifted Avara from the ground with one hand. He flung her aside with ease, as if she weighed nothing. She toppled into the dirt, further twisting her knee the wrong direction. Behind her, she heard the paladin’s hoarse cackle as he bent down and turned her over, then unleashed a barrage of blows. One fist after the other came crashing down as metal gauntlets collided with Avara’s face.

Among the thrashing, she caught a glimpse of Daelin. He was up, but his back was too her. After she had risked her life to save him, he ignored her, letting her die. She cried and tried to break free, but the paladin’s weight had her pinned. She cried out for Daelin, but he suddenly vanished completely, leaving the arena grounds. He had left her to die.

“You’re tough,” Andorath said as he paused his blows. “I do not delight in killing you, you know. But you have interfered in powers beyond your wildest imagination. And for that, you must be-”

A feeling of dread fell over the arena. The magical lights all vanished. The crowd began to trade words of regret as many realized the error in wishing to see demons up close. Through the shared whispers came the sound of a large metal object falling, crashing into the arena floor.

Andorath jumped from Avara’s body and fumbled about as he tried to ready his hammer. Still on her back, Avara managed to see the fallen object. The elven paladin lay dead with a dagger stuck in the middle of his back. Above him, standing in the pavilion surrounded by several raised spears, stood Daelin. He still held Aelandria’s sword in his hand. The blade glowed with a bright blue flame as he stared over the fallen paladin.

Confusion and gasps filled the arena. Some distance off, the clashing of swords ceased as Emilia and Loria turned to address what had transpired. As Loria and Andorath came together to face Daelin, Emilia ran to Avara.

“By the gods, I can’t believe you’re still alive!” she gasped as she slid to her knees beside the battered woman.

Avara wanted to say something, but her broken jaw wouldn’t allow words to come through. She merely whimpered in excruciating pain.

“I think it’s time for us to go,” Emilia whispered, wrapping her arms around Avara’s shoulders. “Daelin’s gone berserk. Maybe there’s a demon inside him after all…”

Emilia began dragging Avara. They did not make it far before a shockwave of black energy shot across the arena floor. When it touched them, their bodies felt numb as fear overwhelmed their morale.

“Is this your true nature then?” Loria shouted. “You have come to kill a member only just returned to us? To what, satiate your hunger for death?”

“That’s not your friend,” Daelin shouted down to them. “I tried warning you; he isn’t who he says!”

“You lie!” Andorath roared. “You are releasing your magic as some final attempt to dissuade us! But it is no matter, your fate is sealed!”

Andorath began to charge when another way of black energy shot across the arena. Avara watched in horror as the dead elven paladin began to rise, as if pulled up by puppet strings. His eyes opened, but they were no longer his own. Black pits replaced his vision as he stared at Andorath. The elf removed the dagger from his back, then stabbed it through Andorath’s chest. It

broke through the metal plate and erupted out the man's back, exploding against the wall behind where it sank into the stone.

"Wha..." Andorath collapsed before he could say his final words.

"The boy was right you know," the elf laughed. "Your friends never did return from the cave..."

The elf turned on Loria. The paladin raised her weapons, but Avara could see the slight quiver in her arms replacing her previous calm. The chain jingled under the plate as her body shook. She took small steps away from the paladin, the face beneath her helm no doubt overtaken with fear.

"So much fear and anger," the elf breathed in as he spoke, his arms spreading wide as a dark shadow overtook him. "This feast is quite lovely. I will very much enjoy such sport today!"

While the paladin backed away from the elf, Daelin appeared beside Avara and Emelia.

"Are you two alright?" he asked. He placed a hand on Avara's shoulder as he knelt beside her. "I'm sorry I let this happen to you. But I needed everyone to know..."

"I get it," Emilia whispered. "But what now?"

Daelin turned to the elf and the paladin, then he turned to Avara. He wore a slight smile as he placed the blade in Avara's hands. She felt the warmth of the goddess's magic come over instantly, clearing her head and easing her pain. As she stared at the sword in her hands, she realized what he intended to do.

"This is yours now," He whispered. "Take care of it..."

Daelin turned to face the elf. As he went, the shadows began to merge around him, following him as he stalked forward.

"What the hell is he doing?" Emilia whispered.

Chapter 35: A Wise Decision

We were outmatched without him. Avara was immobile. Gorm and Syldra were incapacitated. Andorath was dead.

A wise decision.

The transition was seamless. Maybe it was due to the demon's increased awareness, but we slipped between control perfectly. I felt myself turn to mist and fall out of my own body and watched as the shadows began to circle around my physical form as Y'lth Qant took charge.

"Ah, I was wondering when you'd join the fray," the elf chuckled as he turned to face Y'lth Qant. "I was hoping you would have killed a few more of your enemies before I intervened, but that human in you is rather troubling."

"It's a horrid trait of humans, isn't it? Always meddling in others' affairs," Y'lth Qant said, shaking his head.

Behind the elf, I saw Loria charge forward. She raised her shield and readied her sword to swing at the elf, but she never got the chance. Without turning from Y'lth Qant, the elf released a stream of shadowy flames from his hand. They engulfed the paladin's armor and sent her flying backwards, crumpling in a heap.

“See what I mean?” Y’lth Qant gestured towards the fallen paladin. “She should have realized this wasn’t her place.”

“Yes, and you should realize this isn’t yours,” the elf replied. “You weren’t meant to exist in this realm. You’re on borrowed time.”

“Borrowed? Nay, that’s such a cheap way of putting it, don’t you think? I’d prefer-”

He was cut off by the elf’s attack. The same flames he had just used to dispose of Loria launched at Y’lth Qant and enveloped him. I felt the heat surround me as if I were still there, though I could not move or react.

The shadows surrounding my body lept up to consume them and doused them. They hissed out as black tendrils of steam rose in a ring around my physical form. Y’lth Qant now held two daggers made entirely of shadow and glared at the elf.

“I don’t like being interrupted,” he spat.

“Devils below, you’re as intolerable as ever,” the elf growled. “I truly wish our lord had removed you eons ago.”

“Come now, he wouldn’t dispose of his greatest asset. Afterall, I was supposed to replace you, remember?”

“You could never!”

The elf released a massive spell of magical fire that erupted around Y’lth Qant. The fires rose to the roof above, melting through the stone, and letting in the sunlight. Screams erupted from the audience as they pushed against one another, locked in a mad scramble to escape. Adella seemed to be the only one remaining, watching the fight below with horrified eyes.

“Silence!” the elf’s voice sounded corrupt as he shrieked, extending the fire outwards over the audience. Some ducked below their seats and narrowly avoided the attack, suffering

minor injuries and immense fear. They were lucky. Anyone caught in the blast immediately burst into flames. The smell of burning flesh filled the arena as screams of agony filled the air before death silenced them.

I turned about in my vaporous state and saw Emlia and Avara were unharmed by the blast. Aelandria's sword was shrouded in a vibrant blue light that seemed to have shielded them in the attack.

In the center of the fires, the elf released the spell. The flames cackled around the ruins of the arena, and the elf breathed heavily in its center. The plate armor had melted from his body, revealing corrupted holes that seemed to be growing around his skin. Bits of body fell off in black ash that disappeared in the air, while his veins turned a dark purple against ghostly pale skin.

"That seemed rather unnecessary, wouldn't you say?" Y'lth Qant's voice rang out, though I could not see where he and my body were.

"How on earth did you manage to survive that?" the elf shouted. "You should be dead! All of you should be dead!"

As he roared, the flames burned higher, spreading to the walls, and casting the world in shadows that twisted and turned over one another as if alive. Above, the sun was shrouded in dark smoke. The only light remaining came from Aelandria's sword, clutched in Avara's arms. Around her and Emilia, the ground remained unscathed, despite the black soot and ash that covered the arena.

"Come now, you're holding back," Y'lth Qant taunted. "Here, let me give you a hand!"

My body appeared out of thin air wearing a wicked grin. The daggers of shadow suddenly erupted in the elf's chest, buried to the hilt in his back. Y'lth Qant stepped back as the elf sat sputtering, gasping for air as black and purple blood dripped from his lips.

I realized that what I thought was sputtering was laughter. The elf cackled as he turned towards the demon housed in my body. His eyes were black pits as he pulled the daggers through his chest. His skin turned to ash at an increasing rate. When he spoke now, his voice did not come from the elf, but echoed around the arena like thunder overhead.

“You should have died when you were told to die,” the voice boomed. “Now, you will suffer! You asked for my full wrath, and you shall receive it!”

The elf turned black, and the final physical pieces disappeared in a cloud of ash. Where the elf once stood, a shadow swirled together. It grew larger, rising to loom over the entire arena, shrouding everyone in darkness. Arms and massive horns appeared in the swirling shadows; two massive black wings spread wide, crashing through the arena's walls.

“You eluded me twice before, but you shall not live a third time!” the demon's voice echoed. “This time, you all shall perish!”

The demon released a hideous shriek that rattled my bones, even in my subconscious state. Around the arena, those few still alive froze in terror. Their eyes glossed over, and they began to shiver uncontrollably. Adella, who once stood defiant in her pavilion, fell back into her chair, and wept, reduced to the same mindless state as the others in the arena. Even Emilia, despite the presence of Aelandria's sword, began to falter, collapsing behind Avara.

The demon's infernal eyes scoured the crowd. It began turning about frantically, searching for Y'lth Qant. As it looked about, a sudden burst of flame erupted behind the demon. The flames lit the world red for a moment before smashing into the shadow's back. The shadow

grunted, but otherwise was unphased as it released a blast of dark magic in the direction of the fireball's origins. The blast exploded, blowing a hole clean through the arena's wall and claiming a few onlookers with it.

"So, we're back to our old tricks now," the demon roared. "Dancing and hiding in shadows again. Always running! If you stop, I may change my mind and provide a clean death, instead of an eternity of misery!"

"I'm not hiding," Y'lth Qant's voice echoed around the arena, though I could not tell where it originated. "Afterall, you were the one who gave me such perfect darkness. Why would you do such a thing unless you intended for me to make use of it?"

The demon cackled then brought its hands in. The shadows around the arena responded instantly and rushed inward. Sunlight leaked through the whole in the arena's roof, casting daylight over the crowd, though none of them responded to the new warmth. However, the new light of day exposed Y'lth Qant. He stood in the center of the arena floor near the demon's feet, his two daggers of shadow dissipating in the sun's light.

"There you are," the demon hissed.

A massive arm came thrashing down, striking Y'lth Qant in the side. He went tumbling across the arena floor until the wall halted his movement. Before he could regain his feet, shadowy tentacles extended outward, lashing around him, and lifting him to the air. He struggled to break free; the tentacles held firm.

"You can't run anymore," the demon laughed. "Now, you shall die."

"No, I think not," Y'lth Qant spat. "You really should learn to fear the light."

The demon let out a sudden shriek as the tentacles released Y'lth Qant. To my complete surprise, Loria had risen and taken Aelandria's sword from Avara. The blade was shrouded in

intense blue light under the sun, releasing new bursts of fire that spread over the demon's skin with each new strike the paladin released upon it. Unlike the cave, the shadows did not regenerate. Aelandria's blessing seemed to permanently sever the bonds between the shadows, leaving massive divots hacked into the creature's physical state.

"You bitch!" the demon roared as it whipped around. Its hands came flying down to strike at the paladin. They crushed downward and sent cracks through the arena's floor on impact. The demon removed its arms to reveal nothing but stone underneath. It let out a ground-shaking shriek as it spun around searching for its prey.

Loria now stood at the opposite end of the arena in Y'lth Qant's arms. He had shadow phased her from danger at the last possible second. However, they had little time to rest as the demon noticed them. A massive wave of dark energy radiated from the beast, building up in its arms. The shadows began melding together, forming a massive sword that stood nearly as tall as the demon itself.

In a single motion, the sword came propelling downward. Y'lth Qant phased again, grabbing hold of the paladin as he did. In their absence, the sword cut through the stone, exposing the levels beneath the arena floor. Part of the walls collapsed inward and fell through the levels below.

The two solidified behind the demon, but they were not safe. The demon's tail lashed out like a whip and struck the two. They were knocked away from one another as Y'tth Qant fell into a crevice in the ground. Loria was sent hurtling back and landed in a heap beside Avara and a still cowering Emilia. The force knocked the sword from the paladin's hands as it clattered against the stones, just out of reach.

“You’re bothering me,” the demon said as it loomed over the three women. “It’s time you all learned your place!”

He swung the massive blade downward.

Loria rose from her daze and raised her shield, catching the shadowy blade above her. A blast of light shot outward, to meet the shadows. The strength of the demon pushed the paladin to her knees, yet the light did not falter.

This only infuriated the demon further.

He released strike after strike with the sword, repeatedly bashing at the light. Cracks began to form in the shield she held over them, and the light began to flicker. Behind her, Avara was beginning to stir, but she was still clearly in a daze. Her eyes seemed glossed over as she looked around slowly. Her legs did not respond to her movement, all her weight on her arms holding her up.

“I’ll kill you all!” the demon cackled. “What fun you’ve made this little game!”

He clutched the shadowy blade with what I presumed to be hands and brought it crashing down with one final blow. The blade collided with the holy magic and released a massive shockwave of power that shook the entire arena. Those audience members still alive remained frozen in fear despite the massive display of magic. Avara, Emilia, and Loria lay flat against the ground. Two of them were passed out, with only the paladin still clutching to consciousness. Sweat covered her as her arms hang limp by her side, staring up at the demon’s massive form.

Y’lth Qant resurfaced into the arena and stood in the shadows some distance off, simply watching. He looked at the demon, and I could feel hopelessness washing over him.

You’re just going to give up? I screamed in his head.

You see any way we win this? He hissed. *I'm out of options here. I can't fight and save people at the same time. To make matters worse, he's completely immune to every attack I've thrown his way. We're better off running while he's distracted.*

We run he'll just hunt us down again! Besides, we can't just leave them!

We can do whatever we want. Y'lth Qant began to back away from the arena floor. He peered out a gaping hole in the wall to the land below as he judged the distance for one final shadow phase.

You can't leave! We're not backing out now!

So now it's "we"? After all this time, you decide there's suddenly a "we" in all of this? You're truly something else. We will have to talk to this out after we leave!

I fought against Y'lth Qant's will, but my struggles were in vain. His grip around my subconscious remained. He had complete control. I could feel the shadows closing in, the magic building as he began to navigate his way across the shadows to the ground below.

I turned back one last time and watched the horror unfold. The demon's great sword swung overhead. A visceral shriek released from the demon's form as the blade came crashing down, dousing the entire arena floor in shadows and flames. No light came to meet the blade and impede its progress. No attacks came from the shadows to delay the inevitable strike.

The sword dissipated in the air, and the entire world seemed silent. No one stirred; even the elements paused as the air stood still. From my vantage, I looked down at a gaping crater in the floor where stones lay cracked or shattered.

Loria lay in the crater, her armor melting to her skin as shadowy plumes of smoke leaked through the cracks in her plate. The glint in the metal had worn away, leaving it cold and grey,

like the stones that surrounded her. Somehow, she had taken the brunt of the dark magic in a last desperate attempt to save the two women she protected.

But it had not been enough to save everyone. Beside her lay Avara. Her hair fell in waves along the ground, her eyes closed and face almost calm. Yet there was no denying the pool of blood that began to pool under her head. No breath graced her lips, and her chest remained still...

Chapter 36: A Deal with Demons

I was back in my own body.

I could feel the tears run freely from my eyes. My fists clenched tightly together as I stared across the ruined arena. My heart pounded in my chest; the rapid beats sent my ears ringing.

What the hells... how are you doing this? The demon shrieked in the back of my brain. I could feel his thoughts nagging at my skull, scraping against the side of my head like an animal in a cage. But I shoved his thoughts away, burying them under my own emotion.

I stared across the way at Avara. She lay surrounded by the demonic shadows, though her body seemed uncorrupted by their energy. I wished beyond hope that I would find her alive, but I knew better.

“Well, this sport has been fun, but now I’m just pissed off!” the demon howled. “Show yourself you fucking coward!”

A blast of demonic energy erupted from the demon as his voice carried over the entire castle grounds. Walls shook; the dogs whimpered below; birds shot from the trees. Yet all the

humans in the compound were silent, still frozen. Tears fell from their eyes, their brains beginning to fade into madness.

And it was all my fault.

I stepped out of the shadows and approached the demon, conjuring up a massive amount of fire in the palms of my hands. They blazed a rich blue, illuminating me in their light. Yet there was no warmth from these flames. I could feel the chill washing over me. Everything began to fade, except for the massive shadow that turned to face me.

“Well, you’re certainly no demon,” the shadow said as he could ignore my magic no longer. “Did I scare him off?”

I said nothing but continued my approach, the fire’s intensity growing with each step.

“Come now, nothing to say? Has fear set in, leaving you with one final hurrah?” The demon stopped to laugh then stared intently at me. I assumed the red flames in the shadows acting as eyes were locked on me, though they seemed rather unafraid. His mistake.

“Child, this is wearisome. I’ll just kill you and hope Y’lth Qant goes with you!”

He raised his hands above his head and began to conjure up his shadowy blade. As he did, I watched the shadows spread upwards, all the energy accumulating at the top...

Leaving no magic to protect his body.

I released the magical fires swirling around me in one massive spell. The energy flooded from my arms and shot forward like a river. The fires surged forward and collided with the demon, knocking him from his feet. They quickly spread across the demon’s body, shrouding him in flames as he staggered back. A bestial screech erupted as the shadowy spell was abandoned. His energy was focused on desperately putting out the flames.

In the chaos, I summoned up the magic Syltra taught me. I imagined a massive surge of energy washing over me and released it with reckless intent. The energy propelled me backwards but caused even greater damage to my foe.

The blast exploded against the demon, carrying the creature off his feet. In a swirling mass of shadows and blue flames, the creature fell through the arena wall. It tumbled down towards the earth below, mixed with the rubble and falling stones.

For a moment, the fear that froze the entire arena alleviated. People resumed their frantic scramble for the exits, while others stared around dumbfounded. Adella fell back into her seat, suddenly gasping for air, while Gorm remained motionless beside her. I reached out in search of his magical energy and managed to find a glimmer of his powers, though they seemed diluted. But looming over that were two sources of incredible strength. One was the holy energy stemming from Aelandria's sword. The other was growing larger, racing towards me...

I jumped from the wall at the last second as the demon broke through. Debris cascaded downwards as the creature appeared in full, its shadows stretching to succumb the arena. Fear washed over the onlookers again, and the world fell deathly silent, save the crackling of the demonic fire encompassing my foe.

"That's enough!" his voice berated my thoughts, pounding within my skull. "Mortals should all learn their place, especially when they are on borrowed time!"

The demon released his magic. Demonic fire lunged forward like a python. The first bit of magic exploded against my chest as the rest of the magic wrapped around me, suffocating me. The energy began to press against me, trapping me in a vacuum. There was no air to breathe. There was no light.

I collapsed to my knees, my chest burning as I gasped desperately for some respite from my suffocation. I tried to focus and map out the shadows, but my head was too foggy. I could not imagine any magic, nor conjure up any flames to push back the darkness.

I fell further, collapsing to the ground. I rolled onto my back and stared up into nothing but eternal darkness. My body felt trapped, like thousands of pounds of force pressed against me. I could not move. I could only watch as the life slowly drained from my body, void of any breath or urge to fight anymore.

We should have run, Y'tlh Qant's voice was strained. He felt the same pain and could do less than I to fight it. I could feel his subconscious slowly fading away, his once fiery anger little more than a candle in the wind. *You're an idiot. Coming back to die for someone who was already dead...*

I'd do it again... I managed to think one last time...

A piece of metal grazed my finger. It was warm and seemed to be calling for me. My hand reached out reflexively and wrapped around the hilt of a sword. The warmth from the metal raced through my veins, filling me with new life. Y'tlh Qant's voice fell away as my head began to clear. The blue flames from the sword spread further, encompassing me in their energy. Then suddenly, they burst outwards in a wave of holy light, shattering the dark flames, and breaking the spell.

I gasped greedily for the air that flooded my lungs. My head was still swimming, but my thoughts were my own. The pounding dissipated as the shadows in the entire arena were broken away. I glanced across the arena and saw Emilia. She had managed to grab Aelandria's sword in the brief moments the demon's spell broke, and it protected her when the being reemerged. She had thrown the blade into the fire, and now stood ready, bow in hand.

There was little time to celebrate. The demon howled in fury and shot tentacles of fire swarming at me in a mad rush. I ducked away from some, but more broke through, wrapping around my arms and legs. They pinned me down, and the demon strode forward so he towered over me.

“I’m really sick of your parlor tricks,” the voice boomed.

He raised his hand to strike when a series of arrows shot forward. I watched them whistle past, striking the tentacles. Some went straight through with little effect, but others managed to cut through the shadows and weaken their bond.

I managed to pull my sword hand free. In a quick motion, I cut at the other tentacles. However, the demon, undeterred, brought his fists hammering down in one massive strike. I raised Aelandria’s sword to meet them and watched with delight as the sword’s fire flared brighter, piercing the shadows.

The demon released a visceral scream and pulled its arms away. Shadowy liquid fell from the demon, and the shadows wavered, revealing flesh underneath. Emilia noticed the same moment I did and released a volley of arrows into the flesh. Once one struck home, the others followed that same trajectory. One arrow quickly became a gaping hole, leaking a black liquid as the demon shrieked in pain.

It stepped back and its demonic flames flared up again. The shadows regrouped around his body, but they could not hide the truth. Underneath the shadows existed a physical being, one that could be wounded by mortal weapons. If it could be wounded, it could be slain.

As the demon reeled from the first strike, I ignited a blaze of blue fire. It released no heat, but I could feel its energy enhanced as it drew on the holy power of Aelandria’s sword. The

demon took notice and released a blast of shadowy fire, but I knocked it aside with the enchanted sword. I followed up by releasing the blaze directly at the demon's head.

The fire erupted and spread across the demon's body, causing the shadowy smoke to sizzle, dissipating in smokey vapors. More flesh was revealed underneath, and Emilia released another series of arrows at the various openings. Unlike before, some of the arrows bounced off the demon's flesh, as some areas seemed protected by his natural armor. However, once one arrow pierced skin, the others congregated in the same spot, until they tore a massive hole in the demon.

His tail came flashing out like a whip, but I managed to dodge the blow, shadow phasing beyond its reach. Unfortunately, I realized too late that the tail was not aiming for me.

It continued in a wide arc, until it wrapped around Emilia. She became ensnared. The shadows spewing from the tail slowly encompassed her, until I could no longer see her behind the darkness.

"Let her go!" I shouted.

I rushed in with my blade and struck at the demon. The blue flames shattered the shadows around the demon, and the blade cut deep into the flesh beyond. I continued to swing, hacking away at its leg. The beast howled, but it did not release Emilia. Instead, it shadow phased to the opposite end of the arena.

We locked eyes, staring each other down. A small pool of black liquid gathered under the demon. I felt my legs trembling, but I managed to keep the blade steady, its point aimed straight ahead at the demon.

“It seems you’re more trouble than I bargained for,” the demon mused. “However, your friend here is simply human. I can already feel her life energy draining away. It won’t be long now before she is gone entirely.”

I clutched the sword tighter and strode towards the demon. I could feel the dark energies stemming from the demon’s tail, and I knew it was the same magic that nearly killed Syltra.

“Stop there,” the demon hissed. “Stop there, like a good mortal, and let’s talk this all through.”

“I take it you care to bargain,” I shouted.

“No, there is no bargain here. Just a simple task. A life for a life is all. You drop that sword and let me kill you, and I will release your little friend.”

“I’ve made deals with demons before. They don’t tend to go according to plan, nor do they tend to be very... reliable.”

“Well not all of us have the same set of honesty,” the demon performed a sort of half bow as he spoke. “But there are always exceptions. Trust me boy. I swear on my own soul, that once you die, I will not harm the human girl.”

“Fine,” I replied. “You can kill me, and the girl goes.”

“Excellent,” the demon hissed. “Drop the sword and walk to me.”

I lowered the sword and placed it on the arena floor, point facing the demon. I ran my hand along the blade, feeling the blue flames come to my arms, then disappear. I stood and walked from the blade when a familiar voice began clawing away at my thoughts.

Fucking heroes, Y’lth Qant laughed. Always walking to their deaths for people who mean absolutely nothing. This is all meaningless you realize.

I’m not doing this to be a hero. I have my reasons.

He's never going to follow through on his deal. You're going to let him kill us.

No, he won't, I agreed.

Y'lth Qant laughed in my head and fell back like a distant echo. He had enough of me and allowed me peace as I approached the demon that towered over us.

“Now this is a wonderful turn of events,” the demon replied. “A human with reason, ready to admit his own defeat.”

“Release Emilia,” I shouted. I stopped a few feet from him.

“Oh, the girl?” The demon looked at his tail, then released his arm. It shot forward and stabbed through me, jutting clean out the other side. “Truth is, I lied.”

I coughed up blood as the arm began to pull me from the ground. I was beginning to lose feeling in my legs, and my vision was closing in fast. As the demon hoisted my body, the dark shadows began to flood towards his arm, burning at my skin.

“How sad really,” the demon mused as he lifted me closer to his face. “After all this time struggling, you give up so easily. Is it pride? Love? Well, in any case it matters little. You won't have any stories to tell once you're dead!”

He laughed maniacally then, though the sound was more like the sound of a screaming animal. His head lifted as he enjoyed his victory, the shadows beginning to spread over my body. However, they never contacted my arm.

As the demon lauded himself on his success. I raised my right hand until it was level with his neck. As the shadows rushed to his tail and arm, they left the rest of his body exposed. I could see through the thin veil surrounding him and clearly saw the demon's flesh underneath.

“Go to hell,” I gasped.

The flames from Aelandria's sword, previously hidden inside my arm, burst to life. I sent them hurdling forward, manipulating the flames to form a single javelin. It blazed forward and broke through the shadows, piercing the demon underneath.

The demon's laughs died away, replaced with gurgling gasps. Blood dribbled from the demon's mouth, and he began to stumble about. The shadows rushed away from his arm and tail. Emilia collapsed to the arena floor, wounded but alive. I slid off the demon's arm as his hands desperately went to cover the hole in his neck. But when he tried to cover it, the flames only intensified, spreading over his body. The shadows evaporated, and the demon roasted under the heat of the goddess's magic. He fell backwards through the hole in the arena, disappearing as he plummeted hundreds of feet to the courtyard below.

The wave of fear and terror was released, yet no one moved. They all stared in awe at me, now standing alone in the center of the entire arena. The only one to move was Adella. She leapt over the pavilion wall to the arena ground. She weaved through the carnage to Emilia's side, checking her pulse. I watched relief spread over her face as she motioned for people to aid her.

"Well stop gawking, the lot of you!" she commanded. "Help my daughter!"

Men and women from the crowd came down, though they struggled to clamber over the rubble. They managed to carry Emilia from the arena. I began to follow but collapsed to my knees after barely taking a step. In my position, I coughed up more blood. I pressed my hands against the gaping hole in my chest, only to watch blood continue to spill forth.

As blood pooled in my hands, I heard footsteps approaching. I looked up at a long green dress as Adella bent down beside me.

"You're quite impressive, Daelin," she said. "I must thank you for saving us."

I tried to reply, but blood caught in my throat as I spoke. I swallowed it back down, only to cough it out, spewing the red liquid across her dress. Adella seemed unphased and placed a hand on my chest. Her hands glowed a soft green. A series of shocks fell over me before my entire body began to grow numb. My vision clouded over as I wobbled, struggling to stay upright.

“Relax,” she whispered. “You’ll be safe soon...”

Epilogue

I awoke the color red.

At first, I thought it was my own blood. I had certainly seen enough of it in the past... however long it had been. My body was weak, and my vision blurred. Panic filled my thoughts as I figured I was certainly dead. However, a hand took mine and squeezed. Feeling it, I began to calm myself down. I felt every muscle in my body throbbing, and I felt every bone in my body ache. Despite the excruciating pain, I began to breath regularly and took stock of my surroundings as my vision finally cleared.

I lay in a bed nearly naked, wearing only my trousers. The room itself appeared small, with the stone walls threatening to suffocate me at any moment. Relative darkness held the room, tempered only by the orange flame of a dying candle. I struggled to turn my head, but managed it ever so slightly, to see a familiar face staring back over me.

“Syldra...”

The words were barely a whisper, more a whimpering exhale of air, but she heard me. She appeared to smile at me, though I could just make out lines of tears leaking from her eyes.

Her lips touched my forehead. I wanted to cry, but even tears would hurt. Instead, I squeezed her hand, finally warm to the touch, holding mine. She squeezed back.

“Rest now,” she said. “Rest, and we can speak later.”

I nodded and, despite the pain, felt a smile cross my face as I let myself drift off once more.

#

My sleep was interrupted later by the sound of the door opening. Footsteps echoed, as green joined the red fluttering about in the corner of my vision.

I blinked away my grogginess and pushed myself up to my elbows. It hurt, but after a brief struggle I managed to sit up so I could better look at the two women now sitting beside me.

“I’m impressed,” Adella remarked. “Looking over your wounds, I assumed you would take much longer to recover.”

She wore a green night gown, her hair falling freely about her. Deep bags wore under her eyes, and I swear there were more lines than usual marking her expression. Still, her eyes radiated with unparalleled intensity as she looked me over.

I looked down at my chest and realized it was covered with white bandages that once bled through. Now, the blood had dried, and the bandage itself was already falling from my skin. My arm shook as I tried to remove it. The cloth felt heavy, but I managed to fling it aside enough to see my chest.

The wound had been healed somehow. Where once a gaping hole lay, there was now just skin, though it appeared pale compared to the rest of my body. A shaking hand rested against the scar, and it felt cold. The warmth from the rest of my body stopped abruptly on the edges of the wound.

“Your wounds were cursed beyond my knowledge. I almost didn’t think I’d be able to do anything about it, as the tissue was completely dead. Nothing I can do with death, unfortunately,” Adella explained. “Those scars will stay white as a ghost until the rest of your flesh rots away. Even then, they may remain.”

“I heal fast,” I muttered, collapsing back to my pillow as I spoke.

“Indeed, you do,” she nodded.

“What happened to Avara?” I asked, though I knew the answer.

“Daelin...” Syldra spoke this time and took my hand in hers. “She...”

“Please, just tell me.”

“She is passed from this world. We did all we could to save her, but the physical trauma she went through... she was never meant to be in a fight like that.” Adella’s face seemed stoic as ever, but there was a softness to her voice, a regret that seemed to haunt her.

I knew the answer was coming. I saw her body there, her chest still and all the blood. She seemed cold, and there was nothing I or anyone else in that arena could have done at that point. I blamed myself of course. I still do. But at the time, the grief was almost unbearable...

“What about... what about Emilia?” The words came through broken gasps of air, hiding back the emotion that threatened to break loose at any moment.

“Safe, thanks to your heroics. She is afflicted with the same curse that marred Syldra’s soul, but not nearly as horrific. She should wake in a few days and will then resume her normal responsibilities around the castle.”

I nodded slowly to myself. Emilia was safe but Avara was gone. Somehow, I couldn’t find triumph at saving one, when the other now lay dead in a foreign land so far from home.

“There are other things you should know about,” Adella continued. “As you may have guessed, all three paladins have passed. Now the Enclave, they will hear word soon enough that their warriors have died at the hands of a demon, in the halls of Edinrow. That can cause a lot of trouble for us. Gorm, having recovered surprisingly fast from a near-death poisoning, is returning to Elysium to share word of the events that transpired here. He hopes he can prevent any further action causing trouble in Eastwood.

“As for you and Syltra, you’re now both dead. Syltra never recovered from your travels in the caverns, and you died in the arena. As far as anyone knows, my people are already spreading word that Loria vanquished the two demons at the cost of her own life. It was dazzling heroism, a story that Gorm himself will corroborate when he arrives in Elysium. As of today, the Demon of Windhelm is officially no more. You never made it out of that arena. You were impaled by the demon and died shortly after. Your body could not be found, as it dissipated like the other monster, gone in a wisp of smoke. Rather poetic, I must say.”

“That’s all well in good, but who knows I live?”

“Besides Gorm and the three of us sitting here, only my two daughters. We’ve already begun weaving the stories of a young mage who will be coming to serve the court, a role that Syltra has already agreed to take on as payment for saving her life. As for you, you will serve as my family’s personal guard. Ariel herself met you on the plains, and your bravery impressed her, perhaps even enough for a betrothal to follow. That’s how we shall spin it anyways. For now, you are to remain here and rest until the appropriate time to present you to the court.”

I stared at Adella while my head mulled through everything. Everyone believed I was dead. Gorm left. Avara was gone. Besides Syltra, the list of people I knew and trusted continued to shrink. There wasn’t much left for me to live for, not anymore.

Come now, don't say such things, the demon in my head cackled. *We're just getting started.*

THE END