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FATES' GUIDE

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BOOK I

THE HUNTER'S HEART

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Prologue

DR 108: Year of the Flood

The young mother knelt over her sleeping daughter, looking on her for the last time. The cool night air blew in from an opening in the thick sandstone walls. Adjusting her daughter's blanket, Hyliph stifled her tears. Abruptly she turned away and moved to the window that faced the great courtyard of the king. There stood the massive statue of the God-king Gilgeam, fully the height of ten men. A semi-circle of smaller, life sized statues stood behind him, their heads bowed. They were the dead gods of Unther: Inanna, Utu, Girru, Ki, Ramman, Marduk, and even the lord of plagues, Nergal. All fell defending the empire from the Orcs, and were honored still.

Her eyes fell on the smallest of the statues: the granite shaped to represent the beautiful goddess Nanna-Sin. Where the other gods were arrayed with implements of war, Nanna-Sin held no weapons and displayed no armor. Instead her hands rested on a bare pregnant belly. The goddess of fertility wore only the moonstones in her hair, proud of her body that carried the next generation of Unther. The image stabbed

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Hyliph to the heart.

The message had come with the rains. She was to prepare to leave her husband's house and join her sisters. It was clear that she would not return. While the message appeared authentic and had the proper codes, it made no sense to the young woman.

She was third wife to a general in Gilgeam's army. And not only was she third wife, Hyliph knew she was actually her husband's most favored. While she had tried to disguise her anguish over the past week, her husband had seen through it. He had taken her into his bed every night, and let her stay until morning. She was the love of his life. Where could she go that would be more important than where she was now?

But she could not ignore the call. The queen had followers throughout the vast empire, and they would find her if she tried to flee. Telling her husband the truth, that she was a spy, would only earn her an equally painful death. No, she had made her decision, declared her allegiances years ago and they could not be revisited or ignored. Nanna-Sin was dead and could not aid her.

There was no stopping the tears that welled up in her dark eyes when she turned back to her tiny daughter. Nanna-Sin was gone but she prayed to her just the same, hoping someone greater was listening to her plea. Hyliph drew a black stone knife from her sarong as she walked to her child. Cutting across the outside of her own arm, Hyliph winced but kept silent. Bright blood quickly overflowed the wound and ran down her wrist to drip from her fingers. She let a spot of blood fall on her infant's cheek and then moved about the small room, smearing blood and carefully making a mess of the mat and covers where she took her sleep.

Maybe if General Toduk thought she had been kidnapped, maybe he would show mercy to the child. Hyliph did not trust herself to look at the baby again. She pulled her body through the window and dropped into the courtyard. Sheets of wind driven rain soaked her immediately but her sorrow numbed her to the elements.

Shielding her eyes against the pounding rain, Hyliph ran in a crouch along the wall of the courtyard. She tried to keep an eye out for guards

but the night was pitch black. The only light came from the small windows cut in the sandstone walls, and she was careful to avoid those. So it was she passed within a few paces of a guard before either saw the other. “Hold!” At the sound of the man’s voice, she jumped and spun around.

The man had his spear leveled. “Identify yourself.”

Her voice cracked as she spoke. “I am Hyliph Nur Aluktum.”

The spear wavered, and then rose to the soldier’s side as he came forward a step. “Lady. Why are you out of your chambers?”

“I...” Hyliph’s mind raced. Even if she bluffed her way past the guard, it would be clear she had run away. Her daughter’s life would be forfeit. Straightening her back, she shifted her shoulders slightly. “Please do not tell anyone. My husband is merciless.” Her hand slipped up to pull an errant lock of silky black hair behind her ear. Her other came to rest on the obsidian dagger.

The soldier’s eyes faltered, glancing down to where the linen clung to her swollen bosom. “You go to a lover.” It was not a question.

Hyliph let hers eyes drop but she watched the soldier’s feet and the butt of his spear. “You need to return to your rooms. Now.” Hyliph turned away, as if to run. “Wait.” As his hand came down on her shoulder, she whirled and thrust the stone dagger into his chest.

Staggering back, his eyes registered disbelief. The black knife stood out of his chest, and she knew she had struck true. The guard sagged and collapsed to his back without making a sound. Hyliph knelt at his side. She ignored his accusing gaze and pulled the knife from between his ribs. A finger width snapped off the tip of the blade as it came free. She whispered, “I had no choice,” but the soldier heard nothing.

She did not linger. The outer wall was just ahead and while the exterior was carefully ground smooth, the interior face was not nearly so well fashioned. Her fingers sought cracks and bulges, and she scaled the wall with an ease that would have shocked her husband. It had been years since she had had to do such work, but the old skills had not faded.

Water, filthy with the grime of the streets, ran along the bottom of the

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wall. Hyliph landed in an ankle deep, fast moving stream, slipped and fell to her side. She scrambled to her feet and ran directly away from the palace, quickly losing herself in the narrow alleys between the homes of the commoners.

She was alone in the streets, the ferocity of the storm driving all reasonable people to huddle inside their homes. As such she was one of the first to realize the horror that was about to befall the city.

Coming out onto a broad tree lined street, she tried to orient herself after the confusing flight through the warrens. The boulevard sloped down to her left and presumably to the river. As she turned to go right, she heard a strange noise. The pelting rain had seemed nearly deafening moments before, but now she heard a mighty roar, as if Anhur himself were screaming in her ear. Looking back to the river, she squinted against the rain. Lightning lit the sky momentarily, giving her a glimpse of the city's doom.

The ground quivered beneath her feet and Hyliph was clutched by a primitive fear. She turned and ran.

Water surged past her ankles as she fled, rising quickly. When it reached her knees, she lost her balance and was swept from her feet. Still the water rose as Hyliph flailed, tossed by the immense power of the tide.

Then she was caught, the water driving her through one of the trees lining the street. She lurched to a painful halt. Her hair was tangled in the branches, leaving her body to flap like a banner in the horrendous current. Fingers clawed at the branches, at her hair, but already her lungs burned for breath. She would die, and when the water receded her body would dangle like an ornament.

Her struggles slowed as she came to the edge of consciousness. Limp arms were taken by the current and her hand brushed over the knife that was somehow still tucked in her skirt. Suddenly she fought for her life once more, hacking at her hair with desperate strokes.

Chapter 1

DR 1376: Year of the Bent Blade

Ehric knelt as he put his finger to the black blood that ran down the stone. His eyes narrowed against the bright sun and he kept his head high, looking for threats. Touching the tip of his finger to his tongue, he learned that it was Orc blood. Spitting out the foul ichor, the hunter raised a waterskin to his lips and took a quick pull to wet his throat. The ground was too stony to show clear tracks but Ehric grew suspicious that this was more than some intertribal fighting.

Given the amount of blood on the rocks, he expected he would come across a body soon enough. In his experience an Orc was very much like any other game. It ran when injured, even when injured to the death as this Orc almost assuredly was. The question was whether it was being pursued, something the rocks would not tell him.

It was time to take to the air.

He intoned; taking his time as he carefully spoke the syllables. He would have been shocked to realize he was speaking in the Sylvan tongue, but any Fey creature of the world would recognize the words. A moment later his body faded from view and Ehric rose with the air heated by stones baking in the sun. It was a glorious day, hot but clear. With a

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simple act of will, his vaporous body rotated to take in his surroundings. The peak of the unnamed mountain rose before him, maybe a hundred paces up and three times that distance as a straight line. It did not make for an easy walk. A host of similar peaks, many of which he could look down on from this vantage, covered the land to the east and west. If he could have looked through the mountain before him, he would have seen the impossibly wide expanse of the Shaar away to south. It was not a land he had traveled, but he knew it to be full of savage horsemen. Wyvern's Cairn, his family home, was to the north, where the mountains faded into rolling hills and meadows. Beyond, the city of Innarlith was just visible on the horizon, though he could make out little of its details. It was a dark smudge at the edge of a vast sea.

These things he took in at a glance, for he knew the mountains well and the surrounding country. He focused on the ground nearby, quickly picking out his quarry.

It seemed the Orc had finally succumbed and lay against the trunk of a spindly pine. Ehric drifted closer and noted that the creature still drew breath, though it looked near to passing. Releasing his spell, he landed just a few paces from the dying goblinoid. The Orc coughed in surprise, launching a thick glob of blood to land at Ehric's feet.

He grunted in disgust and spoke in the creature's guttural language. "Who killed you?"

It attempted to laugh, "Perhaps you will meet my killer, human. I would like that."

Ehric decided he could inspect the wounds after the thing's soul had departed. For now he wanted to get what information it could tell. "You are of Glangdrig's clan, or has he been replaced?" Ehric knelt. "It doesn't matter. I can tell your clan who did this to you. Perhaps they can avenge your death."

"Glangdrig deserves this fate. I tell you nothing."

Ehric tried a different tact. "A mighty Orc such as you must have a special female. Perhaps I can do something for you?"

A little light came back into the creature's eyes. "I will tell you if you see

that no one else takes her.”

“This I will swear to you. May One-Eye smash me if I fail.” He used a common oath of the Orcs.

“Shurgulug is my mate. You will know her by her great chest and swelling belly.”

“Who did this?”

“The snakes.” The big Orc spoke with his last breath.

“Snakes?” There would be no response. Ehcric cautiously approached the dead tribal, but it was no ruse to draw him in. Inspecting the body, he found slashing wounds to its gut and a deep penetrating stab in the upper chest. “Quite the fangs on these snakes.”

He found nothing else of particular interest and continued to muse on what the dying creature had said. Ehcric had not traveled frequently or far but he knew a little of the Yuan-ti. It was said that they actually ruled in some cities to the north but he found that difficult to credit. Looking around, he tried to imagine why anyone, even a snake, would purposefully come to these mountains.

He only came because of the Orcs and Ogres... and the snakes, if they proved to be real. The lands to the north were divided into city states, Innarlith being the largest and most powerful. Trade flourished along the Lake of Steam, but the cities competed vigorously for that trade. Sometimes competition turned into violence, often enough in fact, and cities would war against each other. All the while they ignored the outside threats. Like the threat of Orcs and Ogres massing in the hills and mountains.

It had happened before. In his youth Ehcric had survived the descent of an Orc horde out of the mountains. The cities had endured and come away relatively unscathed, but the countryside and the hamlets like Wyvern’s Cairn had been hard hit. His parents had had to rebuild from nothing, and Ehcric had vowed that it would not happen again.

And so he found himself in the Firesteap Mountains, tracking Orcs and dealing with chiefs. It looked as though he would get a chance to do the latter again soon.

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But not today. Instead he moved back down the mountainside, seeking the ground where the Orc had initially been attacked. Ehrlic moved with a practiced ease as he descended, though a true mountaineer would have called him reckless. A ring on his left hand gave him his confidence. It had been costly but worth every copper. With the other ring on his right hand, they gave him most of what he needed to survive in the wilds.

Most, but not all. There was more to survival in these mountains than avoiding a fall and finding food. He kept his eyes constantly roaming, looking more to his surroundings than his footing, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

The tree cover thickened as he approached the spot where he had picked up the dying Orc's trail. Stunted pines mixed with oak offered some shade but stifled the air. Sweat beaded on his brow and made his beard itchy. Dirty nails dug into his chin to relieve the itch, but stopped abruptly as he came upon the scene of violence.

Two more Orcs, smaller than the one he had interrogated, lay sprawled on ground. Blood still dripped down hill from the corpse of one of the Orcs, but it was the other Ehrlic moved to inspect. He prodded the prone body with his spear, both to ensure it was dead and to try to set off any traps that may have placed on the corpse. Confident it was dead and safely so, Ehrlic reached down and rolled the body.

He recoiled at the sight. The Orc's chest was hollowed out, burned away but not by fire. Covering his mouth, he placed the spear to his side and drew a dagger from the dead creature's belt. Touching the blade to the edge of the wound, his caution was rewarded by a faint hissing as acid ate at the rusty blade.

Ehrlic tossed away the knife and felt his stomach turn. Maybe the Orc hadn't been lying. Suddenly the familiar woods took on an ominous feel. Snakes had never really caused him any worry, he'd spent too much time in the wild for such irrational fears, but now every fallen log or pile of brush looked like a potential ambush.

He quickly inspected the other body and found only the marks associated with death from a blade. It appeared the Orcs had not

wounded their attackers. No blood trails led away, save for the one he had already followed.

If there really were snakemen in these hills... Ehric realized he did not exactly have a plan. “And this is no place to think about it.” He spoke once more in the Sylvan tongue, letting his body dissolve into air. There was no wisdom in leaving tracks.

* * * *

“Snakemen in mountains. Keep watch. I am well. Tell Meghun, stop growing.” Ehric sat facing north as the sun hovered just above the horizon. His message became a gentle breeze that drifted north. It would reach his parents’ home within the hour and he hoped he had kept the concern from his voice.

He would visit Glangdrig’s tribe. Once his shock had died down, it was clear that this was just another threat to be managed. The snakemen, he was now convinced they were real, could be a great threat to the tribes. Of course, they wouldn’t believe him. He may have to find some proof, but that would undoubtedly come. In the meantime, even the rumors of snakes could work to his advantage. As Orcs died mysteriously, the chief’s wisdom and favor with Gruumsh would be questioned. It could mean the end of Glangdrig’s rule or at the least the death of many of his tribe, at their own hands or the fangs of the snakes. A small smile creased his eyes but then he shook his head. “Getting ahead of yourself.” He muttered to himself as he often did when alone.

Turning away from the overlook, he took a few long strides to cover the full breadth of his small camp. It was his most remote site and he came here only when he felt distinctly threatened. No trails led to the small outcropping; he had to use his spells to reach it himself. Still, he felt some unease as he slipped out of his boots and unfastened the clasps to his leather armor.

He decided he would not light a fire.

* * * *

The Orcs were on edge. As he floated above Glangdrig’s camp, he noted there were more sentries than normal. As they say, bad news

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travels on dragon's wings. That might make things easier, assuming they didn't put a spear in his chest before he got the chance to speak.

With that concern in mind, he decided to announce his imminent arrival. He returned to his human body about a half hour's walk from the camp and with a quick glance around he began to cast once more. The breeze carried his message to the center of the Orc camp.

He waited.

It was not long, perhaps no more than an hour, before an Orc patrol arrived. He counted four of the primitives but assumed at least one scout would be shadowing them. He didn't try to locate them; it would be rude. Ehric barred his teeth in an exaggerated smile as the lead Orc stalked towards him.

Ehric spoke in Orcish. "Greetings, Shur." He didn't think about what the direct translation meant.

"Chief says you leave."

"He sent you to tell me that?" He glared past the big Orc to one of his companions. That Orc shifted his gaze after a moment. "I think you are lying, Shur. Do you think to become the new chief?"

The Orc growled deep in his throat and came forward, spear leveled at his chest. Ehric stood his ground and chanted quickly. Lightning arced down his arm as he pointed at the beast. Shur slid to a stop.

"You could make an excellent chief, Shur. But you need to work on your lying."

The Orc exhaled sharply. His breath stank of spoiled meat. Ehric managed not to gag through long practice. "Follow human. I try save you painful death but you want it, so it be." He didn't even speak his own language well.

Ehric was immediately surrounded by the other three Orcs as he followed Shur along the well trod trail leading to the camp. He may have heard movement in the woods to his right but he couldn't be sure. It was surprising. He didn't think Glangdrig's scouts had been that good in the past.

A gurgling scream came from far to his left. Without thought Ehric

crouched low, his spear coming smoothly to his hands. The source of the scream was obvious a moment later as an Orc, small with a painted face, rose and stumbled from the woods. He clutched a ruined throat, only managing a few steps before collapsing.

The Orcs around him did not wait for the body to fall. Two with readied bows drew arrows and launched them blindly into the trees. Shur swung around to face the unknown assailant even as the Orc beside him screamed, a shaft standing out of his back.

Ehric began to cast, clawing at the weave for the magic he needed to escape. Shur turned to him, spear raised. "You!" His spell unraveled as he was forced to deflect the goblinoid's spear with his own. Before he could respond an arrow glanced off the Orc's hide, drawing his attention. Fully enraged, the humanoid charged into the woods.

Another arrow found Orc flesh, and the last of the archers took off at a run, dropping his bow in panic. With difficulty, Ehric ignored the chaos around him and cast his spell. The pounding in his ears disappeared as he took his gaseous form. Safe from the arrows, he calmly took in the scene. The panicked Orc lay writhing on the ground a few paces off, two arrows standing out of his back.

He got his first look at the attackers when Shur reached the fallen scout. A scaled creature, of a similar size to the Orc he fought, rose to meet the charge. It flowed, as if in a dance, to avoid Shur's furious onslaught. Dark blood coated the snakeman's sword a moment later, but the Orc didn't seem to notice. Reversing his grip on the spear, he thrust in a sweeping arc. The snake was unprepared for the attack, and hissed as the spear plunged deep into its body.

He was buffeted, as if by a strong gust, as an arrow streaked through his vaporous body. A surge of panic quickly subsided when the dart struck the Orc lieutenant. He had not been the intended target, merely in the way. As both combatants fell, Ehric turned to seek out the archer.

She, Ehric noted the snake was a female, already had another arrow notched. She slid forward on a thick tail that blended into a slim humanoid torso. Her entire body was scaled, though they seemed to thin

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near her face. Ehric drifted closer.

The archer wore a leather belt at her waist, from which hung a long bladed knife and a couple of small pouches. Otherwise, she wore nothing but gray and brown scales made dull by the grit of the mountain. Her face was surprising human, though her black eyes, while intelligent, were devoid of emotion.

Suddenly Shur moved, lurching, and the serpent flashed into motion. A cobra's hood flared from her neck and she loosed a final shaft into the Orc. He shuddered and was still once more. Ehric continued to follow her as she moved warily towards her companion.

He clutched Shur's spear in dead hands. Ehric inspected the swordsman closely, noting that he was far more human in appearance, despite the scaled hide. He wondered if the two snakes were even of the same race.

The archer reached into a pouch at her waist and removed a small glass vial. Uncorking it, she turned her face away and poured the contents on the dead snake. Immediately the body began to hiss and smoke as the acid worked. It was a matter of moments before the creature was unrecognizable. The serpent took her companion's sword, frowning at a spot of acid that had splashed on the blade. Turning from him, she gave a last look to her surroundings before dropping to her belly and slithering off into the woods.

Ehric followed from a height of ten paces, any higher and he risked losing the serpent in the broken terrain. In a few minutes she came to a low cliff face and stopped. Sliding over to a jagged rock jutting from the ground at a shallow angle, the serpent removed her weapons and the belt at her waist. She slipped the items under the stone and backed away, looking to be sure the weapons were well hidden.

Then the serpent woman shifted. Ehric would have gasped if his form allowed it as the archer shrank into the form of a cobra. The snake looked perfectly natural. She slithered towards the wall of rock and disappeared into a crack in the mountain.

Ehric hesitated at the narrow opening. He might not get this

opportunity again. Surprise was his and if she was alone, he might be able to take her alive. Decision made, he pressed his body against the stone and flowed into the mountain. Darkness enveloped him after a few short feet as the crack turned sharply and then began to widen. A faint glow suddenly appeared, as if someone lit a candle. Following the crack led to a small natural cave, less than a man height in each dimension.

The Yuan-ti had returned to her larger form and lay next to a small glowing rock. Her tail was coiled under her as she reclined. There were no other snakes in evidence and the cavern seemed to be a dead end. Just as importantly, he saw no weapons. He realized she would have no way to get them through the narrow entrance.

It would be nearly impossible to get behind the snake in such close quarters and his spear would be useless. Knife work did not particularly appeal to him, but maybe with the proper display of power she could be cowed.

He let his spell fade.

As Ehric drew his knife, the serpent flew into action. She launched herself at his legs, using her tail to push against the irregular wall of the cavern. Ehric exhaled sharply but kept hold of the weapon, plunging the blade into the serpent's lower back even as her arms wrapped around his legs. He withdrew the blade and stabbed again, but he was off balance and the blade dug only a shallow gash in her shoulder. A second later he was on his back, stabbing blindly at the writhing serpent. He didn't feel the prick of the serpent's fangs but her poison burned in his veins, radiating across his chest.

The knife fell twice more, finding flesh both times, but the snake was still full of fight. A small hand clawed at his face, seeking his eyes. Ehric took her wrist in his empty hand and pulled her arm away, giving him a glimpse of her black, animal eyes. All thought of taking the creature alive had evaporated. His knife sought the snake's heart.

But came up short. The serpent's tail wrapped his wrist and wrenched his arm up, pinning it against the ceiling of the chamber. The strength in her grip was immense and she controlled his arm with ease. A tiny fist

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struck him in the face and Eheric spit blood, realizing belatedly that the serpent had a free hand. He ducked his chin into his chest as the fist came again.

He dropped the knife and started to mutter a spell. The fingers of his trapped hand worked to complete the necessary motions as his other still held the snake's wrist. The chamber exploded in light and sound.

* * * *

The slave struggled to her feet, the muscles of her legs corded and taut. Coarse rope cut into her shoulders and hips where the pack had been lashed to her back. Through the veil of her long black hair, she saw the soldier approach.

He parted her hair with the blade of his knife, bending at his knees to look into her eyes. "Is this too heavy for you?"

The slave knew better than to waste effort in answering. She would simply endure what came.

"Surely it is if you cannot respond. I will lighten your burden." The guard slid the steel blade down the side of her neck and across her collarbone. The slave concentrated on being still. With a violent motion, the soldier reversed his grip on the hilt and plunged the knife down between her breasts. She gasped despite herself but there was no pain.

Her tormenter reached out with his other hand and pulled away her sliced top cloth. "Much better." She resisted the urge to close her eyes as the man gazed on her bare chest. "But you still look like you could use some more help..."

"Soldier!" The man whirled away and came to rigid attention. It was a Wizard who addressed him. "Were your orders unclear?"

"No My Lady." The soldier kept his eyes downcast but the slave risked a glance through the hair that shielded her narrowed eyes. The woman's gray robes marked her as an apprentice, but this one possessed a commanding presence.

"These horses were to be unloaded and the supplies taken to the camp." The young mage stalked forward. "Instead I find you slowing the process. Do you expect us to wait while you ravish this woman?"

“No... I wasn’t...”

The apprentice mage was already turning from the stammering guard. Apparently he would not be punished. “I will return before sunset. If these supplies have not been moved by then, I will have you in chains.” With that, the woman departed, two soldiers and a large hunting dog in tow.

The slave cast her eyes back to the ground and saw the strip of linen the guard had cut from her. Even a simple piece of cloth could cause much strife among such people. The long years had taught her that the motivations of her captors were base and small.

“Why aren’t you moving?” She felt certain the soldier would have struck her, his pride was surely damaged, had it not been clear she would have collapsed from a blow. Instead he used his voice as a cudgel, and she could hear the slaves behind her begin to move.

The slave raised her foot and took a step forward. She did not look up at the trail she would climb. There was no point in anticipating the future. She lived in the present, always.

* * * *

Ehric groaned as he came to. The dim light of the magical gem was obscured by the dust and grit his spell had thrown into the air. The snake lay in front of him but when he tried to twist his body for a better look, his muscles refused to move. Panic held him for a time and his breath came in rapid gasps.

How long he fought with himself, he couldn’t say, but eventually he brought his breathing back under control. Long deep breaths filled his lung with grit but helped him to think. The snake’s poison hadn’t killed him. He reasoned that if it were going to paralyze his lungs or heart, it would have already. All he needed to do was wait for his body to purge the stuff.

His patient approach failed him when he saw the snake woman shift. She moved haltingly, pained noises passing her lips as she struggled to lift her head. Finally, with her slim torso supported on quivering arms, the snake turned and faced him. Despite the human face, the eyes were

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those of a serpent, cold and emotionless.

The snake slowly lowered herself onto her side, facing him from a distance of no more than two handbreadths. Blood started to run again from the wounds he had inflicted as delicate scabs broke. She lay there awhile, plainly gathering her strength, though to what purpose Ehric could only guess.

His answer came as she transformed, shrinking into a cobra. Ehric quickly lost sight of her as she slithered away. He heard her return only a few minutes later and she took her Yuan-ti form. The graceful agility he had noted as he followed her was back, and her wounds seeming largely healed. The snake took him by the shoulders and dragged him to the center of the small space. His knife appeared before him, her blood still coating the blade. The snake spoke in her own language, and Ehric imagined she promised terrible things.

But the knife was placed aside as his captor methodically stripped him. She carefully inspected the contents of his pack, but seemed to find little of interest there, beyond the length of rope she used to bind his limbs. She paused at his hands, bringing the light gem closer as if inspecting them. He realized what drew her attention when she roughly wrenched the two rings from his fingers.

When he was secured, the serpent transformed once more and slipped from the chamber. Ehric was left in darkness. He could not say how long he lay in the utter black but it was long enough for his body to fight the effects of the poison. Slowly he regained sensation in his limbs, starting with his arms.

He froze as a grating noise came from the entrance to the cave. The chamber was lit dimly as the serpent returned with the glowing gem in her maw. A moment later a second figure was present, not by way of the entrance but simply appearing out of nowhere in the center of the chamber.

Hope surged in him and he struggled in his bonds. The woman who had appeared was clearly human, no scales marred her skin and she wore the clothing of an Innarlithian. Her cruel smile ended his hope.

“I will be asking you some questions but first I must ensure you will not try to harm me or my followers.” Ehrlic sagged in his bonds. He would not resist them until he had the right opportunity.

The woman appeared to be about his age, and while her clothing spoke to a life in Innarlith, her face told of a more exotic origin. Brilliant teeth flashed against dark skin as she hissed the incantation to a spell. She closed her eyes and looked strangely serene as her voice fell silent.

He tried to prepare himself but the spell was like nothing he had experienced, nothing an Orc shaman could possibly hope to do to a victim. The woman was in his head; it was as if fingers scraped at the inside of his skull. And then her voice was there.

You will obey my servants. You will not try to escape. You will avoid any encounter which would result in this magic being dispelled or negated. You will stay on this plane of existence. You will avoid anyone you know well. You will not indicate in any way that you are under my control. You will not commit suicide.

The presence left his mind and Ehrlic stared wide-eyed at the sorceress. She spoke pleasantly. “Now for my questions.” The woman leaned close and removed his gag. “What were you planning on doing today, if you had not met us?”

Ehrlic found himself talking. “I was to meet with Glangdrig of the Orcs to discuss the snake threat. There is an Orc female named Shurgulug that I needed to free or kill to fulfill my oath to her mate.”

The woman chuckled. “And how is it you managed to get into this chamber?”

Ehrlic began to explain, which led to a line of questioning that revealed his magical talents to the strange sorceress. Finally the woman seemed satisfied. “Stay here with Yyll.” The dark skinned woman disappeared.

The cobra, Yyll, took her humanoid form and slid close to him. Rolling him to his stomach, her small fingers worked at the knots binding his arms and legs. Soon he was free and thoughts of escape flooded his mind. He tried to cast a spell but he couldn’t make his fingers or his voice complete the necessary incantations. Yyll looked at him

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impassively.

An image appeared in his mind, in it he was sitting quietly while the snake woman slept. It was clearly a command and he found himself doing as he was told. Yyll found a comfortable position, and Ehric watched her sleep until he drifted off himself.

* * * *

“Wake.”

He stared into the giant eye of a serpent. As Ehric scrambled to rise, the serpent lifted its head to reveal a humanoid body. The monster wore gray robes covered with indecipherable runes.

“You are familiar with these mountains?” The creature’s voice held as much emotion as its black eyes.

“Yes.”

The snakeman unfurled a scroll in front of him, laying it on the stone floor of the small chamber. “Very well, then you will recognize the features represented here. You will correct any errors you see and fill in details concerning each region. We specifically wish to know who claims what land. Can you write in the language of your kind?”

“I can.”

“I will aid you in this task. You will start now by drawing in the regions claimed by the various barbarians.”

Ehric immediately took a quill and bent to the task. When that was complete the snake continued.

“Tell me the properties of your non mundane equipment.”

“The spear is magical. It is infused with lightning. My armor allows to me to blend in with my surroundings.” The snake nodded with each item he announced. “Lenses on my eyes improve my vision but I do not know if they are magic. I have five feathers that will turn into large trees if they touch the earth.”

The snake nodded. “Is this all the magic you possess?”

He thought of the rings Yyll had taken but found he could still respond truthfully. “It is.”

The snake did not seem to notice his elusive answer. “Do you have any

items in your camps?”

“I have some potions for healing.”

“Very well. You will leave this place and go with Yyll. You will lead her to your camp here.” He pointed to a spot on the map. “She will place images in your mind to instruct you.” With those final instructions, the bestial creature rolled up the map and disappeared in much the same manner as the sorceress.

Yyll, still in the shape of a cobra, slithered off through the crack in the wall. Ehric collected his equipment, including his spear and armor, before casting the spell that turned him into air.

Chapter 2

He felt the now familiar intrusion of Yyll's mind. An image of him bathing in the nearby stream held the power of a command. Ehric looked up from sharpening his knife and the snake woman wrinkled her nose. With a short bark of a laugh, he set aside his work and trudged down to the water.

Yyll followed and watched as he undressed. "You haven't done that before." He stared at her as well but her black eyes were impenetrable.

They had settled into a routine over the last several weeks. She pointed out landmarks she wished to visit and he led her there, trying his best to avoid routes that would cross Orc trails. Thus far they had been successful.

He had been surprised to discover Yyll did not seem inclined to harsh treatment. While it surely was not needed to make him obey her commands, he had expected some brutality from her. He could only assume she wanted him healthy so he could continue to act as a guide.

The other snake, the one who looked human, would appear out of the air every six days. She stayed only long enough to cast the spell that sapped him of control over his actions. Thus far he had been unable to resist it.

Still, some thread of hope remained. He had studied the mage's casting

and felt he had learned something from her. Strangely enough, he looked forward to her return. One more view of the spell might be enough.

Ehric had never been to this particular spot; Yyll was taking him further west than he typically would range. If they continued, they would reach the road south into the Shaar in short order. The mountain pass was guarded on the north end by units of the Innarlith army garrisoned in some unnamed fort. He had never been through the pass but it was rumored the south end was patrolled by tribals. They were said to welcome travelers, so long as they stayed on the roads.

Yyll tugged at his mind once more and Ehric splashed out of the rocky pool. “What are we looking for?” The snake put her finger to her lips, a gesture she’d learned from him, and Ehric lapsed into silence. Soon they were moving west once again.

The journey was a difficult one. Having rarely visited this part of the range, Ehric had to rely on generalizations of topography to guide him. They followed many seemingly promising paths that ended in sheer walls or tumbling water.

It was near a fast moving stream that they encountered the patrol.

There were three of them. Two soldiers with banded mail, swords, and crossbows stood closest. A bowman, a woman in this case, was a few steps behind. The rushing water and the particular arrangement of the terrain had allowed the two groups to get within paces of each other without raising an alarm. The archer spotted Ehric first, pointing and shouting to her companions as they filled their canteens. Ehric started to raise his hands, to try to talk his way out of a fight, but then Yyll came into view.

The men scrambled to their feet as the archer reached for the quiver at the small of her back. Ehric started to duck back the way they had come but Yyll roughly pushed him aside, flaring her hood as she raised her bow. The Yuan-ti was swift and fluid in her motions, sending an arrow streaking towards the archer before she could notch her own. The woman screamed and stumbled.

Yyll drew another arrow, but the two men had taken up positions behind

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boulders on the far side of the shallow torrent. Only the wounded woman was in the open, but Yyll did not waste an arrow on her.

Instead she placed an image in his mind. In it he took shape as air, moved, and attacked the soldiers from behind. Ehrlic shook his head, but found his fingers were already making the proper motions to weave the spell. His body dissipated into air and he ascended to cross the shallow stream.

The men had their crossbows at the ready, arguing with gestures about a plan. A few paces away the woman clutched the shaft in her side while she crawled slowly for cover. Ehrlic chose another boulder for his own protection and let his body return. At that moment the soldiers made their move.

The men rose together, both leveling their crossbows at the snake woman. Yyll swung her bow to her left and took quick aim, but her target immediately dropped down behind his cover, his weapon still loaded. Before she could swing to the other threat, the second crossbowman shot. The Yuan-ti shrieked in pain but did not fall. The soldier foolishly kept his head up to see the results of his efforts, taking an arrow through the throat for his curiosity.

Ehrlic was already moving, having leapt from behind the boulder, he charged at the remaining soldier. The soldier did not see his approach but instead rose and took careful aim with his crossbow. Ehrlic held his weapon in two hands, slamming the man across the shoulders with the shaft of the spear. The soldier fell forward into the boulder he was using as cover, and Ehrlic shifted his grip to slip the spear over the man's head. The smooth wood pressed hard against his throat.

The soldier struggled mightily, and Ehrlic worried he would be overpowered. Suddenly the man jerked hard, once, and then was still. Ehrlic let the soldier fall and stared down in horror at the arrow standing out of the man's chest. Finally, he raised his head and looked across the swift moving stream. Yyll was leaning against a tree, the bolt from the first soldier buried high in her tail. After pulling the shaft free, she pointed behind him, to where the archer had dragged herself.

Turning from the dead soldiers, Ehric found the archer lying behind a low shelf of stone. The woman struggled upon hearing his approach, meeting him with a knife clutched in hand.

Blood trickled from her nose and she was forced to swallow before she could speak. "Who are you?"

Tears leaked from his eyes, but he couldn't respond. A quick slash knocked the knife from her hand. Ehric's spear rose and fell.

* * * *

"May I ask why you insist on leaving his mind intact?" Pethiss watched as a tiny garter snake attempted to twine up her leg.

"We need him to see and to interpret. While your thralls certainly have their uses, they are not known for their keen eyes." Verpith's hand dropped past the arm of his chair and came to rest in a tangle of black hair. As he rose the slave came to her feet as well. Verpith presented her to the sorceress. "This one, for instance, is one of your stock from the plains. I imagine she once was quite formidable... for a human." He added the last as a way to avoid a speech on the greatness of the Yuan-ti. Pethiss was ever quick to remind him she was Yuan-ti, despite her soft exterior.

Verpith continued. "But now she is a shell, fit only for the simplest of tasks. We can learn nothing of her ways, of her people's abilities." He released her and she took up her position once more at the side of his chair. "If she were not a gift from you, I think I would have discarded her by now."

Pethiss smiled. "I know this one. She lost very little when I cleansed her mind." She brushed the snake from her calf and took two steps forward. "Has your keen-eyed human discovered anything of use?" Of course she knew the answer. Verpith had noted she rarely asked genuine questions.

"In time, perhaps, he will prove useful. I am sorry that you are forced to refresh your spell so regularly, but I deem this the best way to proceed."

"I go to them again tonight. Do you have any instructions to relay?"

"Yyll knows what to do."

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“What shall I do in the meantime?” Pethiss tone had changed again. She came the rest of the way to him, her arms sliding around his scaled hide.

The elder looked dispassionately into the sorceress' eyes. “You have only just laid the eggs of our first clutch. We should wait to see their strength.”

Pethiss turned away abruptly. “You truly have learned nothing from humans.” With a flourish, she cast a spell to take her from the chamber.

* * * *

“How can you send us away?” Lurlin struggled to keep her voice level. She saw Fayla was trying to do the same, but her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“It is not merely my desire.” Father mixed gentleness and a firm hand. “The Morninglord has instructed me.”

“But why? He has not answered my prayers.”

“Nor mine.” Fayla interjected.

The priest reached out to his daughters, drawing them into a tight embrace. “You are in danger and a danger to all of us if you stay here.”

“But how? How are we a danger to you?”

“It is not Lathander's will that we should know. We must trust His greater wisdom and good intent for our lives.”

His daughters lapsed into silence and he held them. Fayla sobbed quietly. At last he spoke. “Lathander has marked you for great deeds.” His daughters raised their heads. “You will accomplish great things for Him, much greater than anything I have done with this life.”

They obviously wanted to believe him, but they still wrestled with fear. “Lathander has given you His blessing. You will be shielded from the eyes of His enemies.”

He kissed Fayla on the forehead. “Keep watch over your sister. You speak rarely, so keep your eyes open.” In turn he spoke to Lurlin. “Keep your sister safe.

“Keep faith in the Morninglord. Go to Him firstly, not as a last resort. Heed His reply.” He paused and looked each in the eyes. “Now go and

await the priest from the north. Rhonain is a strong and able servant. He will guide you well.”

The father was able to hold back his tears until his daughters were gone.

* * * *

Yyll fell asleep soon after the sorceress left and Ehrlic felt he was ready. The last casting had given him the insight he needed, showed him how to enter a mind. Even if he was not prepared, desperation drove him. He could not let himself be used to kill again.

He focused his attention on the sleeping snake. She lay on her back; tail uncoiled and her hands resting on a smooth stomach. Blocking out the noises of the night, he fixed his eyes on the rhythmic motion of her chest rising and falling. He forced himself to believe there was a heart there, a being capable of affection.

His hands moved of their own accord, shaping the weave to touch the snake. A detached part of his mind noted his weave didn't look the same as the sorceress, but he continued. The magic slid away as it touched Yyll and the snake woman shifted in her sleep. Cautiously, he crept forward, all the while concentrating on the spell. The proper weave formed once more and he tentatively reached out his hand.

As he touched the smooth dry scales between her vestigial breasts, the magic flow into her. She awoke suddenly, her fist flashing out to strike him in the jaw. Ehrlic fell back, scrambling to get away from her as she thrashed into wakefulness.

She entered his mind, ordering him to sit still. He complied instantly; his efforts had done nothing to negate the sorceress' spell. After briefly checking to ensure he hadn't stolen anything, or somehow harmed her, she coiled up and watched him for a time. It was a matter of minutes before she fell asleep once more. When he finally fell asleep, he could not say, though he knew he was awake for hours, just watching and praying that the spell had succeeded.

He awoke to Yyll nudging his shoulder with the tip of her tail. Blinking away the sleep in his eyes, he looked up to find a small brown mouse dangling from her fingers. She pointed to the rodent and raised her chin.

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“It’s a mouse.” She looked at him quizzically. “Mouse,” he repeated.

Yyll nodded and mouthed the word to herself. Then she handed the twittering animal to him. Now it was Ehric’s turn to express bewilderment. What did she expect him to do? No instructions came with the offering, so he finally just released the creature. As it dashed away, Yyll shook her head.

“Mouse.” She beckoned him to stand. Pointing off to the south, she spoke once again. “We go.”

She had never spoken to him before, and he could only hope it was a sign the spell had had an effect.

* * * *

The Cartographer, as Ehric had come to think of him, stared into his eyes. The abomination had appeared late in the day, after he and Yyll had made yet another perilous climb along a narrow ridgeline.

The Cartographer queried. “The soldiers were all killed?”

He had not expected this question. “No.” His heart beat hard in his chest.

“Explain.”

“I made it look like I had killed the woman but she still lived when I left with Yyll.”

“An interesting decision on your part. Why did you do this thing?”

“The image from Yyll was only that I should attack the soldiers. I attacked the one but the archer was no threat. I had hoped Yyll was too injured to check on her.”

“I did not ask how you did it, but why. You thought she was no threat, but surely you will be a wanted man.”

“Do you mean to let me go then?” Ehric response was acidic.

For the first time he saw the snake smile. It was an unpleasant sight. “You have a valid point. So you decided to side with your own kind against us...” He looked over to Yyll. “At least to the extent that you were allowed.”

Ehric was silent. He had not been asked a question.

“But you aided Yyll in killing the man. How do feel about that?”

Ehric glared but he wasn't sure the snake even understood. "You forced me to murder. I will have to live with that for as long as you allow me to survive."

"I wonder, though, whether you would truly murder someone at my request." He lapsed into silence for a moment. "But that is of no importance right now. Tell me Ehric, what else have you intentionally kept from me?"

Ehric was speaking before he could think of some way around the command. "I had two magical rings but since I did not possess them when you asked, I did not tell you about them."

The snake spoke blandly. "I will have to be more careful with you in the future. Where are the rings?"

"Yyll took them."

He rose without a word and took Ehric's spear. Yyll bowed low and spoke some phrase in the snake tongue. Before she could rise, Verpith bludgeoned her across the shoulders with the haft of the weapon. The serpent lay prone, not making any attempt to rise.

The Cartographer raised Ehric's spear, obviously intending to impale Yyll. Before he knew he was doing it, Ehric had bolted to his feet. Two strides later he tackled the giant snake.

The fight was short.

"Stop moving!" The Cartographer's command still compelled him. Slowly the serpent rose from the ground. Yyll remained on her stomach, but she craned her head to look up, her face blank.

The Cartographer took a moment to straighten his robes before he spoke.

"Why did you attack me?"

"You were going to kill her."

"True. Why do you care what happens to her?"

"I don't know."

"I believe you. But I will still know." Reaching out, he pulled Ehric roughly to his feet. "Did Yyll conspire with you?"

"No. How would she do that?"

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“She made you no promises?”

“No.”

He paused and glanced back to where Yyll lay sprawled. “Do you wish to mate with her?”

“No! I just couldn't watch you kill a defenseless girl.”

“Tell me Ehric, are you considered sane by your people?”

It was Ehric's turn to pause. “Most people would think I was strange but I am not insane.”

“Do many others of your people share this concern for females? Even for females you do not wish to impregnate?”

Ehric thought of the city, where a woman's body could be bought for a few coppers. He answered simply. “No.”

“Is this why you live apart from others of your kind?”

“I have never thought about it.”

“Do so now.”

Ehric slowly nodded. “It is part of the reason, yes.”

“You must know your actions are entirely irrational. Yyll is your enemy as surely as I am. Your seed would find no purchase in her, even if you were to mate. She is nothing to you.”

Ehric was silent through it all, though his eyes occasionally glanced to where Yyll's sinuous body lay. Her eye's met his once but she quickly looked away.

“I am intrigued by this outburst though it is disappointing your behavior is not representative of your entire species.” He retrieved Ehric's spear and tossed it to him. “You will kill Yyll. Then perhaps we will see if Pethiss' magic is strong enough to compel you to kill one of your own kind.” The Cartographer backed away, giving him a clear line to his victim. “Now, Ehric.”

Yyll had seemed willing to accept death at the Cartographer's hands, but against Ehric, she fought. As Ehric approached, the serpent woman lashed out with her tail. He grunted as it slammed into his side and quickly coiled about his waist. Setting his feet, he stabbed for the snake woman's heart.

The spear was wrenched aside. The tip of Yyll's tail grasped him by the elbow, fighting him for control of the weapon. Wiry muscles stood out from his arms as he strained against her incredible strength. Yyll twisted around the spear and rose to face him, her tail still wrapped about his waist. Ehric staggered forward under her weight, tripped, and landed hard. The spear fell from his grasp and Yyll gasped as his weight came down on her.

He felt her grip on his elbow slacken and with a hard jerk of his arm he was free. His hands took hold of her hood and he slammed her head into ground. Her tail went slack and fell from his waist. Panting, Ehric dragged himself to his feet. Yyll was only semi-conscious as she slowly drew her tail back towards her body.

Ehric bent to retrieve his spear. The Cartographer looked on dispassionately. Ehric's body shook with the desire to kill the monster but after an agonizing moment he turned back to Yyll. She leaned heavily against a low spur of rock, her arms raised in a vain attempt to defend herself. Ehric came closer.

The instant he stepped forward to thrust, Yyll lunged towards him, propelled by her powerful tail. The spear grazed over her scales and then the full force of her hit him squarely in the chest. Locked in a fierce embrace, they rolled once on the stony ground and disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

Chapter 3

Ehric woke slowly, looking up through the hole he and Yyll had punched in the canopy of short oaks. Yyll's sudden lunge had knocked the air from his lungs, making it impossible to mouth even the simplest of spells to slow his fall. He was surprised to be alive.

Turning away from the blue sky he was even more shocked to find he was alone. Yyll was gone, but she had left a clear trail through the underbrush. It made no sense to him that she had left him alive. She had not even taken his weapons.

Ehric warily followed the trail for the rest of the day, still feeling the compulsion to find and kill the snake woman. It seemed Yyll was intent on leading him somewhere, for even after night fell he was able to pursue his quarry. Broken branches and overturned rocks every few paces made the task simple.

It was not until the next morning that the trail suddenly disappeared. She had led him north, mostly, and they were no longer in the truly mountainous terrain. Sharp needled pines and even cedars were interspersed with oaks at the base of the mountains, limiting his visibility. He stopped and searched the ground carefully, though with little hope of success. If she had turned into a cobra, she would be nearly impossible to track. He was forced to search in a spiral on the off chance she left

some clue to her passing.

Completing one loop without finding any signs and just about to start another, he caught a whiff of smoke. It was not just burning wood but quite clearly a cook fire. He continued to search for the trail, but it seemed certain Yyll had led him here on purpose.

Soon he heard human voices; they were not hard to distinguish from the Orcs he might have expected to find. It was still some minutes of careful approach before he could make out their speech. There were five voices, three male and two female, speaking in the common tongue. That fact, combined with their presence here, marked them as adventurers, probably hailing from different lands. They spoke of simple things and joked in a manner that named them long friends.

He considered his instructions and determined he could approach. His stomach growled at the smell of meat being fried. Eschewing stealth, Ehric rose to his full height and walked towards the camp.

His count had been accurate. As he came into the clearing of the camp, he was struck by the image of a tall man in chainmail and a gleaming steel cuirass. The breast was engraved with a rising sun, marking the man a follower of Lathander. Hope for rescue momentarily flared but he suppressed it. Another Dawn Worshipper, one of the women, wore robes of yellow and red instead of mail. She was clearly an arcanist, though her round cheeks and short stature took some of the dread out of that title.

By comparison, the other three were quite plain. The second woman wore dull chainmail and a shortsword, her bow standing nearby. The men were both tall, but that was where the resemblance ended. One was a mass of muscles, carrying his banded mail like it was a fleece tunic, while the other looked like he could have been a snake in leather.

“Hail and well met.” Ehric kept his hands in front of him and took three steps away from cover before he stopped. The cleric in the bright mail addressed him.

“Well met, indeed, for we expected to encounter only Orcs and other foul creatures here. Pray tell me what business you have in these parts.”

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“I live in these hills but have fallen on difficult times. I would have passed you by but the smell of your cookfire drew me in. May I barter with you for food, for I have none.”

“Lathander welcomes all to him who have righteous intent, but would you tell us what has caused you to fall into such desperate conditions?” The cleric seemed to stare into his very soul as he asked the question.

Ehric desperately wanted to speak the truth but could not. “Orcs have pursued me for many days. I killed their chief and a group of them took exception to that. I think I lost them yesterday but I want to put more ground between me and them if I can.” He had actually done exactly that nine months ago and would go into detail if pressed.

The cleric nodded and smiled, “It sounds as if you have accomplished a noble deed. Come and share our food. We can discuss barter after you have eaten. I would not take advantage of a starving man.”

The warriors eyed him warily as he approached and moved to flank him when he sat. The cleric offered him a plate of fried potatoes and pork. Ehric wolfed down his food as the small company looked on. The cleric was clearly the leader and he seemed content to wait until he had finished before beginning a conversation.

“My name is Rhonain.” Indicating the warriors in turn he rattled off their names. “This is Kendel, Vajir, and Mere.” Vajir was the snake. He looked like he had put his myriad knives to use, and not necessarily for Lathander’s glory. The woman, Mere, gave him a small smile that stretched an old scar on her cheek. “Our mystic and student of the arcane is Evandra.” The pale young woman nodded as she crammed a forkful of potatoes in her mouth. “Feldan is our scout, but I don’t see him around. He must be off... scouting. How was your meal?”

“Excellent. It had been a long time since I had eaten anything warm.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Rhonain’s voice had changed, becoming grim. Ehric looked at him questioningly.

“What’s going on here?”

“You may have been pursued by Orcs but men seek you as well.” The bright cleric slipped his hand into a pouch at his waist and removed a

crumpled piece of paper. He held it up for Ehcric to see. “We came north through the Shaaran gap not two days past and this is what the soldiers there were distributing.” There was a sketch of a man, heavily bearded and gaunt. He carried a spear and wore leather armor.

Ehcric moved to stand but hands clamped down on his shoulders. Mere’s smile was gone now as she and Kendel restrained him. Rhonain continued. “Two soldiers murdered and the third left for dead. She was a strong soul, to drag herself to safety as she did. It was fortunate we were in the pass at the time as I was able to mend her wounds.”

“She lived?”

“You do not deny you were there?” Ehcric was silent. “Yes, Eina lived. She also told me something that is not on this poster.” The cleric leaned in close to the captive. “She said you were not alone. Of course, it is not surprising that the authorities would want to keep the Yuan-ti a secret.” Ehcric said nothing. He couldn’t make his lips move if he tried. Rhonain let the silence stretch, studying him. “I find it odd that you have nothing to add to this discussion.” He nodded to Evandra, who began to cast.

“There is a faint aura around him, Rhonain. I believe, yes, it is an enchantment of some kind. I don’t recognize the effect.”

When she mentioned the enchantment, Ehcric was forced to resist. He thrust his elbow into Kendel’s groin and kicked at the inside of the woman’s knee. The big warrior released his grip and stumbled back, bent in agony. Mere fared better and retained her hold on Ehcric, pulling him face first to the ground when her leg gave out. A moment later Rhonain slammed his knee into Ehcric’s back, driving the air from his lungs.

“Just relax. We won’t hurt you.” Ehcric couldn’t listen to those instructions and continued to struggle.

Mere tried to pin his arms but Ehcric squirmed out of her grasp. “Is he possessed? Calm down!” She slammed a fist into the back of his head and Ehcric’s vision blurred.

Rhonain and Mere managed to twist Ehcric’s arms behind him while Vajir went to see how Kendel fared. Evandra continued to peer at Ehcric but what she perceived was beyond the sight of the rest of the group.

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The robed woman squinted and slowly shook her head, "I do think he is possessed. But I don't know by what or by whom." Mere looked distinctly uncomfortable at that news. Kendel and Vajir decided not to come any closer.

"Hold him Mere, I need to try something." Mere shifted to straddle Ehcric's back, her forearm firmly planted in the side of his neck. Rhonain began to chant, calling on Lathander to grant his prayers. The chanting sounded like gibberish to Ehcric, but immediately Rhonain was surrounded by a faint yellow glow that grew in intensity with each passing second.

Suddenly Ehcric relaxed for the first time in weeks. He was free. "What did you do?"

"Lathander has granted his followers some power over the works of mortals. What was done to you is detestable in His sight. Stay within His glow and He will shield you. I mean what I say, do not stray from my side. Mere, you may release him." She slowly rose and helped Ehcric to his feet. Despite Rhonain's instructions, she did not let go of his arm.

He babbled out his story. "I was captured by snake people in the mountains. They cursed me in some way, taking control of me, talking in my head. Please help me." Ehcric nearly fell back to his knees to beg.

"I may be able to lift this curse from you, but I will need time to pray and seek counsel from the Lord of the Morning. The protection you enjoy will not last long either I am afraid. We will have to bind you for your own good."

"I understand, but can't you think of anything else? I don't want to hear that voice in my head again."

"Eve, do you have any thoughts? I don't see any other way." Rhonain was careful not to move away from Ehcric as he turned his attention to the mage.

Evandra chewed on her lip as she considered, "We don't have anything with us to block magical effects. I know there are supposed to be regions of dead magic in this general area but I don't know where they are or how we would go about finding them quickly. I could try to negate the effect

but it appears to be a very powerful spell; I would almost certainly fail.”

“You must try.” Rhonain said.

She paused as if considered what she would say next. “I will, but there is another thing we are not considering. How will this creature react to his freedom. Might it not come here to retrieve him?” Mere’s grip tightened on Ehric’s arm.

“That is an upsetting notion, but we probably don’t have to worry about it finding us for a while. Ehric, how far are we from its domain?”

“I don’t know where they hide, but the sorceress is able to move from place to place in an instant.”

At this news a debate erupted in the group. Vajir seemed inclined to leave Ehric tied up somewhere and make a run for it. Fortunately for Ehric, Rhonain was an honorable man.

“There will be no more talk of leaving anyone to the mercy of the Yuan-ti. However, I agree that this man cannot be our primary concern. The other matter must be attended to.”

Vajir spoke. “So what do we do? The ‘other matter’ is pressing, is it not? We can’t attend to it if we are all killed by this snake.”

Rhonain thought a moment, or perhaps he was praying. “We will split into two groups. Feldan can take Mere, Kendal, and Vajir. Your weapons will probably be of no use against this foe. Move quickly and don’t stop for any reason until your reach Innarlith.” They nodded vigorously at that. “Evandra and I will take our new friend and hopefully draw off this beast.” The mage opened her mouth as though to protest, but under Rhonain’s gaze she closed it again. “Good, then we are decided.”

“Now where’s Feldan?” A cursory examination of the immediate surroundings did not reveal him. “He can’t have gone too far but I can’t risk anyone going to look for him. We’ll just have to wait for him to come back. In the meantime, stay alert.”

* * * *

Yyll had looked on anxiously as Ehric was assaulted and subdued. She came close to aiding him but then the frightening glow appeared around

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the metal clad one and Ehric was calm. The humans spoke in their strange clipped voices like the bright birds of her home and it looked like they came to an agreement. When they forced Ehric to doff his armor and started to bind him, her apprehension rose again.

It was common knowledge among the Yuan-ti in her tribe that Pethiss could command minds, but she had hoped to get him far enough away to escape her magic. There was nothing she could do to break the spell. His only hope lay with these humans.

It seemed a dim hope when the glow around the priest faded. Ehric immediately began to struggle against his bonds. Careful of her wounds, Yyll slithered slowly out of the tree and towards the fat female's bag.

* * * *

Your death will not be quick, I assure you. You will say nothing more to these vermin, but simply resist in everyway your mind can conceive. I will be with you soon enough.

It pained Ehric to do it, but he struggled endlessly as Rhonain and Evandra finally decided they could wait for Feldan no longer. He was gagged and his head covered in a loose fitting bag cinched at his neck. His wrists and ankles tightly bound in a thin but coarse rope. The cleric hoisted Ehric onto his back and set off with Evandra.

Soon he could feel blood slick his hands but still he continued to writhe. Rhonain kept up a constant stream of one sided conversation, telling him that he would be healed once they got him back to his church, just try to resist, focus on the ones you love... It made no difference.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, perhaps an hour or so, when Evandra spoke. "Do you feel that? I can feel eyes upon us. We must assume she will come soon." Her voice held no confidence whatsoever.

"I think I feel it now myself. We should try to make it up onto that little hill over there and prepare ourselves. Eve, it will be well. Lathander will watch over us."

They quickened their pace and within five minutes Ehric was dropped to the ground at their destination. "I will pray for strength and protection now. Do likewise if you have the spells prepared."

“Y-yes, of course.” Evandra sounded a bit winded from the quick climb. It was clear to him that this was merely a diversion to give the others a chance to escape. Even Rhonain, with his confident words, did not seem to truly believe they would prevail.

He heard Rhonain approach and he tore the hood from his head. “You will have a chance to fight for your life. When the creature comes, I will free you. The effect will be centered here so stay close to this spot.”

They didn’t have long to wait. Barely a minute later a booming voice filled the area, “Surrender and your lives will be spared. Do not think of resisting.”

Rhonain slowly turned in a circle, scanning for the origin of the voice. He responded, “We will not yield to you, nor will we let you take this man back to slavery. Depart now or face judgment. The choice is yours.” He knelt beside Ehrlic and spoke a quick prayer. His head cleared. A moment later his bonds were cut and he rose next to the cleric.

Evandra stood a few paces away to his right, a purplish glow surrounding her body. In her hand she held a gnarled twig, poised to unleash whatever magic it held. Rhonain prayed once more and the power of the Morninglord surged through him. He was fully eight feet tall now, a beacon of strength and goodness.

Evandra screamed to Rhonain, “Look out, she can fly!” Ehrlic scanned the sky and there she was. She dove with feathery wings tucked up against her too human body. Evandra’s wand flashed and three bolts of magical energy streaked into the air to intercept the mage. The bolts fizzled out of existence as they made contact.

Her wings flared as she neared the ground and she swung her head to regard the plump woman. Evandra blanched under her gaze. Gasping in fright, she dropped her wand and turned to run, nearly tripping over her pack in her haste.

Meanwhile, as Ehrlic began his own spell, Rhonain moved to intercept the snake, his long strides covering the distance between them quickly. Pethiss landed lightly but ignored the cleric. Even as Rhonain lifted his morningstar to strike, the snake mage calmly reached down for the

discarded wand. The cleric was nearly upon his foe when he seemed to catch his foot on a tree root and tumbled to the ground. The true reason for the stumble became apparent as black tentacles rose from the earth.

They quickly snared the priest but Ehrlic dove aside as a rubbery tentacle writhed towards him. He was driven another few feet and then he heard the mage's voice in his head. *Hold.*

Pethiss mumbled a trigger word and the wand sprang to life, three pulses of magical energy leaping to strike the fleeing woman in the back. She fell with a whimpering cry.

Only then did the beast turn her attention to the cleric. Rhonain was tearing at the thick tentacles, but they were both resilient and implacable. Where one touched the priest, it immediately wrapped around him in a vice-like grip. Soon Rhonain could no longer move at all, but still the foul spell squeezed him harder.

Ehrlic looked on in horror as the Yuan-ti cast another spell. From the ground around Rhonain rose a foul alchemic stench. A yellow fog seeped from the soil and enveloped both the cleric and the mass of writhing tentacles. The gurgling scream that came from the noble cleric was enough to break Ehrlic's heart. But still he was held fast by the snake's charm.

When the scream eventually died away, and the snake was satisfied with her work; only then did she turn to address Ehrlic. She did not speak in his mind, rather using her oddly accented voice. "I will speak to you before I kill you human. I want you to know that I will enjoy feeling you die, it is the only reward I will receive in this entire pitiful affair." She began to cast a spell, but still Ehrlic could not force himself to move. Ten sickly green spheres formed in the snake's upturned hand. They slowly began to spin and rise from her palm, until they revolved just in front of the mage's face.

Ehrlic's eyes were fixed on what he knew was his own death. He didn't notice Evandra's pack shift on the ground behind the mage as a small cobra slithered out. Pethiss raised her hand to hurl the magic at Ehrlic even as Yyll took her Yuan-ti form. "Err-ith!" Blackness enveloped

Ehric.

Ehric screamed as he felt the magic burst on his chest. A burning pain and the stench of acid threatened to overwhelm him, but hope kept him alive. The snake had broken her own spell in attacking him. Forcing himself to his feet, he heard Pethiss and Yyll struggling in front of him. He paused a moment as conflicting impulses pulled at him. Yyll's anguished cry decided the matter for him. He dashed to his right, trying to ignore the searing pain in his chest.

Quite suddenly he was out of the magical darkness and he spotted his enemy locked in combat with Yyll. The tide of the battle was turning. Despite being taken from behind, Pethiss had reacted quickly and shifted to her snake form. Yyll's grip on the mage loosened and she began to coil around her torso as they rolled on the ground. Ehric tried to get into a good position to attack the mage but he didn't want to risk getting caught in their fierce struggle. He only managed to deal a glancing blow against the side of the mage's head. In response, the snake hissed a syllable and bolts of magical energy slammed into Ehric's back, flattening him.

Pushing himself to his knees, he saw that Yyll was nearly finished. With her one free arm, she beat at the mage's head, but her blows were ineffectual and weakening. The snake spoke once more in some arcane tongue and grasped Yyll's arm in her fangs. A smoking liquid erupted from the snake's mouth, splashing her face and hood and running down her arm. Yyll screamed in agony and terror as her flesh burned away.

Ehric dove at the pair, reaching to touch Yyll as he rattled off a spell. His hand sizzled. Yyll's screams faded eerily as the spell took effect, her body dissolving into the air.

Pethiss floundered momentarily and collapsed to the ground. She started to change her form, and Ehric caused lightning to form in his hands. The close range should have made the effects devastating. Instead the lightning no more than took shape than it was dissipated by some barrier around the mage. Pethiss completed her transformation and stood nude but invincible before him. Both she and Ehric began to weave spells.

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Ehric was faster. His body vaporous, he willed himself to rise. The mage checked the spell she had begun and moved to retrieve her cloak.

He quickly passed the treetops and continued up into the sky, seeking a breeze to carry him far away from his pursuer. Looking back, he spotted the Yuan-ti emerging from the canopy on her magical wings. The mage scanned the sky intently, her hands weaving intricate patterns as she flew in slow circles.

He was hundreds of feet above the trees and downwind of the mage when the Yuan-ti suddenly stopped circling. She seemed to spot something in the distance and her wings pumped furiously as she accelerated upward and in the same general direction as Ehric. An idea occurred to him then.

Ehric continued to add altitude as the mage approached. Pethiss was nearly under him when she finally stopped and began to cast a spell. With a blinding flash, Yyll was suddenly visible in the air about a hundred feet in front of the mage. She immediately started to fall... slowly. The sorceress looked confused for a moment but recovered quickly. Ehric released the air spell and began to plummet even as Pethiss blasted Yyll with arcane energy.

Ehric focused on the Yuan-ti's wings. After twenty paces, the wind in his face was stronger than the worst mountain storms. Shifting his arms and feet, Ehric managed to alter his path so he would intercept Pethiss.

He hit the mage's right wing with his chest and enveloped it in a bear hug. The force of the impact sent them both tumbling and tore the wings loose from the mage's back. In an instant he found himself wrapped in a cloak where there had been feathers and bones a moment before.

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Ehric was prepared and mouthed a simple spell, the first he had discovered as a child, and his fall slowed. Tearing the cloak from his head, he scanned the sky for Pethiss, but could see only Yyll's limp form gently glide into the trees a short distance away.

When Ehric reached the ground, he moved as quickly as his injuries allowed to where Yyll had fallen. The young snake was lying on a soft patch of moss covered ground, facedown and not moving. Ehric gently rolled her over and leaned close to check for life. He was surprised at how relieved he was when her breath touched his ear.

Ehric tended their injuries. The acid wounds looked terrible but were not as deep as he'd feared. The magical bolts of energy Pethiss had pounded them with left relatively clean wounds but he worried that Yyll might succumb if he didn't get her healing soon.

As carefully as he could, he lifted his new ally and lumbered back towards the hill where he had left the cleric and his companion. The trip was not an easy one, though Yyll was lighter than he had expected. Ehric had to stop and rest a number of times, but eventually he reached the base of the hill where the battle had begun. Laying his former captor on her side, Ehric ran up and found the remains of Rhonain.

The sight of the Lathander was hideous. Rhonain's armor and weapons

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had rusted and partially dissolved under the effects of the acidic fog. A similar fate had befallen Rhonain himself, but the magical tentacles had also eventually ripped him limb from limb. Ehrlic had never seen anything like it, not even the cruelest Orcs would do that to a man. Tearing his eyes away, he searched the ground nearby and found three glass vials that had survived the acid and quickly returned to Yyll.

After smelling each, he was sure that one of the vials was in fact a healing potion. He lifted Yyll's head and slowly poured the potion into her mouth. She swallowed the liquid reflexively and in seconds her eyes fluttered open. "Err-ith? Pethiss dead?" Her eyes darted back and forth and her tongue flicked from her mouth.

"She's gone. You and I are safe." Yyll looked confused and tried to sit up. "Pethiss dead. Sleep." Yyll looked reassured and let Ehrlic lay her head back on the ground.

Ehrlic sat there for a few minutes and rested, but his mind was still racing. He had no way of knowing whether the sorceress was truly dead. Despite his immediate concern for his safety, his thoughts kept returning to Rhonain... and Eve. Ehrlic had forgotten about the young mystic.

His body protested as he forced himself to stand once more and started looking for the woman. He found her sprawled at the base of a tree, three ragged holes in the back of her robes where she had been struck. Ehrlic rolled her over and was immediately rewarded with a groan. It seemed Lathander had been watching over her. A bloody gash on her forehead must have been the result of her fall.

"It will be all right, the snake is gone and I will take care of you." Eve nodded slowly without opening her eyes. Ehrlic tore a strip of cloth from her robes and tied it across the wound.

"How do you feel? Do you think you can walk?"

"I... I don't know." Eve opened her eyes, and squinted up at him. Her pupils were wide; the blue in her eyes was just a small ring despite the bright glare of the noon sun on her face. He knew then that she must have struck her head hard.

"I'll help you sit up. We need to get moving as soon as we can. There

may be others out there.” Ehrlic lifted her until she was resting with her back on the trunk of a small scrubby pine.

“Where’s Rhonain?” The quiver in her voice betrayed her. She knew the answer.

“He didn’t make it. Don’t think about that now, we still have to get to safety. I’m going to go and get your things. I’ll be right back.” Ehrlic found her pack and discarded wand and returned as he promised. “Here you go, keep the wand at hand just in case. Do you have any healing in there you could use?”

“Yes, let me see.” Evandra fished around in the bag and pulled out a small cloth sack that appeared empty. She reached inside it and pulled out two vials. “You look like you could use one too.”

“Yeah, I guess I could.” Ehrlic took the potion gratefully and drank. The throbbing in his chest lessened and he felt knotted muscles loosen. “I want to do something for Rhonain. He deserves a proper place to rest. Please, just stay here and I’ll be back when it’s done.”

“Wait. I have your pack in here as well. Your weapons and armor went with the others so it isn’t much, just those feathers and some personal stuff. Is it really so bad that I can’t come too?”

“I think it’s best for you not to see him like this. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

Instead of going straight to Rhonain, Ehrlic returned to Yyll, trying to work out what to do with her. As he approached, he found her on her tail, leaning against a tree for support. He dropped to a knee and opened his pack. He pointed inside. “I will carry you. Stay inside.” Yyll looked at him with those expressionless eyes and nodded. Her body shrank into the form of a cobra, and Ehrlic laid her gently amongst the clothing stuffed in his rucksack.

Rhonain’s burial took less than an hour. Ehrlic knew he was being foolish, but he couldn’t leave the man who had saved him to lie in the open. When it was done, he found Eve and helped her climb back up the hill.

“He’s buried just there, under the stones. I thought maybe you might

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want to plant this feather in the mound beside him.”

Evandra took the feather from Ehric and walked to the grave. He stayed back to give her a moment alone with the cleric. After a minute of quiet, broken only by the occasional twitter of birds, Eve knelt by the mound and planted the feather. A small green sprout immediately thrust up from the earth, reaching for the sun. Eve stepped backwards as an oak grew, as if years were passing in the blink of an eye. The tree soared through the canopy, dwarfing the scrubby native pines.

“I hope that is a fitting marker. I know he worshiped the Lord of Morning. Perhaps the tree will thirst for light with the same fervor he did. I am really sorry Evandra.”

Tears welled in her eyes but she just nodded and said, “We should be going. Do you know the way?”

“I got a view of the area earlier and I know where we are. We should be able to reach the road easily enough and be in Innarlith by tomorrow.” Eve nodded again.

The rest of day was spent in silence. Tears flowed freely down Eve’s cheeks for most of the morning but she broke down sobbing only twice. Both time she continued to stumble along. She resisted his efforts to comfort her and he quickly decided not to press the issue.

He didn’t build a fire, and certainly didn’t sleep that night. Evandra lay down to rest, but he doubted she slept either, every so often a shudder would run through her body.

The small party set off before dawn the next day and the terrain flattened out quickly as they approached the coast. Small farms began to appear by mid morning and soon thereafter they hit the main road south out of Innarlith.

The guards eyed them warily but did not bar them from entering the city. Ehric sighed in relief. Evandra led Ehric to a small inn he didn’t recognize. Kendel stood by the door, searching the crowds. “Eve! I didn’t think we would see you again.” He rushed out to meet them and lifted her in his massive arms, sweeping her inside. Ehric watched her go and decided not to follow. Instead he sat on an upended barrel a few

paces from the door.

Ehric wasn't sure how long he sat there, slumped against the rough planking, but he was roused from his stupor by a woman's voice. It was Mere. "Why don't you come in?" Her voice held no affection.

Ehric said nothing but grabbed his pack and started inside.

Mere motioned for Ehric to take a seat. "Tell me what happened to Rhonain. Eve says he died but she won't say how."

"Is Eve alright? I couldn't do anything to help her on the trip back."

"She is very upset but the rest of us need to know what happened. She says she was knocked out almost at once and she doesn't remember anything."

"Yes. I thought Pethiss had killed her too. What she did to Rhonain was beyond anything I have seen. Rhonain came to Evandra's defense but Pethiss immobilized him with a spell and then... Dammit she melted the flesh off his bones."

Mere was visibly shaken. "So how did you beat her? You were under her control."

"She broke her own spell in attacking me and then I just got lucky."

"Is it dead?"

"I think I killed her but I was in such bad shape after the fight that I didn't look too hard for her body. It's possible she was just driven off." Ehric tried to change the subject. "All of you made it back alright?"

Mere's angry exterior collapsed into anguish. "No, Feldan never returned. We have no idea what happened to him."

"I don't know what to say. I didn't see him and Pethiss made no mention of him. What will you do now?" Ehric began to come awake again.

"I'm not sure but I, at least, plan to look for Feldan. He has been a good companion for many months and I owe it to him."

"If you need any help..."

"No, I think it is best if you stay away from us. We loved Rhonain."

"I understand."

"Sure you do."

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Ehric grabbed his pack. "I am truly sorry for what happened." Mere just stared at him as he left.

Ehric found an inn nearby and rented a room. Exhaustion consumed him so he went directly to his room and barred the door. He tossed his clothes in a heap on the floor and fell into the cot.

It was dark when he woke from a nightmare. A snake had been squeezing the life from him, all the while acid was pouring down his throat. When he tried to move, he felt the panic rise again. Yyll had come into the bed with him and her tail was wrapped around his legs. She lay against his side, her left arm draped across his chest. After a brief struggle, Yyll woke with a start. She slipped her body over his as her tail uncoiled from around his legs. Ehric felt her bare scaled chest against his skin and tried not to shudder.

* * * *

Verpith found Pethiss lying on her back, arms splayed and one leg twisted under her body. As he approached, the priest could see her life was gone. Kneeling next to the sorceress, Verpith cast a simple spell that would preserve her flesh. "The ladies will still want to see you." Turning, he motioned to two of his guards and they came to lift the body.

* * * *

Ehric woke early the next day. Yyll was coiled in the corner of the room and he was loath to disturb her. Fortunately she woke on her own as he moved about, gathering his gear. "Stay here. I will return." With the aid of hand gestures he managed to communicate his intentions.

He slipped out of the room, made his way downstairs and out through the common room. The day promised to be sweltering. Weaving amongst the throng of merchants and laborers, he kept a hand in his pocket and grasped his purse. It was not difficult to find the location he sought.

The new Ransar had invited the Red Wizards into the city, arranging for them to live in the abandoned estate of his rival Mandalax. The old Ransar had been overthrown the year before, with all those loyal to him killed or driven out of the city. By all reports Mandalax had been a good

and loyal servant of the previous ruler, and had paid a heavy price.

The estate sat on one of the three rocky hills rising from within the city walls, overlooking the Lake of Steam to the west. Its tall rectangular tower was visible from most intersections in the city. Ehric judged it would take him the better part of an hour to cross the city.

Despite the new ruler, Ehric saw little that he could point to that had changed. Innarlith was still a hive of activity, with merchants both in stalls and on the move clogging the streets. The odor of the masses was overwhelming and Ehric soon found himself slipping down alleyways to avoid some of the press of humanity.

A pleasant fragrance wafted out of a nearby building and Ehric noted he was passing one of the many bathhouses the hot springs of the city supported. A woman emerged from a side entrance. Ehric tried not to stare as she approached but it was difficult. She was a priestess of Sharess, the Lady of Pleasure. An ornate and highly stylized cat mask covered her face but the rest of her was nearly bare. She swayed as she walked.

“You look as though you could use a hot bath. I was about to go home for the day, but...” The priestess’ voice displayed a practiced lilt. Ehric knew this woman lived only to give and experience pleasure.

Ehric tried to maintain eye contact. “Perhaps another time. I have urgent business to attend to.”

She sighed. “I see. You do look worried. Is there any way I can help alleviate your concern?”

“I don’t think so, but I thank you for your kind offer.”

“Perhaps when your business is complete then. My name is Fennile.” She drew a long cloak about her and turned to walk in the direction he had come. He took note of the landmarks at the next intersection before continuing to the Enclave.

The Red Wizard compound was circled by a high wall of cut stone. Red banners framed either side of the main gate that opened into a large courtyard. In front of each banner stood a massive guard in plate mail and a long cloak, two-handed sword strapped to his back.

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The periphery of the courtyard was lined with vendors selling various magical wares. A fair number of people crowded the market place. They appeared to be of two general classes, the rich and the adventuresome. Ehric wandered into the throng, trying to determine the differences between the vendors. The pitiful screams of some unknown animal pierced the din of the crowd. Ehric turned away from the sound, sure he didn't want to see what was making those noises. It was then that he noticed an opening at one of the vendor's stalls.

A few candles and scrolls were laid out on a plain wooden table. A cowed figure in crimson silk robes sat on a stool, staring down at a ledger book and making some notes. Ehric approached her cautiously and she looked up to greet him, pulling back her hood. "May I help you?"

The Thayan was stunning. Her head was clean shaven, even her eyebrows were bare, and tattooed with arcane writing in bright metallic red and black. A silver chain ran from the lobe of her left ear to the side of her small round nose. Three tiny gems sparkled in the thin skin under each eye.

Large brown eyes blinked and it was like a spell being broken. "I asked, 'Can I help you?'" Her mouth thinned into a scowl.

Ehric stammered. "Yes, I'm very sorry. I've never spoken to a Red Wizard before. I guess I was a little intimidated."

"It is understandable." Her lips turned into a small smile. "Is there some way the Wizards of Thay may be of assistance to you?"

"I need a spell that will let me talk to someone who speaks a different language."

"That is a reasonable request and I think we can provide what you desire. However, if you wish, we may have a person who could translate for you. Could you tell me the language?" She opened the ledger to a fresh page.

Ehric kept his tone as neutral as he could. "I would prefer to keep the conversation private. Could you tell me the price for the spell?"

"Yes of course." When she stepped off the stool, Ehric was surprised to find the Thayan did not even come to his shoulder. She turned to the

rack of scrolls behind her and scanned them. “It appears that a scroll would have to be prepared for you. I am sorry that we do not have one on hand. The cost will be a hundred weight in gold and the scroll could be completed by dusk. Is this acceptable?”

“Yes ma’am, that’s fine.” Ehric retrieved his purse. “I assume it is unwise to haggle with the Red Wizards?”

“It is generally not done with such mundane items. Will that be a problem or do you still wish to commission the work?”

“That’s fine.” Ehric fished around in his coin purse while the Thayan retrieved a set of scales and the appropriate weights. There was a large pile of coins on the scale before the trays finally balanced.

The woman scowled up at him. “Do you really mean to swindle me?”

“What?”

“This is not gold. At least half of these coins are lead.” Picking a coin off the top of the scale, she produced a small blade from her robes and scored the face. The scratch revealed a dull grey metal under the bright surface.

“I had no idea.” She shook her head as another wizard looked over from a neighboring booth. “Truly, I came by this gold, or whatever, when I killed a bunch of Orcs in the mountains. It did not occur to me to make sure it was real.”

The scowl disappeared and she continued in a calm voice. “Do you realize you are now on Thayan soil? You could be thrown in irons and sent to toil as a slave in the fields. It seems you weren’t intimidated enough by the thought of dealing with us.”

“Look, I have some small magical items I could barter instead. I did not intend to steal from you.” Ehric pulled the four remaining magical feathers from another pouch.

The young woman glanced at his offering, “The Red Wizards have no need of any but the most fantastic magical items. We only sell those items that we have created ourselves.”

“So do you intend to try to take me captive then? I will not go willingly.” Ehric shifted his right foot back and let his hands drift to his sides. Magic

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was probably pointless, but perhaps a knife in the heart would still kill.

The Thayan held very still. She continued in a low voice, little more than a whisper. "I do not think that will be necessary. I believe you when you say you did not intentionally try to deceive. However, it is probably best that you go. While I find your foolish courage refreshing, there are others in this courtyard who wouldn't hesitate to destroy you for even contemplating resisting a Red Wizard."

Ehric did as instructed, backing away from the mage slowly. Only when he was immersed in the midst of the crowd did he turn his back and stride as quickly as he could for the exit.

The young woman's voice whispered in his ear. "Don't go just yet. I would like to talk to you briefly if I could." Ehric spun around, but no one was there. He could feel her breath in his ear as she chuckled softly. "It is a simple spell only, do not be concerned. I did not get a chance to introduce myself. My name is Shoptim Nuln. Please understand, anyone with the rank of Red Wizard is not allowed to be anything but ruthless in the presence of the other Wizards. I am sorry for the manner in which I treated you and thank you for refraining from a fight." There was a long pause. "I'm sorry, you can respond if you like and I will hear you. Just keep your voice down."

"But I don't know that I have anything to say to you. I too am glad that we did not come to blows. If that is all, I must find another source for the spell I failed to purchase from you." Ehric glanced around him, making sure that this wasn't a delaying tactic meant to trap him.

"I understand you are disappointed but you shouldn't be so rude. I stopped you to tell you that I am willing to help. I have already studied and prepared a suitable spell for you, on the off chance a truly exotic customer came to the market. I will be done my duties here in less than an hour, and I don't expect to encounter any extra planar beings between now and then. When I am free I could meet you outside the compound. Are you desperate enough to allow me to help you directly?"

Ehric didn't have any other options and he found himself muttering, "I thank you. I will take you up on your kind offer."

“I feel it is only fair that you tell me your name.”

“My name’s Ehric.”

“I hope that I can help you Ehric. I will see you again soon.”

He exited the enclave gate and jogged down the street, eager to put some distance between him and the Red Wizards. After a few blocks he stopped and thought about what he could do. Obviously she wanted something from him in return for this assistance. But it was unclear what that could possibly be. Ehric resigned himself to the fact that he could not answer his questions without meeting with this Shoptim.

He stayed a block or so from the gate and scanned for the small sorceress among the throng of customers leaving. He took note of a beautiful dark haired young woman approaching but did not immediately recognize her as Shoptim. In addition to having hair, she was no longer in the robes of a Red Wizard, nor did she have her exotic jewelry. Instead she wore loose fitting gray pants with numerous vertical pleats that tucked into the tops of knee-high flat soled boots. A light long sleeved blouse of the same shade was accented by a wide vivid red cloth wrapped snugly around her midsection. The overall effect accentuated the curves of her body.

“I am pleased to see you here, Ehric. Again, I apologize for my tone with you earlier.” She gave him a pleasant smile.

“I’m just happy I picked the vendor I did.” Ehric realized he was stammering again. “I truly did not know the gold was fake.”

The mage dismissed the issue with a small wave of the hand. “I believe you. I wonder if might have some time to talk. Is your errand urgent?”

Ehric decided he shouldn’t display desperation in front of this woman. “It is not that urgent. I can certainly spare time to talk with you.”

“Perhaps we can just walk to the water? I have not had the chance to visit the sea since I arrived.”

“I don’t get down to the water often myself. The sea looks better from a distance in my opinion.” Ehric turned and Shoptim fell in beside him. She set a fairly lazy pace as they started downhill.

“You are no sailor then. You also don’t look the part of a merchant.

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That leaves caravan guard or mercenary.”

“I am none of those things.”

“I see. How would you describe yourself then.”

Ehric thought about his response. “I live in the Firesteap Mountains for most of the year. I keep an eye on things.”

“How very interesting. Are you a native of Innarlith then? So many of the residents seem to have come from somewhere else.”

“Yes, I was born on a farm outside of town. Where are you from?”

Her hand brushed against his as they walked. “I can tell you aren’t comfortable talking with me and I can sympathize. Let me tell you about myself for a little while.

“I doubt you would know of my home province, but it is north of Thaymount and mostly used to garrison armies. I was born in a region blasted by numerous wars. There aren’t many opportunities there for normal people. Fortunately for me, my father is a powerful cleric of Kossuth. Do you know of Kossuth?” Shoptim glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

“He is an elemental power, right?”

“The fire god, yes. He is widely venerated in Thay by priests and commoners alike. The politics of Thay are difficult to comprehend and ever shifting, but you could consider my father a regional cleric of sorts.”

“Are women allowed in the clergy? Why did you not follow in your father’s footsteps?”

“Certainly there are women in the faith but my father did not want his children to follow him. The path to power in Thay lies with the Wizards and that is the future he wished for us.”

“You have siblings then?”

“I did, my older brothers both failed their tests to become Wizards.”

“If you fail you are...”

“Killed? Yes. There is no doubt whether you pass.”

“So your brothers are dead?” Ehric stopped walking and faced her.

“Indeed they are. They were very ambitious and rushed into the tests. Many Thayans think that they are invincible and are taught differently by

the Wizards.” Ehrlic couldn’t see any trace of pain in her eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You joined an organization that killed both of your brothers?”

Shoptim shook her head at his naivety. “Of course I did. The Red Wizards represent the best method to attain power in Thay. I could have become a knight I suppose, but I don’t think I am made for swordplay, do you?” She raised a slim arm for his inspection.

Ehrlic had no response.

She dropped her arm and her forehead creased. “I see you are serious. My brothers got themselves killed. They knew the risks just as I did. And I won’t shed any tears for them. They were ruthless and unnecessarily cruel. You would not have liked them.” A faraway look came to her eyes for a moment but quickly passed. “It was not my intention to upset you Ehrlic, but Thay is a harsh land.” Shoptim started to walk again. “We should talk of something else, the present perhaps?”

“Please do. Why are you in Innarlith?”

“The Red Wizards are here for their own purposes. I don’t really know them and I couldn’t tell you if I did. However, I can assure you that they are not here for conquest. Recent wars have not gone well for us and it appears the Zulkirs are trying a different path.”

“Well I am glad to hear that, but why are you here?”

“Oh, you mean me personally? I am a newly raised Wizard so I go where I am told to go. My master in Thay assigned me to this enclave.”

Ehrlic struggled for topics that didn’t touch upon the horrible reputation of the Wizards. “I have heard that you specialize in certain types of magic. Is that true?”

“You have been correctly informed. I have a certain propensity for transformative magic.”

“Like making gold into lead?”

“Whatever would make you think of that I wonder?” Shoptim looked at him with mock innocence. “I’m sorry to say that I cannot claim responsibility for your mishap. There is a reason some metals are considered precious.”

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“What do you mean?”

“Some elements resist change more than others. Even in a mundane sense, everyone knows gold does not rust. It is similarly resistant to magical transformation.”

“I had no idea.”

“There is no reason you would. Only the most powerful of transmuters can make gold into lead or vice versa.”

“So what is it you do then, if not make gold? Surely you do more than sell scrolls.”

“Yes of course, I make those scrolls as well. It is really very boring Ehric. My nights are spent in calligraphy and days are spent sweating in the sun. I expect you lead a much more interesting life, armor and spear at the ready, mysterious foreigners to talk with.” She kept her face smooth only a moment before her nose crinkled with a smile.

“Yes, well...”

“You are refreshingly easy to fluster Ehric.” Shoptim chuckled lightly.

Ehric kept his own response light. “You did threaten to enslave me. That has an effect on a man.”

“Good point.”

“Are you ready to tell me what you plan for me?”

“Not yet. I’m not sure that I have plans for you actually. Perhaps we can just enjoy each other’s company for a little while. I’m sure something will come along.” She reached out and grasped his elbow. Ehric winced but no magic coursed through him.

They walked that way for a few minutes. Shoptim seemed intrigued by the architecture of the city, commenting on construction methods and the age of the various buildings.

“Are there earthquakes here?”

“The mountains to the south are active. The ground shakes rather violently every few years. Why do you ask?”

“Most of the buildings here show evidence of repair. See the cracks in that wall? I think you are wise not to live here.”

“So I have yet another reason to avoid the city.”

“Do you have a list of reasons? I have never spent significant time away from them myself. I would be interested to hear what it is you dislike.”

“There are too many people, mostly. You have no time to yourself.”

“So you kill Orcs for a living instead? You said that was where the gold came from. Are there many Orcs nearby?”

Ehric was vague. “I have fought Orcs in the past. They reproduce pretty quickly in the mountains.”

“I often wonder why humanity does not do more to pacify the lesser species.”

Ehric didn't really like how she said that but ignored her tone. “It is not an easy prospect. The Orcs and Ogres are tough and the terrain is not amenable to large armies marching. Of course, there is little for any individual city to gain from fighting the Orcs on their own. They would only weaken themselves compared to the other trading cities.”

“It seems you've given this some thought. I guess life in the wild gives you time for contemplation.”

“It does. Have you ever experienced combat?”

“I have fought my fair share of battles. Some of them have been mage duels as you might expect. I have had the occasion to battle some of the lesser species that populate Thay, but they are really not a challenge for a Wizard, except in very large numbers. There hasn't been an Orc horde in Thay for some time. I certainly have never seen one.”

“Nor have I, though the tribes have come down from the mountains in the recent past. The Orcs, Ogres, and giants in the mountains have stayed in small tribes for many years now, not more than a few hundred Orcs in one place. I have tried to keep them that way.”

If she had had eyebrows, one would have rose. “Have you now? You are an interesting man, Ehric. I think that I should probably be going before you tell me too much about yourself.”

“There is no need for that.”

“You seem like a man who needs to be saved from himself. But that is often case with good men.”

“I...”

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“No need to say any more. I can cast the translation spell on you whenever you wish. It will last a little over an hour, so you may want to take me close to where you are planning to have the conversation. Or not, I suppose, since you wish to keep some secrets.” Her conspiratorial wink annoyed him.

“I am staying pretty close to the water. Why don't we finish our walk? I guess I really don't mind you knowing more about me. I'm sure you could find out by other methods.”

“Undoubtedly, I suspect you have made a name for yourself in town.”

“I have not spent much time here, though I suspect my name is known in a few parts. The outlying villages and farms know me better. My mother says that my grandfather's blood runs strong in me.”

“Really? Was he a Wildman?”

“He is an Elf actually. I haven't seen him in years, but that is the way of the long lived folk.”

Shoptim's arm fell away. “You would admit that your blood is tainted by the elves?”

“What do you mean, tainted?”

“Ehric, I... Well, I'm sorry but in Thay no one would admit to having non human blood. It would be considered a great shame.”

“Well, it is regarded differently here, at least by some. I am not ashamed of my blood.”

“I didn't mean to... Ehric, I find myself apologizing to you a lot. Of course there is no reason for you to be ashamed. I could explain to you why Thayans believe what they do but it wouldn't make them right. Please accept my apology.”

“Of course.” Shoptim took his arm again.

They walked in silence until they reached the docks. Shoptim gazed out at the placid water. She sighed and spoke. “I will stop acting like a silly girl and be upfront with you. I am a newly raised Red Wizard. This is a very dangerous time for me.” She turned her head to gaze up at Ehric. “I am looking for people I can trust to help me.”

“And you think I am someone who could help you? Why?”

“For me to answer that I think we need to have some privacy. Why don’t we find someplace we can sit? Some shade would be nice.”

“Very well.” Ehrlic scanned the shoreline. “Over there.” Ehrlic pointed to scraggly pine tree clinging to a rock twenty paces from the water.

“You have good eyes.”

Ehrlic led the petite mage down the shoreline without further discussion. When they reached their destination Shoptim knelt in the shade. Ehrlic remained standing as she fished a short candle out of a pouch at her waist and stood it in the sand between them. Holding the wick between her thumb and index finger, she closed her eyes momentarily and when she released, the wick burst into flame.

“This will keep our conversation private. So where was I? I was telling you how precarious my position is as a newly raised Red Wizard. It is a highly competitive group. My master is still in Thay, making me the highest ranking member of my school in the enclave. I have some autonomy because of this circumstance and I want to make use of it.”

She leaned back on her arm. “You may be able to help me. You spend your time in the wilderness of the mountains, do you not? Perhaps you know of some information that might be useful to me.”

She spoke quickly, not giving him the opportunity to interrupt. “You probably know the present condition of these mountains better than anyone else in the city. Certainly you know them better than any of the Red Wizards. If I could find some magical artifact or significant treasure, I could perhaps secure my position or even be assigned my own enclave. I can tell from even our short time together that treasure is of little interest to you. You are more interested in protecting the lives of the innocents in and around the city. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“But...?” Shoptim prompted.

“But, I’m not sure why I would want to involve myself in your affairs. It seems to me that I have a good chance of being killed alongside you. The spell I wish you to give me is not worth that.” Ehrlic managed to keep his gaze steady, but he was sweating now too and not from the heat.

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The Wizard did not seem at all offended. "I understand your position. Have you considered that while you protect the city from without, that it is already falling from within? There are dark forces at work in Innarlith, Ehric."

"What are you talking about?"

"Surely you don't expect me to name names here, candle or not. Suffice it to say that there are power struggles within the city that are of a very different nature than what you are accustomed to in the past. I may be able help you resolve them in a way favorable to the common folk in the city."

Ehric turned his back. It was easier to concentrate without looking at her. "I can't say that I really believe you. It seems an easy thing to speak of conspiracy without any proof."

"I may have been mistaken about you. You have a certain measure of wisdom along with your bravery. I could perhaps provide you with proof, but would you help me even then?" Her hand touched his back. Ehric hadn't heard her rise. "I begin to sense you are just toying with me. I have told you that I will cast the translation spell on you and I will. You can speak truthfully to me. Would you ally with me to our mutual gain, if what I've said is true?"

Ehric considered before answering. "I would. You seem to be forthright in your goals, even if I do not necessarily share them."

"That is all I ask. Now I think that our little talk needs to end. I will cast the spell for you. If you resist, it will have no effect. Are you prepared to trust me?"

"Yes." Shoptim circled him. She stood so close that she had to crane her neck to look him in the eye. Shoptim intoned a few arcane words and reached up, one hand touching his lips and the other on his ear.

"It is done." Ehric heard her speak common but could tell that wasn't what she had actually said. "It appears to have worked as well. You need to get going quickly. It will only last an hour. I wish you well until we meet again. I will contact you if that is ok."

"Thank you Shoptim. Please be careful."

“I will. You should be careful as well. I think I’ll wait here a while. I’m not up for another long walk in this weather.” Shoptim turned and took a seat in the sand, leaning her back against the boulder. Ehric took off at a jog back down the shore. He made a point of not looking back.

Chapter 5

Shoptim watched Ehric as he loped away. She released the spell she had cast earlier and felt a number of changes. Her hair disappeared and her body returned to its natural form as well, with her blouse fitting more loosely in the bosom. While she was quite proud of her natural beauty, she knew Ehric would remember her as he first met her.

Shoptim did not stay in her natural form for long. She began to cast an intricate transformational spell that she was still mastering, and decided to take the form she had learned first. A wince of pain indicated the magic was taking effect. It took only a few seconds for her body and clothing to condense and reform into a small yellow bird with a blunt black beak.

She took off at once, and quickly found Ehric. He had just reached the docks and was headed towards a rundown inn. When he made his way inside, Shoptim perched on a window looking in on the common room. Ehric didn't stop but went straight up the stairs. She waited to see which direction he went at the top of the stairs and then made a guess of which window would be his.

Shoptim was rather shocked to see a Yuan-ti woman lying on the bed.

* * * *

Yyll lay on the thin mattress and tried to flex her arm. Some feeling and motion had come back in her hand since the battle, but the arm remained basically useless. Just then, she heard footsteps in the hall outside and

took her cobra form. Ehrlic slipped in through the door a moment later and closed it quickly behind him. He whispered into the room. “Yyll, it’s Ehrlic. I can talk to you now.”

“Ehrlic?” Yyll resumed her Yuan-ti form. “How can this be?”

“I acquired magic that allows us to understand each other. For the next little while we can converse like normal. How do you feel?”

“I am in pain but will live.”

“I can go back out to purchase healing potions but I wanted to talk to you first. I want to tell you how ---- I am.” Despite the translation spell, Yyll still stumbled over a word. It was an archaic term she didn’t know. Ehrlic seemed to understand her confusion and tried again. “I am thankful to you for helping me escape and fighting Pethiss. I will do whatever I can to help you in the future.” Yyll realized what a good decision she made in helping this human.

“What would you have us do now? Why did you bring me here?”

“I had to find some way to talk to you and I didn’t want to leave you alone in the wild. I want to help you but I’m not sure how. Have you thought about what you want to do?”

“Ehrlic, if you say you will help me, I would stay with you. You are a powerful mage, you killed Pethiss. Why did you not escape before?”

Ehrlic sat on the cot beside her. “I couldn’t save myself. Pethiss controlled me, she forbid me to escape. Without you to lead me out, I would have been stuck there forever.”

“I have had feelings since I met you that are very unnatural for a Yuan-ti. I think you did something to me.”

“I am really sorry but I had to make you trust me. I will not betray you.”

“How could you use me to escape? I don’t understand.”

“Pethiss gave me certain commands. One was not to try to escape. Another was to follow the orders of your people. I had hoped you were willing take me away. The Cartographer just moved up the timetable.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know his name, the one that was going to kill you.”

“He is Verpith.”

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Ehric repeated the name to himself and then a silence lingered. Yyll marveled at his cleverness but questions remained. “You used magic on me?” Her animal eyes narrowed to mere slits. “So you don’t have any desire for me?”

Ehric sighed. “I’m sorry Yyll.”

“Why do you apologize? You are a strong mage, stronger than Pethiss. She should have killed you when she had the chance.”

“I’m apologizing for what I did to you. It was my only way to escape, but even an enemy doesn’t deserve to have that done to them. I made you think I was a friend when I wasn’t really.”

“Ehric, I said I was feeling things that a Yuan-ti wouldn’t normally. I am not angry, just confused where the feelings came from. And how can you say we are not allies? We have saved each other lives, even when there was no gain in it.”

“You’re right of course. We acted like allies. But I know that you would not have acted that way if I hadn’t compelled you.”

“You think so? You are wise not to trust me. Your magic is not so strong as you think. Suspicion is coming back to me. But I can’t see what you have to gain from keeping me with you. You must really think differently from my people.”

Ehric smiled. “That much is very clear to me now. So do you trust me that I’m not going to betray you?”

Yyll slipped closer to him, looking into his eyes. “Sometimes I think you are truly different but then I wonder if it is all a trap. How could you survive as a race with these feelings?”

“That’s a tough question to answer but it has worked for us. You should know that there are many humans similar to the way you describe yourself. Sometimes trust is foolish.”

“I understand. You say I should only trust you?”

“For now, absolutely. That brings us back to where we started, what can we do?”

They sat across from each on the cot in silence. Yyll was the first to speak.

“Ehric, I relish these feelings you’ve given me. If your spells are not permanent, you must allow me to stay with you.”

Ehric didn’t know what to say. “Are you sure Yyll? I don’t understand why you want feelings you know are not genuine.”

“Of course not. I’m sure you feel like this all the time. Until I met you, the only strong feelings I ever had were fear and anger. That was enough. Fear and anger drove me to be stronger. But now that I know I am capable of these other feelings, how can I turn away from them? Please Ehric.”

“So you want to love me?”

Yyll realized how repulsive she must look to him. “I will heal. These scars will fade some when I molt next. I will not always be this hideous. Please Ehric.”

“I am not saying you are ugly, Yyll, you are not. But we are different species. You are half snake for gods’ sake. Surely I am not attractive to you.”

Yyll thought about her response. “There are methods known to my people to introduce the blood of the Yuan-ti into lesser species. They become like one of us.”

Ehric’s voice rose. “I can’t do that Yyll. I can’t become one of you.” Realizing he was in close quarters with a snake, he tempered his outbursts. “We would both be outcasts.”

“Is there some way to make me like you? I am already an outcast.”

“I don’t know Yyll.”

“Ehric, I know you find me unattractive, no matter what you say. Just do this for me so I can trust you. We can work out the rest later.” Yyll took Ehric’s hand and placed it over her heart. “I remember now. You touched me here when you cast the spell.”

“Alright Yyll. I will try to cast the spell again. Just relax and don’t resist.”

Yyll pushed down her misgivings and closed her eyes as Ehric began to cast. She didn’t feel anything but when she opened them again, she saw a man she knew she could trust.

“Thank you.”

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“Did it work then? You think I am a master wizard, but you are mistaken. I had no idea how to cast that spell before I watched Pethiss.”

“It did. I know I can trust you.” A wide smile split Yyll’s scarred face, revealing the tips of her fangs.

“I have to ask you this even if you refuse to answer. Do you know what Verpith and Pethiss are here for?”

Yyll shook her head. “I do not. I was just a scout for them. They instructed me to mark the features of the landscape. But they never told me what they were looking for.”

“How long have you been in this region?”

“I came recently, only days before we met. I don’t know how long the elders have been here. Ehcric, are you planning on going back to fight them?”

“I don’t know yet. Hopefully they will leave on their own now that we’ve escaped.”

“They didn’t come all this distance to go back home unsuccessful.” An uncomfortable silence fell in the room.

Ehcric realized he didn’t have much longer so just started talking. “I know almost nothing about you Yyll. Where are you from? How old are you?”

“My tribe lives in the jungles far from here. I hatched nearly eighteen years ago. There is very little to tell about me. I was trained to be a scout based on my body type and snake form. I have lived a normal life.”

Yyll quickly changed the subject. “We should be making plans for what to do next. I think we should get out of the city.”

“We could go north and away from the mountains. I have spent some time in those forests as well, but they are very dangerous. There’s also Hlondeth. You could find other Yuan-ti there.”

“I don’t think I want that. I just want to stay with you and avoid Verpith.”

“We can do that. I think we should head into the wilderness, once I gather supplies and get you more healing.”

He mustered his courage. “I didn’t want to ask this, but the rings you

took from me... Could you give me one of them back? I want you to keep the ring that protects against falls. But the other one will let me live without food or water for a very long time. I'll need that more than you." He had barely seen her eat at all in the weeks they had spent together.

"Of course, Ehric. I forgot about your rings." Without any obvious regurgitation, Yyll opened her mouth and her tongue wrapped around two silver rings. She placed them in her hand and presented them to Ehric.

"This one you should keep." Ehric took the other ring and slipped it on the middle finger of his left hand. "It's already saved you once. I hope you never need it again."

"Ehric, what do you do? Who do you owe your allegiance to?"

"I have no allegiances, exactly. The cities here operate on their own. I try to make sure that none of the tribes of Orcs or Ogres in the area get powerful enough to challenge them. If the humans are going to fight one another, and they do all the time, they can't afford to have the Orcs united. But I don't work for anyone officially."

"Good."

They spent the next quarter hour discussing practical matters, primarily how they would fight together and where to go if they got separated, issues that would be critical in the wild.

"Is there anything else we need to talk about for now?"

"I don't think so."

"Then I should go and see about getting supplies. Don't let anyone find you." Ehric stood, grabbed his spear and started for the door

"Be wary Ehric. I would be very angry if you were killed." Yyll slithered to him and embraced him from behind, running her hand across his chest. She felt his body tense but then he turned and slipped his left arm around the small of her back.

"It will be alright Yyll. I will be right back." Yyll shrank down and leaned her head against his chest. She breathed in the smell of him and did not mind at all.

* * * *

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Whatever she had been expecting of Ehric, this was most assuredly not it. Just learning of the Yuan-ti in the mountains made her meeting with Ehric profitable. She had to assume it was related to Polum's work. It suddenly dawned on her she was trying to give a topic serious thought while in the form of a finch. *Foolishness.* Shoptim took flight directly back to the enclave, relishing the feel of the air on her body.

When she reached the small circular window to her room, Shoptim paused on the sill to be sure no one was around. She wasn't sure how many of the Wizards knew she could manage such a radical transformation, and secrets like that were worth keeping. Satisfied that no one was waiting to ambush her, the finch shifted back to her natural form. The spell remained active, giving her a sensation of unnatural flexibility.

Shoptim washed up quickly, without bothering to call her attendant, and donned a fresh set of red linen robes. Sitting at her desk, she retrieved her jewelry and checked her appearance in a small polished copper mirror. She touched a dab of Shou perfume to her wrists and either side of her neck. While it had a pleasant fragrance, it was perhaps too distinctive. It could betray her presence if she wasn't careful. With one last check of her tattoos, Shoptim put down her mirror.

The next task for the evening was to prepare to meet with some slavers. Polum, the head of the enclave, had been intent to increase his slave holdings for some time. For what purpose, Shoptim could only guess. The arch wizard was an evoker and had no affection for those from her school.

Regardless, he had given her an assignment. Well, one of his lackeys had actually delivered the assignment and it was infuriatingly vague. Shoptim opened her desk drawer and retrieved a small rolled parchment. Her orders were to pick up a specific pouch of gems from the treasury and meet a slaver named Nizrim in a copse of trees three miles east of town after the moon had set. The Wizards had arranged to purchase ten male gnomes in good health. Once the deal was made, she was to take the slaves due south another mile and hand them off to a Wizard named Barsheh. Barsheh was a young Wizard, only a few years older than her,

but she was one of Polum's pupils and enjoyed his favor. The orders further specified that she would be accompanied by two Thayan soldiers to be assigned by the guard captain.

Dusk was the time that Shoptim regularly set aside to study her spells and prepare her mind and body for casting. It was still an hour or so till then so she went to see the guard captain and the treasury to be sure all was in order.

Chapter 6

Shoptim cast her final spell to prepare for the evening and moved to her small window. Selune's power waned in the night sky, nearly overwhelmed by her dark sister Shar. Shoptim was staring at the crescent moon, deep in thought, when someone rapped twice on her door.

"Come" Shoptim spun on her heel to face two soldiers. The men were small and did not look particularly comfortable in their armor.

"Mistress, we are here to serve." It was a boy's voice, not a man's.

"Very well. I am prepared. Let us go." They are of no consequence. She could not become dependant on soldiers, even good ones.

Shoptim and the two soldiers rode out of the Enclave quickly and put the city behind them. There was no talk during the ride. Even young soldiers knew not to speak unless addressed.

Selune was still sinking to the horizon when they reached the copse of cedars. Shoptim dismounted and gave her reins to one of her companions. "Stay on your horses. If there is trouble, you are to ride as fast as you can back to the Enclave." She pointed to the smaller of the two as she spoke. To the other, "You may attempt to aid me, but do not get too close." Both soldiers nodded.

And they waited. The moon set and the night took on a very ominous

feel. Suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by the grinding of stone on stone. A rocky outcropping in the middle of the stand of cedars was shifting to reveal a narrow passage. Shoptim tried to look confident and unconcerned as the earth opened up.

A figure emerged from the blackness. He was visible mostly by his bright white hair. *Drow*. Two more Drow emerged; she could just make out their heads turning side to side, looking for threats. The one in the center just walked straight towards her.

Shoptim drew herself up, “Nizrim? I bring greetings from the Red Wizards of Thay.”

“They send a child?” It was a male’s voice, but she thought the Drow flanking him were female. *So he’s powerful*. At close range, Shoptim was able to make out that he was swathed in a long dark robe, cinched at the waist with a thin cord. He had a handful of potion bottles and a wand hanging from his belt. His companions were clad in form fitting mail armor and wore swords.

“I am no child. You address a Red Wizard.”

“I see. My apologies, Wizard.” His tone dripped contempt. “I have some slaves for the Wizard Polum. Do you have payment?”

“I do, but I would like to see your product first.”

“Of course you would. Aarasta, retrieve the slaves.” The woman on his left dashed back into the tunnel and returned immediately with two gnomes, a male and a female, shackled together. “There are nine more pairings like this one, just as Polum requested.”

“Polum is only interested in the males. We have no use for mated pairs.” Shoptim moved to inspect the two half naked gnomes. They appeared to be in reasonable health, with no visible wounds.

“Is that so? Polum was very specific that he wanted gnome pairings. Perhaps you were misinformed?” Shoptim thought she could actually see his eyes begin to throb with a red glow.

“I do not see how that could be the case. What will it cost for just the males?”

“I’m sorry child, but that will not be possible. You will have to purchase

them all.”

“It is all or none?” Shoptim ignored his insult.

“You could phrase it that way.”

“How much will they cost then? Perhaps Polum will find a use for the females.”

The price the Drow quoted was three times the value of the gems in her pouch.

“I am shocked that you value these gnomes so highly. We have no use for such expensive slaves. What if one were to be injured?”

“You dare to mock me?” She could definitely see his eyes glow now.

Shoptim glanced to her side but couldn't find the other female. She prepared herself for the inevitable fight. “Not at all, I'm merely telling you that I can not pay the price you are asking. Unless you are willing to reconsider your decision, we will have to go our separate ways.”

“I am not willing.” Shoptim heard a muffled cry from one of her guards. “Nor will we be going our separate ways.”

Shoptim darted to the side as Aarasta raised a tiny crossbow. Simultaneously, Nizrim began to cast a spell she recognized. She quickly chanted a negating charm as she sought cover. The crossbow bolt ripped through her robes and sank into her shoulder before she could make it to the nearest tree.

A gem under her eye flashed as its magic was activated by the poisoned bolt. Shoptim ignored it and the pain, barking out another spell. Aarasta screamed a foul curse and Shoptim knew that she was blinded. She heard a horse galloping away as she inched around the tree, looking for some sign of Nizrim. She spotted his white mane just as she felt a spell hit her. Her limbs went rigid as the magic surged through her body. Shoptim fell forward against the tree for what felt like an eternity before she started to successfully resist the effect.

She managed to push herself up a moment before a hand gripped her by the back of the neck, slamming her face against the irregular trunk. She tried to twist around but her assailant easily overpowered her, smashing her head repeatedly into the tree, until Shoptim lacked the

strength to resist.

“Very good Sisrelle. Turn her over.” Shoptim clung to consciousness as she was roughly flipped to her back. One hand held her wrists over her head and another clamped over her mouth. “Would you make a good slave, child?” Shoptim could barely make him out through the blood in her eyes. She ignored his gloating and focused.

“You are a very attractive little human, but who would dare to enslave a mighty Red Wizard of Thay?” Nizrim chuckled at his own humor. “No, I think you will have to die... Sisrelle.” The Drow warrior lifted Shoptim to her feet. Nizrim began to intone a long spell she knew with certainty would kill her.

Just then a droning filled the air. Shoptim concentrated on shifting her form, hoping that the insects she had silently called would distract Nizrim long enough. She imagined the hulking muscles of an Ogre and applied them to her own frame. The hand on her face seemed to shrink as the air filled with hundreds of angry wasps.

Nizrim lost his spell in a fit of rage and frustration. Sisrelle released her grip on Shoptim as the small Thayan grew into the form of a hulking Ogre. The magic that summoned the swarm also protected Shoptim from the furious insects and she advanced on the stricken Drow. Sisrelle continued to fend off the stinging wasps with one hand while she fumbled to draw her sword with the other. The dark blade was barely clear of the scabbard when Shoptim pounded her fist in the elf’s delicate face. The bones in the elf’s arm snapped as she pulled the blade from her grasp.

Shoptim spun to face the Drow wizard. A simple spell passed her lips though she struggled to make the proper motions with her thick calloused fingers. Nizrim had given up trying to cast and instead reached for the wand at his belt, just as she had anticipated. Shoptim charged the male, Sisrelle’s sword held high. Nizrim’s hand slipped on the thin coating Shoptim had manifested on the handle of the wand. His red eyes went wide as the blade descended to meet the junction of his neck and shoulder.

Her attack, delivered by Ogre muscles, should have cleaved him in two.

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Instead, Shoptim arms shuddered as the blade was turned by powerful protective magic. Despite stopping the blade, the force still drove the mage to the ground. Without pausing, Shoptim cast another negating spell, this time aimed directly at Nizrim. The effects were not visible, but Shoptim raised her blade again, confident that his flesh was unprotected.

Absolute darkness enveloped her. Shoptim slashed at the spot the mage had been but only hit a tree root. She could hear the waning drone of the wasps and the gnomes' frantic cries but that was all. Willing her body to return to its natural form, Shoptim dropped the Drow blade and reached into her robes for a potion.

The lukewarm liquid relieved the worst of the pain in her head and she could feel her nose realign. Her relief only lasted a moment before she heard an ominous noise, the soft scurrying of many feet approaching. A small smile crossed her bloody face as an idea occurred to her.

* * * *

Sisrelle rose to her feet and brushed away the few dead and dying wasps on her face. Her cheek was cracked and swollen and her right arm was clearly broken but she had no difficulty ignoring the pain. Pulling a stout Dwarven blade from a sheath on her mailed thigh, she looked around warily and listened for some sound of the wizard in the magical blackness. She knew Nizrim well and avoided entering the unnatural darkness that could well mean her death. Instead she skirted the edge to get back to Aarasta and the entrance to the tunnel.

Sisrelle spotted her companion quickly, sword drawn with her back to a tree. The two gnome slaves cowered together at her feet. Nizrim was not visible. Suddenly a woman's startled scream erupted from the blackness. Sisrelle smiled cruelly as the scream dissolved into a whimper and then silence in short order.

Aarasta heard her approach and called out. "Is she dead?"

Nizrim's voice emerged from the shadows. "I think not, but we will see in a moment." Sisrelle spun to see the mage float slowly out of the air behind her. "Sisrelle, I am disappointed in you. You let that child touch me."

Sisrelle lifted her chin to expose her throat to the mage. Nizrim merely ran a long finger along the line of her jaw, indicating that he accepted her apology. As he passed her he cast a spell and pointed to Aarasta. The woman relaxed as her sight returned.

“Now shall we see what became of our customer?” The inky blackness disappeared to reveal a mass of fist sized spiders roiling over one another where the wizard had stood. With a simple gesture from Nizrim, the spiders returned to their master, some climbing his legs to his back while the rest formed a protective ring around his feet. The girl was gone. Sisrelle’s sword lay on the ground.

“Red Wizards are notoriously cautious. I suspect one of those tattoos on her head transported her to safety.” Nizrim handed Sisrelle a potion. “She was a clever opponent. I hope we get to meet again.”

Sisrelle let the healing flow through her before retrieving her sword and helping Aarasta with the gnomes. They were quivering and pathetic, just as she had come to expect.

Nizrim set an easy pace as the group moved back underground. He seemed lost in thought as he followed the slaves, Aarasta at his side. Sisrelle walked at the head of the column and considered her own performance against the Wizard. She had expected the stinging insects to be poisonous; that they weren’t made her feel foolish. It amazed her that such pathetic creatures thrived in the light above.

Sisrelle was interrupted from her thoughts by Aarasta’s cry.

* * * *

The other spiders left her alone for the most part as Shoptim clung to the wizard’s robes. She congratulated herself on her plan. It was highly disorienting to coordinate all of her limbs and make sense of the images from her myriad eyes, but somehow she managed to scuttle up the robes. Once she was safely positioned, she concentrated on interpreting the images that seemed to assault her. Her spider eyes saw the world by a different light than humans. The dark elf woman at the mage’s side seemed to glow any place that her skin was exposed.

Nizrim’s magic was intriguing, even if he put too much trust in it. She

had never seen a wizard command beasts in such a manner. She herself had felt a slight compulsion to follow the orders he'd given his swarm. Shoptim scurried around the mage's waist, trying to inspect the magical potions and devices he carried. The potions on his belt were a mixture of curatives and poisons. The wand drew her attention. It took a long time to figure out the command word inscribed in the otherwise smooth polished stone shaft. Eventually she was forced to trace the script with one of her forelegs.

Shoptim decided that they had gone far enough. Tracing her way up Nizrim's back, she stopped at the base of his neck. She concentrated on shifting back to the form of the Ogre. Darkness enveloped her again as her eyes lost the ability to see heat. Despite her blindness, she retained her grip on the mage as he collapsed under the sudden weight. Shoptim found Nizrim's chin with her massive hands and wrenched his head around. The bones in his neck separated and his body jerked once before going limp.

The nearest Drow shouted in alarm, giving Shoptim a direction in which to cast a spell. A bright flash of light burst in the tunnel, illuminating and hopefully blinding the Drow female. Shoptim snatched the wand from the dead mage's belt and barked a command word. Aarasta managed a short terrified scream before she crumpled to ground.

The gnomes panicked, trying to run from the fight, but they stumbled and fell due to their shackles. Shoptim took a moment to cast a spell that would gently light the tunnel. The remaining Drow was clearly visible above the heads of the frightened gnomes. She was pushing against the tide of slaves and drawing her crossbow as Shoptim leveled the wand.

The bolt nicked Shoptim's ear as she activated the wand. A bright light enveloped the remaining dark elf. Even terrified, Sisrelle remained silent as she fled down the tunnel. Shoptim quickly lost sight of her in the darkness. Easing back to her natural form, Shoptim touched a finger to her ear. It was numb and slick with blood. "A little too close."

She raised her voice. "The Drow are defeated. You must be calm." The slaves had become hopelessly tangled in one another and she realized it

would take them some time for them to settle.

Shoptim checked Aarasta and found her exquisite face twisted with fear, eyes wide and staring into space. She was dead.

“Who is in charge among you?”

There was a murmur in the group and someone called out, “Glip is in charge.”

A rotund middle aged gnome man struggled to his feet accompanied by a woman of a similar age. “I was the leader of our village before we were taken. What would you do with us?” Shoptim thought of a way to placate Polum and perhaps convince Ehric of her sincerity.

Shoptim cast the spell she had used to communicate with Ehric in the marketplace and whispered to herself. “I am a Red Wizard. I am sorry to inform you that I can not free you all. My orders are to return with ten gnomes. I am willing to free your women. Cover your mouth and respond very quietly.”

“It was too much to hope that you would truly rescue us. But I will be happy knowing that my wife is free and those who made us slaves are dead. I think the rest of the men here will feel the same.”

“Excellent. You should not despair. There is always hope for the future.”

“Your kindness is unexpected.”

“Where are you from? Will your womenfolk be able to return?”

“Our village was destroyed. The black hearted elves took us by surprise. They had not been active in the area for decades. The fighting was terrible. They came with thousands of spiders and...”

Shoptim cut him off. “Our time is short. I will listen to the tale of your people but we cannot indulge in that now. I will take your women into my care then. When I find a suitable place for them to settle they will be released.”

“I... I guess I must trust you then. Please do not betray us, we mean you no harm and our women are gentle and kind.”

“I will not betray your trust. Please tell your people the situation. Maintain order and do not think of betraying me. You have seen that I

am not gentle.”

Shoptim left Glip and methodically stripped the two dead Drow of all useful equipment. The woman carried a family emblem of some sort under her dark chainmail. Shoptim would study it later to learn what she could of these elves, in the event that one of Aarasta's kin tried to avenge her death. She also retrieved the crossbow and thin sword Sisrelle had dropped in her flight. They had been held by the surviving Drow and could be used to find her in the future.

Looking down at the dead mage, she truly realized for the first time what she had done. She, a twenty-four year old Wizard, had defeated a centuries old Dark Elf mage. Her pride overflowed in a wide grin.

She knelt to search his body. Of primary interest to the Wizard was Nizrim's spellbook. She handled that very carefully, intending to open it only in controlled conditions. And it would have to be hidden from her associates. She couldn't possibly return with it to the Enclave.

Once she had their possessions stowed in a specially crafted pack, she set to the gruesome task of removing the mage's head. It went in a separate bag.

The gnomes were sobbing by the time she was ready to move.

* * * *

“You are late, the sun is nearly up.” Polum's apprentice was a tall and striking woman, radiating power and menace. Her expression was grim.

Shoptim responded softly. “Greetings Barsheh. There were some difficulties during the negotiations. I had to eliminate the slaver. It was unavoidable.”

“It seems the slaves are unharmed. Do you have proof of Nizrim's demise?”

“I do. I brought his head. Hopefully that is proof enough. I will return the payment to the treasury.”

“Polum will be made aware of your actions. You may give me the evidence and I will see to it that it is delivered to him.”

Shoptim handed over the soggy bag. “Is there anything else, Barsheh?”

Barsheh shook her head and climbed back in the saddle. The knights

rounded up the gnomes and guided them away towards the mountains.

Shoptim waited until they were out of sight before turning into a finch and making the quick flight back to her slaves. When she arrived she observed the gnomes from a perch in one of the large cedars. There was a good deal of argument.

“How can we leave our men to be slaves? Can’t we do something to rescue them?” The young gnomish woman was in tears as she spoke.

It was Glip’s wife that responded. “How can we rescue them? That woman killed two Drow by herself. We have to trust her as Glip said.”

“But she’s a sorceress, how can we trust her?”

“We have no choice. Do you suggest we run? She is our only hope to find out where our men are and we mustn’t anger her. Glip said she was sympathetic and we have to keep her that way.”

“I just want to see my Porpagil again.” The little woman broke down in long wracking sobs.

“I know, Tewli, you will.”

Shoptim decided that enough was enough and flew just out of sight of the women before she returned to her natural body. She called out to the gnomes as she approached.

“I have returned.” The women huddled close together as she addressed them. “You are in my care. If any of you wish to leave you may.” Shoptim paused. “Otherwise I will try to find a place for you to live.”

“What about our men?” This came from a straight backed young gnome. She was grimy and her clothes hung in tatters but she managed a dignified look nonetheless.

Shoptim met her eyes. “Your men are in the hands of the Red Wizards. There is nothing that you can do for them. If they complete the task set before them, they may come up for sale in the future. I should be able to purchase your men back and give them their freedom.”

“So we do nothing then?”

Glip’s wife spoke up. “Be quiet Flippip. Mistress Nuhn is doing what she can for us.”

Shoptim spoke. “It is fine Awanda. I understand how difficult this

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situation is but I truly have no options. I am doing all I can to help you.” Flippip fell silent. “Are any of you with child?” Awanda looked to Tewli. “Is there anyone else?” No one spoke or raised a hand. Shoptim opened her pack and retrieved some foodstuffs, handing them to Tewli. “Make these last for the day. You should be safe here. I will return when I have arranged for your quarters.”

Shoptim walked behind a tree and seemed to disappear.

* * * *

Ehric woke with a start. He had fallen asleep on the floor of the small room after a late night of packing. He woke to find Yyll on the floor next to him, her tail wrapped loosely around his legs. “Yyll, I need to get up.” She yawned widely, giving Ehric a clear view of her long upper fangs and forked gray tongue. Her tail unwound slowly and Ehric climbed to his feet. Yyll coiled around herself and fell back to sleep.

Going to the window, he noted that sky was starting to turn from black to purple. The sun would be up in another hour or so. Ehric hoped to be leaving the city by then. He checked his pack one more time and then pulled on his enchanted leather armor. When he was ready to leave, Ehric went back to Yyll and touched her shoulder. “Yyll, you, I go.” She opened her black eyes and nodded. Her body shrank in on itself until she took the form of a small cobra. Ehric lifted her to his neck and shouldered the large pack. Yyll slithered under his armor and down his sleeve. He grabbed his spear on the way out the door.

Evandra was outside the inn. She looked tired but her wounds were healed. “Ehric, I needed to talk to you.”

“Of course. Did you find Feldan?”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about. I spent all night trying to track him down with a spell I purchased from the Reds.” She looked at him with bleary eyes. “He’s with them. I don’t know where he is but I saw a Red Wizard with him.”

Ehric felt a sinking sensation in his gut. “How did he look? Was he alright?”

“He looked like a slave. The others are trying to figure out a way to

break into the compound or capture one of the Wizards. I keep telling them it's madness but they are determined."

"Why did you come to me? Your friends surely won't listen to what I would say."

"You've lived here all your life. Do you have anyone you could contact, some way to find out exactly where he is?"

"I will see what I can do. Just try to keep them from doing anything suicidal."

"I will. How are you doing?" Eve looked at him closely.

"I am fine. Let me find out what I can and I will talk to you later today or tomorrow." Ehric slipped past her and up the street.

* * * *

Shoptim sat by the round window, lost in thought, when she noticed a tall man coming up the street. He was whip thin and bent under the burden of a large pack. She had not expected him so soon. The mage had nearly exhausted her spells but she managed to cast the simple communication magic required to talk over distances.

She forced a pleasant lilt into her voice. "Ehric. I am so pleased to see you. Look to your left and you'll find me in the small round window above the wall." Ehric stopped abruptly and turned, seemingly spotting her instantly. His hand came to his mouth.

"Shoptim, I need to talk to you urgently. Is there a way we can meet?"

Shoptim considered her situation. She had the morning free but she hadn't slept in more than a day. "Yes, of course Ehric. I will meet you at the tree in about an hour. Is that soon enough?"

"Yes. I will see you then."

Shoptim turned from the window and began to collect her things. She would have to use scrolls but she had a sufficient stock. Calling in her attendant, she let the dark haired girl know that she was not to be disturbed. With that taken care of she changed into a less conspicuous outfit and refreshed her transformational magic. A small yellow finch took flight, headed to the sea.

She beat Ehric to the meeting place and transformed back to her natural

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body. Ehrlic appeared on the beach a few minutes later.

“What is so important Ehrlic that you would risk being seen with me?”

“This is a difficult thing to ask you Shoptim but I don't see that I have a choice. A friend of mine has been enslaved by the Wizards.”

“You want my help?”

“Yes.”

“That may be possible. Do you know where he was taken?”

“In the mountains to the south. He was scouting and was snatched somehow.”

Shoptim was quiet for a moment, considering her response. “I don't know that I can get your friend back. If he were in Thay, I would be able to purchase him but this is different.” She waited.

“Shoptim, I'm willing to fight to get him out. He saved my life and I owe him. If you can just tell me where he is I will do the rest.”

“So you mean to fight Red Wizards and you want me to help you do it? I told you my situation was dangerous but this will surely get me killed. If I give you the information you want, and you were to be either captured or killed, it will be tracked to me. I cannot do this for you Ehrlic, you ask too much of me.”

“Please Shoptim.”

“Ehrlic, I know nothing about you. How can I trust you with my life?”

“I will tell you anything you want to know.”

“Really? Even in front of your friend?”

“What?”

“Of course, your friend doesn't speak this language does it?” Shoptim cast and then continued in a slurred tongue. “I know you are there serpent. I am a friend of Ehrlic's. Please come out. There is no point in hiding.” Ehrlic was caught completely off guard as Yyll slid off of his arm to the sand. “Stay in your present form for now while I talk with Ehrlic.” The snake hissed at her.

“What did you say to her?”

“Her? I see. I told her to stay in her snake form while we talked. So why do you have a Yuan-ti woman as a companion?” Shoptim's tried to

make her voice flat while betraying a sense a hurt.

Ehric sighed. “She has almost nothing to do with Feldan. Her name is Yyll. There are Yuan-ti in the mountains and she helped me escape from them.”

“And why would she do that?”

“I cast a spell on her to make her trust me.”

Shoptim kept her features calm. “Is the Talent inborn in you?” How had she missed that he was a wildling?

“It is.”

“I am impressed Ehric. That is a very difficult spell you managed on this ‘Yyll.’ So why is she still with you?”

“She saved my life and she has no where to go.”

“But Ehric, she only saved you because you bewitched her. She is your enemy, even if she doesn’t realize it right now. Aren’t you worried she will turn on you when the spell wears off?”

“Of course I’m worried about that and I don’t know what will happen in the future but she is changed from the creature she was before.”

“You charmed the snake. You are a remarkable man. So how does this ‘Feldan’ fit in? Is he another Yuan-ti?”

“No, he’s a Halfling. I came across his camp while we were escaping. His companions helped us fight off one of the more powerful snakes they sent after us. Somehow Feldan got separated and captured by the Wizards. Please Shoptim, I need to know where he is being held.”

Shoptim stared into Ehric’s eyes before taking a deep breath. “Your friend is being held not far from the city. The master of this enclave is leading a search for something, I don’t know what, in the mountains. I delivered a group of Gnome slaves to him just last night.” She shook her head and looked up at him. “I know what you are thinking, but I didn’t have any choice. I managed to free ten, all women, but I don’t know what more I can do for them. Would you help me with them before you go?”

“Of course. What can I do?”

“They are a group of rock gnomes. Their village was razed by Drow slavers so they have no where to go. You mentioned your family lived on

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a farm nearby. Would they be willing to house them temporarily?”

“I can arrange that, yes.”

The Wizard had other questions. “I want to ask you more about this Yyll. Will she accompany you to free your Halfling friend?”

“I don't know. I don't think his companions would welcome her. But I can't talk to her to explain what is happening.”

“I can explain to her and I may be able to help you in another way. I told you I specialize in transformative magic.”

Ehric made the leap immediately. “You could make her human?”

“Indeed I could, or pretty much anything else you might desire.” Shoptim studied his reaction.

“I think she would like that, but I don't know if it is wise.”

“Ehric, if you were wise, you would kill her. But you are honorable so that is not an option. You've already transformed her emotionally, why do you balk at a simple physical change?” Shoptim knew that she had him convinced.

Ehric thought for a second before he responded. “You're right of course. Can you make the offer to her?”

* * * *

Yyll kept a keen eye on this new human. Her thin leather boots would not offer much protection if Yyll chose to strike.

Quite suddenly the woman turned to her and began to speak. “Ehric wishes he could ask you this but I must translate for him. He wants to know if you are willing to renounce your snake blood and become a human. It is within my power to offer this to you.”

Emotions surged in Yyll, threatening to overwhelm her. She transformed back to her Yuan-ti body. Ehric's eyes widened and he quickly pulled her down, putting the tree between her and the docks. “Yes, mage. I wish to be made human.”

Shoptim continued calmly. “I will make you as one of the tribes of humans in the jungles. No one will expect you to understand the language of this region. Ehric will have to explain how you came to be in his company, but I am sure he can do that.”

“Yes, I understand. Will I be attractive to Ehric?”

“Is that important to you? I do not know what he likes in a woman but I will try to make you alluring. You should prepare yourself, the process will be painful.” Her smile was not comforting but Yyll could not think about pain.

Ehric said something to the new woman. She relayed the message. “Ehric thinks it would be best for you to return to your snake form for now. He wants to find someplace more secluded. I think he has a good idea.”

“Fine. Please be quick.” Yyll slowly shrank back to a cobra. Ehric scooped her up and the three of them continued down the shoreline, looking for more significant cover. They found some after a short walk, a group of large stones overgrown with pines. Ehric cleared out a section in the middle of the stand of trees and let Yyll down to the ground. Yyll took her natural form.

“Are you ready?” Yyll nodded. “Very well.”

The sorceress began to chant in a foreign tongue and made intricate patterns with her hands. Yyll felt the magic take hold in her body. The pain in her tail was agonizing as her skeleton snapped and shifted. She felt as though she was being torn in two. Looking down, she saw her tail contracting, with a crease forming down the centerline. Her vision narrowed and she heard a ringing in her ears. A moment later she passed out.

Chapter 7

Ehric looked on in shock as the magic wracked Yyll. When she changed between her Yuan-ti and snake forms, the process seemed quick and painless. This was entirely different. Her lower body writhed and twisted as Shoptim's invocation pulled Yyll's tail in half along its length. Two tentacles then contracted and reformed into long scaly legs.

He looked to Shoptim but she was fully engrossed in her task. When he returned his attention to the Yuan-ti, he found Yyll's thrashing had suddenly stopped. Ehric knelt at her side, wondering if Shoptim truly meant to kill the snake. Scales peeled away as he cradled her head and felt her brow. But it was clear she still drew breath, though in fitful shudders.

With the gross transformation complete, Shoptim shifted to details. Scales began to flake off of her skin as her hood was drawn in. The skin underneath was a dark brown, many shades darker than even Ehric's tanned arms. Curly black hair pushed out of her scalp. Shifting his eyes down, he saw that she retained her slim torso but her body widened into round newly formed hips. Her legs were long and muscular.

The Wizard finished her work with Yyll's face. Her angular features softened. Shoptim sculpted a rounded nose with flaring nostrils to

complement plump pink lips. Deep set eyes seemed to grow as they pushed forward, her strong brow receding into a gentle curve. All evidence of scarring disappeared. Her breathing eased and Ehrlic watched her chest rise and fall. The transformation was complete.

Yyll was beautiful. He looked up to Shoptim and shook his head. “How? That’s... it’s just astounding.”

“Thank you Ehrlic. It was not a simple procedure.”

“When will she wake?”

“I don’t know. It may be a few minutes.” Shoptim leaned against the trunk of a tree and closed her eyes.

“Are you alright?”

“I will be fine. I told you it was not a simple spell. I am just tired.”

“Shoptim, I don’t know how I can thank you. For this and helping me with Feldan...”

“Yes, I need to tell you where to go, don’t I? The gnome ladies are in a small stand of trees three miles due east of the city gate. They should not cause you any trouble. Awanda is in charge and the one called Tewli is pregnant. If you can send them on their way I can meet you back at those trees late tonight with the rest of the information you need.”

“Shoptim, I am truly grateful.”

“I understand that Ehrlic. I really must get back to the Enclave before I am missed. I will leave you some funds to cover the care of those Gnomes. Good luck with the snake.” Shoptim looked small and weak as she left.

Ehrlic turned his attention back to Yyll. He stroked her cheek and spoke softly to her. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when she started to wake.

“Just relax.” Her eyelids fluttered open and light brown eyes stared at him in confusion. Her legs began to kick in spasms. She reached up and grabbed Ehrlic under the shoulders. He spoke soothingly and helped her to her feet. Yyll continued to flounder, leaning heavily against Ehrlic as she tried to control her lower body.

It didn’t take as long as he’d expected. Yyll spent the rest of the

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morning mastering movement on two legs. The magic in Shoptim's spell must have helped the process, for by the time the sun had reached its peak, Yyll was jumping from the large boulders strewn in the area and seemed completely at ease. She grinned at him and there were no fangs.

“Err-ith. You I go?”

“Yes, we can go.” Ehrlic led Yyll along the beach and back to the streets of Innarlith. He noticed that she received lingering glances from many of the men. The fact that she walked barefoot in the street wearing only an old tunic did not help. He found an appropriate shop and ducked inside.

“I need some clothing for this woman. She needs something for a trip in the wilds.” The storeowner tore his eyes away and looked at Ehrlic.

“Do you expect fighting? I have breeches and tunics to fit her and a leather hauberk that I could resize. I guess she'll need gloves and boots as well.” He trailed off. “Gods man, where did you get her?”

Ehrlic had already decided on his story. “I purchased her freedom from the Reds. Apparently she is from the southern jungles. I think she will be a good companion in the wilds.”

Lust filled the man's eyes. “No doubt, no doubt. I will get started right away. Will she be needing a weapon as well?”

“Yeah, let me see your swords.”

Ehrlic ended up deciding on deerskin breeches, a few sets of linen tunics and a piecemeal set of leather armor. The hauberk consisted of overlapping strips of hard leather sewn to a soft deerskin backing that extended nearly to her knees. Separate pieces of boiled leather protected her upper arms and legs. Soft soled boots completed her attire. Yyll selected a medium length sword with a curved blade and a long hilt. She clearly knew the art of its use.

* * * *

Darkness had descended on the countryside by the time they reached the small stand of trees Shoptim had indicated.

Ehrlic called out to the gnomes he expected to find. “I was sent by Shoptim. Awanda, Tewli, are you there?” He heard some shuffling in front of him and a small figure emerged from behind a rock.

“Who are you? Why are you here?”

“My name is Ehric. I am a friend of Shoptim. She sent me to find you. I have an idea about where you can live.”

“Why did she not come herself?” The gnome was past her middle years though Ehric didn’t know how old that made her.

“She has other duties and did not want to draw attention to your presence here.” Ehric dropped to one knee to better address her. “Are you Awanda? Do you speak for the rest?”

“My name is Awanda but those with me are free to choose as they will.” She glanced behind her quickly. “However, they have decided that I will handle negotiations with the Wizard, and her representatives.”

“Very well. I would like to offer you accommodations at my family home in Wyvern’s Cairn. It is warm and safe and you will be provided for.”

“I will relay your offer.”

Awanda returned after a brief discussion and accepted the offer. Ehric instructed them on the path to take. The open countryside was safe enough, even at night. The gnome women had nothing to pack and they began their journey immediately, their eyes having no trouble with the night.

Ehric found a soft patch of earth and sat. He had to tell his parents that guests would be arriving soon. Closing his eyes, he envisioned the interior of his family home. He felt the magic take hold of the air around him and he inhaled deeply. “Mom, there is a group of ten gnome women coming. They are freed slaves and need food and shelter. I sent money with them. Build a fire for them to see. Love you.” He relayed the message as he exhaled the magically infused breath in the direction of his home.

Yyll was standing in front of him when he opened his eyes. She had one foot placed on the other, a pose that accentuated the beautiful curves of her long legs. He had a vision of her nude, wrapping her arms, and those legs, around him. He shook his head slightly, realizing that the image was not from his own mind, though it echoed his thoughts. Yyll reached

down to him.

It had been a long time since Ehrlic had lain with a woman and desire burned in him. But whatever she looked like, she was still a snake. Yyll saw his hesitation, and withdrew her hand.

“Err-ith, no?” She was clearly confused.

Ehrlic knew that he wouldn't be able to explain to her and realized he didn't want to. Was she really still a snake? His spells had transformed her spirit. Snakes didn't feel what she felt, Yyll had said as much. And then Shoptim's spells...

He stood and reached out to her. At some point she had removed her leather hauberk and she felt like a woman as she rushed into his arms. Her hands went to the clasps of his armor.

Ehrlic mumbled, “I love you.” Soft lips pressed against his and cut off additional conversation. They stumbled to the ground, Yyll's balance ruined in her passion.

* * * *

Shoptim lay on her side on a padded sofa. The flickering light of a small candle cast dancing shadows around room. The candle would create a gentle ringing sound when it finally burned down but the Wizard had not really slept since she finished her duty at the Enclave market. Sleep was important but her mind was racing. If Ehrlic successfully rescued those slaves, it could push Polum's work back weeks. But there was still the question of what Polum was looking for. Despite numerous attempts, Shoptim was no closer to learning what the archmage was devoting all of his energies to find. For now, her plan was simply to delay him and be prepared for any opportunities that arose.

If Ehrlic is captured... She would have to make it clear to him again that he held her life in his hands. It was the best way with men like him. Shoptim rolled out of bed and took her time selecting attire for the meeting with Ehrlic. If he turned out to be as resourceful as she hoped, Shoptim had every intention of tying him closely to her.

She selected a long closefitting sleeveless dress of gray silk and tied her favorite red sash low around her waist to accentuate her hips. The loose

tail of the sash formed a long train that fell to the ground behind her. The pull of a chord summoned her young attendant to lace her corset. The skinny girl was barefoot and wore loose fitting short linen pants and a simple vest. A tattoo on her cheek marked her as property of the Wizards.

Shoptim considered the gnomes as the attendant pulled the corset tight. “Do you ever think of home, Lune?”

The girl kept working as she responded. “No, ma’am.”

“No? I find that hard to believe. Stop for a moment.” Lune’s hands froze. Shoptim turned around to face her and girl fell to her knees. “What would you do if I gave you your freedom right now?”

“Please Mistress, do not send me away. I will work harder.” The girl kept her head bowed and her hands on her knees. Shoptim could see that she was shaking.

“This is not some sort of test Lune. I truly wish to know how you feel.”

Lune did not speak. Shoptim let the silence stretch.

“It’s alright Lune, you are an excellent attendant. Please come to me if you have any troubles... or if you wish to speak of home.” Shoptim turned her back to the girl and let her finish with the bodice.

“See to it I am not disturbed.” The dark haired girl bowed her way out of the room. As the door closed, Shoptim willed her body to shift into a small grey owl, her preferred form for night flights. She took off and disappeared silently into the night.

* * * *

Yyll had fallen asleep soon after their encounter, not bothering to get dressed. Anticipating his meeting with Shoptim, Ehric got up and found his hastily discarded clothing. He covered Yyll with a blanket before lying back down beside her. Sleep would elude him as he considered what he had just allowed to happen.

Life in the wilderness did not lend itself to meeting members of the fair sex and Ehric had not lain with a woman for too long. He felt like a foolish boy. It was difficult to be too upset though and he found a small smile crossing his face even as he tried to concentrate on the dangerous

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situation he was in. His thoughts kept returning to Yyll.

There were so many unknowns but he was determined to help her. He hoped having a human body would help her to sever her ties with the snakes. Surely she would never be accepted by them again. Ehrlic was all she had. He turned his attention from the star filled sky and watched Yyll sleep peacefully. He had to take care of her.

A rustling in the trees snapped Ehrlic out of his reverie. He cursed himself for a fool once again when he realized his spear was out of reach. The hairs on his arm stood up as he prepared a lightning bolt. Ehrlic rolled to his stomach and slipped into a crouch. Yyll did not stir. "Shoptim?"

"Yes." Ehrlic relaxed slightly but still retrieved his spear before moving towards Shoptim's voice. He found her standing serenely next to the shaggy trunk of a cedar. She was in a full length dress but even in the darkness he could make out some sort of feathery mask on her face.

"I apologize for my appearance. It's an experiment with augmenting my night vision. I was ambushed recently and I want to be in a better position in the future."

"So that's not a mask?" Ehrlic found himself reaching out to touch her face before he realized it. Shoptim flinched away.

"No it is not a mask and I assure you it is quite sensitive."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

Shoptim waved away his apology. "Don't concern yourself. Ehrlic, I wish I had more information I could give you but all I know is that I delivered the gnomes to Polum's men a short distance from here. They were on horseback and should be easy for you to track. I can take you to the handoff point."

"Do you know anything about their numbers?"

"I do. Polum has two apprentices, on par with me in strength, and maybe ten to fifteen initiates. The initiates can perhaps manage one conflagration of fire, or a powerful bolt of lightning before their energy is spent. You will find Polum and his followers to be very direct. They will react with fire to any assault."

“So I have to deal with more than a dozen fire wizards?” Etric had a difficult time keeping the defeat out of his voice.

“Perhaps, but maybe not, if you are judicious in your timing. Polum does not spend all of his time away from the enclave and his initiates have other responsibilities. They are not all waiting for the chance to burn you to a cinder.” Shoptim chuckled but Etric was not amused. “No. If you time your attack properly, Polum will not be present and you will only have to deal with one of his apprentices and a few initiates. Remember your goal; this is a rescue, you don’t have to kill everyone in the camp to rescue your friend.”

“Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten why I’m doing this. What about guards? Steel may not be a concern for you but I can be killed just as easily on the end of sword as by some sorcerous blaze.”

“The place will be well guarded. I doubt Polum would trust any local thugs there so you will be facing trained Thayans. Of course, on the plus side, there will be fewer of them. I can really only make a guess here but I’d say you should expect at least thirty or forty soldiers.”

“I see. Will you be able to help me plan the right time to strike? Can you tell me when Polum is at the enclave?”

Shoptim shook her head. “He doesn’t keep a set schedule. He must have some accommodations in the mountains. The complement of the guard should tell you if he is present.”

“Right. Of course.”

“Etric, I have a number of healing potions I recovered from the Drow slaver. You are welcome to them.” Reaching into the case, she pulled out a half dozen small metal vials.

“This is worth a fortune.”

She dismissed his comment. “I do not want you to die. Will your snake companion be accompanying you?”

Etric paused in thought. “I don’t know if Yyll will come. I can’t really explain what I’m doing so I think she will probably just follow me.”

“Ah yes, I brought something to help with your language barrier. I crafted a few candles that will allow you to understand one another. Just

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light one and stay within the envelope of light it sheds.” Shoptim handed over a small flat box. Ehrlic opened it to find four candles tightly packed to prevent damage.

Ehrlic was amazed. “I can talk to her again?”

“Certainly. You might want to see about teaching her to speak a human tongue if you plan on keeping her.” Shoptim did not seem overly pleased with his excitement. Ehrlic wondered how long she had been in the trees before he heard her. “I have to get back to the Enclave before sunrise. I can take you to start of the trail into the mountains.”

“I will rouse Yyll.”

“Of course.”

Shoptim soon led the way over the rolling hills. Not even Shoptim’s owl eyes spotted the small stealthy form that followed them.

* * * *

“If you need to contact me, I will be at my window everyday, an hour after the sunset. I’m sure you can get my attention.”

“Thank you Shoptim. Hopefully I will see you again...”

“Yes, speaking of which, I meant to tell you that if you are captured... well, let me just say that your death will be much swifter and easier than mine. Please don’t get caught.”

“I swear I won’t allow it.”

“I don’t know what gods you worship but I wish their favor upon you.” Shoptim turned and began to carefully walk back to Innarlith, leaving Ehrlic and Yyll to venture into the mountains.

It was a simple matter to track the horses, even in the dead of night, so Ehrlic and his new lover walked side by side over the rolling hills. He intended to get as far as he could during the night while they could move with little chance of detection. He’d have to gauge Yyll’s woodcraft skills and make a decision whether to keep moving during daylight.

* * * *

The sun was still hidden by the mountains when Ehrlic motioned to Yyll to stop. It had been a tough night of hiking as the terrain got rougher. Yyll fell a number of times and Ehrlic was forced to hold her upper arm

and support her as she fumbled with her footing. Her frustration obvious, Yyll sat rubbing her bruised knees.

She motioned to him to join her and Ehrlic complied, after making one last scan for threats. He decided it was worth a candle to talk to her. Yyll looked at him with curiosity as he retrieved the candle box and kindled a quick flame. Ehrlic held the flickering candle close between them. He found her even more beautiful lit by the soft orange glow.

“Can you understand me?” Yyll’s eyes widened and she grinned.

“Yes. The candles are a gift from the magician? Tell me, who is she?” The candle did not convey emotions well. Ehrlic couldn’t tell if there was jealousy in her voice.

“It is probably best if I don’t tell you too much about her. She’s helping me for her own purposes, but she has been trustworthy so far.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Of course I do. I think you are safer this way.”

“I am very pleased that we coupled.” Ehrlic blushed red under his beard.

“Me too.”

“But this body is weak. I can’t see at night. I can barely smell. I am very hungry Ehrlic. How often do you humans eat?”

“We aren’t as strong as you but I hope you will give it time.”

“But Ehrlic, my natural body was so strong. My scales protected me, not like this skin.” She went back to rubbing her knees. “The only thing I like is that you find me attractive.” Yyll leaned forward to give Ehrlic a kiss.

“I wanted to explain to you my plans.”

“The human woman already told me you are going to rescue someone. I don’t understand why you are doing this.”

“He is a friend of Eve. Eve is the human woman we walked into Innarlith with. I owe them for helping me.”

“I don’t understand. You say you are indebted to them but how can they make you help them? We are free to go where we wish.”

“Yyll, I want to help them.”

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“Why?”

“Because they helped me escape, just like you did.”

Yyll was clearly confused. She thought for a few moments before responding. “So you feel the same way about Eve that you feel about me?”

“No, no. It’s different. It is hard to explain but I need to do this. When someone saves your life, it is natural to feel indebted to her.”

“I don’t understand how that is different from your feelings for me. I saved your life because you forced me to and now you say you love me. Eve helped you willingly but you don’t love her? Is it because she is ugly? The other human, the one you won’t tell me about, do you desire her? Do you love her?”

Ehric realized he was losing control of the conversation. “Yyll. Love is different. I love you, not Eve or Sh... the other mage.”

Yyll was fixed on her theme. “The thin one? She is beautiful, I am sure.”

“Yes, but I do not love her.”

Yyll was silent but Ehric could see she was not convinced. He decided to let the matter drop. Instead he shifted to their immediate future.

“I have a camp nearby. We can rest there and I’ll get you something to eat. This trail will be very easy to follow but I worry that someone else may follow us.”

“I used to take my cobra form to avoid being tracked. Will you turn us into air?”

“I was thinking that. Keep my ring on your finger and you’ll be safe.”

“I will.” Ehric wondered if she would see any significance in the ring he gave her, but decided it was unlikely. “We are nearing Turgbag’s territory. He’s an Ogre chief. Either he’s working with the slavers or they killed him.”

“Do you know this chief?”

“Yeah, we’ve spoken before. He’s typical, not too smart but sly nonetheless. I should be able to deal with him if he’s still around.”

“Once you rescue this Halfling, what then?”

“I don’t know. I hoped you’d be willing to stay with me. We can live in these mountains or travel elsewhere.”

“I like that, Ehcric. I will see to it you are not killed before we can do that.”

“I want you to be careful. I can take care of myself. If I need too, I am very good at escaping. You’re more vulnerable than me.” Yyll’s light brown eyes flared at that and Ehcric quickly added, “Of course, you captured me... Maybe I should be more careful too.”

That seemed to placate the serpent. With a small smile she moved the candle aside. Sliding close to Ehcric, she nuzzled into his chest. His hand naturally slipped around her, coming to rest on her hip.

Yyll whispered. “Do you really like this body more?”

“Humans are not as varied as Yuan-ti. I’m sorry about that Yyll. I’m sorry you were forced to take this shape. But you are truly beautiful to me.” Yyll’s smile was as genuine and innocent as he’d ever seen.

Ehcric stood and pulled Yyll to her feet. “It’s time to go. We are going to leave the trail and go in the wrong direction. I’ll cast the air spell on you and then myself.”

“So where are we going?”

“If we get separated you should just head towards the outcropping there; the one that looks like a clenched fist. I’ll find you.” Yyll nodded.

“Before we go, would you cast the spell again?”

“Do you think you need that? Are you starting to doubt me again?”

“No. Not really. But I like the way it feels.”

“Maybe we should wait until we have more time for each other. I don’t want you to be distracted right now.”

“You are right of course, though you distract me nonetheless.” Yyll didn’t have to stretch to kiss him. Shoptim had made her tall.

Ehcric savored the taste of her, wrapping her in his lanky arms. He was thoroughly enraptured but kept his eyes open as they slowly rotated together.

Yyll was the first to disengage. “I am not the only one who can be distracted.”

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“You are a devious woman.” Ehric’s grin softened the comment. Yyll did not look at all offended, seemingly taking it as a compliment.

“I am weak now, I need to use my wits more than before.”

“I guess we should be going.” Ehric walked hand in hand with Yyll for a half hour before he decided it was time to retrace their path.

“I’ll cast the spells then. Just follow me.” The candle was no longer lit but Yyll deduced his meaning. Magic coursed through Ehric’s arms and he allowed it to flow into Yyll. She turned insubstantial in his hands and faded into the air. Ehric followed suit a moment later. He could feel her as an unnatural breeze as their bodies mingled.

Ehric led her up and used his knowledge of the winds in the area to navigate towards the rocky outcropping he had indicated to Yyll. They covered most of the distance before their bodies coalesced and they started to drift to the ground. Completing the journey to Ehric’s campsite took another hour of tough climbing.

The camp consisted of a lean-to of sapling pines built into the cliff face. Inside, there was a sizable stock of cured meat, dry wood, and simple tools.

Ehric offered Yyll what hospitality he could. She eyed the salted venison skeptically at first but her hunger won out.

The magic in Ehric’s ring not only provided for his sustenance but also greatly reduced his need for sleep. His intention was to continue on to the Reds camp while Yyll rested.

She sat on a convenient boulder and untied the laces of her boots. Ehric helped her with her footwear and armor and led her into the shelter.

“You stay, sleep. I go.” Ehric pointed in the direction of the trail. Yyll shook her head. “I come back.” He pointed to the sun and then traced its motion across the sky. “I come back when sun... there.” There was no point in wasting a candle if he could get his point across. Yyll evidently understood and reluctantly agreed. She kissed him and presumably wished him good luck before lying on the sandy floor of the shelter.

Chapter 8

Ehric noticed a broken branch. After leaving Yyll, he had returned to the trail, paralleling the path to avoid leaving any obvious signs of his passage. The Wizards had taken an easy route into the mountains, constrained as they were by their horses. As a result, the woodsman had been able to concentrate on staying quiet and concealed without worrying about losing the trail.

He hadn't noticed any tracks but the freshly snapped twig indicated something had come through the area recently.

Despite his suspicions, Ehric eventually heard the sounds of horses ahead without locating any lurking foes. Instead of approaching on foot, Ehric decided to cast his air spell and scout the area from above.

An area had been cleared for the horses just before the terrain turned steep and treacherous. A dozen horses stood tethered to posts feeding from makeshift troughs. Ehric only spotted five tenders: three slaves and two guards, relaxing in what shade they could find. The three slaves were women and one of the guards was watching them with a predatory eye Ehric found unsettling. Both guards were Thayan, but the slaves clearly were not. If he had to guess, Ehric would have said they were tribals from the great plains beyond the mountains.

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A narrow trail continued on, steeply ascending into the mountains.

Ehric considered trying to free the three slaves, but in the end his concern about avoiding detection won out. Instead he floated upward along the trail, trying to get out of sight of the camp before his spell ended.

Just then he spotted movement near the trail. A small shape was creeping skillfully up the path, taking care to avoid disturbing any of the small stones littering the trail. Ehric took justifiable pride in his own woodcraft skills but this person was simply astounding. As he willed himself closer to the stalker, the suspicions that had been growing in his mind were confirmed. It was one of the gnome women, the one that glared at him that night before. Her tattered clothes and grey skin blended perfectly with the rocks. Ehric recognized the long bladed knife she carried as the one of his own. *She must have stolen it when Yyll and I were...*

He cut off that thought and concentrated on getting ahead of the gnome before his spell ended. A few minutes later his body coalesced behind a large boulder above the crafty gnome. Ehric considered his options for making his presence known and decided it was probably best to be direct.

Ehric whispered, confident that the gnome would hear. "Why are you following me?" There was no response. "I saw you just now. You are one of the gnomish women. Why didn't you go with the womenfolk to my parents' farm? Do you think you can rescue your men on your own?" Still there was no response and when Ehric slipped out from behind the boulder, he couldn't locate the stealthy gnome.

The blade sliding under his armor convinced him of the gnome's skills. The cool steel of the knife rested against his skin, poised to be driven into his kidney. Ehric froze.

"I am interested in what you are doing here. How are you in a better position to rescue the slaves by yourself, if that is truly what you intend?" The tip of the knife never wavered.

"I will rescue the slaves, or at least die in the attempt. But I will not be alone. One of the slaves has companions that will help in the rescue. My

job is just to scout the area.”

“So I should trust you? My folk may not know about the Red Wizards but I do. They are evil, evil and conniving.” The knife dug a little deeper into his back.

“You obviously have more experience with them than I. I met Shoptim a couple of days ago. I know only rumors otherwise.”

The gnome was silent, seemingly deep in thought. Ehric concentrated on keeping still. “Could you tell me your name?”

There was no response and Ehric began to think she might just kill him.

“Flippipsomme.” The pressure from the knife eased and Ehric risked turning around. The gnome woman was of a height and size to match a human child, maybe a six or seven year old. But despite her small frame, Flippipsomme was a fearsome figure. Her dusky gray appearance was a result of rock dust rubbed over skin, clothing and into her hair. The only color to be found on her were bright green eyes.

Flippipsomme had an overly long but narrow nose which dominated the rest of her features. Unlike some of her kin, her features did not result in a cute or comical look. Instead the gnome reminded him of a large hawk.

“I believe you Ehric. Do you want to proceed together?”

“I have no doubt you can reach the Reds’ camp without being noticed. I suggest we split up.”

“Really, what will you be doing?” Flippipsomme cocked her head to the side.

Ehric knelt down, coming nearly eye to eye with the gnome. He figured it was courteous as well as helping to make him harder to see from a distance. “This is Ogre land. Either the Reds bought them off or drove them away. Either way I think I may be able use them to help us. I don’t like the idea of fighting mages if I can get the Ogres to do it for us.”

“Do we have time for that?”

“I don’t know. Hopefully you’ll be able to tell what shape they’re in. If we have to move faster, we will.”

“I understand the logic of what you propose, but I disagree. We should stay together.” She continued before Ehric could protest. “I don’t really

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trust you and I want to keep an eye on you. And if we are discovered, the two of together might have a better chance.”

Ehric thought for a moment. He realized he would need to see Feldan if he was to enlist Eve’s aid. “Agreed. First we scout the Reds and then we’ll visit the Ogres.”

“And where’s your companion?”

“I have a camp nearby. She is not skilled in moving quietly in the wild. She will help if it comes to a fight.”

“I apologize for stealing your knife, but you didn’t seem too concerned about safeguarding your things.” Even though he felt sure she was joking, there was no smile on the gnome’s face.

Ehric slipped the pack off of his back. “Feel free to take anything in here you think could be helpful. I don’t have clothes or armor that would fit you but maybe you can find something useful.”

Flippipsomme waved away his charity. “I already looked last night. This knife is all I need.” A small grin nearly escaped. “You passed the human slaves just now. Why didn’t you help them?”

Ehric shook his head. “I thought about it. I think I could have taken the guards but then we would tip our hand to the Reds. Still, I worry that the slaves will be... abused. I don’t know.”

Flippipsomme looked at him with hard eyes. “There are three of them. They are not chained. If they aren’t willing to fight or even make a run for it, I don’t see why you or I should risk death for them.” The gnome’s expression was disdainful.

“There are many reasons why they wouldn’t run that aren’t based on cowardice. Maybe their husbands are enslaved or their children are also held.”

At the mention of children, Flippipsomme shuddered. “Enough. If you want to rescue them, go. I will continue and find my husband.”

“No, I will go with you. In fact, let me lead so you can ‘keep an eye on me.’”

Without further discussion, they began once more to creep up the trail. Even this close, Ehric could barely hear the gnome woman behind him.

* * * *

They heard the unmistakable sound of rocks being broken well before they reached the Thayan camp. Ehrlic and Flippipsomme left the trail and scrambled through the barren rocky landscape to approach the camp from the opposite side. While the gnome woman's prowess for moving undetected easily outstripped his own, Ehrlic was the first to spot the sentries. Ehrlic concentrated on them, letting the magic augmenting his vision do its work. The trio of Thayans came into sharp focus. A heavily armed and armored guard was being led by a large hound on a leash. A second guard scanned the area, an arrow notched in his bow. Trailing behind a few paces was the mage. She was young but burn scars marred what may have once been a pretty face. Her robes were simpler than Shoptim's attire and fewer tattoos adorned her scalp. He deemed her one of the initiates Shoptim had mentioned.

Initiate or not, Ehrlic was concerned. It looked as though the sentries would cross the area he and Flippip had just walked. While he had no doubt he and the gnome could avoid being seen, the dog was a problem. Looking back to the gnome woman, he gestured for her to freeze as he crept back to consult about the situation. He noticed the gravel dust she had rubbed into her skin was running from her perspiration.

Once the sentries were pointed out to her, Flippip had no trouble tracking them. Ehrlic whispered. "The dog will be trouble."

"Maybe."

"We can split up. I'll draw the sentries away and catch up with you."

The gnome looked at him skeptically. "You will draw them away? How will you get back without leading them to me?"

"I still have some secrets."

"Fine. I will approach from the East. See you there." The tiny woman continued along their original path while Ehrlic reached into his pack for a spare shirt.

The woodsman backtracked along the path he had just trod. He moved relatively quickly, less concerned about noise now that he knew where the enemy was. When he was close to where he suspected the Reds would

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intercept the path, Ehric angled away to bring himself across the Reds projected track before they would reach the original path and Flippip's scent.

Wiping his spare shirt across his face and through his hair, Ehric intended to ensure the dog would follow him and not the gnome. He rubbed the shirt on the boulder and then proceeded away from the track Flippip had taken and back the way they had come.

He was rewarded a few minutes later by the loud barking of a hound on the scent.

* * * *

The Thayans proved persistent. Ehric had expected them to chase him to some set distance from the camp and then turn back, but they had ranged far from their base of operations. He decided after a full hour of the chase that it was time to let them close the gap.

Ehric took up position at the base of the rock field where a few small trees had eked out a life. His pursuers were clearly visible to his eyes but still some distance away. At the pace they were setting it would only be a matter of minutes before they were upon him.

Ehric wove his spell for speaking over distances, this time directing his voice at his pursuers. "It is evident you are not careful with the Craft. You are not prepared to deal with one who is. I give fair warning." Ehric focused on the woman's disfigured face and watched her stiffen in anger when the wind bearing his message arrived. Despite his taunt, it was clear she was wise in her art, for she did not to look around for the source of the sound like her two companions.

Instead she urged them onward more quickly than before. Ehric smiled as he turned into air.

Ehric passed close to the three Thayans as he drifted back up towards the Wizard camp. The mage looked excited at the prospect of fighting a fellow magic user and kept up a steady stream of aggressive berating at her guards. Their responses provided Ehric with her name. *Okhamet*.

Ehric returned to his solid form a quarter hour later and started his journey to meet up with Flippipsomme. Looking back, he could no

longer see Okhamet but imagined her frustration.

* * * *

Once again it was Flippipsomme that made contact with him, this time with a tap on the hip instead of a knife to the back. Ehrlic shook his head slowly, marveling at her prowess.

“The slaves are toiling just ahead. There is a shelf cut into the mountain and they are working to clear rubble.”

“Is your husband here?”

“I did not see him but I only saw one of my kindred. The site continues underground. They must be there.”

“I guess I should take a look for myself.”

“Be careful, there are more dogs and many men and Ogres.” Ehrlic heard more disdain than concern in her voice.

Ehrlic moved very slowly and cautiously until he found a spot where he could overlook most of the camp. It was as Shoptim had warned. A dozen tents were arranged in neat rows on the high ground of the camp. A fenced in area held a handful of humans and a single gnome some distance away.

The main activity centered on what appeared to be ancient ruins. Cut out of the cliff face were two large and weather worn pillars. A massive archway that once led into the side of the mountain had collapsed. The slaves were working to clear the obstruction.

Ehrlic took his time and counted both the guards and the slaves. Six large Ogres broke rocks with massive sledgehammers, while an equal number of nearly naked men and women cleared the rocks away. The slaves in the pen were sleeping or obviously injured and unable to continue working.

He could see no sign of Feldan.

The Thayans were of more immediate interest to him. As Shoptim had warned him, there were nearly a score of soldiers and mages in view with as many likely to be resting in the tents. The Wizards were focused primarily on the slaves and the work at hand while the soldiers faced outward, wary of threats from without.

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Ehric returned to Flippipsomne. “This is about what I expected. We should move on to the Ogre camp.”

Flippip nodded. “I don’t know what you expect to accomplish there but I will go with you.”

* * * *

The Ogre camp was nearly a mile past the worksite but Ehric and Flippip covered the distance while the sun was still above the horizon. Unpleasant odors drifted on the breeze from the open latrine pits dug too close to the settlement. There were not enough building materials to fashion shelters for everyone. Only the chief and his close kin lived under a roof, the others slept in the open or retreated to nearby caves in emergencies.

The chief’s tent was a simple pole tent with the hides of various beasts roughly sewn together, making up the canvas. There was little movement in the camp. Ehric decided to wait until nightfall to make contact with Torbag. In the meantime he’d contact Yyll and Eve to let them know what he’d found.

* * * *

“You can’t just attack the Reds and expect to get anything other than dead!” Vajir’s raised voice echoed through their room. The two priestesses looked up from their prayers with worry in their eyes.

“Calm yourself Vajir.” Mere looked as though she hadn’t slept in days. “If we must take on the Reds to get Feldan, we will. But no one is talking about going to the Enclave and swinging swords.”

“Exactly, there are Wizards all across the Realms.” Kendal had made this argument before. “We find one in an out of the way town and make him tell us where Feldan is.”

Vajir sighed. “And why would he necessarily know? That’s your problem, Kendal, you think evil is one big team, all working together.”

Kendal glared. Mere cut in. “We have to find the person with the information we seek. Eve was able to find Feldan with her spells. We know he is alive.”

Eve rested her head on folded arms. She didn’t look up from the table

as she spoke. “I only saw him once and I can’t tell you what any of captors looked like beyond vague impressions. The magic only focuses on the target.”

“You just have to keep trying.”

“Can’t we ask them for help?” Kendal motioned to the Lathanderites.

Vajir snorted. “Rhonain brought us here to help them, not the other way around.”

“But they live here. They must know someone...”

Vajir interrupted. “Rhonain was pretty specific, wasn’t he? We can’t take them back to the temple and they are supposed to be in some sort of danger.”

“We will help you however we can.” Laurlin’s voice was determined.

Kendal shook his head. “Vajir is right. I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I don’t see how you can help and stay safe at the same time.”

Before Laurlin could respond a breeze ruffled the priestess’ dark hair. Vajir spun to face the door, knives instantly in hand, but it was closed and barred. A moment later a man’s voice whispered in the sanctuary.

“Eve... Found Feldan... Wizards Camp... Meet me base Craggsbeak north side tomorrow sunset... Beware Wizards avoid if possible...gnome helping...hope this finds you well... Ehric.”

All eyes turned to Eve. “I asked him if he could help us. I didn’t think he would be successful and I knew you all hated him, so I didn’t say anything.” Silence stretched.

Vajir was the first to speak. “I for one will hate him a little less if he is telling the truth.”

“I as well.” Kendal was always serious, even responding to jest.

Mere stood. “Does anyone know where this place is? If it is far we will need to make our plans quickly.”

* * * *

Flippipsomme stayed behind as Ehric slipped into the Ogre camp after nightfall. It was a simple matter to bypass the guards; the Ogres were obviously not expecting any attacks on their mountain redoubt.

Ehric considered his entrance and decided to announce himself first.

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Stepping close to the canvas tent he muttered a quick greeting in Orcish. "Chief Torbag, it is your servant Ehrlic come to speak with you."

There was a rustling in the tent, accompanied by a grunting exclamation. "Out, out!" Two Ogre women suddenly burst forth from tent, naked and angry. Ehrlic backed away and let them go by. Behind them came a large specimen of Ogre, glaring down at the intrusive human.

"Ehrlic. Come." The giant exuded raw strength.

The odor in the tent was overwhelming but Ehrlic managed to keep from covering his face in disgust. He continued in Orcish, a second language for both of them. "How is life Chief Torbag?"

"You treat me like human? Ask stupid question? Why you here?"

Ehrlic shrank under his verbal assault. "I look for small one, a Halfling."

"Why you come to me?"

"He is slave of Wizards. The Wizards in your territory."

"Yes. They have many slaves."

"I want to buy one back."

"They are not mine."

"What?"

"They are not mine. The wizards own them."

"But they are in your land. They are working for you."

"We work together."

"Who is human now?"

Torbag took a moment to absorb the insult, giving Ehrlic time to prepare himself for his inevitable violent reaction. So when the huge fist came swinging down at him, Ehrlic slipped to the side. "Why do I ask slaves to free slaves?" Torbag took one more swing before he got control of his temper.

"I work with Wizards. They give me gold, slaves, power."

"And why would they give you so much? All they do is dig hole."

"Humans dumb."

Ehrlic fell back into Common. "Can't really argue with that."

"What?"

"I said you are right. Ogres would not let themselves be slaves."

“Yes. You go now or I eat you. No come back...” There was yelling from outside. Ehrlic recognized a mixture of Ogre and human voices. Torbag barred his gigantic teeth and motioned for Ehrlic to go first. “I will leave by the back door.” Ehrlic had nearly exhausted his spells and struggled to accomplish one more. Torbag had seen this spell before and found it amusing.

“Yes, you disappear now.” Ehrlic slid through a seam in the tent and followed the chief. Okhamet and her two guards stood ringed by a half a dozen large male Ogres with spiked clubs. The great hound turned in tight circles, trying to bark at all of the Ogres at once. The wizard seemed unconcerned with her situation and continued to call for Torbag. “Wizard, what you want with Chief?”

Her Orcish was excellent. “We tracked some spies to your camp. Have you seen them?”

“No spies here. Now go back to your pit and let me sleep.”

“We will look around the area first. Send out your warriors to check the perimeter.”

“You will no order me. I no slave of Wizards!”

The archer to Okhamet’s left whispered in her ear. “Very well, Chief Torbag. We will return to our camp. If you see anyone, please tell us so we may chase them down.” The Wizard turned on her heel and stalked out of the camp. Ehrlic followed them to near where he had left Flippisomne. There he hovered until the spell ended.

It was a short wait before the gnome returned. “They tracked you.”

“It appears that way.”

“The dog lost our scent in the stench of this place.” Flippip’s irritation was obvious.

“Well, you managed to take care of yourself and I think I was successful with Torbag. It’s time to get going.”

“Fine. You go back to your camp and your friends. I’m going to stay here and keep looking for my husband. I’m sure I’ll be able to find you when the time is right.”

Ehrlic looked down at the gnome and decided against argument. “I will

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try to get back here in a couple of days. Don't do anything unless you absolutely have to."

With that the two parted ways, Flippip disappearing from sight almost instantly.

* * * *

"Yyll. Wake up." Ehrlic gently touched her cheek. Yyll had finally fallen asleep next to the fire, but it had gone out by the time Ehrlic returned shortly after dawn. Her eyes opened but she did not have a smile for him.

"Are you all right?" He checked her for injury but Yyll gently pushed his hands away. Instead she pointed to the fire lay. "Of course, I will get it going again." Ehrlic took out his knife and started carving long shavings from the kindling he had stored in the lean-to. Digging around in the ashes of the fire, he found some still glowing embers and carefully arranged the shavings over them. It took only a few puffs of breath to get flames once more.

When he turned back, he saw that Yyll had opened his pack and drawn out one of Shoptim's candles. She lit it on the rapidly growing fire and spoke.

"Ehrlic. You are safe?"

"I'm fine. Are you alright?"

"I was very cold. Why did you not return when you said you would?"

Ehrlic tried to move closer to Yyll but she pulled away. "The Wizards had dogs that made it tougher to get close. But I did find the slaves and I think the one I'm looking for is there."

"So you will gather the other human woman and her followers?"

"I sent them a message. They should meet us at the base of the mountain this evening."

"The base of the mountain?"

"I didn't think they could find this camp and I can't send long messages. You can stay here. You aren't used to your legs yet."

"There are many things I am not used to. How could you leave me to die here?"

“Yyll, I... I didn't leave you to die. I didn't know how different you were before.”

“Do you see how weak I am? I want to be a help to you Ehric.” Now Yyll moved towards him, fear replacing anger. Ehric hugged her tightly. “I cannot stay this way.”

“I can't imagine what this is like for you Yyll. I will talk to Shoptim and ask her to return you to your natural form.”

“But I love you.”

“I love you too Yyll.”

“But you do not like me as I truly am. You only like me in this form.”

“I will still love you Yyll, even if we are not mated.”

“I want to believe that Ehric.”

Ehric clawed at the weave. He was tired but determination drove him to cast one more spell. Sliding his right hand from her back, he traced the contours of her ribs until his hand rested on the center of her chest. Magic flowed through his hand and he felt her heart race.

“Ehric, I trust you. I will never know why you love me but you do.” She kissed him hard on the lips, oblivious to the sweat and grime that covered his body. He readily kissed her back, knowing this was probably the last time they would get to enjoy one another.

Chapter 9

Hot water, made opaque by minerals and specially prepared salts, lapped against Shoptim's bare knee. She reclined in a shallow alcove carved into the side of one of the smaller hot spring pools. The Sapphire Peacock represented the height of decadence in a city seemingly devoted to pleasure.

Lune stood behind her on the damp marble floor of the bathhouse. She was to tell her mistress when Polum arrived, which gave her an excuse to watch the people moving about in the complex. Shoptim couldn't ask the slave to join her in the pool, but she hoped watching the finely muscled young men serving as attendants would give her some pleasure. As for herself, Shoptim kept her eyes closed and absorbed the luscious perfumed scents that drifted over the steaming water.

"He has arrived, Mistress Nuln." Lune whispered softly in her mistress' ear.

"Thank you Lune. Please, invite him to join me." Lune started to rise but Shoptim raised her hand from the bath and touched the girl's arm. "Remember to be very polite with Master Polum."

"Yes mistress." Shoptim listened to the patter of the girl's bare feet on the wet marble. She ran with the short steps of one used to weaving

between superiors. Shoptim mused on what she might glean from that metaphor while she waited.

Heavy footsteps approached and Shoptim turned, careful to keep her body submerged in the pool. Polum was a tall, muscular man in his middle years. Even dressed in a simple robe, his power was evident in the way he carried himself.

The mage greeted her. “You requested an audience?”

Shoptim inclined her head. “I apologize if this is an inconvenient time, Master Wizard.”

“Not at all. The pools are an excellent place to have a discussion and I very much want to talk to you about poor Nizrim.” Polum looked around briefly and saw Lune standing at a respectful distance, her head down. “I normally use the Peacock’s attendants but perhaps it is best if your girl tends me this time. So we can talk less... circumspectly.”

“Lune.” The girl ran up and took Polum’s robe as he descended into the pool.

Shoptim glanced at the tattoos covering much of his torso. Dragons were the dominant theme. With a few deft motions of her submerged fingers, the tattoos lit up to her eyes, their magical nature evident, if not their exact purpose.

“Is there any particular reason you wish to speak with me?” Polum pointed to Lune. “Massage my shoulders.” The slave leapt to obey.

“No, nothing in particular. I have been here for many weeks and we have never really spoken.”

“So you wish to make a connection with an Evoker?” Polum shifted to let Lune get a better angle. “It is not often that our schools work together.”

“Is that not a loss for Thay?”

“Normally I would say no.”

Shoptim feigned annoyance. “You said ‘normally.’ Is there something that has changed your mind?” She sat up slightly as she said this, bringing her shoulders out of the water. She caught Polum’s eyes shift momentarily.

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“Well, *normally*, I expect a transmuter such as you to be slain by a mage as powerful as Nizrim. That you are here now indicates you may be different from your brethren.”

“So you did set me up.”

“There may have been some miscommunication on my part, yes. The fact is that while I did not expect you to survive, a true Red Wizard would have.”

“I am certainly glad I have proven myself, given the alternatives.”

Polum smiled. “I wouldn't say you have proven you are fit to wear the robe, but you have certainly proven you could be. Tell me how you defeated Nizrim. He had a unique style.”

Shoptim shook her head slowly. “Mage duels are private affairs.”

“I see. Can you at least tell me if he had his bodyguards with him? I remember Aarasta was a truly stunning specimen of dark elf.”

Shoptim frowned. “I did not know your tastes ran in such directions.”

“I can appreciate fine examples of the subhuman races without demeaning myself with them.” Polum smile was gone.

Shoptim took a subservient tone. “My apologies Lord. I believe the one of which you speak is dead. There were two dark skinned nymphs with Nizrim. The one I killed, I would consider to have been quite beautiful.”

“So one escaped you?” Polum slid away from the edge of the pool and sat next to Shoptim. Lune scurried around the perimeter to continue her work.

“She fled into the tunnels. I regret to say I was not prepared to pursue her, and besides, I had to deliver the slaves to you.” Shoptim placed her arm on the side of the pool and rolled to her side to face the heavily tattooed Wizard.

“Did he really bring mated pairs?” Shoptim nodded. “That's truly hilarious. He's transported umber hulks for gods' sake and he dies delivering gnomes.” Polum laughed like only a man supremely confident can. Shoptim merely smiled, cruel laughter was not one of her skills.

“I think I know why you were successful.” Polum's foot brushed against her calf. “You are a remarkably disarming individual.”

“I know the limits of my strength.”

“That is a rare trait for a Wizard. There is a certain wisdom in knowing your limits, but life does not reward the timid.” Shoptim felt sure he would try to kiss her after a line like that but the Wizard held his ground.

“Of course, a Shou would say it is the tall nail that is pounded down.”

Polum pulled away abruptly. “Enough philosophy. What will you do about the Drow who escaped you?”

“I had not given it a great deal of thought. Do you have advice on the matter?”

“You do not live long by leaving your enemies alive. Nizrim had no allies that will be particularly upset that he is dead, except of course, for Sisrelle. I believe you have done a good job of upsetting her.”

“Would you give me leave to pursue her?”

“Sisrelle will try to kill you. Being a dark elf, she can take her time planning it but the day will come. She will also undoubtedly come for me. I did not live this long by ignoring threats when they were easy to address.” Shoptim looked at him expectantly. “So yes. I believe it would be in our best interests for you to leave the Enclave for a time.”

“I will make preparations.” Shoptim inclined her head in gratitude.

“Just be sure that she is dead. I cannot spare any of the Enclave guards; you will have to make your own arrangements.” Polum brushed away Lune’s hands. Clearly the interview was coming to an end.

“I will leave you to enjoy your bath in private, Master Wizard.” Shoptim glided over to the steps and began to rise from the water. Lune met her with a white robe.

“One more thing.” Shoptim turned to face Polum as she cinched her belt. “I know you are here to spy on me. I have certainly enjoyed this talk but if you attempt to disrupt my work, things will not go easy for you.”

Shoptim offered her courtesies and left.

* * * *

Polum watched the attractive mage depart, and considered whether it would be necessary to murder her. Thus far she seemed cautious, not willing to go out of the bounds set for her. That meant one of two things,

either she was strangely tentative for a Wizard or she was more skilled than she appeared.

The encounter with Nizrim would tend to indicate the latter.

Polum scanned the bathhouse for an attendant to his liking. He spotted a lithesome young woman, clearly marked as a priestess of Bast, walking amongst the guests. Polum noted her heels never touched the ground. Her priestly raiment was absurd but alluring and Polum used a simple cantrip to draw her attention. After a quick glance at his physique, she smiled and slinked in his direction.

Before he gave himself over to the woman's attention, Polum made a mental note to have Solugum track the transmuter's actions. Given enough freedom, he hoped she would provide him the excuse he needed to deal with her harshly.

* * * *

"We can't possibly hope to take them on face to face. I counted six wizards and nearly thirty soldiers." Ehric cleared some ground to draw a map with his spear tip. After a quick greeting and some perfunctory introductions, they had hiked for many hours, stopping perhaps an hour from the base of Wizard camp.

"But you saw Feldan?" Mere asked.

"I didn't see him but I didn't stay too long. The Wizards have dogs."

"So he might not be here at all?" Kendal was not happy with this revelation.

Eve chimed in. "I'm sure he's there. I saw him laboring with stones. How many excavation sites could the Reds be running in the area?"

"Eve's right. I tracked the gnome slaves to this pit and I only saw one of them above ground. I think he must be in the places the humans and Ogres don't fit."

The big swordsman agreed. "That makes sense I guess. Please continue with what you were saying."

"Well. The camp is arranged with the Reds camped together here." He pointed to a series of lines he had carved to indicate the tents. "There is an old trail here leading into the archway and the underground area. On

the other side of that from the tents is the slave pen.”

Vajir had his own concerns. “Do they have horses? What about latrines?”

“Yes, their horses are vulnerable. The trail gets very difficult as you approach the site so the horses are some distance away. They were only lightly guarded. As for latrines, the slaves set aside a corner of their pen. The Reds’ is on the far side of the camp.”

“If we can get their horses, we may be able to make a quick escape. And the latrine is always a good place to take them down one at a time.”

Eve raised her hand to stop Vajir from continuing. “Ehric, did you have a plan on how to attempt the rescue? You’ve actually seen the layout after all.”

“I am not familiar with your strengths but my initial thought was to get the Ogres’ to attack the Wizards. I’ve already planted the seeds for that in the chief’s mind. Once we get them fighting, a couple of you will secure the horses and be prepared for a quick ride. I and anyone willing to help me can attack the camp from the far side, distracting them while someone leads the slaves out.”

“Who gets that last job?”

“I will do it if it comes to it, but I have in mind someone else. A gnome woman followed me here. Her husband is one of the slaves.”

“You mentioned a gnome.” Kendal looked intrigued.

“Yes, well, Flippip is the most amazing sneak I have ever seen. She could be standing right here between us and you wouldn’t know it.”

“So where is she then?”

“She decided to stay and keep watch on the camp. If she wasn’t caught she will surely find us.”

“So what do we think of Ehric’s plan?” Eve looked around to the others.

Vajir voiced his opinion immediately. “It seems as good as anything I can think up, in theory at least. We’ll have to hammer out the details.”

Kendal flexed the muscles in his forearm. “I agree. But I will not sit back with the horses if there is any real fighting to be done.”

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“If you two agree I will go along with it. And if no one else wants the job of making sure we can get away, I will take it.” Mere shook her head at Kendal’s display.

“Then it is settled.” Eve declared.

“I’m glad to hear it. I have something I’d like you to look at Eve.” Ehric reached for his pack. After a little rummaging he pulled out a bright white cloak. “I took this from the sorceress during the fight. I think it should let its wearer fly but I haven’t been able to figure out how it works.” He handed the garment to Eve.

“Let me see. I would have advised you not to carry this, since it once belonged to that snake woman, but I guess no harm has befallen you.” Eve held up the magical cloak and inspected the hem. “As I had hoped. There are inscriptions sewn into the weave here.” Eve mumbled, sounding out the syllables. With a flourish, she tossed the cloak across her shoulders and called out a phrase in a slurred tongue. The cloak reacted violently, suddenly going rigid and rapidly changing shape into large white feathered wings.

Eve let the wings beat a couple of times, sending the rest of the party scurrying. Her feet lifted from the ground but she did not rise more than a couple of feet. “A useful item, to be sure.” With a second slurred phrase, the wings disappeared and she dropped to her feet once more. “It is very simple to activate and deactivate. I will teach you the proper wording.”

“Thank you. The cloak might be helpful for the rescue.”

When Eve finished the instructions she turned to Yyll. “Where did she come from?”

“I don’t really even know her name. Well, I guess I know it but I can’t really say it. Sounds sort of like ‘eel.’ She was a slave of the snakes as well. When Pethiss died, she managed to escape. I found her in the forest.” Ehric had concocted his story on the way down the mountain to meet them. He thought he was convincing.

“Well, she sure seems to like you.” Vajir grinned. “But can she use that sword at her hip? We might need another sword if it comes to a fight.”

“I think she can. If she comes from the jungles like I think she does, I have no doubt she can defend herself.”

“Vajir is going to find out whether she can fight if he doesn’t stop looking at her hips.” Mere punched Vajir in the shoulder. “She may not understand us but I don’t think she is too happy with your leering.”

“Fine, fine. I’ve just never seen a swordswoman that beautiful before. Normally they are just sour tempered, scarred...” Vajir just managed to avoid the fist aimed at his nose. While he continued to fend off Mere’s playful attacks, Vajir briefly turned his head towards Ehrlic. “Just out of curiosity, you’re not still possessed and this is all a trap, is it?” Mere stopped her horseplay and turned to look at Eve.

Eve was very serious despite Vajir’s light tone. “I can check.”

“Of course.” Ehrlic rose and moved away from Yyll. Eve made a quick motion, wiping her hands over her eyes, and spoke an arcane word. There was silence as the company waited.

“I see no magic influencing him, though he certainly carries some magic about his person.” As Eve turned to look at her companions, her gaze passed over Yyll. Ehrlic didn’t see her eyes widen momentarily. “I think we are safe.”

“I doubt that.”

“You know what I mean. Now let’s ‘hammer out these details’ as you put it.”

* * * *

The details took most of the rest of the night. The magic in Ehrlic’s ring kept fatigue at bay but most of the others woke groggily. The first person up was one of the young priestesses. She rubbed sleep from her eyes as she approached Ehrlic.

“Good morning to you. Your name is Laurlin?”

“No, I’m Fayla. Laurlin stayed up later than me. I will get her up when the sun breaks the horizon.”

“I’m sorry. You and your sister were introduced together and I was never very good with names. You are an Innarlithian, right?” Ehrlic handed the girl a metal cup filled with cool water.

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“Yes, both Lurlin and I are from Innarlith. We were raised by the Church of the Morninglord.” She drained the cup quickly. “It was a tough walk yesterday. I’m not used to this sort of living.”

“You’re young, I’m sure your aches will go away quickly. I find it tougher and tougher each year when I first head back into the hills.”

“How long have you been doing this?” Fayla handed the cup back to Etric and he refilled it from his wineskin.

“It’s been eight years since I first came up into the hills. I worked as a caravan guard for a while but I didn’t particularly enjoy that life. Too many unpleasant employers.”

“I can imagine. Was it dangerous too?”

“Not as dangerous as living out here, I suppose. It was mostly boring, actually. You don’t get to know a place either, you’re always on the move.” Etric hadn’t discussed his life with anyone in a long time.

“So you find living in the wilds by yourself exciting?” Fayla was obviously dubious.

“Sometimes it’s exciting and I have the scars to prove it. But no, mostly I just find it more rewarding.”

“I don’t understand. Are you a treasure hunter?”

Etric laughed. “No, I mean in the spiritual sense. I enjoy it out here. There are dangers but it’s such a beautiful country.”

It was Fayla’s turn to chuckle. “So you live out here all alone, except for the dangerous monsters of course, because you think it’s pretty?”

“Was it the Year of Gruumsh?”

“What?”

“Was that the year you went to live in the church?” The Orc raid that year had left many orphans. Etric couldn’t remember the official name of the year as given by the Prophet Alaundo. It had always just been the Year of Gruumsh.

“Yes.”

“That’s the real reason I’m out here. Guarding caravans is fine work, trade is important, but I wanted to do something that directly helped human civilization.”

“How do you do that?” Fayla was fully awake now. This bearded mountain man was proving much more interesting than she had suspected.

“The Orcs live in various tribes. I try to keep them at each others’ throats. Orcs are only really dangerous if they have a powerful leader. I guess I’ve taken it upon myself to make sure that doesn’t happen again soon.”

Fayla’s voice was soft. “Did you lose anyone that year?”

“No. My family works on a farm outside of the city, but the landowners were prepared. They had built a palisade and the Orcs decided to go after easier targets. I saw the results though.”

“You must have been very young.”

“Maybe I’m older than I look but I will never forget what I saw.” It was still fresh in his mind. The Orcs burned everything: fields, farms, livestock and people.

“I was too young to remember. I don’t know how I survived but someone found me in the wreckage of the house and brought me in to the city with the rest of the refugees. Father took Lurlin and I and raised us as his own.”

Ehric hesitated before he responded. He kept his voice low. “I don’t mean to be rude but I must ask you this. Why are you and Lurlin here? This is a very dangerous task we are about to undertake.”

“We didn’t have any choice. The church is under attack.”

“What happened to the church?”

“You don’t know about the attacks?” Fayla was astonished.

“Fayla, I told you, I spend all of my time out here. I don’t hear much of what happens in the city.”

“Murder is what happened, murder in the night. We don’t know who or why. Father decided to send us away. He said we were too young. That is why Rhonain came, to take us away.” She shook her head. “I don’t think he would be pleased to know Lurlin and I are here.”

“I’m so sorry. Rhonain was a good man.”

“You knew him then? How?”

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“I was there when he died. He died protecting me.”

“What happened?”

“It is not a topic we should discuss today. After this rescue is over, maybe. It is a painful memory and heavy burden to bear.”

“I agree; this is too much sorrow for what will be bright morning.” Fayla forced a smile. “Can I help you with anything? What will we eat for breakfast?”

“Breakfast is going to be cold I’m afraid. Bread, dried meat. I wouldn’t wait for the others to wake.”

“Well, I have to do my morning prayers anyway.”

“Does Lathander grant you his miracles?”

“Only in proportion to my faith. Laurin is stronger than me and neither of us is close to Rhonain.”

“If I may be so bold, please ask him to forgive me. And as for yourself, it will likely fall to you to heal the wounded and perhaps shelter the weak from harm. Do not bother to ask for strength of arms, others will take that role.”

Fayla was silent for a moment as she looked up at him. Finally she said, “I will pray for you.”

Ehric watched her go and prayed that he wouldn’t get her killed as well.

“Ehric.” He turned and found Vajir had woken.

“Good morning.”

“Yeah, not too worried about the day. Tonight has me a little concerned.”

“Agreed.”

“So you’re out here saving civilization?”

Ehric narrowed his eyes. “You listen to other people’s conversations a lot?”

“Well, I find people don’t really open up to me. So I listen to what they have to say to others.” Vajir’s smile did not reach his eyes.

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, so you don’t need to bother.”

Vajir kept up the fake smile. “It’s no bother, just practice.”

“Look, if you have something to say to me, just say it.”

“It’s nothing like that. I just don’t trust you at all so I will be keeping a close eye on you.”

“I only want to help you...”

“Snake!” Mere’s voice came from the far side of the camp. As Ehrlic turned towards the scream, Vajir came at him from the side. In an instant there was a dagger at his throat and Ehrlic went very still.

* * * *

Yyll woke with the point of a sword pressed to her throat. She looked up to find the scarred woman standing over her. The fat mage was nearby, and she began to cast. Ehrlic was gone.

Yyll launched into motion, turning her head to the side and smacking the sword with her hand. Cuts opened on both her palm and the thin skin of her neck but she managed to sweep the legs out from under the woman with the blade. Instinctively she tried to grasp her but her human legs could do little to restrain her attacker. Mere still held the sword and sliced deep into Yyll’s calf.

The mage completed her spell. Yyll writhed in pain as her body contorted. She thrashed her limbs and Mere rolled away from the hideous scene. It was a much faster process to return to her natural body but no less painful. Eve and Mere looked on in horror as Yyll legs fused and her bones cracked and reformed.

Even before the transformation was complete, Yyll lashed out with her tail, knocking the two women to the ground. Rising, she spotted Ehrlic being held by the skinny human male, the one who had stared at her with lust before. There was only revulsion on his face now. She started towards him but the huge fighter was fast approaching, swords in hand.

Yyll flared her hood and the warrior blanched, his knees giving out momentarily. She glanced around and saw the thin swordswoman coming to her feet. The mage leveled a wand. Bolts of brilliant energy shot from the little twig and slammed into her chest. Despairing, the serpent formed a globe of darkness over all four of them.

Dropping to the ground, she slithered away, using her arms to move as fast as possible downhill. The giant man yelled out something and she

could hear their pursuit.

* * * *

“The snake threw herself off a cliff.” Kendal trudged back into the camp, Mere at his side.

Ehric started to stand but Vajir put his hand on his shoulder. Eve asked the obvious. “Is it dead?”

Mere shook her head. “She was bleeding but she must have had some magic. She floated down from the cliff. If I’d had my bow, but I left it here.”

“Does this affect anything?” Eve stood apart from Ehric and Vajir. The two priestesses flanked her. Fayla glanced at him occasionally, looking very nervous whenever she did so.

“I’d say it means we finally let the worms have this one.” Vajir shoved Ehric hard and rose.

“He is no snake, nor is there magic surrounding him.” Eve spoke quickly to forestall a rush to violence.

“That just means he is working for them willingly now.”

Kendal grunted. “And why would he do such a thing?”

“You saw her, why do you think?” Vajir laughed harshly. “The mountain man wanted someone to warm his bed, patch of dirt anyway, and the snakes provided. Not everyone is so virtuous as you.”

“Nor are they all as debased as you Vajir.” Eve spoke sharply.

Mere interjected before Vajir could respond. “Has anyone asked him?”

Vajir spit. “He’s not saying anything. He lied to us from the first we met him.”

“Do you think he lied about the camp?” Eve’s voice was hoarse, like she was about to cry.

“I mean to find out once we decide how we’re killing him.”

Evandra sighed. “No more talk of killing. I’m tired of it. Rhonain would never have allowed it.”

“And he’s dead!”

Vajir’s comment sparked a firestorm. Eve started to respond but instead broke down into tears. Kendal and Mere continued to argue with Vajir,

vehemently but with subdued voices.

Fayla blurted out, "Ehric is not evil."

All eyes turned to her. Vajir spoke first and with little sympathy. "You think that because he spoke to you kindly. He is a good liar."

"No, Lathander confirms his heart." The young cleric turned to her sister. "You see it as well, you must."

Laurin hesitated a moment and then nodded. "She speaks truly."

Ehric decided it was time to speak. "I would help you. I have not lied about the camp. You have done so much for me, freeing me from the snakes." He paused and then added. "I will be where I said. Just stick to the plan."

The company exchanged confused looks but when Ehric began to chant. Vajir was the first to react. His blade swept out but cut only air.

Chapter 10

The Wizard spoke to the only woman in the group, a crossbowman in light leather armor. There was one more crossbowman and three warriors in plate armor, armed with large shields and heavy swords. Vajir watched the interplay and guessed that this group had worked together for a while. There was no bickering or petty disputes common in newly formed bands. Everyone knew everyone's name.

So far the information Ehric had provided had been accurate. Eve and Kendal were betting it all on the premise that he was loyal. Vajir was certain they were wrong but they were not to be deterred. At least he wasn't the one who would have to go into the heart of the Thayan camp. He distracted himself from what he assumed would be his imminent death by studying the slave woman.

Ehric had said he thought the human slaves were from the plains tribes of the Shaar, but Vajir began to doubt that. The woman had black hair and olive skin, which were similar to the tribesman over the mountains, but he thought her origins were more exotic. Her eyes betrayed her. They were narrow, little more than slits really, and her eyelids were thick with insulating fat, despite the fact that she was not a large woman. Vajir decided she was more than likely from the east, captured when the Horde

came west.

The slave woman tended the horses lovingly. When she finished with one she would hold the back of her thigh as she limped down the row to the next. She had obviously been hamstrung, though some time ago.

The sun descended in the sky and soon Vajir was watching the Thayans and their slave by the light of a small campfire. Two of the Thayans: a swordsman and the woman unrolled sleeping mats, shed their armor and lay down to sleep. Vajir nearly whistled to himself. All the eyes in the camp were on the woman until she was concealed herself under thick covers. Then the four Thayans on watch struggled to stay vigilant.

Ehric's signal was a birdcall that seemed to originate on the other side of the camp. The mage turned towards the sound, away from Vajir and Mere, and stared intently into the night. Mere shifted next to Vajir and notched an arrow to her short bow. It was time to act.

Vajir slipped slowly and quietly to the edge of the area cleared by the Thayans. No one looked in his direction so he moved into the open, crouched low and moving as quickly as he dared. He managed to draw up directly behind the mage and put a dagger to his throat. The large man froze.

"Put down your weapons." All eyes now turned to him and the two Thayans off shift woke with a start. The three in armor fanned out in a semi circle, weapons drawn as the two in their nightclothes scrambled for their arms.

Vajir pressed the blade firmly against the mage's neck. "Do not think of fighting or the Wizard dies." The Thayan soldiers shot glances at one another. Grips tightened on the hilts of their swords.

The mage noticed and screamed. "No! Drop your weapons!" The soldiers ignored him and the two swordsmen advanced while the crossbowman maneuvered for a clear shot. Vajir made good on his word. The dying mage clutched at his torn throat as Vajir pushed him into the path of the charging swordsmen.

An arrow shot out of the darkness behind him, catching the nearest soldier in the center of the chest and toppling him to the ground. Vajir

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rolled to the side, trying to keep the body of the mage between him and the swordsman still on his feet. The crossbowman shifted his attention to the tree line, dropping to one knee as he scanned for Mere.

The swordsman slowed his approach, suddenly wary of the threat in the trees. He circled Vajir with his shield arm towards the archer. The snap of a bowstring alerted the Thayans. The swordsman threw up his shield just in time to stop an arrow destined for his neck. With the soldier momentarily distracted, Vajir shifted his attention to the crossbowman, hurling his dagger even as the Thayan shot back into the darkness.

The blade punctured the light leather armor easily, and the crossbowman crumpled with the hilt standing out a few inches below his sternum. Vajir turned back to the swordsman just in time to find a blade slashing at his chest. Off balance and temporarily unarmed, he scrambled to the Thayan's left in an attempt to use his own shield for protection. The bulky swordsman was surprising agile and quickly adjusted, slamming his shield at Vajir to force him back and into striking distance. The blow knocked him flat instead.

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Mere dropped her bow to the ground and drew a long-bladed knife. The quarrel standing out of her left shoulder robbed that arm of the strength needed to brace the bow. Vajir was obviously in trouble, and she had just begun to move forward through the underbrush when the night sky exploded with a bright white light. Mere made the mistake of looking directly at the radiant glow and purple splotches clouded her vision.

The two off duty Thayans were up. The man, armed with longsword and shield, spotted Mere and advanced confidently, despite being clad only in breeches. The woman, also barefoot and minimally clothed, notched a bolt to replace the ensorcelled one she had just launched into the sky.

Mere decided there was little she could do to help Vajir until she dealt with the new opponents. She rushed to meet the unarmored swordsman's charge. The Thayan led with his oblong shield, sword raised to strike with a downward slash. Mere advanced in a similar fashion, but both her buckler and knife looked feeble compared to the Red's armament. The

fighters plowed into one another at full speed.

The fight lasted a fraction of a second. The Thayan pushed out with his shield arm, anticipating a slash that didn't come. Instead Mere pulled her arm in close to her chest before thrusting behind his shield. The Thayan didn't see Mere's feint, concentrated as he was on landing his own blow. Even as Mere's knife sank into the Thayan's ribs, his heavy bladed sword slid off her buckler and connected with her upper arm, slicing muscle and shattering bone. The combatants fell in a tangled heap. Mere struggled, the Thayan was still.

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Vajir slid to the side as the sword descended at his skull. The blade splashed sand and grit over his face. The Thayan cursed in frustration when Vajir grasped his wrist, holding the sword fast.

The soldier with the crossbow called out encouragement. "Would you kill him already? I'll finish off the..." She went abruptly silent and the swordsman fighting Vajir looked around to see what had happened. Vajir took advantage of the distraction, removing one hand from the bulky man's wrist and pulling a dagger from a sheath on his belt.

Whatever the soldier saw distressed him. With a curse, he rolled to the side, freeing his arm from Vajir's weakened grasp. Vajir let him go, rolling the other direction before rising in a wide stance. He hazarded a quick glance behind him and saw the slave kneeling on the back of the Thayan woman. She held a loaded crossbow at the ready.

She had a surprisingly deep voice. "Both of you drop your weapons."

Vajir turned slowly and held his hands in the air, but he retained his grip on his dagger. The Thayan soldier kept his shield up but made no overt moves.

Vajir spoke quickly. "I'm on your side. We're here to rescue the slaves."

The woman glared at him. "Then put down your weapon."

The Thayan spoke. "She only has one shot. I don't know why you picked this fight, but we both know you care nothing for this barbarian wench. I propose a truce."

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Vajir looked from the Thayan to the Easterner and made his decision. The dagger slipping from Vajir's fingers was like a signal to the soldier. He charged the slave with a cry, shield raised.

As Vajir looked on, the slave adjusted her aim and shot. The bolt caught the soldier just above the knee, buckling his leg. The Thayan tumbled to the ground, dropping his sword in the process. The Easterner stepped forward and with a swift kick to the head, the soldier went limp.

Vajir drew another dagger and locked eyes with the woman. "I have to check on my friend and I don't have time for your games. Walk towards me." The woman glared at him but complied, dropping the crossbow as she came forward. When she was halfway to him Vajir called out again. "Stop. Now just take a seat on your hands and relax."

The Tuigan complied. "Are you going to try to assault the main camp?"
A distant rumble answered that question.

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Ehric gave Flippip an hour to get into position before he cast his air spell. Since he met the determined gnome, Ehric had lost a lot of confidence in his ability to move undetected and he saw no reason to take any chances being spotted.

He drifted upward at first to get a last look at the camp arrangement. Bright lights lit the work area, leaving the slave pens and the Wizards' tents in relative darkness. The Ogres were moving large stones to shore up the partially collapsed archway, but it looked like they were nearly finished for the day. A few Thayans watched them but kept their distance.

Ehric turned his attention back to the slave pens. He counted five small figures in one pen with three human men. A separate, smaller pen, held five women of human size. That left too many slaves in the work site but he couldn't wait much longer or the Ogres would be gone.

His wispy form descended back to the ground, hovering amongst a number of large boulders and small oak trees that would provide some cover. When he was sure he would be safe from the casual observer, Ehric allowed his spell to end.

The Ogres were close, close enough that Ehric could smell them. A few Thayans, including one man in robes, stood nearby as well. Ehric hoped he could catch them all in his spell.

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Okhamet gently slipped the robe off of her shoulder to inspect the burns. Painful blisters marked her first encounter with a demon. Fortunately the skin was not blackened and she was hopeful it would fully heal on its own. It would have to. Barsheh had forbidden her to seek magical healing, saying the scars would remind her to be more careful drawing pentagrams in the future.

Cursing her name, Okhamet redressed the wound, incinerating the old bandages with a simple spell before sitting down to her studies. It was still unclear to her what she had done wrong summoning the minor spawn. The young wizard hoped to find the answer in the tome which lay open on her cot.

She managed to ignore the throbbing pain radiating from her breast, but her thoughts kept returning to the mage she had pursued. Mistress Barsheh had not been in a mood to take her seriously after her mistake with the summoning, instead publicly rebuking her for going to the Ogre camp. Still, Okhamet noted that the soldiers had looked more alert this past day and the stable guard had been increased. Her long nails picked absently at the scabs forming on her cheek as she considered her future revenge.

Loud shouts came from outside, both Ogre and human. Okhamet leapt from her cot and threw back the tent flap. The camp was in chaos. Her eyes were drawn immediately to the lights of the excavation area, where the Ogres appeared to be in full rebellion.

A magical fireball exploded in the night and then another. Okhamet had no doubt the Thayans would quell the uprising, but she wondered if anything would be left when they finished.

Torgbag must have planned this in league with the mysterious mage. Instead of rushing to the fight, she walked swiftly in the other direction, towards the center of the camp where she could get a better view of the

action.

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Ehric tried to look everywhere at once. The battle he had provoked raged a scant fifty paces from him, with a couple of Thayans lying broken on the ground already. He was sure the tide would turn soon and he needed to be ready to give the mages another battle to fight.

Ehric cast vaporized and glided upward and back towards the slave pens. There were only two guards still at their post and they were largely ignoring the slaves, intent as they were on the skirmish with the Ogres. It proved a fatal distraction.

A small boulder near the corner of the large slave pen began to shift and come alive. As Ehric watched, Flippip slunk on all fours towards the closest guard. She covered the last few paces at a run. Still the guard did not hear her over the din of the battle, and Flippip leapt to bury the knife in the soldier's back. He fell with a loud cry and Flippip drove the knife home again before he fell silent. The second guard turned towards the scream, just in time catch a knife in his throat. The gnome quickly located the keys to the pen on the first guard and opened the lock.

The three men were the first out. They glanced at Flippip and then moved to the guards' bodies. Following them were the gnomes. Ehric saw Flippip embrace one of the small men before she led them away from the camp and back to the trail.

The trio of men took swords and knives from the fallen Thayans and to Ehric's surprise, advanced into the heart of the camp.

Ehric realized Flippip had left without freeing the women. He began to speculate on why but decided he didn't have the time. The armed slaves would soon alert the Thayans to the escape attempt. Ehric allowed himself to coalesce and ran hard to the slave pens.

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Okhamet saw nothing out of the ordinary at Barsheh's tent and turned to survey the camp. Soldiers and Wizards were running everywhere; a small knot of Ogres had broken free of the excavation site and were rampaging through the tents. Oddly, she saw a man running in the

direction of slave pens and away from the battle. Shielding her eyes from the glare of the magic raging behind her, the wizard peered into the night.

Where are the guards? Okhamet looked around and yelled to a couple of nearby soldiers. “The slaves are escaping. Come with me.”

“Yes wizard.”

Returning her attention to the slave pens, she tracked the mysterious man once more. He stopped at the women’s pen and started to bash the lock with the butt of his spear. “Wizard, armed men approach.” The soldier on her right pointed her sword. Three men, slaves by the look of them, were indeed advancing on them, swords in hand.

Okhamet’s hands flashed and a flaming bolt shot towards the Tuigans, scattering them.

“Kill them.”

The soldiers ran forward as Okhamet turned to the man working to free the remaining slaves.

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The lock finally came loose and Ehric tore the gate open. Huddled in the far corner of the pen were the five slaves. “Come on, I’m here to free you. You can escape if you come with me now.” Timidly, the women started to come forward. “Yes. We need to run.”

He grabbed the first woman by the arm and pulled her through the doorway. Ehric pointed. “That way.” She started to run gingerly over the rocky terrain.

One of the women still in the cage screamed in a foreign language, pointing behind him. Without turning, Ehric dove forward into the pen, taking her and another of the slaves to the ground with him. The air exploded a moment later.

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Okhamet returned her attention to the escaped slaves to see how the battle proceeded.

She was amazed by the Tuigans. Two of them were armed with swords and the third had a simple knife, but they advanced as if they backed by an army of ten thousand. The knife wielder ran out ahead of the others,

and the Thayans looked eager to cut him down, confident in the greater reach of their swords and superior armor.

The slave threw his only weapon. The lead soldier fell with a curse, the hilt of the knife standing out of her thigh. The remaining Thayan launched a slashing attack but the now unarmed Tuigan slipped inside the arc of his blade, grasping his sword arm in both hands. The other two slaves gave the lame swordswoman a wide berth and came to their companion's aid, swords held high. Okhamet knew the soldier was overmatched and began to cast.

The Thayan managed to block the first hordesman's blow, but a follow up strike carved a deep furrow in his brushed steel breastplate. Stilled unharmed, the soldier twisted to punch the Tuigan holding his arm. His grip loosened but the motion exposed the soldier's back to the sword wielding hordesmen.

The soldier yelled in pain and defiance; a blade had found a gap in his armor. The unarmed slave stripped the soldier's sword from his hand as he stumbled forward onto hands and knees.

Okhamet completed her spell and a small sphere of flame shot towards the gathered hordesmen. It exploded a moment later, scorching their unprotected flesh. One Tuigan stayed on his feet and made an attempt to continue forward. Okhamet cut him down with a simple spell. A small smirk pulled at the scar on her face.

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The stench of burnt hair and flesh assaulted Ehric's senses as he dragged himself back to consciousness. He looked up and wished he hadn't. The three slaves who had been standing had been consumed by the flames. Their charred bodies littered the ground.

Ehric pushed himself up on one hand; his left arm was numb and unresponsive. His body had largely shielded one of the slaves he tackled, and she pushed against him as he rose to his hands and knees. She shrieked in terror when her eyes fell on the bodies. Before Ehric could react, the light haired woman was on her feet and running away as fast as she could.

Ehric rolled to a sitting position and looked back towards the camp. A robed figure stood there, maybe thirty paces away looking off to his left at another group of burned bodies. Rage filled him as he drew elemental energy into himself.

The person turned towards the sound of the fleeing slave and Ehric recognized Okhamet. Her eyes went wide and she began to weave, but it was too late. With a primal scream, Ehric hurled a tremendous wind at the mage. Grit and small rocks took flight. Okhamet lost her spell as she threw up her hands to protect her face. Jagged slivers of rock tore through her robes and skin, but it was a small blunt stone that cracked her skull, knocking her to the ground. When the wind passed, the wizard lay unmoving.

Ehric looked around for another target but there was nothing. Slowly his rage subsided and he found himself shaking. He concentrated on breathing regularly.

A small noise came from the ground beside him. The other slave he had tackled was lying there on her back. Her warning had saved his life but her own was quickly ebbing away. The burns were horrific. Her flesh was blackened and cracked except for bands of smooth skin on her face, matching where his hand had shielded the fiery blast.

He pulled one of Shoptim's healing potions from his belt and uncorked it with his teeth. Pouring the contents past her undamaged lips produced little improvement. The slave's breathing came more easily but any other healing was difficult to see. He tried another potion but it seemed her injuries were too extensive for the magic to combat.

He needed to move. Ehric lay on his back across the woman's midsection and slipped his good arm under her right knee. He pulled her knee into his chest and grabbed her right wrist with the same hand. Some of her skin peeled away as he struggled to sit up. With a grunt of exertion he managed to get his feet under him and stand, the slave lying across his shoulders. With a last look at the blackened corpses, he set off towards the trail leading to the horses.

He was nearing the trail head when he heard footsteps. Looking up, he

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spotted two figures, one massive and one small, approaching from the edge of the plateau. "Ehric, are you alright?" It was Eve's voice.

"I will live. Did the slaves reach you?"

"Five gnomes and your friend Flippip are headed down the trail. They didn't need our help."

Ehric dropped to one knee and Kendal helped him place the slave on the ground. "What about a woman?"

"What?" Eve looked at him quizzically.

"Did you see another slave? A woman escaped as well."

"I'm sorry. There was no one else."

Ehric sighed. "She ran when the wizard attacked. I'd hoped she'd come this way. The rest of the gnomes and Feldan are still in the cavern."

"Eve and I will have to go in."

Ehric nodded. "I will try my best to distract the Wizards. Hopefully they've already used most of their spells on the Ogres."

Eve looked up from the slave woman and gasped. "Your arm is charred."

Ehric finally looked down at his left arm and found she was right. "It doesn't hurt."

It was Kendal who responded. "It's burned too badly for that. Do you have any healing potions?"

"No, I used them on her but they didn't seem to work." Ehric nodded towards the burned woman.

"Is she alive?" Eve looked like she was going to be sick.

Kendal placed his ear over the slave's mouth. "She's still breathing."

Eve's voice was tense. "What can we do with her? She will have to be carried down the mountain side."

Kendal shook his head. "We don't have much time. I can move her somewhere sheltered." He looked around. "Maybe that stand of trees?"

Ehric nodded. "Go quickly." Eve handed him a vial of healing potion. He drained it as Kendal lifted the slave. Pain erupted in his arm but he was able to flex his hand again.

"I'll fly off and approach the camp from the opposite side. When the

lightning strikes, get moving.”

Eve looked very concerned. “Be careful.”

“Yeah. You too.” Ehrlic spoke the command word for his cloak and leapt into the air.

The feathery white wings beat rhythmically, driving Ehrlic up and into a tight orbit high above the camp. It would have been an exhilarating feeling had he not been sure he was about to die.

His acute vision allowed him to make out the battle still taking place below. There were only a few Ogres still standing and they were fleeing back along the trail to their camp. A group of soldiers and Wizards drove them away, but they had little chance of outpacing the giants. A dozen soldiers and a couple of Wizards remained to defend the camp. He couldn't spot Kendal or Eve but assumed they would be ready.

Ehrlic took a deep breath and began to cast. He took careful aim, intending not to actually strike any of the Thayans with his lightning. The bolt slashed down from his outstretched hand, striking a sizeable boulder near one of the mages, a tall woman. The rock exploded as the water trapped inside flashed to steam.

The mage ignored the superficial wounds caused by the flying rocks and directed the soldiers with crisp commands. The other mage scanned the sky and Ehrlic spotted his hands weaving in a distinctive manner.

The magical cloak failed suddenly, the wings returning to simple fabric, and Ehrlic plummeted towards the ground. A quick utterance arrested his fall, but not before he was in range of the three archers amongst the soldiers. Two arrows flew wide of their mark but the third buried into his leather armor. Ehrlic felt the head of the arrow in his skin but the wound was shallow. He ignored it.

A flash drew his attention back to the tall woman. He expected to find a fiery spell headed his way. What he saw was even more terrifying. The Cartographer, the one Yyll had named Verpith, stood in the midst of the Thayans. His body was covered with writhing snakes, shedding from his arms and legs. The female Wizard barked out a spell and took to the air herself while the Thayan soldiers quickly readjusted to the new threat,

advancing on the lone Yuan-ti.

Verpith stood impassively as the soldiers drew close. The source of his confidence became clear as the snakes surrounding him morphed in Yuan-ti warriors, armed with weapons composed entirely of flame. The Thayans plunged into the monstrous snakes and the battle devolved into mayhem.

Ehric continued to descend slowly, a ripe target for a bowman, but the Thayans were fully engaged in the fight with the Yuan-ti. Regardless, he decided it was well past time to leave. As Ehric wove his air spell, Verpith turned his gaze on him. His emotionless voice rang in his ears, even as they dissolved into mist. "Thank you for your aid. I am sorry Yyll could not be here."

There was no physical manifestation of Ehric's fright, he had no heart to race, but he fled the snakes as fast as his spell would allow.

Chapter 11

Mere was near death. Vajir was surprised to find even a weak life pulse at her neck given the amount of blood that had pumped from her nearly severed arm. He screamed into the night for Lurlin and Fayla. Frantically, he tried to cover the gaping wound with his hands.

“You need to tie off the arm if you wish her to live.” The Tuigan offered her advice without any sympathy. “Maybe use a belt?”

Vajir ignored her tone, recognizing that she was right. His hands were slick with blood as he fumbled with his belt. Even unconscious, Mere groaned when the tourniquet was applied, but the bleeding slowed to a trickle. He held the stump of her arm in his lap and turned to the Easterner. “Thanks.”

She nodded.

“You are a Tuigan, aren’t you?”

She nodded again. “Perhaps we fought on opposite sides not too long ago.” Lightning and fire burst at irregular intervals on the mountain side above them.

Lurlin and Fayla appeared at the edge of the camp. “Vajir?”

“Get over here! Mere’s hurt badly.”

The two priests looked to one another and darted over. Fayla slowed as

she looked around at the bodies littering the ground. Vajir shouted angrily. "Ignore them! Mere needs you." The priestess looked pale but she quickened her pace.

Vajir retrieved his dagger and moved out their way. They fell to their knees and started to chant, laying their hands on the hideous wound. Vajir stood to the side and watched them work for a minute or so before he started to feel ill. "Will she be alright?" The priests kept up their prayers, either not hearing him or more likely ignoring him.

"May I stand? I will not try to harm you." Vajir returned his attention to the Tuigan woman.

"Just stay there for a minute." Vajir checked each Thayan in turn. The first three were dead. When he bent to retrieve his dagger from the crossbowman, he found the man still drew breath. Thinking of Mere, he gave the dagger a twist before pulling it free.

That left the two Thayans lying unconscious near the Tuigan. Vajir found some lengths of rope and securely bound the man, after first making sure he had no weapons hidden on him. The woman was lying facedown in the dirt and was very obviously unarmed.

When Vajir began to bind her wrists, she groaned and shifted. Vajir whispered in her ear. "I wish I had met you under different circumstances." He quickened his pace to make sure she was restrained before she woke. He called across to the healers. "How's Mere doing?"

"She is stable, I think, but she will not wake for some time." Lurlin left Fayla and came to Vajir's side. Her voice was consoling. "The arm is lost."

"At least she'll live. Do whatever you need to so we can move her."

"Right, of course." Lurlin wiped the blood from her hands on her robes and returned to Fayla.

"You, Tuigan, what's your name?"

There was a long pause. "I am Mengkau."

"I am going to assume you have some form of personal honor and won't try to kill us. Go ahead and get up."

Keeping her injured leg straight, the Tuigan lifted herself on one foot.

The graceful move clashed with the limping gait she employed as she headed to the horses.

“You won’t get away with this.” The Thayan woman rolled to her side with some difficulty.

Vajir squatted in front of her and brushed her cheek with his finger. “You’re awake. Lidhra, isn’t it? That’s what the Wizard called you.” Vajir motioned to the corpse. “You may be right, but we couldn’t let you enslave our friend.”

The Thayan recoiled from his touch. “You are doing this to free a slave?” Her laugh was harsh. “You could have just contacted someone in the Enclave. We make deals all the time to return merchandise.” A particularly loud concussion shook the ground. “By Kossuth, you are actually attacking the main camp! You should run now while you have a chance.”

“That’s enough. I think I would really like you if you weren’t a Wizard’s lackey, but I can’t have you ruining morale.”

“You think this is a joke? You killed three Thayan soldiers and a Wizard apprentice.”

“Only because you chose to fight instead of surrendering.”

“Do you think that will matter? You have made powerful enemies.”

Vajir paused as if considering her dire warning. “I suppose I should kill you then. What’s the point in leaving witnesses?”

The Thayan blanched but quickly regained her spirit. “Go ahead. I’m sure you’d enjoy murdering a bound woman.”

“I’m always open to trying something new.” Vajir laughed. “But perhaps some other time.” The woman burned with anger. “Well, Lidhra, I will leave it to Tymora’s luck or Hoar’s vengeance that we will meet again.” He gave the soldier a squeeze on the shoulder as he stood. She twisted to keep him in her baleful gaze as he walked away.

Vajir chided himself for wasting time with the beautiful soldier. *If Mere were awake she would have put a stop to that.* Looking around, he spotted Mengkau ransacking the Thayans for weapons and supplies, which she then loaded into saddlebags. Vajir ignored the supplies and

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began to saddle the rest of the horses for their escape.

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Verpith put Ehrlic out of his mind and concentrated on the battle. His followers had the benefit of surprise but achieving that surprise came with a price. None of his small army was wearing any armor or carried weapons, which meant they had to rely more heavily on their inherent powers. Already, their ability to project fear had broken the ranks of the defenders, driving fully a third of them into flight.

The Wizard in the air would not be defeated so easily. She was already casting again, something deadly, no doubt. Verpith chanted a powerful counter spell, and whatever effect the Thayan had in mind unraveled. He made his voice heard in her mind. "Leave now hotblood or your blood will grow cold this night."

As he expected the human ignored his advice, instead drawing a wand and leveling it at him. Fire exploded around him; the flames obscured his vision a moment but otherwise did him no harm. He had expected more from the Red Wizards. As the magical flames died away, the Wizard was no where to be seen. *So she will attempt her own surprise.*

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Ehrlic's fear faded quickly as the distance grew between him and the Yuan-ti, replaced by what he deemed a completely rational desire to flee. The Thayans that had taken up pursuit of the Ogres were flooding back onto plateau to engage the roaming bands of Yuan-ti weaving through the camp.

Ehrlic resisted the urge to escape downwind and instead drifted towards the excavation site. Eve and Kendal would need his help if they were to have any hope of escape.

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"Where are you going?" Vajir addressed Mengkau. She sat on a dappled gray mare with the reins of another mare in her hands. The saddlebags on the pack horse were full of Thayan equipment and she wore leather armor scavenged from the crossbowmen.

"I am leaving. I hope you find your way to safety."

“What about the other slaves?”

The Tuigan shook her head. “I have no allegiance to them.”

“Do you owe me anything for saving my life?”

“I thought you said you were going to free me.”

“Of course.”

The Tuigan laughed. “You wanted to free me so I could do your bidding? If you wished to enslave me, you should have tied me up like that one.” Mengkau pointed to the Thayan woman. “I assumed you didn’t like my looks enough. Was I wrong?” Her smile would have been inviting if she hadn’t held a sword in her hands.

“No, you were right. I like my women with white teeth.”

Her lips tightened into a scowl. She muttered an oath in her native tongue before turning and urging her horse forward. “A wise man does not make more enemies than he must.” The Tuigan pointed towards the bound soldiers. “Nor does he fail to kill enemies when he has the chance.”

The first gnomes arrived in the camp moments later. Vajir approached them and knelt. “My name is Vajir. Can you tell me what is happening on the mountain?”

The only woman in the group came forward. “There are more slaves still in the pits. I think your companions were going to try to get to them.”

“Alright. Let’s get you mounted up and headed out of here.” He helped Lurlin and Fayla lift the gnomes into their saddles. Most of them seemed to be in fairly good shape physically and they were able to hold the reins. He had no illusions that they would be able to ride fast. After they were settled, Vajir motioned for Lurlin to mount one of the horses. “You need to take Mere out of here with you. Fayla can lead the other two horses with the gnomes.”

After some struggle, Vajir and Fayla lifted an unconscious Mere into the saddle in front of Lurlin. The priestess wrapped her right arm across Mere’s chest and held the reins in her left. Soon Vajir was alone with the remaining horses and the two Thayan prisoners.

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Verpith glided around the wounded swordsman's slashing arc and casually tore out his throat. The Thayan gargled blood as he fell but Verpith had already turned to survey the continuing battle. What he saw pleased him.

An arrow shattered against the thick scales of his back, interrupting his contemplation. Verpith sneered and charged his clawed hand with killing energy. Turning, he gestured at the archer, a young female of the species standing thirty paces away. A black bolt of energy leapt from his hand. The archer started to duck but Verpith's gaze froze her in fear. The bolt struck her breastplate and blackness splashed across her chest and throat. The archer clawed at her armor and skin as she dropped behind the boulder she had intended to use as cover. A moment later she lurched up, rolling over the rock, kicking and screaming. The shadow spread up her face and already covered most of her torso. While not his most elegant spell, Verpith had found it to be effective.

Shifting his gaze away from the dying soldier, Verpith reflected on the Thayans' fortitude. He was impressed with their courage; the fact that any were willing to engage him was a testament to that. But the outcome of the battle was never in doubt. After the initial rout they had attempted to rally. The result was a handful of small skirmishes. It appeared the mages had largely fallen or fled; he saw no more fireballs or similar evidence of Wizardly craft. Still, he assumed that the Thayan leader remained on the battlefield.

A small knot of Thayans and Yuan-ti drew his attention. Three heavily armored soldiers and a pair of archers held a narrow pass that led further into the mountains. One of the archers glowed brilliantly in his sight, clearly denoting magic. Verpith hissed a quick incantation and brushed his bloody hand across his eyes. As he expected, the mystical archer was the missing Wizard. With his vision enhanced, he saw that the bow she carried was truly a staff. The arrows she pretended to fire appeared to be bolts of brilliant white energy.

Verpith relaxed into his serpent form, gliding over the body of the slain swordsman and onward towards the Thayans. He doubted the Wizard or

her guards would notice him, despite the size of his constrictor body. He let his thoughts flow into the Yuan-ti engaged in the battle. "Withdraw on my command. Delay will be costly." He noted his warriors took a more cautious approach to their fighting, anticipating, no doubt that Verpith would soon deal with their foes.

When he was within a dozen paces of the battle he transformed to his legged form and began to cast. The mental command to withdraw did not distract him, and came mere moments before the spell took effect. Blades erupted from the air, slashing wildly all around the beleaguered Thayans. The real archer fell instantly, a magical sword catching him in the neck and sending his blood showering into the night sky. The swordsmen fared little better. Of the three, two escaped instant death only to be cut down by the Yuan-ti warriors as they tumbled forward out of the reach of Verpith's spell.

The Wizard dropped her illusion as she scrambled out of the deadly storm of blades. Verpith dismissed the spell and commanded his warriors forward. The Thayan woman rose to her feet to face them, defiant to the end.

One of Verpith's swords had penetrated her magical defenses and she grimaced, holding her hand against her stomach. Despite the wound, her right hand held her staff steady, leveled at the onrushing Yuan-ti. She barked out an arcane syllable and liquid air erupted from the tip of the staff. The closest Yuan-ti warrior, a small but quick halfblood, took the brunt of the frigid blast. She attempted to twist away but the super cold liquid washed over her arm and the left side of her chest. The liquid froze flesh solid wherever it touched, and chunks of crystalline flesh broke free when she hit the ground. The two Yuan-ti behind her were largely shielded, one leapt over his dying comrade while the other slid to his left to come at the Thayan from the side.

The legged Yuan-ti eschewed his flaming sword and tore into the Wizard with claws. She brought her staff up in defense but her strength did not lie in the martial arts. The warrior wrenched the staff aside and his taloned hand ripped a gash in the side the Thayan's neck. The

Wizard was obviously well trained, stifling her scream and managing to call out another arcane word. Five bolts of energy burst from the tip of the staff, plunging deep into the Yuan-ti's back. The snake hissed but continued to tear into the Wizard.

The Thayan protected her throat with her off hand as the second Yuan-ti warrior entered the fray. He lashed out with his massive serpent tail, knocking the woman from her feet and momentarily out of reach of the first attacker. The gravely wounded Wizard hit the ground, retaining her hold on the staff through sheer force of will. Choking down the blood rising in her throat, she managed to enunciate one last syllable. When the Yuan-ti dove in to finish their work, they rebounded off an invisible field surrounding the human as she lay curled defensively on the ground.

Verpith approached. He spared a glance to the fallen warrior. She squirmed weakly as blood leaked from her horrible wounds. His mind briefly entered hers. "Endure Yyriss. I will heal you when the battle is finished." The two warriors continued to batter the shield surrounding the Wizard, but Verpith knew it was to no avail.

"She uses an elixir, Elder." The halfblood gave up on the shield and turned to address his lord.

"Very well, Heth. Stand away." The warriors complied, moving to flank the elder as he stood above the Wizard.

Verpith explored the Wizard's mind. Her resistance was impressive, but Verpith was not looking deep. "Barsheh... You are known as Barsheh."

The Wizard made eye contact with Verpith and he noticed her wounds were less severe than moments before. Her fine clothes were ripped and bloodied, but she remained proud. "If you know my name, you must know my allegiance. I thought our reputation had reached to your dank swamps but I must have been mistaken."

"I know of the vaunted Red Wizards. You are not as powerful as you presume." Verpith spoke matter-of-factly. "You did not take my advice hot-blood, but I am willing to let you live as my prisoner. How would you like to proceed?"

Barsheh growled. "I am not defeated, I will not be defeated." Her grip tightened on the staff and Verpith prepared himself. She uttered a familiar command and he knew another globe of invisible energy had appeared. This globe was also centered on the Wizard but was much larger, encompassing Verpith and the two warriors. Yriss lay just outside.

Verpith had a notion of the Wizard's plan and decided to wait. Sure enough, as Barsheh began to cast, he felt the air around him change, thickening slightly. He closed his mouth and stopped breathing after instructing the warriors to do the same. He focused his mind and body on resisting the Wizard's magic.

The air filled with a noxious yellow-green gas. The two warriors endured silently, though he had his doubts they would survive. Verpith closed his eyes and began to cast, careful not to inhale as he did so. As he finished the spell, he touched the smaller globe of force surrounding Barsheh. The resisting field disappeared and his claws quickly found her flesh, sinking into her ribs. The Wizard screamed then and started to choke, jerking wildly in his grip.

She tried to use the staff but her speech was unintelligible. Verpith spoke into her mind. "You are clever hot-blood, but too proud." Barsheh dropped the staff and her hand lurched towards her throat. Verpith opened his eye a slit, confident in his resistance to the caustic gas. Soon he felt her body go slack and saw her hand slip away.

Verpith initially assumed she had succumbed to the killing gas. As her hand slid under the neck of her blouse, he suspected some deception. The shifting fabric revealed a tattoo that glowed to his eyes. Barsheh shuddered as he tore his claws free of her ribs, reaching to restrain her straying hand.

He was too late. With a simple touch, the magic in the tattoo was released. The stricken mage disappeared, whisked away to some predetermined location. Verpith chided himself on his own pride as he stood, quickly dispelling the deadly vapors. He should have simply annihilated the human, not tried to kill her with her own spell. The

attraction of an ironic death had overcome his better judgment.

Heth still lived, though his scales were blistered and he swayed uncertainly on his tail. The two-leg was dead. Verpith expended another spell removing the larger invisible barrier and moved to kneel beside Yyriss. He offered a quick prayer of healing and the wounds to her chest and arm closed. The scout rose on her tail, looking around for any Thayans still resisting, intent on returning to battle.

“Stay with me, the battle is over. Now we will tend to the injured and locate any survivors among the humans.” Yyriss and Heth bowed and scanned the area. Verpith retrieved Barsheh’s potent staff and headed towards the excavation complex.

* * * *

“Follow me!” Kendal screamed at the gnomes and the human woman he and Eve had found in the caverns. Feldan stood at his back, armed with one of his spare daggers, scanning for a way out. Eve waited to take up the rear guard position. Her eyes scanned the battle, looking for magical threats that she could negate.

“We have to stay out of the middle of this fight.” Between them and the path down to the horses was a raging battle. Blasted rock and patches of writhing tentacles dotted the landscape. “Circle around maybe? Don’t forget that we’re not hulking brutes like you. We can’t run through fire and we don’t have nine foot strides.” Kendal nodded and set out, longswords at the ready.

The battle had lost all concept of planning. There were no lines, instead small groups of Thayans and Yuan-ti did battle where ever they met. Kendal led his charges around the periphery of the fighting, trying to keep the mountain wall close to his right to avoid being flanked.

He was passing a small group of dead Thayan soldiers when his luck ran out. Figures seemed to rise out of the ground around them. Kendal counted three Yuan-ti and then the first snake was upon him, flaming sword slashing at his chest.

Kendal intercepted the strike with one of his longswords, expecting to turn the weapon aside. To his astonishment, the flaming blade washed

past his sword and splashed his breastplate with fire. Kendal grunted in pain and backpedaled, swinging his second sword in a low slash to keep the snake tailed warrior at bay.

The serpent let the slash pass in front of him before pressing the attack. A second Yuan-ti fell in at his side, a shimmering blue aura outlining her sleek form as she wove a spell. Kendal continued to fall back, trying to avoid the blows he knew now he couldn't parry. The sorceress completed her spell and he felt his arms and legs begin to cramp.

Kendal attempted to slide away from high slashing attack but his limbs refused to comply. All he could manage was an ungraceful fall. As he hit the ground, his muscles seized tight and he stared up at the snake, waiting for the killing blow.

Instead the snake roared in agony as a spear burst from its chest. Lightning crackled over its flesh as Ehric landed on the snake's back, driving it into the ground. He tore the spear free and spun to face the wide eyed sorceress. The dark scaled female took a couple of quick steps back and a blazing sword materialized in her hands.

Ehric held the snake at bay while Eve knelt over Kendal, speaking some arcane words. The warrior scrambled to his feet as the energy holding him was dispersed. He looked around and saw Feldan standing near the third Yuan-ti as it struggled in its death throes. The slaves were gone, running in every direction, some even back towards the excavation pit.

"Run!" Ehric didn't take the chance of turning to address the trio. The sorceress had recovered and was weaving her fiery blade in deadly arcs before her. "I can take this one."

Kendal ignored him and started to move to enter the fight when Eve grabbed his arm. "He's right, we have to go." She pointed behind the sorceress to three more Yuan-ti approaching. "They're going to kill all of the Reds soon and then they'll really be after us." With a last look to Ehric, Kendal nodded and began to run.

* * * *

Ehric probed the Yuan-ti's defenses. She looked very nearly human, except for dark scales that covered her body from the neck down.

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Dressed modestly, she could have passed unnoticed in a city like Innarlith. As it was, she wore only a shimmering magical aura.

“Surrender and your life will be spared.” Her voice was melodic and sweet but the suggestion held no sway over him. Ehrlic feigned a thrust high and slashed low at her leg. The Yuan-ti reacted to the feint but still managed to pull her leg back in time. She threw a quick glance behind her but the reinforcements pursued Kendal, Eve, and Feldan.

“Are you worried you can't handle one monkey?” Ehrlic taunted. The sorceress bared brilliant white teeth and came forward, her sword leaving smoke in its wake as it swung up at him. Ehrlic had seen Kendal fight the other Yuan-ti and knew he couldn't parry the swing. Instead he used the greater reach of his spear to strike at her arm. The blue halo surrounding her flashed at the point of impact, shielding her from harm. His parry still knocked her swordarm aside, even as her momentum brought her body within reach. Reversing his grip on the spear, Ehrlic stabbed into her midsection. The magical second skin surrounding the serpent concentrated around the point of the spear once more, preventing it from doing its deadly work. Instead of piercing her ribs, the force of the blow lifted the Yuan-ti from her feet and threw her to the ground. She came to rest facedown, her magical armor dissipated and flame blade extinguished. Ehrlic could hear her mumbling as he rushed forward.

The sorceress disappeared. Ehrlic swung at the area she had just occupied and he felt the weapon strike flesh. The Yuan-ti yelled out but a second swipe met nothing but air. He kept his spear in a ready position and listened.

His heart beat a dozen times with no sign of the Yuan-ti. Ehrlic was about to try to catch up with the others when a woman shrieked. He spun around and saw a barn owl beating the air with its wings and tearing at what appeared to be empty space with its talons. Blood dripped from the bird's claws and beak.

Ehrlic swung his spear at a point about a foot below the enraged owl and felt a satisfying shudder as the shaft of the spear connected. Blood and shattered teeth flew as the haft of the spear smashed her jaw. Ehrlic heard

the Yuan-ti's body hit the ground and saw pebbles scatter, but she was still invisible to his eyes. Taking no chances, he probed with his foot, quickly finding the serpent's body. A final thrust of the spear ended the spell and her life.

He muttered. "It seems I won't be your slave after all."

The owl hooted and he glanced around. "Shoptim?" Ehrlic spotted the bird sitting on a nearby boulder. It winked and extended one wing in what looked like an attempted bow. Then it took flight, heading towards the excavation site. Ehrlic looked back to the trailhead but he couldn't see the others. He decided to take a chance, figuring that even carrying the burned slave woman, Kendal would be able to outpace the snakes on the treacherous downhill path. He followed the strange bird as it flew towards the excavation site.

Chapter 12

The tide of the battle had flowed away from the excavation pit. Ehric stayed low nonetheless and reached the area without challenge from Thayan or snake. The site was lit on the inside by magical torches and Ehric felt little trepidation venturing in, despite the confined space.

The owl turned a corner and momentarily flew out of sight. When Ehric came around the corner himself, he found Shoptim in the middle of transforming back to her natural form. The transformation was over in a few seconds.

“Greetings, Ehric.” Shoptim wore very practical clothing: breeches, high boots, and a loose blouse. A cowled cape concealed her bald head and draped over a small backpack. She carried no weapons that he could discern, though a long polished black wand hung from the sash at her waist.

“I did not expect you to be here, but I am glad for your help.”

“I don’t think you really needed me. You seem to have found the other way into a serpent’s heart.”

Ehric was not in the mood for her humor. “Why did you come in here? You’re taking a big risk.”

Shoptim took a serious tone. “Aren’t you curious what is so important

about this place that Red Wizards and Yuan-ti would openly do battle over it? I know I am and I intend to find out.”

“I suppose. Whatever it is probably dangerous in either of their hands.”

“Undoubtedly.” Shoptim smiled inwardly. Ehrlic was already thinking of her and the Wizards as separate entities. “Well, let’s see what we can find.” She led the way deeper into the underground ruins, pausing now and again to inspect runes carved into the broken rocks. Ehrlic soon felt the weight of the stone above him like a crushing force on his chest. Shoptim pulled back her hood and looked up at him with concern. “Are you alright? Did that snake woman poison you?”

“No, I’m fine. I just don’t like being here. Can we go faster?” He wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Yes, I suppose we do not have an abundance of time.” Shoptim picked up the pace and Ehrlic tried to concentrate on the wrinkles on the back of her neck and ignore the tons of rock above his head.

Ehrlic heard metal scraping on stone somewhere ahead. He tapped Shoptim on the shoulder and put his finger to his lips. Gently, he pushed past the petite mage and slipped quietly forward, spear held out ahead.

He wouldn’t need it. As he inched around the corner, Ehrlic spotted three slaves huddled around a particular spot in the wall. Two of them, both gnome men, wielded chisels and rock hammers. It was not clear to Ehrlic what they were trying to accomplish but they worked with feverish urgency. Clad only in loincloths, sweat dripped from their leathery skin.

The third slave was human, similarly clad, and it took Ehrlic a moment to determine she was a woman. She was lean to the point of starvation, with no fat to smooth the lines of her body. Skin stretched thin over her bones, her ribs and pelvis standing out from the surrounding flesh. Even the muscles of her arms and legs had shrunk to point that the bones were clear. She was a living skeleton, ghastly to behold.

Apparently the gnomes had put the woman on watch; brown eyes bulged from her sunken face the instant he stepped around the corner. The dark haired woman took a step back, drawing the attention of the two gnomes. The chiseling stopped and silence stretched. Ehrlic shifted his

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grip on the spear, and put up his hand. "It's alright. We're not going to harm you." At that moment Shoptim strode out from behind the corner and the three slaves all dropped to their faces. The woman let out a small whimper. They knew what the bald head and tattoos meant, even if she didn't wear the red robes.

Shoptim's voice was emotionless. "Do you speak this tongue?" All three slaves nodded. "Then tell me what is going on here." She pointed to the older of the two gnomes.

"We... we were trying to escape." He stuttered out the confession.

"By digging your way out? That seems time consuming. What is so special about this particular stone?"

"There is an open space behind it."

"You can tell that how?"

The gnome considered a moment. "I don't think I can explain. I don't have the words. But there is a passage."

Ehric spoke up. "Whatever we're going to do, we need to do it soon."

Shoptim ignored him and continued interrogating the gnome. "Does anyone else know about this?"

"Some of the other gnomes, no doubt. Humans are not at home under rock. They couldn't... feel the way."

"How much longer will it take to finish your work?"

"Minutes."

"Get back to work then." The gnomes complied, returning to their task with the same urgency, if less hope. Shoptim took Ehric by the arm and drew him away. "I'd understand if you don't want to accompany me any farther. You could escape here if you needed to, am I right?"

Ehric nodded. "Probably. But I couldn't take them as well." He indicated the gnomes and the prostrate woman.

"So will you...?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thank you."

"Do you mean to try to keep the passage a secret?"

"If we can. We'll undoubtedly need time to explore. Do you have any

ideas?”

“I have a worry.” Ehrlic pointed to the ground, at a bloody footprint. “The woman cut her foot. Even if the snakes or Wizards don’t have a tracker, it will be obvious that she walked to this spot in the passage and disappeared.”

“That is troubling.”

“Let me take her back towards the opening of the cave. I can bind the wound and return with her.”

Shoptim nodded. “I think that’s the best we can do on our timetable. Go ahead.”

Ehrlic walked over to the woman lying prone on the dusty floor. “I need you to walk with me. Everything will be alright, we’ll come right back.” The woman raised her head and looked confused at Ehrlic’s kind tone. Still, she did as she was told.

Ehrlic guided the woman through the narrow passages at a quick pace, both for the sake of time and to make her trail look more frantic. Looking back, he could see her sole was still bleeding. After the second time he checked her tracks, she spoke up. She had a strange accent he couldn’t place. “You worry I lead them to you?”

Ehrlic was impressed with her reasoning. “Yes. I don’t want anyone following us to...” Ehrlic didn’t have a chance to finish his thought. The slave woman bolted like a startled deer, catching him completely off guard. He recovered, taking two running steps and diving headlong, spear in his outstretched arm. The slave tripped over the shaft and hit the ground.

Ehrlic’s calloused hand closed on her ankle and he pulled the emaciated woman to him. “What are you doing?”

Tears were in her eyes but the woman’s response was fierce. “You kill me to cover your tracks.” Ehrlic was forced to swat aside a kick aimed at his face. He released her ankle and came to his feet, looming above the woman. The slave scrambled to the nearest wall but did not try to rise.

What she had said made some sense. From a purely practical perspective, she was most useful dead, and she knew it. That she

expected to be murdered because it was expedient said much about her captors. Ehrlic locked eyes with the woman. "I'm not going to kill you. I just wanted you to track some blood to the opening. We'll both be going back. I promise."

Tears leaked down her cheeks and ran from her nose. "If you lie... be quick about it."

"I'm not lying. Now get up, the entrance is just up ahead." Ehrlic pulled the woman to her feet and held her upper arm tightly. The sounds of battle were fading as they neared the crumbled arch he could hear the slurred speech of Yuan-ti.

"I think this is far enough." He felt the woman tense. "What's your name?"

"Pai. I'm called Pai."

"Alright, Pai. I'm going to pick you up and carry you back to the others. But first I want you to wrap this around your foot." Ehrlic reached into his pack and pulled out a spare shirt. She did as he instructed and Ehrlic lifted the woman with ease. He jostled her considerably as he ran back, but Pai was silent.

* * * *

Vajir continued to pace as he waited for Eve and the others. Lidhra managed with difficulty to roll to her back. Her captor paused for a moment to watch her struggle before returning to his previous exercise. She groped around the ground behind her back until her fingers found a stone with a sharp edge. Keeping a careful eye on Vajir, the Thayan began to rub the stone against the cord lashing her wrists together.

She had nearly cut one strand when she was forced to stop. Vajir had finished pacing and came back over to her. "I think we'll take you with us." Lidhra was silent as he helped pull her back to a sitting position. She quickly palmed the stone she'd been using and tried to distract Vajir by leaning against him. By the feel of things, she was quite successful.

He left her sitting there and her hands were free just in time for his companions to arrive.

"Eve!" Vajir ran to greet the new arrivals. "Feldan, good to see you

again, Big Guy.”

“Where’s Mere?” Kendal had a semi-nude, burned woman draped over his shoulder. Her weight seemed to be no burden at all to him.

“She’s hurt. Laurlin and Fayla took her and the gnomes already. They left maybe a quarter hour ago.” Vajir peered into the darkness behind them. “Anyone following you?”

Feldan answered. “There were snakes. The Reds are being slaughtered. They aren’t fast on this terrain but at least three of them were following us.”

“Did Ehric betray us?”

“No, he held them off.” Eve saw Vajir’s incredulous look. “It’s not like he just stood there. He was killing them. He didn’t betray us, but Yyll certainly did.”

“We can argue about that later.”

“What about her?” Feldan had noticed Lidhra. The grip on his dagger tightened.

“She’s coming with us.” Vajir put his hand on Feldan’s shoulder. “They’ll be time enough later. Let’s get this poor girl on a horse and get going.”

Despite Vajir’s insistence, there was little Feldan could do to help. It was left to Vajir and Kendal to situate the unconscious woman on a horse in front of the burly swordsman. When Feldan was sure Eve was distracted as well, he advanced on the Thayan soldier. She saw murder in his eyes. Lidhra kept quiet as the halfling approached. “I’m not going to let you get away somehow.” Feldan stepped forward and drove the dagger at the center of the woman’s chest. Lidhra waited until he fully committed before twisting to the side and making a grab for the dagger.

Feldan was caught completely off guard and Lidhra ripped the knife from the halfling’s hand, using his momentum to drive him into the ground. A flick of the blade freed her ankles. She pulled a dazed Feldan to his feet and held the knife to his throat. She called out to Vajir. “I’ve changed the circumstances.”

All eyes swung to the Thayan. Vajir showed the woman his palms.

Kendal shifted in the saddle but there was little he could do with the slave slumped in front of him. Only Eve made any overt motion, drawing a wand from her robes and leveling it at the soldier. Vajir spoke "There is a spare horse, just take it and go."

"Back away from the beast." Vajir and Eve complied while Kendal guided his horse away as well. It was awkward for Lidhra to keep the knife at Feldan's throat but she managed to half drag the small man over to the saddled horse. There she paused, considering whether to release the halfling or attempt to force him into the saddle.

She didn't get the opportunity to decide.

A green streak of light flew out of the night, striking Kendal in the back and knocking him from the saddle. The horse bolted and the unconscious slave dropped to the ground as well. Kendal was slow to rise. Eve and Vajir spun to face the new threat but neither saw where the magic had come from. Lidhra had just shoved Feldan to the ground and turned to climb into the saddle when she felt a prick on her calf. Looking down she saw a trickle of blood running down to her ankle and a small black snake slithering away. Urgently, she pulled herself into the saddle, even as she felt poison burn through her veins. The horse galloped into the night.

Vajir rolled away from a second green beam and Eve fired back into the darkness with her wand, three brilliant bolts of magical energy rushed to strike their attacker. A bestial figure was visible for a moment before the bolts struck. Vajir doubted it was enough to kill the monster. He yelled to Kendal. "Are you alright? We could use your help."

With a groan Kendal dragged himself to his feet. "It did something to me." It seemed a monumental act of will for him to draw his sword.

"There's another!" Feldan scrambled away from the black snake near his feet as it grew into its humanoid form. Vajir turned to aid the halfling, drawing a spare knife in his left hand.

"Catch." Vajir tossed the knife, blade up, in Feldan's direction without removing his eyes from the Yuan-ti. The snake completed her transformation just as Feldan caught the weapon. For a moment Vajir

thought the snake was Yyll; she had the same humanoid upper body and snake tail, but the pattern of her scales was wrong. Vajir shifted his grip on the dagger in his hand and hurled it at the serpent.

She moved with lightning quickness, twisting her upper body so the blade barely grazed her ribs on its way to burying itself in the trunk of a nearby pine. Keeping her eyes on Vajir, the snake smiled slightly as she touched a hand to her scales.

Vajir was as shocked as the snake when a knife hilt seemed to blossom from her chest. Blood frothed on the Yuan-ti's thin lips and she grabbed at the weapon, her body swaying drunkenly. Vajir looked to Feldan and the unarmed halfling grinned. Another of Vajir's seemingly endless supply of knives appeared in his hand, but the snake was already sagging to the ground, her coiled tail causing her body to spiral slowly as she fell. As she sprawled over a slab of rock, her tail seemed almost a separate creature, swishing over the rocks while her upper body lay lifeless. Vajir shuddered.

He tossed Feldan the knife. "Always willing to take a risk if there's someone to hide behind, aren't you?"

"I prefer Kendal for my hiding purposes. You're too skinny." They returned to Eve together.

They found her kneeling behind Kendal, scanning the scant treeline for some indication of the snakes' location. Vajir shared a look with Feldan but quickly got serious again as a ray of fire lanced through the night. Kendal pushed Eve to the ground and ducked behind a boulder. As she rose, Eve noticed Vajir's approach but quickly returned her attention to the trees. "They keep disappearing. I think there are two of them. One with magic."

"Are you both alright?" Vajir didn't see any new injuries on them.

Kendal nodded. "I feel weak but I'm not hurt."

Eve was obviously frustrated. "I don't see how to force them to fight us close range. Why don't we try to run? We still have a couple of horses."

Feldan piped in. "What about Binxin? We can't leave her to those things."

“Who?” Eve snapped.

“The slave.”

“Enough talk. We need to go.” Vajir kept his head on a swivel as he continued. “Eve, you need to distract them. The next time they attack, just keep that wand firing back at them. I'll round up the horses while Kendal grabs the girl.” He pointed to Feldan. “You can keep an eye out for anything amiss.”

They didn't have long to wait. Another blaze of fire erupted from a spot a bit higher on the mountainside, splashing across the impromptu rock shelter Kendal and Eve huddled behind. Eve responded with her wand while Vajir and Kendal sprang into action.

Vajir reached the two remaining horses, grabbing the reins of one and quickly mounting the other. Kendal stooped to pick up the slave and looked a bit winded as he attempted to carry her over to Vajir. “Come on, she can't weigh more than one of your swords!” Kendal glared but finally reached the side of Vajir's mount. He reached down and grasped the woman by the forearms, dragging her up and across the saddle in front of him. The woman groaned as her burnt skin cracked and bled. He laid a steadying hand on her back and motioned for Kendal to take the other horse. “Eve, Feldan. Let's go.” With a last burst from her wand, Eve turned and sprinted towards them, Feldan barely keeping up on his short legs. Eve angled towards Kendal, who reached down to help her in the saddle behind him. Feldan needed no assistance and Vajir took off at a full gallop as soon as he felt the Halfling's hand on his back.

It was some time before he remembered the other Thayan he'd left behind.

Chapter 13

Polum let his hand slide idly across the woman's bare hip. She nuzzled against him, her freshly shaved head on his muscled chest and a long shapely leg draped across his thighs. Polum smirked as he thought about bedding the priestess of Bast. The hedonist church ran the bathhouses and perpetuated the city's reputation for sensual pleasure. In the wake of the coup the previous year, Polum knew the clergy of the cat goddess felt the need to insinuate themselves into the good graces of the city's new elite. It was a measure of their wisdom that they recognized Polum as a member of that group.

The woman moved, purring softly as she found a more comfortable position. Her body sliding against his roused him from his contemplation. After muttering a quick spell to shore up his strength, Polum roughly pushed the priestess to her back. She woke, startled and angry, and lashed out with an open hand. Long nails scratched across his chest, but Polum only smiled and drew her close. The priestess' struggles quickly changed in character and she was soon purring once more.

A fist pounded on the chamber door. Polum groaned and pushed the woman to arms' length. "What is it?"

The voice on the other side of the door sounded tentative. "Mistress

Barsheh is returned. She is injured my lord.” The priestess squirmed in his grasp, managing to free herself enough to bring her mouth back to his. Polum’s anger rose. He shoved the foolish woman hard and she fell from the bed to land on the smooth tile floor. She came to her feet, her anger very much real this time.

“How dare you...” She pulled back her hand as if to strike him but Polum casually gestured in her direction. Her indignation dissolved into shrieks of pain as hundreds of tiny burning embers flew from his fingertips, sizzling where they hit her exposed skin.

Polum pulled on a robe and flung open the door. “You have called for a priest?” The soldier nodded. “Bring me to her.”

The soldier turned and proceeded down the hall at a fast walk. Barsheh’s quarters were not far and he soon stood in her doorway. The wounded Wizard lay in a canopied bed, priests of Kossuth on either side of her chanting prayers of healing. Polum took in her condition quickly and decided it was grave. The deep tears in her body, obviously the result of some beast’s claws, would be relatively simple to close. Indeed, even as he looked on, they began to seal in response to the priests’ intervention. Of greater concern were the blisters that dotted her skin. Polum knew the spell that created such effects on a person and that similar injuries likely afflicted her lungs.

“I need to speak to her.” The priests looked up and saw Polum for the first time.

“That may not be possible, Lord Polum.” The elderly firemaster rose slowly from his knees. “Brother Serrum is capable of dealing with the straightforward wounds, but the injuries to her lungs and throat are extensive and require a delicate touch.”

“You do not have this skill?”

“It is not a priority of Kossuth to learn such techniques.”

“You will make it a priority, Elder Izcot.” Polum threatened.

Izcot cast down his gaze. “Yes of course, I apologize. I will be able to help, and I am sure I can preserve her life for a time, but to heal her is likely beyond my capabilities.”

Polum sighed. "Very well. Bring her around immediately." He turned to the soldier. "Return to my chambers and have the woman taken to guest quarters. Then retrieve Master Solugum." The soldier saluted and left. Polum moved to Barsheh's writing desk and retrieved a quill and parchment. By the time he returned to the bed, her eyes were open.

"Leave us." The priests rose and left without another word. Polum put a hand on his apprentice's shoulder. "Do not try to speak, just answer my questions." Barsheh nodded weakly and gasped for breath. "Is the site overrun?" She nodded. "Was it the Ogres?" She shook her head and reached for the quill. Polum held the parchment in front of her. As her hand scribbled shakily, his mouth tightened.

"How many?" She shook her head again. "You don't know." Polum closed his eyes and considered for a moment. "I'm sure you fought well, my dear apprentice. These priests will keep you comfortable until a more capable healer can be found." Barsheh visibly relaxed. Justice was often harsh in Thay. Polum leaned close and his voice softened further. "I am pleased with you. You have proven once again that you are a loyal servant. It is my failing as a teacher that you did not prevail." Polum kissed her blistered cheek and stood. The parchment in his hand burned to ash. "Rest. I must plan our revenge."

* * * *

Ehric checked Pai's foot to make sure no blood had soaked through the makeshift bandage before letting her stand. "We will have trouble soon."

Shoptim nodded and turned to the gnomes. "How much longer?"

The older gnome looked up from his work. "I think the stone is free, but it will have to be drawn out. It is shaped like a wedge."

"Fine, step away." The dusky skinned gnomes complied. Shoptim intoned a spell and laid her hands on the rock. The stone shrank in all dimensions and slid to the ground with a dull thud. Warm air wafted from the hole. "Quickly, get in there." Shoptim pointed to the slaves. The gnomes scrambled into the dark hole but Pai hesitated. Ehric didn't blame her. The Wizard kept her voice level. "I can't leave you here alive." Pai cringed and shimmied into the darkness.

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“I’ll stay on this side and cover our tracks as best I can.” Ehric positioned himself to lift the shrunken stone back into position.

“You will follow?”

“Yeah, I’ll be along shortly.” Shoptim squatted in front of the hole. With a last look up and down the passageway, she reached into the darkness and pulled herself out of sight. Ehric noted even a Wizard couldn’t retain much dignity crawling through a hole in a wall.

Despite Shoptim’s reduction spell, the stone was still nearly too much for Ehric. He grunted and felt something twist in his back as he levered the rock into place. He braced his feet against the opposing wall and held the stone in position, waiting for Shoptim’s magic to dissipate.

It felt like a lifetime but was probably only a few heartbeats before the rock swelled, locking itself in the wall once more. Ehric inspected the passageway. There was a wide seam around the loosened stone and a small pile of grit and dust on the ground underneath. Even to Ehric it looked pretty clear that someone had removed the stone and then replaced it. He thought for a second, trying to come up with something he could use to cover that section of the wall. In the meantime he collected some of the grit and tried to smear it into the cracks, with less than ideal results.

In the end he found a low wheeled cart and moved it in front of the loosened stone. A sliver of rock jammed in the spokes was sufficient to prevent the cart from moving. Stepping back, Ehric decided that was the best he was going to be able to do. He intoned and slipped through the seam, finding himself in a narrow, rough hewn passage.

Shoptim held a small stone in her palm that gave off a faint white light. The pebble lit her face from below, giving her a slightly otherworldly appearance. The two gnomes seemed at ease in the narrow confines. They inspected the passage and exchanged whispers in their native tongue. Pai stood hunched, clutching her arms with her eyes firmly locked on the light stone.

Shoptim seemed to see him despite his vaporous form. “Would you mind staying in your present form a little longer? I think it may be

useful.” Ehrlic complied. “Excellent, let’s see where this leads us.” Shoptim turned her gaze to the gnomes once more. “Now that we have a moment, I would like to know your names.”

The gnomes looked at one another and the older one responded. “My name is Filbrim. His name is Porpagil.”

“I am pleased to meet you Filbrim, Porpagil. Could you tell me please what you would do to collapse this tunnel?”

The gnomes looked at one another quizzically. Pai slid down the wall into a crouch, her shoulders shaking in silent sobs. The older gnome, Filbrim, peered at the ceiling of the passage for a minute. He pointed at a section of the rock directly overhead. “This stone is the keystone for this stretch of the tunnel.”

“How much would come down if that stone were removed?”

Filbrim thought about that for a moment before responding. “I’d say a good ten paces or so. All the way back to the wall we came through, surely.”

“Very well. Let’s move down the tunnel a few paces then.” The gnomes led the way with the terrified human stumbling to keep up. Shoptim followed last, looking up at the ceiling as she went.

“Ehrlic, I am going to bring down the passage. Hopefully it will delay anyone following us.” The wizard dropped to one knee and slipped her pack off her shoulders. Reaching inside, she pulled a scroll case out of a side pocket.

The gnomes continued to step backwards, away from the mage as she began to intone. Porpagil reached up and grabbed Pai’s hand, drawing her back as well. Shoptim raised her voice as she uttered the final syllable of the spell, pointing at the rock formation Filbrim had indicated.

There was a loud splat as mud fell from the ceiling, followed by a horrible groan of shifting rock. A high pitched scream erupted from Pai that was quickly drowned out by collapsing rock. Shoptim held her cloak across her nose and mouth to filter the choking dust thrown into the limited air. She seemed satisfied with the results and moved quickly down the passage, taking the lead now. Ehrlic drifted along behind the

coughing slaves.

The tunnel followed a natural fissure in the mountain, and Ehrlic quickly lost track of direction. It was tough for him to judge distance but Shoptim led the group for what he thought was a few hundred paces, before they reached their first obstacle; another tunnel collapse.

Shoptim turned and quickly spotted Ehrlic. "This is why I asked you to keep your air form. Can you see how far this collapse extends?"

Ehrlic considered her request but decided to return to his natural body. Pai and the two gnomes gasped in unison, while Shoptim looked a little annoyed. "I'm sorry but the spell was nearing its end. I didn't want it to end while I was in the middle of that." Ehrlic indicated the rubble.

"That is understandable. You can't have much energy left for casting today."

"No, I don't think I do." Back in his physical body, all of the fear and exhaustion of the battle hit him. Ehrlic decided to sit down.

"Well, we can spend a few hours here then. I don't expect the snakes to follow us immediately."

Porpagil spoke for the first time. "What about air? It is stagnant here."

Ehrlic's breath caught in his throat. He had been distracted since coming underground, but the horror of his situation came back with his coalesced form.

Shoptim merely smiled and reached into her pack once more. "I was expecting to venture under the earth, and I think I am prepared." She pulled forth a small corked bottle and inspected the runes carved in its side. Shoptim handed the bottle to Ehrlic. "Could you unstop this please?"

Ehrlic gripped the protruding cork and popped it free. Clean cool air surged from the bottle. "This is a small portal to the elemental plane of air."

"Amazing."

"I agree. We will not have to worry about air as long as this is with us. Now I suggest we rest. Ehrlic, may I have a word?"

The petite woman led him some paces away. She kept her voice low as

she spoke. "I am going to rest. Would you be so kind as to keep an eye on everyone?"

"Of course. Are you worried about someone in particular?"

"No, nothing like that. I just don't feel comfortable sleeping in the presence of slaves. I don't want to wake up with their hands on my throat."

"I understand."

"Hopefully you can ingratiate yourself to them. The woman looks rather frightened, perhaps you can cheer her up?"

"Well, I'm not all that enamored with this place myself. How are you planning to get back to the surface?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead yet but I have some contingencies in place. You needn't worry so long as you stay close to me."

"I will try to keep my wits then."

"Porpagil's wife is pregnant. You should be able to use that to motivate him if the need arises. I don't know anything about the older gnome, or gnomes in general really."

"I'll go see what I can find out. I don't really need to sleep right now anyway."

"Of course not, you have that ring, don't you? It's almost as impressive as that bottle of mine." With one last knowing grin, Shoptim turned away, looking for a relatively smooth place to lie down.

Ehric returned to the slaves. "I'm Ehric. Sorry about appearing out the air like that. I didn't mean to scare you anymore than you probably are already." The slaves stood silent. "Look, I'm here to help you, and so is she, in her own way. I know that at least five of your friends escaped with my companions." Ehric directed his attention to the gnomes. "They are headed back to their wives right now. The same will happen with you soon enough."

"Have you seen my wife?" Porpagil spoke up.

"She is the one with child, is she not? I guarantee she is more worried about you than you are about her. She is fine." Porpagil let out a great sigh and Filbrim gave the young gnome a great smack on the back.

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“I told you they would be alright. Tewli’s a tough one.” Filbrim turned his attention back to Ehric. “And what are you and... her doing down here?”

“I don’t exactly know. I’m here to get you out safely. Shoptim has some other reasons I’m sure but she’s agreed you are to be freed.”

“I’m glad to hear it. It looks like we would not have gotten far on our own.” Filbrim waved his tiny hand at the mass of stone rumble. He leaned forward and continued in hushed tones. “Could you do something for her?” He nodded towards Pai. “She is a kind person and I’m surprised at her fear. She seemed very brave when she was dealing with the slavers.”

“Even brave people have their limits. I’m sure you feel perfectly comfortable underground, but this is terrifying to me. I will see what I can do.” Before he went, Ehric unloaded a couple of blankets and some cured meat from his pack.

He found Pai huddled against a wall. She looked up as he approached. “How can you... so much rock.”

“Not a pleasant place, that’s for sure.” Ehric dropped his pack next to the woman. “I’ve only got one blanket left. Are you thirsty, hungry?” Ehric handed her his soft leather canteen and Pai drank deeply. “You need to get some sleep. It is going to be a tough day tomorrow and you’ll need your energy.”

“Tomorrow? There is no sun, no air, no tomorrow.” Pai dropped the canteen and clutched her knees to her chest.

Ehric snatched up the skin before too much water spilled out. He grabbed her left ankle and pulled her leg straight. “You need to get all of this despair out of your system right now. In a few hours the Wizard is going to remove the barrier in front of us and we’re going to start marching. You won’t get the chance to hug your legs then.”

Tears streaked her sunken cheeks but Pai said nothing.

Ehric softened his tone. He didn’t have the heart to yell at the woman. “From the looks of you, you’ve been a slave a long time. I’m sure you’ve experienced worse than this.” He wiped away her tears. “There is just

one more thing to endure and then you are free.” Ehrlic pointed at the two gnomes. “Look at them. They are as happy as can be and they actually know what it’s like to live down here.” Pai’s eyes were closed but he hoped she was listening. “I have no experience down in the depths and I have no desire to ever be here again, but I’ve decided I’m not going to panic about all this rock until they do. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes, but...”

“No ‘buts.’ You’re perfectly safe.”

He rummaged in his pack. “I must have some clothing you could wear. You are not a slave anymore.” She finally opened her eyes. Looking down at herself, she seemed to realize how little she wore. She brought her knees back to her chest, this time out of modesty. Ehrlic looked away. “I didn’t mean to... Anyway, I have a spare shirt and some breeches for you, though they will be a little large.” He kept his eyes cast downward as Pai pulled on his clothes.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. The gnomes have thicker skin so I think they’ll be fine with what they have.”

“I am sorry I kicked you.”

“That’s alright; you had every reason to be suspicious. Let me look at your foot. We were in a rush before.” The cut on her foot wasn’t bad but Ehrlic cleaned it out with some water from his canteen and applied a new bandage. “I don’t have any shoes for you, but I can wrap your feet before we start out in the morning.”

Pai wiped her nose on the sleeve of her new, poorly fitted shirt. “I am sorry for this. I do not know what is wrong with me.”

Ehrlic decided it was best to focus the blame on someone else. “It’s the snakes. They can instill fear. Magically I mean. Once you experience that kind of fear, your mind can go wild. But I don’t expect to run into them again.”

“You know about them?”

“Too much and not enough. I was a slave like you for a short while. The snakes caught me in the mountains. So I don’t know too much

about them, except that I never want to see them again. In fact I'd rather talk about something else."

"Did any of the others escape?"

Ehric hesitated. "Some of the gnomes escaped."

"What about the women?"

"I tried, but a Wizard was there..."

"What happened? Are they dead?"

"The wizard killed three. Another was hurt but she should be with some friends of mine. One other ran and I lost track of her. I'm sorry. I wasn't..." Ehric didn't know what to say. *I screwed up and they all died?*

Pai didn't seem to notice his distress. "The ones that lived... Was there one that looked like me?" She was no longer huddled against the wall but leaned forward towards Ehric. "Please, she can't be dead."

"The one who ran off had blond hair but the one who was hurt..." He had been concentrating on her wounds, but as he thought back, her eyes and nose were similar to Pai's. Her hair was black. "Maybe. It was dark but I think she may have been of your race."

"Of course, the spirits would not let her pass yet." Pai seemed to convince herself. "I am sorry the others died, and she would be upset with me for thinking her life was more important, but she is very special."

"Is she family?"

Pai laughed softly. "No. You would know if you spent time with her. Binxin is a holy woman and a descendant of spirits."

She said it like it was a perfectly normal way to describe a person.

"What do you mean, spirits?"

"The spirits in the natural places. She is descended from them."

"I don't understand but I hope she is safe."

Pai smiled fondly. "I am sure of it."

"Are you from the Shaar?"

She shook her head. "I do not know of 'Shaar.' I come from a land far to the East, beyond the steppe where the barbarians live." Pai continued. "But I have not thought of home in a long time. There was no point."

“I can’t imagine what it was like for you to be taken so far from home, but I will help you anyway I can.” She said nothing and silence stretched.

Finally she spoke again in a small voice. “Sleep here would be like death. How can anyone sleep underground?”

“I’m not sure, I wasn’t planning on it myself.” Ehric looked over his shoulder. “The gnomes aren’t having any trouble.” Sure enough, the two gnomes were wrapped in Ehric’s blankets and appeared to be slumbering peacefully.

“They are creatures of earth. Binxin says people are creatures of... I do not know word for it. Place where things meet.”

“I understand, I think.”

“We live where water, earth, and sky all come together. People cannot live in one element.”

“I’m not sure I agree.”

“You drown in water, crushed in earth, fall in air. You must have all to survive.”

“Have you ever flown?”

Pai’s eyes widened. “Are you a shaman?”

“I can use some magic, but I don’t think I’m a shaman.” Ehric smiled. “I’m not philosophical enough for that.”

“Are you descended from spirits as well?”

“I don’t think so. I am human.”

“But you think you can live in the sky alone?” Pai leaned forward, coming close to look him in the eye. “I wonder if perhaps you could.”

“I think I would miss the earth, at least the surface. I could do with never being underground again.”

“Binxin is more than human, fully at home in certain elements alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“She would not drown in water, and is most comfortable in darkness.”

“Darkness, what does that have to do with it?”

“Fire is the last of elements.”

“But what does that have to do with light?”

“The sun gives light and heat. What is the sun but giant fire? She is not

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balanced like we... I am. The gnomes are out of balance in the same way towards the earth.”

“Is this the way all people from your land think?”

“Most people do not have time to think about such things. I was lucky to meet Binxin so she could give me instruction.”

“She sounds like an interesting person. You can introduce us when we get out of here.” Ehcric reached out to put a hand on her bony shoulder.

“You should try to sleep. I will be awake and right beside you.”

“I would stay awake with you. You are a kind man and for once I think I prefer waking life to dreams.” Ehcric smiled and adjusted the blanket on her shoulders.

Chapter 14

Yyriss found Verpith inspecting a wall covered in worn script. She waited, sure that he had noted her approach. After he had finished tracing a line of text with his claw, he spoke. “Yes, Yyriss?”

“The dead are collected and the prisoners secured.”

“How many dead?”

“Fourteen, my Lord. The sorceress Malcathrya was among them.”

“And the humans?”

“Twenty-three bodies were found, as well as four Ogres. We have five Thayan prisoners. The wounded are being kept alive as you instructed. There is one wizard among them, an unconscious female.”

“Take me to them.”

Verpith followed the smaller serpent out of the temple and through the arrayed dead. His eyes fell on the body of a tall female two-leg with dark scales. “Bring Malcathrya.”

Yyriss turned and slithered over to the sorceress. Verpith left her to struggle with the burden and continued to the prisoners. He was surprised to see the archer who had shot at him was still living, though he doubted she would last the night. Quickly passing by the soldiers, he found the Wizard lying a little distance away, guarded by two Yuan-ti.

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The woman was unconscious, her robes ripped and bloody. Verpith knelt and grabbed her chin, turning her head side to side. He clawed away the tattoos adorning her scalp and then inspected the rest of her body. There were no additional magical markings and he concluded she must be a low ranking member of the order.

He instructed the guards. "Take her to a chamber in the temple. If she wakes or her physical condition changes, inform me."

Turning back to the mundane prisoners, he found Yyriss laying Malcathrya on the rocky soil. Verpith reached into his robes and brought out a black gem. Motioning the small tail-walker to the side, he leaned over and pried open the dead sorceress' shattered jaw. The gem went in with difficulty and then the priest took a step back.

Dark speech passed his lips, causing even the unconscious prisoners to moan and thrash. He continued to chant until he felt a response to his supplication. The body of the sorceress darkened and within moments the darkness began to seep from the corpse. Verpith's chant rose in intensity and then cut off abruptly. The prayer was complete.

The body was gone, dissolved into utter blackness, and a deep shadow rose from the ground to hover before Verpith. "Malcathrya, you know who you are, what you are?" The darkness did not respond. Verpith continued. "You can feel the light of life in the humans. Snuff it out!"

The shadow had begun to coalesce into the shape of the sorceress, but Verpith's command sent it into blurred motion. The priest looked on as the horrified Thayans were drained of life. Their screams soon died away and four dark specters rose from dissolving bodies.

He addressed Malcathrya. "There is a passage into the mountain. Take your slaves and search the tunnels for the entrance."

* * * *

The "morning" arrived in a few hours. Shoptim spent nearly an hour studying her spellbook before rising and greeting Ehric.

"No incidents?"

"No, everything was quiet."

"You were able to calm the Shou woman?"

“Pai is Shou?” Ehric had heard of the distant land of Shou Lung, but had never been truly convinced it existed. “How did she end up a slave here?”

“You’d have to ask her but it is not too difficult to conceive.” Shoptim fell into a lecturing tone. “The Tuigans, Hordesmen to you, invaded the kingdoms to the East before they came West. They brought many slaves with them.”

“And she went from being the Tuigans’ slave to being the Wizards’?”

“I think that’s most likely.”

“She must have been very young when she was taken.”

“Indeed.”

“I don’t want to think about what they did to her.”

“Then don’t.” Shoptim was nervous and low on sympathy. “It is in the past. She will not appreciate it if you try to bring up the topic, I can assure you. We should be thinking about how we are to proceed.”

“Very well. I assume you still want me to see the extent of this collapse?”

“I do. I have three more scrolls that will allow me to turn large masses of stone into mud. I don’t want to run out of them.”

“Let me round everyone up then.”

It took only moments to get three slaves up and ready to go. Pai seemed to benefit the most from her chance to rest. The Shou woman held her fear in check and exchanged greetings with Filbrim and Porpagil.

Ehric handed out some dried rations from his pack and explained the course of action.

“Mistress Nuln is determined to find whatever it was the Wizards were trying to find here. I think it is in our best interest to help her complete this search and find another way to the surface.” Ehric addressed Filbrim. “There is going to be another way to the surface, right?”

The old gnome shook his head. “Who knows? I would hope so. It depends on what this place was used for. If people lived down here, I say probably there is another exit. If it is a tomb...they don't need backdoors.”

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“If there is not another way out, do not despair. I can cast the spell that turned me to air on others. We will escape the way we came in if we must.”

“Why not do that now?” Porpagil chimed in. “Let her search on her own. I must get back to Tewli.”

“Personally, I'd rather not try to get past the snakes, even in the form of air, if I can help it.”

“He's right. We should see if there is another way out. What if you were caught?” Filbrim asked.

“What if there is something down there that is going to kill us? At least we know what is behind us.”

“There will be no going back.” Shoptim had heard the conversation and decided to intervene. “I will free you when this task is done but I still need your service. Ehrlic treats you as free, which is laudable, but false.”

Ehrlic was shocked by her tone but the slaves acquiesced immediately. Shoptim continued. “Ehrlic will determine how far this collapse extends. I will need your advice on how best to clear the obstruction. You will be freed soon enough, but your attention needs to remain on the task at hand.”

Ehrlic gave the slaves a sympathetic look. “I'll be right back.”

“Wait a moment. You may want this.” Shoptim handed him a polished stone that gave off a faint light.

“Of course. Thanks.” Ehrlic held the stone as he cast. The light faded with his body. He pressed his insubstantial form against the mass of stone and seeped into the fissures and pores. He was in utter blackness almost immediately and could only guess at the appropriate course. Fortunately the length of the tunnel collapse was only a score of paces. It took nearly a minute for his entire body to seep from the other side of the blockage. Once he was completely free he was still shrouded in darkness and was forced to feel his way along the walls. He had to decide whether to return in his air form or allow himself to coalesce and get a look at the tunnel. Both options caused him some concern but he determined in the end it was safer for Pai and the gnomes if he used his

eyes.

The stone's magic returned with his physical form, illuminating a roughly hewn passage. The air was much warmer, and Ehric mind latched onto the thought of lava nearby. He knelt and touched his hand to the rock floor and found it was no warmer than the air. His relief manifested in a nearly silent sigh. It was a short walk back to the crumbled ceiling, but before he got there a voice whispering in his ear.

“Are you safe?”

Ehric whispered back to the mage. “I am. The collapse extends perhaps twenty paces. This side looks clear.”

“Very good. Back away, I will cast my spell now.”

Ehric did as she suggested, flattening himself against a wall while he waited. It didn't take long. A circular cutout of stone near the top of the tunnel collapse suddenly changed consistency, becoming a thick plug of dark mud. The tunnel was running downhill towards Ehric and the mud slowly oozed out of the hole towards him. There was some momentary noise that Ehric feared would presage a new collapse, but it quickly passed and the steady slurp of the mud continued.

Ehric waited some minutes before he approached the hole. He could just make out the light of Shoptim's stone at the other end of the tunnel. A couple of minutes later Filbrim was the first to climb into the newly formed passage. He moved quickly and surely, despite the slippery conditions and soon Ehric was helping him down to the muddy passage floor. Porpagil came next, he was already halfway down the tunnel when Ehric finished with Filbrim and soon joined him.

Pai was a different matter. She climbed into the tunnel and got about halfway before an ominous noise quivered through the rock. The Shou woman panicked, lurching through the tunnel. Ehric looked past her and saw Shoptim scrambling into the channel. “What are you doing? It's going to collapse.” Shoptim didn't respond and Pai quickly absorbed his attention. Ehric pushed down dread as he leaned into the tube to meet the Shou woman. His hands found her outstretched arm and he pulled. Ehric let his feet slip from their perch and he dragged the mud slicked

slave from the hole as he fell to the floor of the passageway. Pai landed awkwardly on her shoulder but Ehrlic left her to the gnomes to care for. He quickly returned to his perch and found Shoptim was about midway through. The mountain groaned again and chunks of stone dropped into the narrow tunnel.

Shoptim grunted as a stone the size a fist hit her in the back of the knee, but didn't seem to slow her pace. The tunnel was clearly collapsing and the process was accelerating. A half dozen smaller rocks rained down on the mage and larger stones began to block her path. Ehrlic's face must have shown his panic, Shoptim's amused grin seemed to shine out of her mud splattered face as she reached out her hand to him. Ehrlic's calloused hand engulfed her delicate fingers as the rock gave way in a series of rapid sickening snaps.

Ehrlic tried to pull Shoptim free, but her fingers slipped from his grasp as he fell to the passageway floor once again. Something hit him in the head and his last confused thought was that Pai looked almost serpentine as she struggled in the mud to escape the falling rock.

* * * *

Ehrlic woke slowly to a conversation between the slaves.

"-- different from the wizard. We shouldn't be doing this." It was Pai's voice. She still sounded scared.

"I agree that he is well intentioned." Filbrim's voice reminded Ehrlic of gravel. "But he is obviously beholden to the mage. You know he will try to rescue her."

Ehrlic came awake quickly as the memory of the tunnel collapse flooded back. He opened his eyes and tried to speak, but realized that he was gagged and blindfolded; rope bound his arms and legs. All he could do was squirm to get the slaves' attention.

"He's waking up." Ehrlic jumped at the sound of Porpagil's voice right next to him.

"Come back here. Don't touch him." Ehrlic heard footsteps approach through the mud and then felt fingers on his face and scalp. Pai's touch made him flinch in pain.

She spoke softly. "Are you alright? There was a lot of blood."

"Stay away from him. He can use magic too." Filbrim's tone was insistent.

The hand on his face disappeared and the one on his scalp shifted to his shoulder. "We can't leave him like this. We need him if we are going to escape."

"You may be right but we can't be sure until we look for ourselves. There may be another way out of here."

"But what if we do need him? He will not help us if we let the wizard woman die." Ehric was once again impressed with Pai's reasoning. She was making his case well, probably better than he would have.

Filbrim seemed to be considering her argument. As the silence stretched he wondered about Shoptim's condition. They were talking like she was still alive, but did they know for sure?

"Fine. Take off his blindfold and remove the gag. Porp, if he starts to cast a spell, you stab him, you understand me?"

Porpagil's voice quivered a little when he said "yes." Pai's hands moved back to his head and gently removed the blindfold. Filbrim stood a few feet off, holding Ehric's spear in both hands. Pai loosened the knot on the gag and stepped away as he spit out the coarse strip of fabric.

"How long was I out?" Ehric looked to Pai for an answer. He noted the mud that caked her face was dried and cracked.

Her response was timid. "A few minutes."

"Let me go so I can help Shoptim. She could still be alive."

The old gnome spoke. "I believe she will kill us rather than let us escape. Why would she do otherwise?"

"Look, I know she is a Wizard but she is different. She let your women go. They are in a village close by."

"Do you know that for sure? Have you seen them?"

Ehric stuttered. "I... I prepared a place for them and sent them."

"So she could have killed them and you would have no idea."

"NO!" Porpagil interrupted them. "Tewli's not dead!"

Filbrim didn't let the outburst distract him. "We just don't know. That's

the point.”

He kept his eyes locked on Ehric. “You trust her but I don't even understand why you do, let alone see why I should”

Ehric's head throbbed and he couldn't see his way through this argument. Fortunately Pai interjected on his behalf. “And what if you are wrong, Filbrim? Are you willing to take the chance and leave a woman trapped under that stone? What if she does not die before the snake people come?”

“So you argue to spare the life of a Wizard? They enslaved you.”

“This woman saved us from the snakes. She did not enslave me.”

Ehric couldn't keep silent. “Just let me go and get her out of there. If she is... if she is dead then the argument is settled. If not, we can figure out how to keep you safe. I don't think she will be in any condition to threaten you.”

Pai nodded but let Filbrim make his decision. He responded after a few heartbeats. “Very well. Do not try to use your magic except to free her. I was not always a blacksmith and I know how to use this spear.” It was clear from his stance that he was not bluffing.

“I understand. Please.”

Pai began to work on the knots binding his wrists and ankles but ended up using Porpagil's knife to cut the bonds. Ehric's head swam when he rose but he managed to stumble over to the collapse. Pai followed him. “Help me move some of the rocks. I need to be able to touch her.” Pai and Ehric worked frantically and recklessly while the gnomes watched. Both were bleeding from dozens of small scrapes and cuts by the time Ehric's finger brushed against something soft, Shoptim's little finger. Her hand was crushed under a large slab of rock, but the tip of her finger protruded. “I've found her.” Pai stopped her digging. “You should back up.” Pai retreated while he intoned softly the words to the spell that would transform Shoptim's body into air. As he completed the spell, Ehric backed away. The rock fall collapsed further with Shoptim's body no longer supporting the stone that had crushed her.

Ehric looked to Filbrim. “I need to cast another spell to pull her out.”

He nodded. Ehric briefly considered putting a lightning bolt into the gnome but the impulse passed. Instead he used one of his simplest spells to create a continuous light breeze in the direction he desired. He set the spell in place deep in the collapsed tunnel and soon he could feel the air seeping from the stones. "It will be some minutes before the spell is over." He threw a scowl in Filbrim's direction and sat down.

The four of them waited in silence for what felt like an eternity. Even though they all knew it was coming, Shoptim's reappearance was a shock. Her body materialized at an awkward angle about head height from the passage floor. She hit the ground with a finality that unnerved Ehric. He rushed to her side, convinced she was dead. Red mud covered her face and neck. He put his raw fingers to the side of her throat but the thick mud masked any life pulse she might have had. He pushed down panic and checked for other signs of life, putting his ear to her mouth and willing her chest to rise and fall. There was nothing. Ehric grew more desperate and moved down to listen to her heart. His own heartbeat was loud in his ears but he convinced himself he felt something.

"Her mouth is full of mud." Ehric realized he had closed his eyes while he was listening; when he opened them he saw Pai pulling a clump of mud out of the Wizard's mouth.

"Help me get her on her side." Together Ehric and Pai rolled the petite mage. "Hold her. I'm going to try something."

Ehric placed one hand on the mage's upper back and closed his eyes once more. He tried to envision the air in her lungs; warm, moist, and stagnant. He cast the same spell he had just used to draw her vaporous body out of tunnel, but this time he acted to force the stale air from her still lungs. The air started to move but stopped against the viscous mud in her throat. Slowly, Ehric increased the force he applied with the spell. After a few agonizing moments he felt something slip, heard and felt the air following the mud from her mouth.

"She's not breathing." Pai was right. Her throat was clear, but Shoptim was not drawing breath. Ehric forced air down into her lungs, this time not relying on spells. Pulling Shoptim to her back, he took a deep breath

and blew into her mouth. He saw her chest rise in his peripheral vision. He drew another breath and repeated again, and again. As he was about to push a fourth lungful of air into her, Shoptim convulsed and began to cough violently. More mud surged from her mouth, followed immediately by the contents of her stomach.

Ehric rolled her to her side once more as she continued to wretch. He shared a smile with Pai, who placed her hand on his shoulder and congratulated him. "You did well."

He surprised himself with his response. "Akadi be praised." He had never really worshiped the Lady of the Winds but it seemed the appropriate thing to say. Shoptim's fit of coughing subsided without her regaining consciousness. "We need to where else she is hurt." Ehric began to prod her stomach and ribs with his fingers, looking for signs of bleeding or broken bones. He thought her ribs were mostly intact but the mage's abdomen was hard, a sign she was bleeding inside.

Filbrim spoke for the first time since the woman had reappeared. "Is she going to live?"

"I don't know. She's breathing again, but she's bleeding in her gut."

Filbrim nodded. "Well, we need to start walking again if we are going to stay ahead of our pursuers. Step away from her for now."

Ehric's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What are you going to do?"

"I won't hurt her. Just back away."

He did as he was told but prepared himself to intervene if Filbrim was lying. The gnome approached Shoptim, shifting the spear to free his left hand. He crouched beside the injured woman and ran his hand along her body, looking for hidden weapons. Finding none, he pulled off her boots to reveal a vial of liquid and a narrow dagger. Filbrim gently removed the small pack she carried but didn't open it. He handed the rucksack to Porpagil. "Put it on."

Filbrim stepped away from the mage and spoke to Ehric. "I'm willing to let you carry her, but you will have to bind her hands and gag her mouth."

"There may be something in that pack to help her."

"True, but I am sorry to say I prefer this woman on the brink of death.

She can cause less trouble.” Ehrlic took a step towards the gnome, anger flashing in his eyes. Filbrim continued. “When we are free of this place, I will leave the pack with you. So you should move quickly.”

Ehrlic's patience was growing thin. He had no doubt he could overpower the two gnomes, but he wasn't sure he could do so without killing them. Despite his concern for Shoptim, he couldn't bring himself to kill the gnomes to save her. If he were in their shoes, he'd probably act the same. And he had to think of Porpagil's pregnant wife. Restraining the lightning that seemed to want to course down his arm of its own accord, Ehrlic snatched up the gag he'd recently worn himself and started to tie it on Shoptim.

With that done, Ehrlic lifted the mage and cradled her. “Alright, let's go. I guess I'll lead the way?”

“Yeah, that would be best, I think.” Pai fell in close beside Ehrlic while the gnomes brought up the rear.

* * * *

Ehrlic's arms were finally beginning to burn with fatigue. He had carried Shoptim for what he guessed was about twenty minutes, when Filbrim called a halt.

Ehrlic kept the mage in his arms as he spoke. He didn't want to disturb her any more than he had to. “What is it?”

“There is something wrong ahead.” Ehrlic couldn't see any farther down the tunnel than the light of the magical stone reached. Apparently the gnomes' vision was superior. “A rift. Can't you hear the water?”

“This is your environment, not mine. I can't see anything or hear anything.”

“Put her down and come with me. Pai, you can stay and keep an eye on her.” Pai looked to Ehrlic and he nodded, laying Shoptim on a relatively smooth section of the tunnel. He walked forward with the gnomes and soon found they were correct. A deep rift intersected the tunnel at a right angle. The passage continued beyond the gap. This close, Ehrlic was finally able to hear the babble of water somewhere below them.

“How far up does it go?” Filbrim and Porpagil had been peering down

into the abyss and looked up.

“Not far. But this is a good sign. The water is moving. It may lead to a way out of the mountain.”

Ehric considered the situation before responding. “We can't take Shoptim down this way. But maybe I can find a way for you to escape.”

“Be quick. We will wait here.”

“Of course.” Ehric uttered an arcane syllable and stepped off the ledge. Porpagil gasped and started forward in what appeared to be an effort to catch him. Ehric just smiled as he slowly descended. “I'll be back as soon as I can. If Shoptim is not alive when I return, things will not go easy with you.” He let a little lightning run down his arm.

The rift did not maintain a constant width but it never narrowed so far for Ehric to have trouble navigating down. His light stone lit the rock around him but did not extend far into the blackness below him. He pushed down his fear and reached the base of rift in less than a minute. A thin ribbon of water proceeded swiftly along, tumbling over and around the irregular features of the fissure. He found a ledge near the water and let his spell expire. He palmed the light stone and waited for his vision to adjust. After another minute or two in total darkness, he was able to see just the slightest hint of light downstream. Ehric removed one of the light stones and left it on the ledge before casting the spell that would turn him to air.

He drifted downstream, hovering just above water and letting the air currents the stream created help pull him along. The light grew in intensity and as he came around a bend he was struck by a shaft of light poring in from a jagged crack. Ehric drove towards the light and emerged from the mountainside. He willed his insubstantial form to turn in the air and found the small steam poured from the mountain, cascading down a sheer cliff fifty paces high. He basked in the sun and open air for a moment before forcing himself to return to the dark confines of the mountain.

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The shadow drifted in the darkness, driven by some will it could not comprehend. Confusion dominated what passed for thought in the creature. When it tried to remember, it knew there was something to remember, thought would be overcome by thirst. And when thirst threatened to twist its course, the iron will would return, driving it to seek a passage of air.

And so the creature drifted through solid rock: seeking air, thirsting, trying to remember...

* * * *

Ehric returned after leaving Porpagil at the base of the falls. He and Filbrim agreed to wait for twelve hours before they would try to make their own way.

He found Pai holding the Wizard's head in her lap and stroking her forehead. "I will check the pack." He discovered a vial that had the same label as the one Shoptim had given him. "Lift her head and I'll try to give her some." Pai supported Shoptim's head and shoulders while Ehric poured the contents into her mouth. She reflexively swallowed. The effects were immediate and drastic. Shoptim inhaled sharply and jerked to a sitting position, knocking the vial from Ehric's hand. Her eyes

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were wide as her hands went to her waist, feeling for a weapon or wand. Finding nothing she started to cast. Ehrlic recovered quickly and wrapped his arms around her.

“It's ok. It's Ehrlic.”

Shoptim continued to struggle for a moment but seemed to just as suddenly come to her senses, sagging into his arms.

Ehrlic whispered in her ear. “Do you hurt?”

Shoptim seemed to think about his question. “I believe I hurt everywhere. Can you let me lie down?”

Ehrlic blushed and gently lowered her to the floor of the tunnel. “Is there anything in your pack to help you?” He pulled her rucksack over.

“I could only identify one of the vials. Do you have more healing salves?”

“Indeed I do. Show me the potions and I'll tell you which one.” Ehrlic did that and soon Shoptim looked and acted much healthier.

“What has happened to Filbrim and young Porpagil? They were not injured I hope?” Shoptim's voice did not contain much concern.

“No, I led them out. Pai agreed to stay behind to help me with you.”

“I see. They gave you trouble then?”

“A little. You worried them. Understandably.”

“Understandably. I'm sure I owe it to you that I am still alive.” Shoptim's smirk was back and Ehrlic decided he didn't mind. “I also suspect I look as bad as you two. Give me a moment to freshen up.” Her hands moved in a complex manner and flecks of blood, mud, and other detritus peeled away from her skin and clothing. “I'd offer the same service to you, but I think you look more rugged the way you are.” She turned to the Shou woman. “But a woman should take care in her appearance. May I?” Pai shook her head, looking shocked. “Suit yourself.”

“Do you want to continue on?”

“I would. Will the Shou be accompanying us?”

Ehrlic turned to Pai. “You can go with the gnomes.”

“I will stay with you.”

Shoptim looked at Ehrlic askance. “Very well then. I assume there have

been no deviations, no forks in the tunnel?” Ehrlic shook his head. “Alright. Then we just need to cross this gulf and continue.”

A combination of Ehrlic's and Shoptim's spells made it a simple matter to bridge the chasm. The character of the passage changed on the far side. Instead of roughly carved rock, the walls were smooth, with stone pillars rising at regular intervals to support a taller ceiling and wider passage. Shoptim inspected the engravings on one of the pillars.

“What does it say?”

“Just a moment.” Shoptim chewed on her lower lip as she ran her finger along the carvings. “The script is Draconic, but the language is different. I can only read the occasional word. I think it may be an old dialect of Untheri.”

“What would that be doing here?” Unther was hundreds of leagues to the east, a land traditionally known for tyranny but more recently for chaos in the wake of the Mulhorandi invasion.

“I'm not sure. Does this rock look right to you?”

“It doesn't look like the walls, if that's what you mean.”

“Indeed. It is marble.” Shoptim ran her hand along the smooth surface. “I think this is from an Untheri temple.”

“That doesn't make any sense to me. How could these columns be moved from a temple in Unther all the way here?”

“I agree it would take a determined effort, but the devout are often determined people.”

“But why move a temple?”

“To hide it, perhaps?” Shoptim turned away from the pillar to look up at Ehrlic. “Do you know anything of the gods of Unther, of the goddess most loved and feared in that realm?”

“No, I am no student of foreign lands.”

“I suppose not. Perhaps you have heard of Tiamat?” Ehrlic was silent. He had heard of Tiamat, the evil dragon goddess. “I thought maybe you had. She is worshiped by many in Unther. I believe this may be one of her temples.”

“Who is this 'Tiamat' you speak of? Is she a powerful spirit?” Ehrlic

had almost forgotten Pai was there. Her voice behind him made him jump.

Shoptim laughed. "Yes, she is the Goddess of the evil dragons. A very powerful spirit indeed. She is a force of chaos, the antithesis of the orderly wyrms of your realm."

"What do the snakes want with this place?"

"An excellent question. I wonder what Polum is interested in as well. What would Tiamat's worshipers in Unther need to hide?"

"So you want to go through with this?"

"Of course. I didn't expect the snakes and Master Polum were looking for something benign. Now we have an inkling of what we may face."

Shoptim looked from Ehrlic to Pai. "Do you wish to go back?"

"Of course I do, but you are right. I said I would help you and so I shall." Ehrlic continued to Pai. "I want to take you out of here."

Pai's mud caked face was determined. "You are a good man. You have freed me. You saved this woman. You did not kill Filbrim though you had every reason and I know you could have. I will help you."

Shoptim chuckled. "Have you been casting spells again, Ehrlic? Tsk tsk."

Pai looked confused by Shoptim's comment and more so at Ehrlic's angry response. "I have not."

"Fine. Everything she said was true anyway. I haven't expressed my gratitude properly myself." Shoptim slid uncomfortably close to him, craning her neck to look him in the eye. "I would be dead if not for you. No one has ever treated me as well as you have. I fear it is because you do not know me well enough." The mage hugged him quickly; Ehrlic did not have a chance to return the embrace before she had disengaged and stepped away. "I thank you and I promise not to question your motives again."

Ehrlic didn't know what to say. "I... It's alright, I know you were just joking. Shall we get going?"

"Yes, be on the lookout for traps. I will be able to see if there is any magic but it is possible there are mundane devices as well."

As they walked down the passage Shoptim continued to speak with Ehrlic, this time using her magic to keep the conversation private.

Her voice tickled in his ear. “How did you get the Ogres to fight the Wizards?”

“I used the same spell as the one I cast on Yyll, but instead of trying to get them to trust me, I concentrated on making the Ogres and the soldiers enraged.”

“That is remarkable. It worked amazingly well.” Shoptim paused. “Have you always been able to influence people? Not that overtly, but have you always been influential?”

“I don't think so. I just tried to copy the spell Pethiss used. I didn't even know it was possible to affect a person's mind until I met her.” Ehrlic continued. “Why are you asking about this?”

“This kind of magic is dangerous. I told you that before but I have been thinking more about it recently. Did you feel enraged at all during the fight on the mountainside, after you cast the spell of influence?”

Ehrlic started to answer in the negative but remembered Okhamet. “I lost control for a moment, yes. After Okhamet killed the slave women... I was furious. But she had just killed three defenseless women right in front of me.”

“I'm worried that your spell is not as directed as you think. I think you get an echo of the emotions you are trying to impart. That would explain your affection for Yyll, wouldn't it?”

Ehrlic didn't like her line of reasoning. “Yyll saved my life and I treated her poorly, twisting her emotions. The fact that she wanted to feel more than the emotions of a snake is why I like her.”

“Perhaps. It is tough to tell with magic. Just be careful in the future.”

“I don't plan on using that spell again.”

“That would probably be for the best. You are clearly an Elementalist. You should stick to manipulating air.”

“What do you mean, an Elementalist?”

“Obviously you have a predisposition to controlling air. There are some students of the Art that have devoted themselves in a similar manner, but

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the few Wizards I know who have tended to study fire.”

“So all you are saying is that they focus on Fire spells?”

“No, not exactly. You have an affinity for air and are reasonably adept at manipulating it but there is more to the Art than that. I have not formally studied the techniques but I could elaborate on what I know if you are interested.”

“Please, it will take my mind off of dragons.”

Shoptim chuckled lightly. “I know that students of this craft must make contact with a creature from the elemental planes. You can imagine, I'm sure, that can be a dangerous endeavor.”

“Why would anyone wish to call an elemental?”

“They have secrets. A mortal can sometimes convince them to pass on knowledge, with the ultimate goal of becoming an elemental himself.”

“How is such a thing possible?”

“I don't know. That's why they are called secrets.” When her laughter subsided, Shoptim continued. “I could help you contact a native of the plane of air. Some of them I think you would find rather pleasant.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, they aren't all living whirlwinds. There are creatures known as sylphs that would be more to your liking. You do like beautiful women with dragonfly wings, don't you?”

Ehric ignored her. “How do you know about these creatures? Have you seen an elemental?”

“Certainly, they are often summoned to perform tasks or answer questions.” Shoptim paused and her voice lost all merriment when she spoke again. “Sylphs are put to a different use.”

“What do you do to them?”

“Not me. I've been able to avoid the task so far.”

Ehric had trouble keeping his voice to a whisper. “What is done?”

“Their wings are useful for spells and magical items pertaining to air or flying. That cloak of yours, for instance.”

“You take their wings?”

“Ehric, they are killed. The wings are the most potent parts of their

bodies but their blood and even eyes have uses.”

“I asked you before how you could join an organization that killed your brothers, but that was the wrong question. They had a choice to make, as you pointed out. These slaves...” He nodded to Pai. “had no choice. You murder creatures, thinking creatures, for clothing?”

“It is more correct to say they are murdered for money and to increase the influence of the Wizards in Faerun.”

“How is that any better?”

“I didn't say it was but it always helps to know the proper motivation for someone's actions. For instance, let's say you want to meet a sylph. A Wizard doesn't hold any particular feelings one way or another for sylphs. He will simply determine what the creature is worth as “raw material” and price her accordingly.” Ehric pushed down his anger and revulsion, knowing that Shoptim was just trying to educate him. “You were forced into this fight with Polum's followers because he was unwilling to sell these slaves. His motivation for keeping them was entirely different. He couldn't let knowledge of this work to get out, for whatever reason. Therefore their lives were forfeit.”

“Fine, but how can you work for these people?”

“I am working for myself. I told you I have not murdered any of these poor creatures. On occasion I've been required to perform evil acts, but those acts were done under duress.”

“But if you just got away from them, removed yourself from their command...”

“And if I had, how would the events of this day have proceeded? You would be hiding in a tavern with a snake woman and the gnomes would have been taken for sale in the Underdark. Pai would be facing her own imminent demise.”

“But...”

“No evil acts I have performed would have gone undone if I had been a peasant instead of a Wizard. But I assure you that any good things I have done, any relief to the suffering souls I have provided, would not have occurred.”

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“That... that is dangerous.”

“I am careful.”

“I mean to your soul. You can justify any evil act you perform.”

“I avoid as many situations as I can but it is the price I must pay for my position. I am forced to harm some but I am uniquely positioned to help others. Is there some flaw in my logic that I have missed?”

“There... no. What you say makes some sense but I could never live that way myself. I don't know how to detach myself from my actions.”

“There is no need for you to. Can we please discuss something else? I was serious about helping you contact a sylph or some other creature from the plane of air. I think that is the only way for you to increase your power”

“I'm not at all certain I would want to become an air elemental.”

Shoptim chuckled. “That should not be a concern. I believe that takes something like a lifetime of study. I thought that you might want to make contact with beings that could help you with your craft. I like the idea of a sylph because she could actually speak with you and I can perhaps arrange for her to be well disposed to you.”

“What are you saying? Is there one in the Enclave? How many innocents are suffering there like the women...” Ehhric stopped and leaned against the passage wall. He no longer whispered. “Seeing those women burn... I could have saved some of them earlier but I didn't want to alert the Wizards. They burned to death.”

Pai was confused by the seemingly random statement, but quickly moved to Ehhric's side. Shoptim stopped walking and kept her distance as she spoke. “This is foolishness. It is good that you do not revel in the death of those women, that their death affects you, but you bear no responsibility for their fate.”

“The mistress speaks truly. I believe they would have killed us all soon. At least some lived, if only to remember the others.”

Ehhric did not hear Pai words, images of the burned bodies, the feel of a woman's skin peeling away as he lifted her, overwhelmed him, and he slumped to the ground.

“Open your eyes. Look at me.” Shoptim's voice was compelling. The concern etched in her face looked completely out of place. “Don't close your eyes, it only makes things worse. If you can't look at me, look at her. We're both alive because of you.” Ehrlic focused on her eyes. “I'm sorry I upset you. I should not have been so selfish. I wanted you to tell me what I was doing was alright. You have been through a great deal and I should have been more sensitive.”

Ehrlic was embarrassed. Here he was being comforted by two women when there was unknown danger ahead. He forced himself back to his feet, wiping his sleeve across his eyes. “Enough talking. Let's get this over so I can see the sky again.”

“I agree.” Shoptim spun on her heel and kept silent. Pai's hand lingered on his arm but she fell behind him as he began to walk.

They had not gone far when Shoptim raised her hand. “What is it?”

“I sense magic. The column up ahead,” Shoptim stopped to count. “The fifth one up on the right is infused with magic.”

“What does that mean?”

“It could be a magical trap or something else entirely. I will attempt to dispel it.”

“Is that wise?”

“Who knows? I don't want to walk past it, do you?”

“Go ahead.” Ehrlic backed away from Shoptim a step as she began to cast. He did not see any overt effect from the casting, no rays or flashes of light, but the column responded nonetheless. The stone flowed silently, drawing down from the ceiling. His spear came up instinctively and he noted Shoptim was the one backing away now. “What's happening?”

“It's a golem.” Shoptim dropped to her knee and pulled off her pack. The column began to take a humanoid shape, rapidly refining its features into a distinctly feminine form. The golem held a bright sword, the point rested on the ground at its feet. The pommel stopped just under pink marble lips. The creature was no bigger than a small woman and the weapon looked ridiculous in comparison to its size. Still, Ehrlic felt sure

the living statue would have no trouble wielding the massive blade.

“What are we doing?” Ehrlic tried to keep his tone calm.

“Keep it busy a moment. I will take care of it.” Ehrlic started to reply but the golem charged, cutting off any further discussion. He was surprised at the thing's speed, it moved in long strides to cover the distance between them. Ehrlic let it come.

Its swordcraft did not match its agility. The creature charged with the massive sword held high above its finely carved head. Ehrlic stood his ground until the last moment, spear held high as if to parry the golem's blow. Instead he set the butt of the spear against inside of his back foot and ducked low. The golem hit the spear head at a dead run. Ehrlic felt the spear flex and then, to his shock, the shaft snapped. Lightning flashed and a tremendous clap of thunder seemed to shake the very mountain itself.

Ehrlic thought he hit the ground twice, only belatedly did he realize the first impact had been with the ceiling. Adrenaline kept him awake and he was quickly on his feet, searching for the fate of the construct. He found it lying supine, a shattered column pinning it to the ground. He couldn't tell how damaged the creature was, but it still struggled.

A hand rested on his shoulder. He spun to face Shoptim. She spoke but Ehrlic had to strain to hear over the intense ringing in his ears. “Excellent work.” Looking past her shoulder, he saw Pai pulling herself to her feet. She had no obvious injuries.

“My spear.” Ehrlic kept an eye on the golem as he bent to recover the head of the weapon.

“Yes, it appears its magic is expended. Do you have any skill with the sword?”

“Some, sure. Are we just going to leave that thing there?”

Shoptim glided over to the golem, approaching it from the side. “It appears to be trapped. I'm glad you were able to deal with it, even if it did cost you that magnificent spear. Magic can be very unreliable against creatures of this type.” The mage knelt out of reach of the golem. “Come look at her. Truly exquisite.”

“I'll take your word for it. It can't get out?”

“No I believe it is firmly trapped. There is a spark of intelligence in her eyes. I wish we had more time.” Shoptim rose to her feet. “Alas, it is not to be. As I was saying, do you have any skill with the sword?”

“I said that I did. I carried a spear because it fit in with the Orcs and Ogres. When I was a caravan guard, I carried a sword.”

“Very good, I have a fine blade I took from the gnomes' slavers. It is a light weapon as swords go, but still too heavy for me. I would like you to have it.” Shoptim retrieved the weapon from a small, obviously magical pocket on the side of her pack and handed it to Ehric.

The blade rested in a simple black leather sheath. Drawing the sword revealed a narrow double edged blade made of a black metal he did not recognize. Ehric tested the balance of the weapon and decided it was surprisingly light.

“Is this a woman's blade?”

Shoptim smirked. “Perhaps...”

The grip felt strange in his hands, and he sheathed the blade to look at it. It was made of two materials, one bright and the other the same black metal as the blade. He drew the light stone Shoptim had given him and looked more closely at the features of the grip. The engraved image was disturbing. Two Elven women, one dark skinned and the other crafted of bright silver, were entwined. The dark skinned woman held the taller surface elf from behind as a giant spider, which formed the pommel, plunged sword-like legs into her torso and neck. The swordsmith had taken special care to carve the horror and torment on the surface elf's face.

“They have an odd fixation on murder for such an advanced race.” Shoptim had come up beside him without him noticing.

“I do not think I can carry a Drow weapon.”

“That is your decision, of course, but it is a fine sword, despite its objectionable details. Personally I like the idea of you using it. I know it would greatly agitate its former owner.”

“I guess I don't have much choice.” Ehric collected the rest of the

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broken spear and stuffed them in his pack. He kept the sword in hand.

Shoptim nodded. "We can't leave anything behind for someone to track."

"What if there are more of them?" He indicated the golem still struggling futilely under the broken rocks.

"I think I know how to deal with them. I will need a little time though, so you will have to keep them away from me."

"Then I very much hope she was alone."

The air grew warmer as the passage took a downward slant. Columns of marble still supported the ceiling of the passage but Shoptim did not detect any magic emanating from them. Besides the oppressive heat in the air, no other dangers presented themselves.

"It looks like the passage is coming to an end." With the gnomes gone, Ehric now had the best eyesight. "Let's move quietly."

Shoptim nodded and together they crept forward. The passage ended in an abrupt drop of maybe three times Ehric's height into a large cavernous space. The ceiling of the passage was level with the ceiling of the larger chamber. A dull red glow lit the cavern from somewhere far off in front of them and to their left. The glow was sufficient to let Ehric see the general features of the cavern floor, which appeared to be covered at regular intervals by large lumps of stone. Darkness swallowed the cavern off to the right.

"You and I can..." A small flash of red light appeared from the darkness to their right, growing steadily brighter. "What's?" Suddenly Ehric realized the light was coming closer, coming straight at them.

"Jump!" Shoptim leapt from the edge as Ehric reached back for Pai. She was right behind him and he felt her hands clutch his sweaty arm. Ehric threw himself from the ledge, pulling the slave behind him. He waited until the last possible instant to slow their fall and a shudder ran through his spine when he hit the ground. The space they had just vacated exploded in flame.

Ehric drew the Drow sword while Pai maintained an iron grip on his off hand. Shoptim was already beginning to cast, her voice confident as she

pronounced arcane words. A moment later a bright white light exploded on the ceiling of the cavern and held there, illuminating a large swath of the chamber. Ehric squinted against the sudden brightness and peered over the mounds of stone covering the floor to around knee height. What he saw filled him with dread. Two of the living statues flanked a gigantic beast as they charged across the boulder strewn cavern. The golems darted between the obstacles with accomplished grace, in sharp contrast to the beast that outpaced them.

It was a four legged monster with a massive, round body, at least his height at its shoulder. It charged over the low mounds in its way, occasionally breaking off chunks of stone as it came. The beast's head sported a wide fan of bone protecting its neck. A deep threatening roar revealed a fire burning in the creature's throat.

Ehric forced himself into action. He could barely make out Shoptim's chanting somewhere off to his side as he began his own incantation. A bolt of lightning streaked from his hand, striking the beast in the head, but failing to slow its charge.

Ehric judged he had time for one more spell and turned to Pai. His hand quivered slightly, whether from fear or the thundering beast, he was not sure. Still, his voice didn't waver as he intoned the arcane words that would turn her into air. Pai's eyes widened in realization and she shook her head. She released her grip on his arm and ran from him, directly at the monster bearing down on them. Ehric lost his spell in shock and screamed after the Shou woman.

Pai was already three strides away from Ehric before he started to pursue her. He only got a couple of steps before he realized he wouldn't catch her in time. He frantically looked for something to change the situation and his eyes fell on Shoptim. The mage looked on from the top of one of the low mounds nearby. She held a scroll in her hands but was not reading; instead she appeared to be waiting.

He turned back to Pai just as the monster was upon her. She ducked and rolled to the side as it snapped at her. The beast's beak-like mouth snapped shut on the slave's calf, dragging the shrieking woman for a

heartbeat before tossing its head back to the side, releasing its grip for a moment. Pai's body flew freely in the air and then the jaws snapped shut again, this time closing around her torso. The monster skidded to a halt before hitting the far wall, whipping its head around to face Ehric. Pai lay open mouthed in its jaws, her face registering only shock as she lay in the monster's grip.

The beast started forward and Ehric mouthed the words to activate his cloak. He couldn't look away from the dying slave. Blood ran from her nose and mouth as her body spasmed slightly. The monster had taken a half a dozen steps when Pai went suddenly rigid. The beast quivered a moment before dropping its head to the ground. Small bursts of flame escaped around the edges of its mouth as it dragged its burden across the stone floor.

“Kill it!” He heard Shoptim scream from behind the beast and he rushed forward, sword drawn. It was trying to drop Pai but seemed unable to get its mouth open and incapable of lifting her. Ehric didn't understand but he used his wings to drop down on the creature from above. The narrow Drow blade pierced the monster's eye, driving deep into its skull. In its death throes the beast found a new strength. Its whole body thrashed and rolled, knocking Ehric to the ground. He narrowly avoided being crushed and watched in horror as Pai's body fractured. As her armless torso broke in two, Ehric realized what Shoptim had done. Pai's blood coated a body turned to stone.

Movement to his side broke his concentration on the slave's fate. One of the living statues had made it across the cavern, its sword descending at his head. He ducked under the massive bastard sword, his own blade flashing out to score a slashing blow across its thigh. Ehric struck again at the same leg before the golem brought the sword back around. Raising his blade in defense, he just managed to intercept the horizontal slash. The sword, driven by the golem's great strength, forced the drow blade back into Ehric's face. He grunted as the edge dug into his cheek. Switching the blade to his left hand, Ehric stumbled backwards while casting.

The guardian came forward, slowed somewhat by the gashes in its leg, but still weaving the heavy sword with ease. Ehcric continued to give up ground, deflecting a slash meant to cut him off at the knees, while chanting the final syllable for his spell. Lightning coursed down his arm and pulsed into the golem. Chunks of marble exploded from the construct's body and deep cracks spiderwebbed across its torso. It tried to raise its sword but a crack in its wrist suddenly grew, and the weapon fell to the ground, still clutched in a stony hand. Ehcric stepped forward, lowering his shoulder and slamming into the guardian's chest. It was like running into an old oak but he did make to the golem to take a step back. Its leg, weakened by Ehcric's sword, gave way with a sharp crack. As it hit the ground, the magic sustaining the creature failed entirely.

Ehcric swung his head and spotted Shoptim on the far side of the monstrous carcass. She stood against the wall, just below the passage, having already dealt with the second construct.

The golem was immensely strong but its stone body doomed it, dragging it to the bottom of the deep pit of mud Shoptim had created. Only the construct's beautifully carved head was visible and the Wizard was reading a second scroll as he approached.

Ehcric glanced from the trapped construct to Shoptim, but she did not acknowledge him, intent on reading the scroll quickly and accurately. Beyond her, Ehcric saw another shimmering ball of flame slicing through the air. He shouted a warning and the Wizard threw herself to the ground just as sizzling ball exploded into a massive conflagration.

The force of the explosion sent Ehcric scrambling for cover behind one of the low mounds. The flames hadn't touched him and it only took a moment for him to recover his breath. He quickly removed his pack. Staying low, he crawled on his belly between the mounds of stone, towards the source of the fireballs. He could hear the thick slumping noises of the golem struggling in the mud pit, but otherwise all was silent.

A welcome voice sounded in his ear. "Are you alive?"

Ehcric whispered back. "Yes, I'm trying to get closer to whoever is throwing those things."

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Even through her whisper, Ehric could tell Shoptim was in pain. “That is a good plan. I will try to draw him out.”

“How badly are you hurt?”

“I will be fine, thanks to your warning. Just keep moving and don't be spotted.”

Ehric did not bother to respond but did as she said. A minute passed, punctuated by sudden explosions of flame, seemingly tossed out at random. He made good progress, confident that whoever was lobbing the fiery spells had no idea where he was.

Shoptim's whisper came again. “Are you ready?”

“Just about.”

“Very well.”

“Do you know what it is yet?”

“I'm not sure. I have never seen its like before. Reptilian for sure, but bipedal with useful hands. It has some wands hanging from a belt and is obviously a spellcaster.”

“Alright, I'm ready. I can't really see it yet but I am within a dagger throw.”

“Save the dagger and use your lightning.”

“I'm ready.”

“Give me a moment to cast.” The spell reached his ears as a whisper and didn't take long to complete. “He should be very distracted in just a moment. When you hear the... here they come now.” A moment later, he heard it, a droning and clicking noise he quickly identified as a huge swarm of insects.

Ehric started to cast as he stood, and the reptilian spellcaster was plainly visible even in the relative gloom of the chamber. The ground around it seemed to writhe as thousands of insects swarmed up its legs. Despite his peril, the sorcerer quickly spotted Ehric and leveled a wand.

The wand activated before Ehric finished his incantation, but apparently the insects were having an effect on the dragon-kin. The narrow violet beam shot wide and Ehric was able to complete his spell.

The sorcerer ducked to the side but the lightning found its mark.

Insects exploded around the reptile and it screamed in rage and pain. With impressive quickness it leapt away, clearing a full three rows of the mounds.

Ehric had started forward, sword in hand, when he spotted Shoptim. Somehow she had gotten behind the creature, her fingers moving furiously as she cast. Ehric decided to forego spells and continued to charge forward.

Intense cold slammed into him from behind and his legs locked. He threw out his arm to break his fall, rolling off one of the mounds of stone to land on his back. His legs were numb but he managed to push himself up to see his assailant.

It was a woman, not one of the animated statues, and Ehric didn't have time to worry about where she came from. She wore fairly primitive armor, what appeared to be a bronze or copper breastplate, engraved with the crude shape of a dragon. A pleated skirt reinforced with strips of the same metal fell to just above the knee. Her legs were bare, with only thin leather straps wrapped around her ankles to secure her sandals. What captured his attention was the wicked looking morningstar she held in her right hand. The weapon had multiple heads fashioned into bestial skulls. Her left arm ended in a scale mail glove. Two knife blades gave the appearance of claws jutting from the back of her hand.

Ehric gaze shifted to the priestess' face even as he scrambled to cast a spell. She wore a white shawl wrapped around her head and neck. A narrow band of stiff leather stretched across nose and cheeks, holding a translucent veil across her mouth. The veil was caked in frost. Her eyes were wild as she ran forward.

Ehric was nearly exhausted but he found some hidden reserve of strength. The woman was only two strides from him when he unleashed the lightning. Ehric's magic guided the bolt straight into her breastplate, and then nature took over. Much faster than Ehric's mind could comprehend, the lightning sought a way to the ground. It danced across the woman's metal armor, heating it enough to sear her skin through the thin cloth padding she wore underneath. The lightning arced from one of

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the tassets of her skirt into her thigh. It burned down her leg and exploded out the bottom of her foot into the cavern floor.

All Ehrlic saw was a blinding flash and then the woman was falling, her momentum carrying her forward. The priestess hit the ground with a groan, releasing her grip on the morningstar, which continued to tumble along the irregular cavern floor. He twisted to keep her in his sight, hoping she was incapacitated or killed.

Her breathing was labored with pain but she quickly rolled to her side and swung her bladed hand out in front of her.

Ehrlic didn't get a chance to attempt another spell. The priestess shoved off with her uninjured leg, launching herself at him with the clawed glove aimed at his neck. The Drow sword leapt to his defense, almost of its own accord. He interposed the blade and swept her arm to the side. The priestess' open hand latched onto a strap of his armor and she pulled herself close. A sharp twist of the bladed glove nearly wrenched the weapon from his grasp.

With his free hand, Ehrlic grabbed the edge of her breastplate, just under her arm. The metal was still hot enough to burn his palm but he retained his grip.

They struggled for a few moments without either getting the upper hand. Ehrlic was the stronger but he was relying entirely on his arms, his legs still numb and unresponsive. The priestess' uninjured leg pushed against a nearby mound, giving her the leverage she needed to stay on top of him.

Her body slipped forward and the hand on his armor moved to his throat. Suddenly he was struggling for breath. Her veil fell across his forehead and he could see and feel the chilled air flow from between purple lips. He feared another icy blast hitting him in the face and instinctively brought his free hand up. He clamped his burned palm over her open mouth.

The grip on his throat tightened but Ehrlic managed to push the air out of his lungs, whispering the few words required for a simple spell.

Using the same method he had to save Shoptim, Ehrlic envisioned the air in the woman's lungs. Similarly, but more violently, he drew the air

from her chest. Icy breath pushed against his hand and blew from her nose, emptying her lungs in one burst. It was a simple matter to keep air from returning, though he could feel her muscles struggling to pull in breath.

The pressure on his throat disappeared as she clutched at her own. The priestess rolled away and crawled a few feet before collapsing.

Ehric kept his eyes on her as he called out. “Shoptim?”

* * * *

The dragon-kin had leapt away from Ehric’s lightning, landing a few paces from Shoptim. She had just returned to her natural form; having used a gnomish body to hide behind the strange boulders that littered the cavern. Her hands weaved before her. Despite its close proximity, the creature had not sensed her presence, intent as it was on Ehric. When the purple beam shot from a wand in its hand Shoptim’s spell took effect.

The draconic beast roared and spun around, the wand in its other clawed hand coming to bear. Shoptim could not resist a pang of fear as the magical rod swept past her. But the guardian released the magic late and a flaming sphere passed many feet to her side. It continued to launch the fire completely at random, and Shoptim knew her spell had taken hold. Her grin quickly went from beautiful to hideous as her body shifted and grew. She found it cathartic dealing with enemies physically.

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The shadow had found air. The Will told it to continue, to quench its thirst if it could. There was something in the air, tiny motes of life, not enough to quench its thirst, not even close, but they drove it forward.

* * * *

“I’m here, Ehric.” Shoptim knelt beside him, concern etched in her features. “Do you think you can stand?”

“Maybe.” Some feeling had returned to his legs, he thought the effects of the priestess’ attack might be temporary. “That other thing is dead?”

“Yes.” She moved to the woman lying prone, rolling her to her back. “Still alive. Where did she come from?”

“I don’t know. She seemed to appear out of nowhere, behind me. I am lucky to be alive.” His thoughts turned to the Shou woman. “Pai! What did you do to her?”

Shoptim’s tone became harsh but he thought she was upset as well. “It is obvious what I did. She wanted to help you and she saved your life.”

“But why didn’t you use that spell on the beast?”

“I had no way to be sure it would work. It was more likely to be successful on a starved slave than some beast with dragon blood in its veins.” Shoptim stood and looked around. “There is still a golem to deal

with.”

Ehric pulled himself to his feet, swaying a bit. “Is there anything to be done for her?”

“You mean, ‘Is she dead?’ I’m not sure if she can be helped. We will not leave her. Or this one.” She pointed to the priestess. “Even if she is beyond our help, the enemy can make her talk nonetheless.”

Ehric didn’t know what she meant but decided he didn’t want to. “Do we need to destroy the golem? You left the other one trapped.”

“True, but I am not convinced this one can’t get out. I’ll be right back.” She nodded towards the priestess. “Keep an eye on her, will you?”

Ehric paced for a little while and felt blood flow return to his legs. Instead of numbness, they hurt. He took it as a sign of progress. Kneeling next to the Tiamat priestess, he removed first her clawed glove and then the bronze breastplate she wore. The thin sleeveless tunic she had underneath her armor was blackened in spots from his lightning bolt. He used her shawl to tie her wrists and gag her. The injury to her leg made it pointless to bind her ankles.

With her head uncovered, Ehric studied the woman more closely. She was muscular and either naturally dark skinned or deeply tanned. With her face relaxed, he decided she wasn’t entirely unattractive. He wondered what made her decide to join a cult.

“I do not like that look Ehric.” Shoptim had returned. “You are sympathizing. You should stop.”

“I was just trying to understand why she would have joined this cult.”

“We will have time to discuss that with her in the near future. For now I need you to back away from her.”

Ehric did so and Shoptim began to cast. The first two spells had no obvious effect but the third was overt. The woman’s body shrank and sprouted feathers, eventually resolving itself into a small yellow finch. Shoptim gently picked up the transformed priestess and, taking one of her wings in hand, twisted. A tiny crunch marked the bones of her wing snapping. “I think we can safely transport her now.” Shoptim produced a netted bag and slipped the unconscious bird inside. She let the bag

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dangle from the outside of her pack. "Shall we... attend to Pai?"

As they started back towards the passageway, Ehric noticed something odd. "What is all this?" A backpack and thick blanket lay on the ground.

"Oh yes. Do you realize now where the priestess came from?" The backpack was positioned where one of the small stone mounds should have been. As the realization dawned on him he felt a shiver run up his spine.

"That thing missed me with a wand. But it wasn't trying to hit me, was it?"

"It doesn't look like it. Still I wonder why it didn't just wake up enough of these cultists to deal with us."

"But how can this be? There must be a thousand mounds in here."

"I'm not sure yet. But we may still perhaps find out. At least we know why someone might be interested in this place. There is an army waiting here for something or somebody." She reached out to touch his arm. "We are both nearly spent. Let us deal with Pai's remains."

Ehric nodded and limped along behind Shoptim, finally coming to the body of the huge scaled monster. A little way off the golem could still be heard in its struggles. Blood was everywhere.

Some of Pai's petrified body was still in the great monster's jaws, but Ehric and Shoptim concentrated on retrieving the pieces scattered on the ground. The largest piece was her upper torso and head. Ehric stifled tears as he wiped away blood that had already started to dry in the intense heat of the cavern. Her eyes were shut but not at peace. She was caught in mid scream, her features distorted horribly by the pain.

Ehric imagined her stuck in that moment forever and was unable to keep the tears from his eyes. He kept wiping away the blood, as if it would make a difference to her, oblivious to Shoptim working behind him.

"Ehric?" Shoptim stood beside a little behind him. "The rest is done, except for this piece."

"How... how did you get the jaws open?" When he looked around the

creature's mouth was agape.

"I am stronger than I look." Shoptim left it at that and Ehrlic decided he didn't care.

"Where did you put her?"

"In this bag. It will preserve her perfectly and allow us to carry her."

Shoptim stepped forward and slipped a large, seemingly empty cloth bag over Pai's head. When the bag completely covered the stone, it went limp and appeared empty once more.

"Come, Ehrlic. We are almost done." Shoptim helped him to his feet and then drew a wand from her belt. Ehrlic blinked away tears and unsheathed his sword.

The golem had reached the edge of the mud pit but there it was stymied. The pit was too deep and the stone floor too smooth for the golem to pull itself free. Still it continued to try and Ehrlic assumed it might eventually succeed, depending on how the mud dried. When the golem saw them, it stopped its struggles and reached its arms under the mud, pulling its sword free and holding it aloft.

Shoptim leveled the wand, and without preamble, spoke the activation word. The violet beam struck the golem and the sword dropped, pulling the golem under the surface.

"Did you just make it flesh?"

"Yes. It is not so strong now apparently." Shoptim carefully placed the wand in an empty case and stuffed it under her sash. She then drew from her sash what Ehrlic recognized as the dragon-creature's other wand. "Stand back." She activated the wand twice and after the second blast of fire, the surface of the mud appeared solid.

"Will that kill it?"

"I doubt it. Golems are sustained by magic. But it won't escape without outside help." Shoptim put the creature out of her mind and surveyed the cavern once more. "If you are still willing to accompany me, I would like to look around a bit more. It seems all we have discovered thus far are further mysteries."

Ehrlic hesitated. "How are we going to escape if the snakes catch up with

us?” He pointed to the tunnel leading away. “We have to get back through there to get out. I don’t know about you, but I expended most of my magical energies just now.”

“I understand. I will be honest with you. I have a spell in place on my person, one of these colorful tattoos in fact, that should transport me to safety if I lose consciousness.”

“But...” Ehric thought back to the tunnel collapse.

“Yes, it obviously doesn’t function down here. So to answer your question, I do not have a good plan for getting past the snakes if it comes to it. We could already be trapped for all we know.”

“Then let’s leave. Too many innocent lives have already been lost.”

“Well I think we’ve determined I hardly count as an innocent life.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes I do. You have seen women killed and it hurts you.” Shoptim drew herself up to her full height. “You know that I am here for my own ends. I wish to see what Polum is looking for so I can use that knowledge to increase my own power and influence. But I think you also know that I am not interested in gratuitous suffering. Polum is heartless. I think you would agree this Verpith intends harm. There is an army here, Ehric. Can you imagine the destruction it could cause?”

“Fine, you’ve convinced me. Let’s not waste anymore time.”

“Alright. The dragon beast wasn’t carrying anything except those two wands. If I had to guess I’d say he and the four legged thing were held in suspension, like the priestess you fought.” Shoptim started to walk towards the far end of the cavern, towards the red glow. “We probably triggered something that freed them. I know your spells are exhausted, but we need to be prepared for more obstacles.”

“I don’t know what use I will be against another of those big beasts.”

“Just take to the air. I can get out of its reach as well. Remember that any enemies we leave behind will likely take some snakes’ lives.”

Just approaching the far side of the cavern proved more difficult than Ehric had imagined. A pool of molten rock simmered against the wall. Ehric squinted at the heat radiating off the liquid and found it unbearable

to get any closer than a hundred feet. Sweat burst from his pores, only to instantly evaporate.

He turned his back on the lava and huddled behind one of the petrified Tiamat minions. Shoptim paused to look down at him. “You can’t continue?”

“You can? I feel like I’m going to catch fire.”

“I have built a certain tolerance for heat. It is a useful skill to have in my profession.” Shoptim pulled a scarf from her pack and wrapped her head. “I think I see something in the pool. Stay here and I will return.”

Ehric actually backed away a dozen paces until he could comfortably follow Shoptim’s movements. As she got close to the liquid rock, the Wizard’s form changed. The pleasant shape of her body, outlined by the reddish glow, seemed to melt and become indistinct. Ehric could only assume she was employing some magic. If she was in trouble, there was little he could do. Eventually her form disappeared altogether, and Ehric was left to wait.

It was some minutes before she returned, this time moving much more quickly. Her form was still strange, like a blob or ooze, but rapidly she changed into her natural shape as she distanced herself from the lava pool.

“What did you find?” Shoptim was bathed in sweat, her chest heaving as she ran from the lava.

“There was nothing, just heat. Whatever secrets this place holds are well kept. We may need to rely on the prisoner to elucidate them.”

“Do we have to do that here?”

Shoptim straightened her back and took a deep breath. “No, I think we should go, before...” She cut off and Ehric saw her eyes focus on something behind him.

He spun to face the entrance. “What is it?”

“I’m not sure. I saw something, a figure in the tunnel.”

“I don’t see anything.” He peered into the darkness.

Shoptim’s scream echoed off the rock walls and Ehric turned in time to see her crumple to the ground. He called out to her, but there was no

response. He rushed to her side.

Ehric was about to lift her when the light from the Wizard's stone dimmed. Looking up, he caught a glimpse of a face, black but translucent, and then a bitter cold seized his chest. He fell back with a gasp and spun, the Drow sword sliding from its sheath. His attacker turned, or perhaps just folded in on itself, and Ehric slashed at the thing.

Black tendrils of its "body" swirled away, disrupted by the magic of the sword, and a moment later the creature made a sound. It was a woman's scream, pitiful and laden with anguish, but he heard it as if from a distance, like an echo with no initial call. He swung again and the shadow's screams pierced the air a second time.

Ehric stumbled back and tripped over Shoptim. He knew now that the creature, whatever it was, was attacking his essence, his very soul. They had to flee. The creature disappeared in the gloom of the cavern, seemingly vanishing into the very rock. Ehric cast a quick spell and activated the flying cloak. Lifting Shoptim over his shoulder, he kept his sword arm free as they rose into the air.

The trip down the tunnel was a horror, his sword darting out to slash at shadows. And while none of them screamed in response, he knew the creature was still following. As he passed the trapped golem, he felt Shoptim move.

He spoke urgently. "Are you going to make it?"

She groaned and whispered. "Outside, get to sunlight."

The shadow reappeared just as they neared the chasm, drifting down from the ceiling to impose itself before him. Ehric dropped to the ground and rolled, his hand shifting to grasp the straps on Shoptim's pack. He narrowly avoided the shadow's lunge and slid over the precipice.

They tumbled as they fell, and Ehric shouted out a spell to slow their plummet. He retained his grip on her straps as they splashed into the warm waters of the subterranean stream. Ehric split his concentration between keeping the mage's head above the water and scanning for a sign of the black shape. His feet cushioned their drifting path between the

stalagmites but he found himself wishing the current were stronger.

He still held the sword and when he saw a deeper blackness descending, he tried to bring the weapon to bear. An awkward slash drove the shadow away with a wail, a black eddy swirling in its wake. It disappeared into the stone wall, but emerged quickly, hovering just out of reach.

Ehric studied the creature, keeping his sword raised. As it floated along, the shadow consolidated itself, drawing its blackness into the shape of a woman in armor. Its face was a mask of torment and longing, mouth open and panting silently as it weaved back and forth in front of him.

“What are you?” Ehric let the tip of his sword dip slightly as he squinted against the light pouring in the end of the tunnel. The creature sensed an opening and darted in, ethereal hands reaching out to embrace him. But instead of the deadly cold, he felt warm sunlight on his face and heard the mournful cry of the apparition fading quickly behind. He twisted to look back but his eyes couldn’t penetrate the darkness.

As they tumbled over the falls, he activated the cloak a last time. Shoptim dangled lifelessly from his arms as they fell slowly through the clean mountain air.

Ehric adjusted their descent to let them land just to side of the stream. As soon as they hit the ground he dismissed the wings and knelt beside the Wizard. Her eyes were still open but did not seem to focus. He saw her lips move and leaned close to listen.

“In my sash... take the stone.” Ehric slid his hand into the sash at her waist and discovered a number of small pockets sewn into the backside. He found two small pebbles. He held them in front of her eyes.

“One of these? Tell me what I can do for you.” Shoptim gave an almost imperceptible nod of her head and smiled.

“Take... her.” Ehric was confused for a moment but realized she was talking about the magical bag containing the slave’s remains. It was hanging from a strap on the side of her pack.

“But what can I do for you?” Ehric’s voice was increasingly urgent.

“Nothing.” The smile returned momentarily. “Good bye, Ehric.” Shoptim closed her eyes and before Ehric could try to revive her, the

mage simply disappeared.

The shock of her departure took a moment to sink in. He fell to his back and stared up at the cloudless sky, trying to take in the events of the last hours. Ehrlic suddenly remembered Shoptim's statement that her magic should have saved her from the rockfall. That was why she needed to be brought out of the tunnel. He felt foolish for worrying about her now that she was gone.

Turning his head, his eyes fell on the magical bag containing Pai's petrified remains. Heartache threatened to overwhelm him as he thought about her and the other nameless slaves who had died. He pushed the feelings down and tried to focus himself. The two gnomes still needed his help and the burned slave might still be alive.

The image of the blond haired woman running screaming into the night tugged at him as well. Could she still be alive? Ehrlic resolved to find her if she was.

He sat up and immediately spotted two small figures amongst the boulders on the far side of the stream. Filbrim and Porpagil looked unharmed and considerably cleaner than the last time he'd seen them. Collecting his things, Ehrlic carefully slipped the stone Shoptim had given him into a pocket before wading across the shallow stream.

Filbrim greeted him suspiciously. "Where's Pai?"

Ehrlic sighed. "She was killed. There were creatures at the end of the passageway that defied description." His voice cracked. "I should not have let her come."

"No, but she was determined to help." While Filbrim spoke, Porpagil shed silent tears.

"She did help. She sacrificed herself." Ehrlic shook his head. "We can talk about it later, when we are safe."

"Is the Wizard alive?"

"I believe so. She was injured but was magically taken to safety. I don't think she plans to return."

"So how do we get back to Tewli?" Porpagil sniffed back his tears as he spoke. "I just want this to be over."

“I agree. It looks like we are on the southeast side of the mountain. If we head north we will reach the foothills where my family lives.” Ehrlic hesitated before continuing. “But I want to look for the other slaves. There is one human woman and at least three gnomes I can not account for. I would like to learn their fates.”

“But won’t that be very dangerous?” Filbrim’s voice dropped in volume instinctively. “Those snake-men were even more powerful than the Wizards.”

“I am aware of the risk. I propose to search in an arc around the camp and see if I can find any tracks. The slaves were all in full flight, running for their lives. I should be able to find tracks if any escaped.”

“So you would not go back into their camp?”

“No, I think that would be suicide, and I am not going to risk your lives.”

Filbrim agreed. “I support this course. It is the only proper thing to do.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.” Ehrlic looked back up at the waterfall. It was actually quite beautiful in the bright sunlight. “For now I think we should get away from this place.”

Chapter 17

Lune gazed out the window overlooking the Lake of Steam. She had nothing to do but wait for her mistress to return.

The young girl had been surprised to learn Mistress Nuln was leaving the Enclave and even more shocked that Lune was to accompany her. She decided she welcomed the change. Mistress Nuln was far kinder than the other Wizards and soldiers she encountered in the Enclave, but now her mistress had left her in a small room above a tavern with strict instructions to stay put. She had no doubt something horrible would happen to her if she disobeyed, so she waited.

Another person in this situation may have read a book or passed the time with a game of cards, but Lune could neither read and had no possessions to her name. Instead she just watched the water and the people that moved about the short stretch of street she could see from her perch.

The slave was pulled from her meditation by her mistress' hoarse cry. Lune spun and found Shoptim lying flat on the wooden floor, staring up at the ceiling. Her soaked clothing formed a widening dark spot on the floor around her. Lune ran the few short steps to reach her mistress and knelt by her side. "Mistress, are you hurt?"

Shoptim opened her mouth to speak and Lune leaned close. “Vial, in trunk.” Lune started to rise but Shoptim continued. “Left latch only.”

Lune was confused but she moved to the trunk anyway. There were two latches holding the lid down and she hesitated as she reached out to touch them. She lifted the left latch first and the lid shifted. Pulling up showed the right latch to be a fake, and the trunk opened to reveal the well ordered contents.

Lune rifled through clothing and scroll cases until she found a clear glass vial. She ran back to Shoptim and held it up to her eyes. The Wizard nodded and Lune uncorked the potion, pouring it past her mistress’s quivering lips. She managed to swallow with great difficulty and then relaxed as Lune looked on anxiously.

“Is there anything else I can do Mistress Nuhn?” The Wizard closed her eyes and shook her head. Lune backed away but kept a close eye on her chest as it rose and fell. She had no intention of losing her kind mistress.

* * * *

Shoptim woke to the sound of a voice in her head. It was Polum. “Return to the Enclave at once. Confirm you will come.”

Shoptim thought about her response for an instant. “Returning soon as possible. Two days.”

“Understood.”

Shoptim could blame the delay on being in the Underdark, where teleportation magic functioned erratically. She was not surprised by his orders but she would have to appear innocent when she met with him. It was a task she had a great deal of practice with.

Her mumbling reply to Polum had brought Lune to her side. The slave girl looked genuinely worried for Shoptim’s safety and the Wizard did not really doubt her sincerity. It was sometimes difficult to be kind and patient with slaves, but in the case of Lune, it had been worth it.

“Mistress, are you well? What can I do?”

“I am well. Lune, have you been crying?”

“I was worried Mistress. I apologize.”

Shoptim smiled warmly and let the matter drop. “Go and bring a basin

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of clean water.” Lune bobbed her head and left the room, her bare feet whispering across the rough floor.

Shoptim rose shakily, the effects of the shadow still lingering as numbness in her limbs. With weak, clumsy fingers she worked at the laces of the boots. She only managed to remove one before Lune returned and took over.

“I think I need to clean up.”

“Yes Mistress Nuln, but the water is cold.”

“That will be fine.” Shoptim relaxed and let the slave remove her garments.

An hour later Shoptim looked at herself in the small hand mirror Lune held. She had no healing potions left, and was amazed at how many she had gone through in the past couple of days. The young Wizard chuckled to herself. “I need to be more careful.”

“Yes Mistress.”

She chuckled again at the slave’s response and returned to inspecting the cut above her left eye. “I don’t think it needs to be stitched, do you?”

Lune spoke tentatively. “There may be a small scar.”

“It will make me look more experienced.” She waved to the slave. “Put away the mirror. I have spent enough time on myself.” Shoptim stood, smoothed the front of her light gray dress and donned her sash diagonally across her body. “I am leaving again, but not for long. Please dispose of the wash water and then remain in the room.” Shoptim waited for the slave to leave with the basin and then moved quickly to her pack.

Somehow the finch had survived. Shoptim snatched the bag holding the small bird and let her body ease into the shape of a horned owl. Grasping the finch gently in her claws, she took flight out the window before Lune returned.

Soaring over the walled city, Shoptim beat her wings and headed to the copse of trees where she had transformed the snake woman days before. Again she found the place deserted and well concealed from the casual eye.

The Wizard dropped the finch from her talons and let her body return

to its natural shape. The bird flopped on the ground, pathetic little chirps occasionally sputtering from its curved black beak. Shoptim cast a spell on herself, one to allow her to understand the ancient tongue she expected to hear from the priestess. She drew the polished black wand before dispelling the transformative magic.

It took seconds for the priestess to return to her true form. She pushed herself up to a seated position and probed the air with her left arm. Her right hung limp at her side. Shoptim dispelled another effect she had placed on the priestess.

“Do you hear me?”

Her head whipped around at the sound of Shoptim’s voice, but her eye’s still saw nothing. The Wizard had left that spell in place. Foreign words resolved themselves in Shoptim’s augmented ears. “Who are you? Where am I?”

The speech that flowed from her lips matched the priestess’ dialect. “You’re safe. I.. I am a friend.”

“You are a defiler. The great dragon will consume you for your trespass.”

Shoptim was silent for a couple of heartbeats. When she continued she put a slight tremor in her voice. “I told Ehric and Pai not to go on but they thought there was treasure. There was only death. Are the guardians coming for me now?”

Now it was the priestess’ turn to pause. Shoptim could only imagine the relief she was feeling. The Tiamatan took a firm tone. “Return my sight to me.”

“No... I can’t let you know who I am.” Her voice was small, frightened.

“It is too late for such games.” The priestess shifted and started to chant a prayer.

“What are you doing? Stop!” As the Tiamatan continued to chant the wounds on her leg began to heal and her broken arm flexed. Finally, her eyes focused on Shoptim’s.

The wand in Shoptim’s hand shook and the priestess stepped forward. “Put it down, now!” Shoptim dropped the wand and stepped back,

stumbling over her own feet.

“We didn’t know. Please!”

“I have questions for you.”

“Anything! Just let me live.”

The priestess loomed over Shoptim. “Did you take anything from the chamber?”

“Yes. I have a couple of wands from one of the...” As her hand moved to the sash, the priestess flew into motion, slamming her fist into the Wizard’s stomach. The Untheri ripped the sash away and emptied her spell components to the ground. She bent to retrieve the wands while Shoptim struggled for breath.

“I wasn’t...” Shoptim cut off when the priestess looked up.

“You will only speak to answer my questions.” The Wizard nodded. “What else did you take?”

“I took your armor and weapons but I dropped them when I ran.” Shoptim cringed but the expected blow did not come.

“What else?”

“Nothing really. Just some trinkets and a few gems of little value.”

“You will show me.”

“But it was nothing. I can tell you where it is but I just want to leave. Will they fol-” A fist lashed out and caught her across the mouth. The blow spun the smaller woman and she landed on her elbows.

“I did not ask you a question.” The priestess knelt and ran her hands along Shoptim’s body, quickly discovering and confiscated her dagger. “Iron?” The muscular woman seemed pleased as she dragged the mage to her feet.

Shoptim felt the dagger at her ribs. “Where?”

The Wizard was slow to speak and the dagger pressed harder against her side. “In the city, at an inn where I keep a room. The stuff is there. Are you going to kill me?”

“Take me there. If you call out to anyone I will kill you. If you cooperate no harm will come to you.” Shoptim had every intention of cooperating.

* * * *

“The inn is there. The one with the blue sign.”

The Tiamatan looked at Shoptim in confusion and spoke. Shoptim had let her spell of comprehension lapse but she could make out, barely, what the priestess said.

The Wizard tried to match the dialect of Draconic the other woman used. “The spell I cast to communicate with you is expended but I speak the tongue of dragons, after a fashion.”

“Good. What did you say just now?”

“The inn is right here. We should go around back to avoid the main room.”

The priestess agreed and soon they stood in the narrow hall outside her room. “Lune, open the door.” As the door swung inward, the priestess shoved Shoptim in and grabbed the girl. Lune shrieked but fell abruptly silent as the Untheri’s elbow connected with the side of her head. The slave slumped to the floor.

“Now show me what you stole.”

With a last glance at her slave, Shoptim scrambled on her hands and knees to the side of the bed. “It is all under here.”

“Do not think of trickery. Show me.” Shoptim reached under the bed and came away with a small bag. “Dump it out on the bed.”

Shoptim did as commanded. If the priestess had looked at her just then, she would have seen the mask of fear dropped. Curiosity was written plainly on the Wizard’s face as the items spilled from the bag.

The priestess reacted instantly, her forearm swinging to drive the Thayan aside. Shoptim tumbled back and fell across the small table standing next to the bed, finally landing on the floor once more. She ignored her new bruises and looked past the priestess’ muscled leg to see her lift an object from the bed.

“You fool.” The priestess still had her back to the pathetic little woman, admiring the object in her hands. “This is a treasure of the Wyrms Queen.”

“Is it indeed?” The Untheri spun at the sound of the strange voice from

behind. Before she could react, thick fingers encircled her neck, and she stared into the oddly bright eyes of an Ogre. The priestess groped for the dagger at her waist, but the Ogre jerked her forward, driving a knee into her gut. The dagger fell to the floor.

A moment later her neck snapped and the pain disappeared.

Shoptim let the woman drop and eased back into a human form. She stepped over the priestess and retrieved the small round rock that had distracted the woman. It fit easily in her palm and to all appearances was a simple river stone, though a little lighter than expected.

She had just confirmed it was much more.

A small noise came from the corner of the room and Shoptim turned her attention to the slave girl. The Wizard used the wall for support as she limped over and knelt by her side.

“Lune. All is well.”

Her eyes fluttered open and looked on her mistress. “You are hurt.”

Shoptim smiled comfortingly. “We will both be fine. I was not planning on returning to the Enclave for a couple of days but that may need to change.” She stroked the girl’s long hair absently, her mind working furiously.

Chapter 18

Ehric only found a single set of tracks as he and the gnomes marched in a wide arc about a mile from the camp. He decided it must be the last slave woman. The only clear footprint he found was small for a human but still far too large for a gnome.

Ehric tracked her until night fell.

“I can not see well enough to continue.” He leaned against a small tree as he talked to the gnomes.

Porpagil spoke. “We can see fine. Can’t we help you?”

“Yes, I think I have an idea of what you’ve been looking for.” Ehric had noticed Filbrim’s attentiveness during the day. “Broken twigs, overturned rocks, and of course footprints. Let us continue the search.”

“Alright. I don’t want to lose the trail but I also worry for her safety.”

“Then we are agreed. Porpagil will help guide you and I’ll look for the signs of her passage.”

Filbrim turned out to be a quick study. He easily tracked the trail of the fleeing slave, though she was not making it particularly difficult. From all appearances, her fright drove her forward heedlessly.

Selune was high in the night sky when Porpagil whispered urgently. “Did you hear that?”

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“What?” Ehric’s eyes were excellent but the young gnome had the superior ears.

“A scream. Quiet... There it is again.”

This time Ehric did hear it, faint but unmistakable. “Stay here.”

“You could use our help.” Filbrim was insistent.

“No, my job is to get you back to your people.” He stared in the little man’s large eyes. “Alive.” He added.

With that he opened his pack and pulled out the flying cloak. “I will follow her voice. I won’t call out for you so if you hear anything like that, run.” Ehric looked up and quickly moved to a clear spot. He activated the wings and leapt into the air.

The cries came intermittently but frequently enough to guide him. They were undoubtedly from a woman in pain. The cool air cleared his mind and he became suddenly suspicious. A woman being hunted doesn’t scream out for her hunters to hear. Ehric hovered for a moment as the woman let out another plaintive wail.

He muttered a curse and started to cast. His wings disappeared with the rest of his body as he drifted down through the sparse trees. The blond headed slave was sitting with her back to a round boulder, clutching her upper leg with both hands.

Ehric watched her for a short time and found her behavior confirmed his suspicions. Obviously terrified, the slave looked around her as if she expected someone to appear. He drifted closer and found her leg was horribly bruised and didn’t doubt she was in great pain. Still, he knew something else drove her to cry out.

Sliding away from the woman, he checked the ground nearby. He found signs of a struggle, with small stones overturned and scattered about. He widened his search until he came upon a snake. It nestled behind a fallen log, a common enough behavior for a normal serpent, but the sword lying beside it belied its true nature.

He circled the area but found no other signs of snakes, natural or otherwise. Returning to the log, Ehric decided on his best course. He drifted up to give himself time to draw his sword before forcing the spell

to end.

His wings slowed his fall, and the Drow blade slipped smoothly from the scabbard. The slave screamed once more, this time in shock at what looked to her to be an angel appearing out of the air. Ehric landed and spotted the snake springing from beneath the log. Once again the Drow blade saved him. The sword tugged at his arm, subtly correcting his swing to intercept and behead the serpent in mid lunge.

Ehric looked around but no other Yuan-ti showed themselves. Cautiously, he stepped over the log and approached the slave. His wings scraped against a tree and he spoke the words to return them to a cloak.

“I’m here to help you.” Ehric whispered. The girl, he decided she was little older than his sister, shook with fear or pain. “You are going to be alright.”

As he reached out his hand, the girl shook her head. “No. There’s...” The slave cut off, rolling to her side to reveal a snake coiled behind her. Ehric was caught on his heels as it sprang.

Fangs sank into his leg. He grabbed the snake behind the head, but it was already growing in size. Dropping to a knee, Ehric pinned the serpent to the ground and raised his sword. The Yuan-ti was midway through its transformation when the blade chopped deep into its growing chest. He freed the weapon and struck again. The monster writhed briefly and died.

The poison continued its work, burning and paralyzing at the same time. The slave sat a few paces away, tears running down her cheeks. Ehric closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing.

* * * *

The young patrol captain listened to the report with interest. “A woman, and she carried nothing?”

The scout nodded. “Nothing at all, she was barely wearing a stitch. Her and the horse are just ahead.”

“Could it be a trap?”

“Don’t see how. Good line of sight all around. She was just laying there on the horse, sleeping like a babe, and the horse was grazing, happy as a

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horse can be. I walked right up..."

"Fine, I heard you the first time." He turned to the rest of his patrol, making eye contact with each in turn. "We will offer assistance, but keep your eyes sharp."

The three soldiers saluted and the company proceeded at a trot.

They came upon the scene in short order. Despite his orders, the patrol captain had a hard time keeping his eyes away from the stricken woman. Eventually he looked to the scout. "You removed her from the horse?"

"Didn't seem safe to leave her up there."

I'm sure you didn't mind handling her either. "True, but you should be more careful. You are expected to make your reports, not render aid." The scout saluted and looked suitably chastised.

Dismounting his horse, the captain approached the woman lying face up on a small patch of grass. She was tall, shapely and wore only scant underclothing. She was also completely bald, the implication of which did not immediately strike him.

He knelt beside her and found the pulse in her wrist. Reaching to his belt he pulled out a leather canteen and splashed some warm water on a kerchief. He put the cloth to her full lips and they moved. She mumbled and the captain recognized the language, if not the meaning.

He turned and shouted to his men. "We make for the city."

* * * *

Ehric had wheezed with every breath and his leg still felt as though it would seize at anytime, but somehow they had reached home. Porpagil ran out ahead of the rest, pains forgotten to the yearning of his heart. The slave, Rana, leaned against him, wincing with every step. Filbrim seemed similarly exhausted, shuffling alongside the tall human.

The back door to the farm house opened and a number of people surged from the building. Even Ehric's tired eyes could make out his mom's familiar form in the doorway. A small smile spread on his face when he saw Meghun outpacing two gnome women across the yard.

"You didn't tell me you were married, Filbrim."

"I'm not."

“By the gods, more tragedy?” The smile disappeared.

Rana removed her arm from his shoulder as Meghun showed no signs of slowing. “Ehric! Mom and Dad were so worried about you.” Meghun leapt at her older brother and wrapped her arms around his neck. Ehric stumbled and fell to his knees. His sister landed on her backside. “You are all right, right?” She grabbed the sides of his head and looked him in the eye. “Look at that cut!” Ehric winced as his sister’s fingers probed the deep gouge in his cheek.

“I’m fine. I’m just tired.” He pushed Meghun’s hands away and continued in hushed tones. “One those women... Her husband is still out there somewhere.”

Meghun looked aghast. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry. Let me help you.”

“Why don’t you help Rana? I’ve haven’t been the best support.”

As they stood up, one of the gnome women burst into tears and fell to her face. Filbrim rushed to her side and motioned to everyone else to keep going. “I will stay with Milliflim.”

Tewli spoke quickly. “Nonsense, we will stay together.” She walked over to the sobbing woman, Porpagil in hand. “Come in, dear Mil. There is still hope. Let us hear what Filbrim and Porpagil have to tell.”

Milliflim slowly got to her feet, her shoulders shaking from sobs. The three gnomes led her back to the house. Meghun tugged at Ehric’s sleeve. “Let the gnomes comfort each other. Mom needs to see you are safe.”

“Of course, let’s go.” Meghun stayed to help Rana as Ehric went ahead.

“I was so worried about you, Ehric.” His mom hugged him for a long time. Ehric was too tired to protest.

“I’m fine, Mom. I just need to rest.”

“Of course you do. I am so proud of you.”

“What?”

She let go of her son and took a step back. “You helped all those people. That very nice young woman Evandra told us everything.”

Ehric looked around the room but saw no evidence of them. “Where are they?”

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“Oh, they already left with the other gnomes. They seemed very anxious to be away, which is understandable.”

“There was a woman who was burned...”

Her expression changed to one of pity. “Yes, the poor thing.”

“Is she dead?”

“No, no, no. But she is very sick.”

“Mom, stop talking to me like I’m still six years old.” He didn’t mean for the anger to be in his voice. “They just left her here with you? What were you going to do for her?”

“Now Ehric. You didn’t let me finish. Of course Evandra would not leave her here alone. One of the young priests stayed as well.” She spoke in hushed tones. “They worried that she wouldn’t survive being moved again.”

“What do you mean? Who is here?”

A small voice came from the stairway. “She’s talking about me.” Ehric turned and saw Fayla standing on the stairway. She looked worn.

“I’m sorry. I... I don’t even know where to start.”

“It’s alright son. As I said, I already know a lot. Why don’t you get some sleep and we can talk when you wake up? Your father should be back in a few hours.”

“Not yet. I need to know how many got out.”

Fayla spoke again, her voice reassuring. “Seven gnomes were saved. Five in the initial attempt and then two more found their way down the mountain on their own. You have brought two more which leaves only one unaccounted for.” She let that information sink in a moment before continuing. “There was one woman, a fierce barbarian that rode away on her own. The only other slave is the one upstairs.”

It was better news than he had expected. “Almost all the gnomes? Was anyone injured?”

“The slaves were all unharmed or have been fully healed, aside from the woman upstairs. Mere was injured badly but we were able to preserve her life. We all agreed that it was best for Laurin to continue to tend to Mere’s injuries while I stayed here.” She took two steps forward. “Are

you reassured now? There was loss and that should be grieved, but there is much to celebrate as well.”

“Things went better than I expected but it was horrible all the same. You will see to Rana’s leg?”

The girl nodded. “I will also look after your wounds. But first let me help you sleep.”

“Listen to her dear. We will be here when you wake up.”

Ehric nodded and headed up the stairs with the young cleric. She led him to his sister’s room. “The injured woman is in your room.” She helped him remove his pack and laid it in the corner of the room. “I can cast a simple spell on you that will help you to sleep. We won’t be far if you need us.” She smiled at him. “I knew we could trust you.” With that she turned and left.

Ehric barely got his boots off before he collapsed into bed.

* * * *

“Tell me when you have an estimate of their numbers.” Solugum nodded his head and returned to peering into the glass ball. An image of an armored woman appeared in the globe. Her voice was muted but she directed others that could not be seen.

Turning his back to the small Wizard, Polum spoke to the guard at the door. “He is arrived?”

“Yes my Lord. The representative is accompanied by another, a priest of Illmater by his word.”

“I was hoping as much. Bring me to them.”

Polum followed the guard to a small room near one of the side entrances to the Enclave. Inside were two men that could not have been more different in appearance.

“Greetings High Wizard.” The large oily man wore thick black robes. Despite his girth, he managed an acceptable bow. The other man, emaciated and wearing only a loincloth, seemed permanently bent into a bow. He said nothing.

“Ambassador Bargest, thank you for coming. Is this the healer?”

Bargest sneered. “Yes. He is one of the afflicted, a worshipper of the

mained one.” He made no effort to disguise his disgust. “Misgrim’s skill is unmatched in this city.”

“And what of payment?”

“That can wait. We should let Misgrim do his work first.”

“Very well.” Polum led the way to Barsheh’s chambers and passed the guards at her door. His apprentice still lay where she had appeared, laboring for breath.

The Illmater cleric had moved ponderously down the hall but at the sight of Barsheh, his back straightened slightly and he moved with more determination. Limping past Polum, he knelt at the side of the bed and touched the stricken Wizard’s brow.

Closing his eyes, the priest fell into a silent prayer. His cracked lips moved rapidly and then Polum saw the divine magic flow from the husk of a man. Barsheh’s eyes went wide and she inhaled sharply and deeply, her body arching under the thick covers. It was over in seconds, with both the wizard and the priest going slack.

Polum strode to the bedside and pushed the priest away. Barsheh’s eyes were open and she spoke with a rasp in her voice. “My lord.” She sat up and looked around the room.

Polum’s eyes lingered a moment on her bare back before he acknowledged her. “Your presence is required. Meet us in my chambers in a quarter hour.”

“Yes, Master Polum.”

He turned to Bargest. “And now to discuss payment.”

“As you wish.” The man’s lip quirked into a smile. “A patrol made an interesting discovery outside the city yesterday.”

Polum narrowed his eyes. “Really?”

* * * *

Satisfied that she was properly attired, Shoptim motioned to Lune to put the mirror away. The girl still had a swollen eye but she seemed otherwise well. “You must stay here while I am away. If someone wants you to go with them, tell him that I forbid it. You are being punished for disobeying. Remember that. I will return for you before I go anywhere.”

“Yes Mistress.” Lune bowed and then held the door for the Wizard. Shoptim strode out and across one of the smaller courtyards, past a bevy of young apprentices.

A narrow hallway led to Polum’s chambers. The slave announced her arrival as he opened the door. The Master Wizard stood on the far side of his chamber, but he was not alone. The other man in the room she did not recognize, but she knew power when she saw it.

Shoptim dropped into a low curtsey. “Master.”

Polum spoke. “Please come in Wizard Nuln. Allow me to introduce Ransar Pristoleph, High Mage and Ruler of Innarlith.”

Shoptim dropped into another bow, slightly deeper than one she had given Polum. “Lord.”

“Shoptim has proven herself a capable Wizard and I propose that she would ideal to lead the effort.”

As Lord Pristoleph approached, Shoptim noted his eyes. They were red. It did not especially concern her, she’d long ago stopped being shocked at non human traits, but she was curious as to the origin of those eyes. The Ransar slowly looked her up and down. “Is this your true form, Wizard Shoptim?”

“It is.” She was a little taken aback by the question but did not show it.

“But it is not the only form you can take, is that right?”

Shoptim took a breath to give her a split second to think. She decided lying would be foolish. “You are correct. Do you have need of a shapeshifter?”

“It may be useful for your task.” He turned back to Polum. “She will be adequate.”

Polum nodded and motioned to the slave at the door. “Bring the others.”

Shoptim waited in silence for the minute it took for the slave to return. When he did there were two with him, a Thayan soldier and a man in dark robes.

The latter was introduced simply as Bargest. Lord Pristoleph motioned them into the room. “Bargest, this is Shoptim Nuln. Polum has agreed

to provide her to aid you in your task.”

Bargest's voice was as oily as his limp black hair. “I do not think this is necessary my Lord.”

“I deem it is. If it were not necessary you would have completed your mission already.” Ransar Pristoleph let some of his anger show. Shoptim decided she did not wish to cross this man.

Bargest merely nodded. The Ransar ignored him and turned back to Shoptim. “Your task is to find two criminals, sun worshipper spies that have fled the city.”

This was not at all what Shoptim had expected but she managed to keep her face impassive. “What is known about them?”

“They are currently somewhere to the east of the city but we know their objective is to get north. One of your soldiers reportedly saw two women that generally match the description we have.”

“So you have been able to scry them?”

“We are tracking a man who is traveling with them.”

“She saw these women?” Shoptim motioned to the soldier, noting, in passing, that she was remarkably attractive.

Polum answered. “Indeed she did, though she had no reason to suspect they were wanted. Lihdra will accompany you to confirm their identity.”

“Do you wish them to be captured or killed?”

“They are to be captured and returned unharmed.” He glared at Bargest as he spoke but it was Shoptim who answered.

“I understand.”

“Good. I will leave you to make your plans. Bargest, you will return with these priests, do I make myself clear?”

“You do, my Lord. It will be as you say.”

“Leave us.” Shoptim bowed once more as she left with the soldier and the oily Innarlan.

She spoke after the door was closed behind them. “Shall we return to my quarters and make our plans?”

Bargest sneered. “I must arrange for horses and supplies. I will meet you in front of the Enclave in two hours. Be ready by then.” His heavy

black robes trailed behind him as he stalked off.

Shoptim turned to the soldier. "Come with me."

"Yes Wizard."

Back in her quarters she packed a few items while she tried to get the soldier to speak. "How did you come to see these priests?"

"We passed on a trail."

"And they were accompanied by others?"

"Yes Wizard."

Shoptim began to get frustrated. "Please feel free to anticipate my follow up questions."

"Yes Wizard." Lihdra continued. "There was an adventuring company with them. I recall seeing three warriors and a Halfling."

"So a total of six?"

"No, there were a large number of gnomes as well, but they were not combatants."

"Gnomes, you say? How odd."

"That is why it stuck out in my mind."

"Yes I'm sure." Shoptim changed the subject. "What are your orders for this mission?"

"I am your servant Mistress."

"Good. I am glad you understand that. I do not enjoy having to explain it." It took a few short minutes to finish packing and then she spoke again. "Are you prepared?"

"I am. My equipment is waiting in the armory."

"Very good. Collect your things and I will meet you there in a few moments." The soldier nodded and turned crisply, striding from the room.

"Lune, you will be joining us. I don't expect to return to the Enclave." The girl looked scared. "Would you rather stay here?"

Lune shook her head. "I wish to serve you mistress."

"And I wish to have your service. You have been a true and loyal slave." She reached out and touched the side of her face. "I need to change you. You will feel freedom you never knew existed."

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Shoptim intoned slowly, trying to ease the pain of transformation as much as possible. Lune still shrieked as the magic took hold, but Shoptim knew no one would investigate a crying slave. Within moments a small bird, she had decided on a local starling, flopped on the floor of the room.

The Wizard left her to orient herself and went to her desk. Inside she found and removed the small river stone. Keeping it in hand, she slipped out of the full length dress she had worn to meet Polum. Once more she intoned a spell. As she felt the magic swirl in her body, Shoptim pressed the stone into the soft flesh of her side, just below her ribs. At first her skin resisted but as she pushed harder the rock slid through her skin and disappeared into her body.

She used a small mirror to ensure there were no suspicious bulges and then she donned more practical clothing. Lune stood on her spindly legs and chirped.

* * * *

Ehric woke and realized it was still the middle of the night. Looking around the room he saw his sister and Fayla lying on a straw mat next to his bed.

He quickly found a full bladder had been the reason he woke. Without bothering with his boots, Ehric carefully tiptoed around Meghun and made for the staircase.

He returned a few minutes latter from the outhouse and decided he was fully awake. From the position of the moon, it was still some hours before sunrise. Ehric grabbed his pack and crept into his bedroom.

The burnt Shou woman was lying in his bed. Fayla had wrapped her body in white cloth so that only her mouth and nose were visible. Her breathing was still labored and filled the room with a sense of despair. Ehric thought back the conversation right before he went to sleep. Fayla had not told him the slave would survive, which led him to conclude she would not. Surely if the priestess could heal her, she would have already. *It is just like Pai, only slower.*

Ehric pulled the magical bag from inside his pack and laid it in front of

him. Being home again made the events of the last week seem like a dream. Reaching into the bag, his hands came to rest on Pai's petrified face. He ran his finger across her agonized features before pulling the hideous bust from the bag.

Her pained expression was horrible to look upon but he felt compelled to remember. She had sacrificed her life for him and that moment was etched in living stone.

He stared at the figure for a long stretch of time, losing track of exactly how long. The slave's rasping breath seemed the perfect background for contemplating Pai's last moments.

The room was suddenly filled with silence. The Shou woman did not draw another breath. Ehcric scrambled to the bedside, realizing for the first time that he knew the woman's name. "Binxin!" His fingers grazed her lips and

"...think that this is the right course of action?" Fayla and Meghun stood in front him. Fayla was speaking to him while his sister stood behind her, concern clearly evident on her face.

"What? What happened?" Ehcric's mind was clouded and confused.

"Something strange." Fayla glanced around and muttered a quick spell.

"What just happened?"

"You woke your sister and me to tell us you knew how to heal the wounded slave."

"You said to bring pie!"

"What? I... Oh gods! She wasn't breathing."

Fayla pushed past him and ran into the other room, Ehcric and Meghun following close behind. It was immediately obvious the woman still lived; her breathing was loud and unmistakable. But Ehcric was appalled at what he saw. The cloth covering her was largely torn away, revealing the hideous burns to her face and chest. It was clear, even at a glance, where Ehcric's arm and hand had shielded the woman. Pai's head and upper torso were still lying on the ground next to the seemingly empty bag.

"What did you do?" Fayla moved to cover the wounds once more but her eyes flashed back to Ehcric.

“I heard her stop breathing and when I touched her...I found myself standing in front of you two.” Fayla stopped tending the woman and moved slowly away from the bedside.

“And what’s this?” She pointed to Pai.

“Another slave. She was turned to stone. I didn’t get a chance to tell you about her.”

“What is her name?”

“Pai.”

“But that’s what you said. ‘Bring Pai.’” Meghun still looked very worried.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I don’t remember saying anything. Is she alright?” Ehrlic pointed to Binxin without looking.

“She is the same as she was.” Fayla answered. “I’m more worried about you.”

“Can you tell me what I said?”

“You knocked on your sister’s door and told us ‘I know how to heal the woman. She needs to be placed in a pool fed by a spring of fresh water. We need to hurry, she can not last much longer in that body. Be sure to bring Pai.’ After saying all that, you looked like you just woke from a dream.”

Ehrlic felt a shiver in his spine. Fayla continued. “Either you are insane or this woman somehow spoke through you.” Her eyes were wide. “I think this woman is a mage of some sort.”

Ehrlic looked past the cleric to the unconscious woman. “But she is not even awake. How could she have cast a spell?”

“Maybe she’s more awake than we realize.”

Meghun backed away to the door. “Is she a witch?”

It was Ehrlic who responded. “Pai said she was a holy woman.”

“Are you going to do what she said?”

“I don’t know.” Ehrlic faced Fayla. “Is there any hope for her?”

“I may be able to keep her alive, or heal her enough that her life is not in danger.” Fayla shook her head sadly. “But she will never be like she was before. I do not have the skill for that.”

“Then I suppose we should do as she, or I, said.” Ehrlic phrased that statement in a manner that invited debate.

Fayla nodded. “I agree.”

“But what if she is a witch?”

“A fire spell nearly killed her. I can deal with her if she proves to be an enemy.”

“You can?” Meghun look at her older brother as if seeing him for the first time.

He reached out and messed up her hair. “Trust me.”

* * * *

Shoptim watched with feigned interest as Bargest peered into the basin of dark water. They had traveled perhaps ten miles east of the city gates before stopping in the middle of the night. The Innarlithian, who had revealed himself to be a priest of some foul god, took the opportunity to check on the whereabouts of the adventuring company.

“What do you see?”

Bargest squinted and finally responded. “They are on the move.”

“In which direction, where is the moon?”

“They head north, along a small wagon path.”

“Do you see the priests?”

“No, their god has seen fit to mask them from my sight. But he is a fool. I can see there is an empty horse that someone keeps talking to. The Lord of the Morning is not Leira.” Bargest swiped his hand through the water, disrupted the spell. “We know where they were, so it is clear where they are going. They seek the East Road.”

Shoptim crossed her arms. “How do you propose we handle this matter?”

Bargest’s reply was immediate. “We waylay them on the East road.”

“You would seek to confront them in battle?”

“You prefer a different method?”

“Yes, battles can be determined by the silliest things. Why engage in them if they can be avoided?” The grimy priest stood as Shoptim continued. “We are only interested in the Sun worshipers. I am

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confident I can separate them from the rest of the group.”

Shoptim outlined her plan and Bargest agreed. From then on she found the man leering at her; apparently he found subterfuge and daring alluring.

Chapter 19

Once the decision was made, Ehrlic spoke briefly with his parents. They were confused but didn't argue with him, until Meghun announced she wanted to go along.

"You are far too young to go out at this time of night." Her father's tone broached no argument and Meghun went away muttering, slamming the door to her room.

Fayla carefully rewrapped Binxin while Ehrlic returned Pai's remains to the magical bag. "Why would she need us to bring Pai?"

"None of this makes any sense to me, Ehrlic." Fayla placed a hand on his arm. "She is prepared."

"I'm ready." Ehrlic stuffed the bag containing Pai's remains in his well worn rucksack. "There is a small spring in one of the fields nearby. It is only a few minutes' walk."

"You will be well, Ehrlic." Fayla pierced him with her gaze, sounding much older and wiser than her years. "There is a high price for opposing evil but you will be a better man for having taken these actions."

Ehrlic avoided looking her in the eyes, distinctly uncomfortable with Fayla's comments. "You weren't there. You didn't see how they died."

"I understand. There is nothing wrong with feeling sorrow. You should

take comfort knowing that you did right.” She let her hand slide away from him. “You will carry her?”

“Yes, of course. Let’s see if she is really talking to us or if I’m nuts.” Ehric picked the woman up gently and easily. Her breath wheezed past chapped lips.

The pond he had in mind was less than a half mile away. Fayla remained silent and on the few occasions Ehric turned to make sure she was still behind him, he found her looking up at the waning face of Selune.

Ehric left her to her contemplations and soon they had reached the small pond. “The farmers use it for irrigation sometimes, but the spring isn’t a big one, so it drains pretty quick.” Fayla nodded.

“Perhaps lay her next to the water?” The young priestess cupped her hands in the water and tasted it. “The water is nearly pure. I don’t taste any minerals.”

Ehric remembered there was a wide flat stone on the far side of the pond that edged out over the water. “Let’s go around.” Fayla followed without comment and Ehric carefully laid the woman on the smooth outcropping. He then pulled out the magical bag and removed Pai’s upper body, balancing it near Binxin.

They waited. Minutes passed without any sign. “Did she say anything else?”

Fayla slowly shook her head. “Nothing.” She was silent for a time. “The other one, Pai, how did she describe Binxin? You said she referred to her as a ‘Holy Woman’”

“Yeah, we were talking about philosophy, I...” Ehric stopped. “Of course. I need to put her in the water.”

“What?” Fayla stepped forward as Ehric moved to the burned woman’s side.

“Pai said she was... out of balance. I don’t know the exact term.” There was excitement in his eyes as he looked back to Fayla. “I remember she said Binxin could live in water... and darkness.”

“Darkness?” There was suspicion in the young woman’s voice.

“Yeah, I thought that was odd too but Pai said she wasn’t like most people. She didn’t need all of the elements.” Ehric shucked his pack and started to remove his leather armor.

“I am not sure I understand but it is worth a try. How deep is the water here?”

“Only to my chest I think.”

“You don’t know this woman, remember that. I can’t do much to help you if she turns on us.” Ehric slowed a little as he unbuckled the straps to his armor. “Your sister may have been correct, if crude, saying she was a witch.”

Ehric paused as he was about to remove his sword belt and instead decided to keep it with him. Fayla nodded.

The water was chilled compared to the night air but Ehric barely noticed. Wading up to his chest, Ehric moved next to Binxin. “Can you help slide her towards me?”

Fayla knelt next to the burned woman and slipped her feet first into the water with barely a ripple. Ehric cradled her in his arms, letting her body sink under the surface until only her face was still in the air.

There were immediate results. Binxin’s breathing slowed and became deeper, less rasping. A tentative smile came to Ehric’s face as he felt her arms move under the cloth wrapping her body. He shifted his hold on the woman and freed his hand to remove the bandage on her face. The grisly wounds were still there and Ehric felt a pang of doubt.

Her eyes opened suddenly and she stared up at Ehric. Her lips moved and she spoke in a hoarse whisper. “Let go.” Ehric looked up to Fayla but she offered no advice, merely looked at him with her eyes wide.

Ehric made his decision and slowly lowered her face just below the surface of the water. Bubbles streamed from her lips... and then she inhaled. Ehric had stopped breathing himself, waiting and anticipating having to wrench her up to the surface. Instead of convulsing as the water ran into her lungs, the Shou woman seemed to relax.

Ehric held her there for another four breaths before she squirmed away from his grasp. He let her go and with water filling her lungs, the burnt

woman sank to the bottom of the shallow pond. He lost sight of her in the darkness.

“Amazing.” Ehrlic looked up at Fayla. “I think she is healing herself.”

Fayla pointed the water next to him. “Look there, a bandage.” A white strip of cloth had floated to the surface. Ehrlic reached for it. “I think you should come out of the water. If she is dangerous, you are probably safer on land.”

“I don’t think she’s dangerous but I will join you. I’m not doing any good in here.”

Together they waited on the flat stone. Occasionally a white strip of linen would float to the surface, but otherwise there was no hint of what was occurring in the water.

“How much longer should we wait?”

“It has only been a few minutes. Obviously she is comfortable in water.” Fayla took a step away from the edge and leaned against small twisted cedar. “She was very badly injured.”

“So you think it will take her a long time to heal herself?”

“It may.” Fayla’s eyes went wide. “Or maybe not.”

Ehrlic turned and saw Binxin’s head poking up from the surface of the small pond. She looked at them with a blank expression. He thought she would look more like Pai but any similarity was limited to eye and hair color. Her features were more angular than the other slave, almond shaped eyes set wide and rising sharply at the edges. Water dribbled from her thin lips into the pond. The faint scars that remained from the horrendous burns did little to mar her beauty.

“Binxin?”

She face seemed to come alive as she cocked a narrow eyebrow and brushed a heavy lock of dark hair from in front of her eye. Dipping her head a couple of inches, her tiny nose slipped beneath the surface. She took a final breath of water before lifting her head again and speaking. “I know you. You have marked me.” A small hand rose out of the water and traced the lines on her face.

“Are you healed?”

She ignored the question and turned to face Fayla. “I don’t know you. You do not look like Shoptim.” Ehrlic inhaled sharply but said nothing.

Fayla nodded. “My name is Fayla. I was caring for you for a short time.”

“I would like to speak with Ehrlic.”

“Yes of course.” Fayla whispered softly and drew a hand over her eyes. She looked intently at the woman in the water.

“What do you see, Sunchild?”

Fayla was taken aback. “How do you know of my God?”

“The Sun burns in your eyes. He controls you like the seasons.” Binxin drifted forward slowly. “But what do you see in me?”

Fayla turned to address Ehrlic. “I sense no foul intent.”

Ehrlic just nodded, his mind reeling. She knew his name, and Shoptim’s. Fayla pulled a spare robe from her soft pack and laid it on the stone. Binxin nodded her appreciation. “Farewell.”

When she was out of earshot, Binxin spoke once more. “You have many questions.” The Shou woman ran her fingers through her long black hair, working at knots.

“Yes I do.”

“I did not enter your mind.”

“What did you do to me then? How did you know my name?” Ehrlic adjusted his scabbard and knelt on the edge of the stone slab.

“I apologize for my actions. My body was too weak and I needed to use yours.”

“How?”

“You would not understand. I could feel the pain and desperation in your touch. Your spirit was willing to aid me.”

“But how do you know my name? Could you feel that too?”

“No, Pai told me your name.”

Ehrlic sat back and faced the petrified remains of the slave. “But she is dead. She must be.”

“Dead’ has a meaning but you do not know it. Her spirit is trapped in the stone.” The Shou woman moved to the water’s edge and reached out

to the statue. "She was tormented, but I was able to calm her."

"I had hoped she was not trapped in those last moments."

"Do not worry. She does not want you to worry."

Ehric was full of questions but could not think how to ask them. "Are you comfortable?"

"I am fine, but perhaps we should speak eye to eye. If you would turn around a moment?"

"Right, sorry." Ehric grabbed the robe Fayla had left and placed it near the edge of the water, before he moved behind the rocky outcropping. He heard her leave the water and then she called out to him.

When Ehric turned back he found Binxin kneeling in front of Pai. Her thick black hair tumbled to the ground as she leaned forward, inspecting the stone. The soaked robes clung to her skin. Ehric glanced over her quickly. Where Pai had been skeletal, Binxin was merely slim. She moved as if in perfect health.

Binxin looked up and caught his roaming eyes. "I am healed. You do not need to worry about my body."

Ehric was thankful for her interpretation of his gaze. "I'm glad. I'm so sorry for what happened."

"We were fated by the spirits to meet. That you marked me shows how our fates are intertwined."

"I was just trying to protect you. If you hadn't warned me, we would have both died."

Binxin continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Your hand and arm protected me, but not completely."

"I'm sorry but I just reacted. I would have done more if I could have."

"Don't be foolish. I am fine now. The spirits are far from me here but they are trying to tell me, us, what I must do for you." Binxin leaned close, within a couple handbreadths of his face. "I looked on my wounds through your eyes." She ran her finger along the faint lines where newly healed skin met skin that had endured the fire undamaged. "You protected my mouth and my cheek. Obviously I have wisdom to impart to you." Ehric looked closely at a blemish under her eye.

“Yes, you protected the Wizard’s mark as well. I wonder what that may mean. I am to be enslaved once more? It is clear my path will cross theirs again.”

“I will not let them enslave you again.”

“It is not within your power to make such assurances. I do not fear the Wizards.” Binxin sat back, moving away from Ehrlic to a more comfortable distance. Ehrlic broke eye contact and traced the faint lines on her face with his eyes. They continued down her throat and disappeared beneath the neck of her robes. He wondered if Binxin saw some significance in that.

“I don’t understand how the Wizards were able to hold you at all. The things you have done in the last few hours, so near death, couldn’t you have escaped?”

“That is not a true description of events. *I* have done nothing, can do nothing, without aid. It is you and Pai that healed me.” Ehrlic looked at her quizzically. “Pai’s spirit is trapped in this stone, when you brought her close to me I could hear her torment. Her screams ‘woke’ me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course not, the spirits in this land sleep soundly. I have not been able to wake them. Pai could not sleep, her screams pierced the unseen world.”

Ehrlic shuddered. “You said you calmed her?”

“Yes, she rests more easily now.”

“Can she be brought back?”

“It may be possible, I cannot say. For now she is my only link to the spirit world.” She paused, seemingly unsure of herself. “I hope this has been a comfort to you. Pai... admired you. She would not want you to grieve overmuch.”

“Are you talking to her now?”

“Not precisely, I get impressions from her, glimpses of memories. In time her spirit may coalesce.”

“She thought she was sacrificing herself for me but it was really you she saved. You would have died if she lived.” Binxin nodded. “You say she

admired me, but it was you she was most concerned about. She said you would not have approved.”

“Pai is a rare person, to be so concerned about others. It was this trait she identified in you.” Binxin rose to her feet. “May I ask what you intend to do now?”

“I haven’t given it much thought. I’ve been running for days.” Ehrlic ran his hand over Pai’s face. “I think Fayla may need help, she and another of her faith were fleeing Innarlith. Once that is done, there is another person I need to find.”

“Will you tell who this person is?”

Ehrlic considered a moment. “We have only just met. I...”

“Do not be concerned. I trust you, but I have an advantage.”

“What?”

“I am resigned to my fate and besides, I can see who you truly are.” She spoke in complete seriousness.

“Do you truly intend to come with me? Just because my hand covered your mouth?” Ehrlic stood and gathered his things. He pulled the magical sack from the pack.

Binxin’s hand drifted up to her chest, holding the neck of her robe together. “You know it was more than that, but yes, I do intend to accompany you. Am I welcome?”

“You are free to do as you like now.”

Binxin shook her head.

* * * *

Ehrlic rested for much of the rest of the day, while discussing plans with Filbrim and Fayla. Binxin seemed entirely uninterested, instead walking around the house and surrounding fields. Ehrlic’s mother was shocked to see her healed, but soon despaired of trying to get the Shou woman to rest. In the end she told Meghun to keep her company.

Ehrlic learned that Evandra and the rest of the company, including the fifteen gnomes, had left for Kagarr, a small city to the northwest. It was known primarily for a portal to Waterdeep. Lurlin hoped to use that portal.

“And the gnomes, did they plan to escape north as well? What of Eve and the rest of them?”

Fayla was the one to answer. “Waterdeep is well renowned. I believe the gnomes had decided they could safely live there, at least for a time. Eve, Kendal, Vajir, and Feldan hoped to find magic powerful enough to restore Mere’s arm.”

“So we follow them?”

Filbrim looked to the other gnomes and shook his head. “Milliflim’s husband is still missing. We can not leave here until we know what has befallen him.”

“I will return to the mountains to search for Sillum but you should go with Fayla north. It is not wise to stay in one place.”

Fayla interrupted. “So you will not accompany us? I had hoped for your spells and sword.”

“If I join you...”

“I know, you can’t go back for Sillum.”

“We will stay until you return.” Filbrim said. “And if you want help, I would accompany you in the search.”

“No. I am best suited to search on my own. When I find Sillum I will find you. It should not be a problem for you leave me a sign of where you are going.”

The gnomes were adamant. “We will not flee while one of our own is still missing.”

Ehric’s temper rose. “I was trying to avoid this but you have forced it upon me. I do not want you in my family’s home. I am sympathetic to your plight and I will do as I said and search for Sillum, but I do not want you here if the Red Wizards are searching for you.” His gaze took in the small folk and then he turned to Fayla. “I will show you the path you should take.”

“I’m sorry, Ehric, I...”

Fayla stopped in mid sentence as Ehric clutched his chest. It felt as though he were being stabbed from all directions. Sagging to his knees he only managed a hoarse “Help” before tumbling face first to the floor.

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He could feel her hand on his back but the cleric's voice was barely audible over the sudden ringing in his ears. Slowly the pain eased to a dull throb and he was able to roll to his back.

Fayla was on her knees beside him, concern clearly etched on her face. "I healed you as best I could."

Ehric managed a weak smile. "Is it my heart?"

"Not just your heart. I'm not sure what happened but it was not natural."

Ehric pushed himself up. "Magic? Here?" Fayla rose and helped him to his feet. "None of us can stay here. I'll find Meghun and Binxin." The gnomes shrank back in fear, only Filbrim looked grimly determined.

Fayla nodded and spoke even as he started to cast. "Be careful."

Ehric disappeared into vapor, blowing through an open window and rising a stone's throw into the air, searching the area for his sister or any sign of the assailant. Drifting on the air currents, he quickly spotted Meghun and the Shou woman near the small pool. Ehric descended on the pair, keeping a watch for anything out of the ordinary.

He hovered behind a low stone fence and returned to his material form. Binxin seemed to be expecting him as he approached. "Have you made your plans?"

"That's not why I've come. I was just attacked by magic but we cannot determine the source." Meghun's face paled and she searched the horizon. "We need to get back to the house, somewhere defensible."

"You are not injured?" Binxin inquired as the three jogged back to the house.

"I was but Fayla healed me. I didn't see where the attack came from but it felt like I was dying." Binxin said nothing, lost in her own thoughts.

* * * *

"Tell me what happened again." Binxin's eyes were closed as she sat on the floor Meghun's room. Fayla stood looking out the small window.

Ehric took a deep breath and could still feel some pain. "There is little to tell. I was speaking to Fayla and then it felt like I was being stabbed."

"And you heard and saw nothing out of the ordinary?"

“No.”

“Did you feel anything?” Binxin opened her eyes and looked to the priestess.

“I felt nothing until I attempted to heal him. The wounds were strange, unnatural.” Fayla seemed at a loss for words. “I could also feel something else, but I don’t know how to describe it. It was unsettling.”

“I want to know why he just attacked and then left. It makes no sense to me.” Ehric slid the Drow sword from its sheath and inspected the edge on the blade. “He clearly had me defeated, why not do the same to Fayla?”

Binxin fixed her gaze on him. “Is it possible your attacker was not nearby, that he could not see you?”

Fayla spoke quickly. “That would take a very powerful caster to affect him at a distance. Surely it would be easier for him to come here and face us in person.”

“I agree. So where does that lead us?”

“He doesn’t know where I am but can still hurt me at a distance.” As he said it, Ehric felt a deep dread settle on him.

“That would require immense power.” Fayla looked doubtful. “If he were that powerful, he could surely find Ehric by scrying.”

Ehric remembered the stone in his pocket; the one Shoptim had given him before she disappeared. “What if he couldn’t find me for some reason, how could he do this to me anyway?”

“I don’t know of any spells that would specifically do what happened to you.” Fayla thought a moment. “I’m sorry Ehric, but I am as confused as you are.”

He tried to focus the conversation. “It seems we are stuck on how and why. Are we settled on what we are to do?”

Fayla answered. “One of us needs to stay with you at all times, in case this is an attack from a distance.”

“And if the mage was actually here?”

Binxin stood and looked at Ehric. “We should leave here soon either way. It is reckless to stay so close to innocents when someone hunts you.”

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Ehric was pleased to hear his words echoed back to him. "You are right. Fayla, you, Rana, and the gnomes will head north. There are paths through the fields that are more direct and seldom used. You should be able to pass unnoticed." He turned to Binxin. "You said you wanted to accompany me."

"Yes. I believe it is becoming clear that I will be needed."

"So there is a healer in each group, in case this magic is used on someone else." He took a deep breath. "This is not ideal, but do you agree it is the proper course?"

Fayla nodded with obvious reluctance. "I agree."

* * * *

After a tearful farewell with his parents, Ehric and Binxin hiked well into the night, crossing the rolling hills north of the Firesteap Mountains. They moved south and a little west. In the darkness he thought about Yyll, for the first time in many days. He took comfort in the fact that she was in her natural form. There was no doubt in his mind that she could survive in the wild for a long time, even alone.

Ehric would search for more than one missing gnome.

"You are thinking about someone important?" Binxin appeared at his side.

"How can you tell these things?" Ehric chuckled.

"It is not hard if you have long experience."

Ehric scoffed. "You can't have seen much more than a score of years."

"Now you try to deflect the conversation with flattery." Despite her light tone, Binxin did not smile. He tried to remember if he had seen her smile at all. "Would you tell who you were thinking about? I know some of your story but there are many gaps. I feel I could help you if I knew more."

"So there are limits to how deeply you can peer into my soul?"

"Your soul is clear to me but that does not tell me your history, except in broad strokes." Ehric decided her eyes were definitely sinister

"I know Pai trusted you but these things you say are disturbing. I don't know that I want you to know more about me."

“I understand.” She did not sound hurt, but the Shou woman increased her pace to move ahead of Ehric.

Ehric thought for a few minutes and then came up beside her. “How old are you?”

Binxin looked over at him. “You wish to learn my secrets?”

“You said I protected your mouth for a reason.”

“You listen and remember. That is a good thing in a man.” Binxin nodded. “They are not really secrets in any event. Most people from the land of my birth could tell you what I am about to say.”

She took a deep breath. “This is my fifty-second summer.” Ehric’s eyes went wide. “My father was a scholar and an artist. He retired to a small home near a deep mountain lake when his service to the empire was complete.” She looked forward as she talked. “But it is my mother that will be of interest to you. She was the spirit of a small stream that flowed into the lake. My father wrote her poetry and painted her in all seasons. Eventually he wooed her.”

Ehric couldn’t keep the incredulity from his voice. “Your mother was the stream?”

“You think this is a metaphor perhaps? No, each natural place or object in the world has a spirit. My mother was the spirit of that mountain stream. She was strong enough to take a different form, one that could allow my parents to express their love for one another.”

“That is why you needed to be submerged in water?”

“Yes, with Pai’s help I was able to use the power of the spirit in that spring. She was groggy still but Pai helped me draw energy from her.”

“This is completely different from any form of magic I have heard of.”

“That does not surprise me. It is very difficult for me here. Pai’s spirit offers me some strength but this is a land dominated by gods. They hoard power to themselves, keeping nature asleep.” Her voice had a hint of emotion; Ehric thought it was sorrow but there was anger there as well.

“How did you come to be here?”

“That is a long story, and one I will not tell in full. But I can tell you the basics quickly.” Binxin’s pace slowed and she looked over to Ehric

occasionally. “My father died decades ago, when I was but a child, and I soon tired of living alone in my father’s home.

“Ehric, my mother tried to warn me what humanity was like, but I did not listen. I left her and made my way to the human settlements. It was the frontier of the empire and when the Tuigan came East, we were among the first to fall.

“I marched west with their army, a personal slave to one of the horsemen. He was not kind and when he fell in battle my heart filled with a dark joy. But I was passed to another warrior and he lived until the final battle in the West.

“When the Tuigan were routed I fled east, only to be captured by some mercenaries who sold me to the Wizards. I did not yet speak any languages of the western lands and could not explain to them that I was not a Tuigan. It may not have made a difference anyway, of course. I spent the next fourteen years a slave to the Wizards but they never learned the truth of my lineage.”

Binxin lapsed into silence. “There’s nothing I can say to ease the pain you’ve experienced.” Ehric dropped an arm around her shoulders, but quickly drew it back when he felt her shudder. He continued awkwardly. “I’m glad that you are now free. I know that you made use of your time in captivity to help people like Pai. I was a fool to suspect you of evil.”

“You trust too quickly.” Binxin stopped abruptly. “You feel sorry for me, and you confuse pity with trust.”

“But I thought you wanted me to trust you.” Ehric confusion was plain. “You asked me about personal things and then get angry when I am willing to tell you?”

“I do not like how you decided to trust me. I could have lied to you or mixed truth and lies together.” Her eyes held his. “Pity is a dangerous emotion in a man. It can drive him to noble deeds or lead him to his ruin.”

“Of course, but...”

“You feel pity for me? That is fine, mine is a pitiful tale, but you already freed me and helped to heal my wounds. Your pity drove you to act but

there is no more to be done. You need wisdom if you are going to prevail against your enemies.”

Ehric’s confusion turned to a scowl as he held her gaze. Binxin’s face was impassive. Suddenly he laughed. “Can I trust you because you offer good advice and there is little opportunity and no incentive for you to betray me?”

Binxin nodded slowly. “Yes, that could be considered wise. What was it you wished to tell me?”

Ehric smiled down at her. “You have given me plenty to think on. I think I will keep my own counsel for now.”

“Very well.”

* * * *

“Holding up alright?” Vajir craned his neck to address Mere as she rode on one of the company’s three horses. He’d noticed her starting to sway in the saddle.

“Yeah, I’m just tired I guess. How about you?” The wiry woman managed a weak smile that tugged at the scar on her cheek.

“Oh, I’m doing great. I haven’t felt this tall since well... ever.” One of the gnome women marching alongside the horse looked up at him with a mock scowl, but it quickly dissolved into a grin.

“Just because I lost an arm doesn’t mean you get to be yourself.”

“I’m sorry dearest Mere. I will work on being more like Kendal from now on.”

The massive man was on the other side of Mere. “Do not put me on a pedestal. You fought valiantly and well.”

“See Mere? I’m walking tall for a reason.” Mere let out an exaggerated groan.

“Ouch!” Vajir stumbled from a blow from behind. Feldan tumbled past the slim fighter as he staggered forward. The Halfling came up facing him, jogging backwards.

“You know you deserved that. Even the Halfling gods do not look kindly on puns that bad.”

Vajir laughed. “I see your sense of humor was destroyed by the Reds.”

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He tossed some loose gravel at the little man.

Feldan skipped away from the horse, looping arms with a young gnome woman and pulling her into a dance.

*“Men and Elves in the rarified air,
No laughing, no dancing, they just rend their hair,
Hither and yon they run to fight dragons
Whilst the little folk twirl, lost in their flagons*

*While Gnomes value gems, and illusional spells
Their true love is gadgets, explosives as well
But true to their size they still have a blast
With an arquebus given to each lad and lass*

*The Halfling he knows the value of home
Sitting by hearth, nose buried in tome
But when trouble's a foot you know where you find 'em?*

Vajir called out, “Hiding behind the nearest human?” Feldan laughed and shook his head.

*Tis a mystery where the little man slinks
But be sure that it's stocked with good beer and high...
jinks*

*'Dwarves,' you may say?
'Small statured be they
And their faces be dour.'
Until the warm beer so sour...*

*Then leap and shout like cats in a fire
Into the rarified air, they do swear,
Leaping in the rarified air.”*

Feldan continued to hum and twirled the little gnome about as she laughed. Vajir couldn't keep the smile from his face. "I stand corrected. Your humor is intact, it was your sanity they stole."

The halfling spun one last time and released the gnome woman, who stumbled a few steps before finding her balance. "That may well be but I am no worse for its loss." He bowed to the flushed gnome. "Thank you milady for the pleasure of the dance." Then the halfling skipped along ahead, to where Eve and Laurin rode side by side.

Overhead, a bright yellow bird twittered.

Chapter 20

Shoptim alighted behind the mage and took one last look around, her head rotating fully to look behind her. She didn't see anyone moving, the man on watch was out of sight down the road. A moment of concentration was all she needed to shift her form, her body growing into the shape of the slightly heavysset woman sitting before her.

Whispering the words required for the spell brought her intended victim out of her studies. The mage had time enough to react in shock at seeing her own face staring back at her, and then the spell took hold. Shoptim grabbed at the woman, covered her mouth to stifle the cry she knew would come. Evandra tried to resist but the magic that twisted her body prevented her.

Shoptim controlled the struggling mage as her body shrank into a small mouse. The dazed animal went quickly into a small sack and Shoptim glanced around again. No one stirred.

That's one. The other target, Lurlin, was some paces away, seated as Evandra had been and lost in her own thoughts or prayers. Shoptim stood and walked towards her, carefully picking her way around the gnomes that slept mostly in pairs.

Lurlin turned as Shoptim approached. "Evandra, what is it?"

Shoptim put a quiver in her voice as she responded. “I must speak with you alone.” She looked around urgently.

“Yes, of course.” Shoptim took the young woman by the arm and together they started out of the camp. She guided her away from the lone guard and up a small incline overlooking the road.

“What is it Evandra? Did Lathander speak to you?”

Shoptim dropped her eyes and the woman’s arm, looking hesitant as she reached into her robes. Her hand closed on a metal sphere that fit easily in her palm. She jerked it free, clearly speaking an arcane word as she tossed the magical device at the priestess.

The sphere opened and grew, thick bands of rusted metal reaching to envelop the startled woman. Shoptim immediately chanted a spell of silence, even as the bands constricted, forcing her victim to the ground. Laurlin managed a short cry for help that was cut off in mid utterance. Shoptim allowed herself the slightest grin as she turned to survey the camp.

She caught a blur of motion in the corner of her eye an instant before a knife tore across the back of her leg, severing tendon and muscle. Her hand went instinctively to the wound as she fell, but she barely had time to register the pain before her attacker struck again. The blade sank deep into her abdomen, just above her navel and angled up. Shoptim gasped as she came eye to eye with one of the gnomes.

“You are not Evandra.” Shoptim vaguely recognized the gnome woman but couldn’t remember her name. “Tell me how to release her.”

Shoptim managed to whisper a response. “She was going to run.”

The gnome twisted the blade as she spoke. “I don’t need lies from...” The twang of a bowstring launched the gnome in motion. She whirled, tearing the knife from Shoptim’s belly as she dove to the side. An arrow whistled between them and the Wizard could vaguely make out two silhouettes rising from the hillside above.

The gnome’s screams pierced the night. “Foes! Fight!” As she rolled to her side Shoptim spotted the woman fleeing back to the camp. Another shaft flew out of the darkness, somehow hitting the tiny target as she

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weaved erratically. The gnome crumpled to the ground without a sound. As Shoptim let her body return to its natural form, she concentrated on repairing some of the damage done by the gnome's blade. Her healing was incomplete but the bleeding slowed, giving her hope she might remain conscious for the fight about to unfold.

Lidhra bounded down the hillside, followed closely by Bargest. "How badly are you hurt?"

Shoptim pushed herself to her knees. "I will be fine. Take the captive and prepare to leave."

Bargest sneered. "Where is the other?"

"I have her. We should go."

"You go. I will catch up." The priest continued past her towards the camp. He chanted in a foul speech as he went. Down below, the camp was quickly coming awake, with confused shouts being exchanged as the adventurers scrambled to find weapons and form a defense.

Shoptim pointed to Lidhra. "Take her and get to the horses." Lidhra already had the Lathanderite slung across her shoulder and she started to make her way to the crest of the hill.

The Wizard returned her attention to adventurers and gnomes, a wand coming instinctively to hand. She hesitated, the wand aimed at the center of the camp, before finally lowered the potent branch. Her body shrank into the now familiar form of an owl and she labored into the air.

* * * *

Vajir heard the gnome's scream and quickly spotted the figures on the hillside. Only one appeared to be advancing while the other two held back. He left the man charging down the hillside for his companions to deal with. Crouching low, Vajir started up the hill, intending to come at the remaining attackers from their flank.

* * * *

Feldan screamed into the night. "Get behind us! Run away from the road." The gnomes were in full panic, most just running in no particular direction.

Kendal was easy to spot. The huge man stood in the road, without his

plate armor but holding two longswords before him. As Feldan moved to join him, he searched in vain for the Lathanderites.

Feldan yelled up to Kendal as he approached. "Where's Eve?"

Kendal kept his eyes on the hillside, on the one man advancing towards them. "Where's Vajir?"

"I guess it's just the two of us. You keep him busy and we'll see how he likes wearing hilts."

Kendal grunted acknowledgment. "Watch for any others."

The black-robed man was only thirty paces from the road when Kendal charged, with Feldan doing his best to keep up. The robed man checked his advance, hands weaving in the air before him as he cast a spell. The halfling took a short hop and hurled a dagger at the villain. The weapon hit the man square in the chest, but the blade failed to penetrate, falling to the ground at his feet.

His spell complete, the foul looking man clambered for his weapon and the shield strapped to his back. Feldan was sure Kendal would be on him first but the giant warrior stumbled to a halt, pressing the hilts of his swords against either side of his head.

"What's wrong?"

Kendal swung around at the sound of Feldan's voice, his eyes wide with madness. The halfling instinctively brought his knives up and fell into a defensive stance. The giant man lunged at him with his swords in a clumsy but powerful swing, forcing the halfling to roll to the side. The fighter continued past Feldan, his attention drawn to a gnome girl running past.

Feldan threw a second dagger, this time aiming at his friend. The blade sank to the hilt in back of his leg, toppling Kendal to the ground. But the warrior did not stay down; instead, reaching back, he ripped the dagger from his leg. Before Feldan could throw again, the priest was upon him, swinging a mace intended to crush the Halfling's skull. Feldan scrambled to the side, and the mace crashed into the paving stones.

He dashed forward, slashing the inside of the cleric's shield arm and reaching flesh. He opened another wound on the outside of the man's

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leg as he rolled behind his shield. The priest whirled and roared, his mace chasing the tiny rogue but not finding its mark.

Mere ran to the fight, long curved knife in her hand. Feldan yelled out a warning as she got close to Kendal. The big fighter lunged at the wiry woman, forced Mere to dance back. She looked on in horror as her friend closed with murder in his eyes.

The priest laughed.

* * * *

Vajir stopped when he saw the horses. He had scrambled up the hillside somewhat recklessly but he didn't think he had been spotted. More importantly he reached the horses before the ambushers.

Slowly, he crept forward, until he was within a knife throw of the horses. He found a patch of tall grass and knelt. The wait was short.

Vajir thanked Tymora. The figure that appeared carried another on his shoulder, blocking Vajir from view. Slowly he rose and slipped forward once more, easily keeping the captive's body between him and the person carrying her.

He was only a few paces away when the attacker suddenly turned. He looked down the shaft of a bolt loaded in a small crossbow. A familiar voice focused his attention beyond the weapon. "Did you think I would allow you to ambush me a second time?"

Vajir had a dagger in hand but he would need to make an underhand throw. Lidhra saw his thoughts and cut them short. "Just put down the knife. We're only here for the dawn worshippers."

Vajir hesitated and the Thayan squeezed the trigger. He gasped and stumbled back, his hand coming up to the bolt buried in his chest.

Lidhra sneered. "Why don't you sit down?" Vajir's knees buckled and he fell to his side, the knife dropping from his hand. Lidhra turned her back to him and laid the bound woman across the saddle of one of the horses.

When she turned back she had a knife at hand. "It is too bad I can't make this last longer. But at least I can..." Lidhra screamed as an arrow cut deep into her leg. She too fell to her knees. As she looked for the

bowman, the beautiful Thayan drew the shortbow from her back.

A horse thundered out of the night, and Vajir watched as Lidhra pulled the fletching back to her cheek. Before she could take careful aim a second arrow soared through the night to strike the Thayan in the chest. The Thayan lost her grip on the arrow and it flew high into the night sky. She toppled to the ground.

Vajir looked away from the dying woman and tried to bring the rider into focus. The night seemed darker than it had a few moments earlier. The horse slowed and its rider slid smoothly from the beast's back. Vajir blinked to clear his eyes as the rider knelt beside him. He swallowed blood and spoke with a hoarse voice. "Did I ever tell you, you have a beautiful smile?"

Mengkau's laugh was more of a bark. "Death must be close to you." Rising, she limped to the woman she had killed. The Tuigan returned a moment later holding a vial. "This may help, or not." She pulled him to a seated position and put the vial to his lips.

As he started to drink, the Tuigan grasped the bolt in his chest and tore it free. Vajir shuddered but Mengkau forced him to finish the flask.

Vajir felt the magic take effect, and his vision suddenly cleared. The Tuigan smiled with mouth closed and Vajir decided she was indeed a beautiful sight to behold. "So it was healing. The gleam has returned to your eye."

"There are at least two more. The camp is under attack."

"Yes." Mengkau helped him to his feet. She pointed to Laurlin. "Do you know how to free her?" The Lathanderite arched her back to look at them. A band of iron covered her mouth.

"No, I don't."

"Then she can not help us." Mengkau mounted her horse. "Take that one." She pointed to one of the Thayan horses. "We will be upon them before they know their peril."

* * * *

Feldan rolled under another swing of the evil cleric's mace and came up throwing. His dagger glanced off the man's raised shield, giving him an

opening to move to Mere's aid.

She was pale and her breath came in gasps. Kendal, still caught by the cleric's spell, wielded his swords with uncharacteristic abandon. Mere had managed to avoid harm thus far, but despite the dagger wound to his leg, it was clear Kendal would outlast the maimed woman.

Just as he was about to reach the massive warrior, the priest uttered a horrifying spell. The dark words, unintelligible but soaked with the foul power of demons, pummeled him. His head swam and he felt sick to his stomach as a swirling mass of colors destroyed his vision. His muscles went slack and he crumpled to the ground. He could barely hear the screams of his companions over the intense high pitched buzz that filled his ears.

* * * *

His horse quickly ate up ground as he followed the Tuigan woman down the gently sloping hill. Vajir heard the clash of steel and could just make out a handful of figures dancing in melee. They were still out of bowshot when most of the combatants suddenly fell to the ground. Instead of steel on steel, agonized screams wafted up from the road.

Ahead of him, Mengkau released the reins of her horse and drew her bow. Guiding the horse with her knees, the Tuigan somehow kept the bow steady even as she bounced in the saddle. The first shaft flew at the lone figure still standing.

The man staggered forward and spun to face the charging horses. A second arrow flew from Mengkau's bow an instant later, but her target raised a shield to intercept it. Vajir slipped a dagger from a sheath on his back and prepared to leap from his horse.

The figure gestured and with a terrible cry, both horses reared. Vajir clawed at the reins but the horse lost its footing and started to fall. With only an instant to react, he pushed himself from the saddle and landed hard on the stony ground. His mount thrashed in terror and pain just a few feet away. Pushing himself up to his elbows, he spotted Mengkau a short distance ahead.

She too was unhorsed, but she stood facing what Vajir assumed now to

be a cleric to the dark gods. Her bow was up, with an arrow notched and poised to fly.

“Tuigan do not belong here.” The foul priest held his shield in defense. “You should take the road east.” Mengkau’s bow wavered slightly. “Go now!”

To his shock and dismay, she lowered her bow and stepped forward. The beguiler came forward as well and Vajir could see his lips moving.

“Mengkau, don’t!” The black haired woman turned at the sound of his voice but her face did not register recognition. The cleric reached out and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

Vajir surged to his feet as Mengkau’s mouth opened in a wordless scream. Divine magic coursed through her, deep black bruises appearing on her face even as the cleric turned his attention to Vajir.

The cleric looked on as the rogue rushed to him. A quick spell passed the cleric’s lips, causing his opponent to stumble. His mace came crashing down on Vajir’s back, knocking him to the ground.

“Do not return to this region. Your kind is not welcome.” The cleric spat in his face before walking off up the hill.

* * * *

Shoptim landed next to Lidhra’s body and returned to her human form. The Lathanderite priestess had squirmed a short distance but she ignored the woman for now. The Wizard considered her options and did not like any of them. The transformed mage she held would no doubt reveal clues to these Cyrists that Shoptim was involved in undermining Polum. But killing both the captives would only increase suspicion. It seemed her time working in the shadows was coming to an end.

She was interrupted by Bargest’s return. The fat cleric rubbed his hands together as he approached. He looked rather pleased with himself.

Shoptim spoke first. “Did you kill them?”

“No. They will spread fear to others of their ilk.”

“You are not worried they will bring reinforcements?”

“That is not my concern.” The Cyrist slouched over to the magically bound priestess. “She is my concern.” He knelt and slowly searched the

woman. His hands lingered in places and Shoptim had some difficulty keeping her face impassive. "Where is the other?"

"She is transformed." Shoptim reached into a pouch and removed the squealing mouse.

Bargest chuckled. "Very well. I will take the remaining horse and this child." He pulled Laurin up and tossed her like a sack over the horse's back. "Too bad about your soldier. I wish I had been here."

Shoptim found herself wondering exactly what he meant. The priest mounted the remaining horse and wheeled away to head west. An owl followed him moments later, the mouse clutched in its talons.

Bargest did not take roads and traveled only a few miles before stopping. Shoptim watched him drag the poor Lathanderite from the horse and throw her roughly to the ground. The Wizard descended in a smooth spiral, having finally decided what she would do. Alighting on the rough terrain, she eased back into her human form, careful to keep the mouse controlled.

"Do you wish to stop here for the remainder of the night?"

Bargest's eyes swept over Shoptim. "I need to be sure these are the two women we were looking for."

"You intend to interrogate them now?" Shoptim arched a nonexistent eyebrow. "Are you sure you wish to do this in the open?"

"I do." Bargest slid closer to her. "Give her to me. Dispel your magic and let me start my work."

Shoptim held out the mouse to the oily man and he snatched it from her. Bargest took a moment to twist the creature's limbs, and the mouse shrieked pitifully. Then, tossing the rodent to the ground, he gestured to Shoptim.

"I'm sorry, Bargest, but my magic is nearly expended. No doubt you can reverse the effects."

The big man sneered. "Very well, but I thought you Reds never ran out of magic." Bargest intoned and gestured at the reeling mouse. It quickly grew into the form of the plump mage. Both her arms were twisted and broken and her face was a mask of fear and pain.

“This is not one of those we seek. She is too old.” Bargest was clearly irritated.

Shoptim spoke softly. “There was only one other woman, and she was older than this one.”

The priest kicked Evandra. “They know where the other one is. It is simply a matter of making them tell.”

Bargest soon became lost in that task. He started with Eve and Shoptim was shocked that he asked no questions. The priest simply tortured the girl, in sight of the still bound priestess, until his arms were covered in blood. As he once more leaned in close to the quivering woman, Shoptim made her move.

She called upon the still functioning transformation spell and shifted, taking the now familiar form of an Ogre. Bargest was enthralled by his work, and the girls’ screams masked the Wizard’s approach. Strong fingers wrapped around Bargest’s neck.

He reacted immediately, his hands coming to his neck even as Shoptim leaned forward and drove him to the ground. She concentrated on crushing his throat, ensuring he could not speak the words to any spells. Suddenly she felt the taut muscles in her forearms start to quiver. The magic sustaining her form wavered and failed.

The hands around the priest’s neck shrank and turned soft as Shoptim returned to her true body. Bargest rose beneath her and shifted his grip to her forearms. A moment later the Wizard’s feet came off the ground as the Cyrist pulled her up and over his back.

She landed hard in front of the priest, her arms still held fast by the large man. A spell formed on her lips but the priest was faster. Slamming an open hand into her chest, he channeled some of the dark power of his mad god into her.

Wounds erupted over her body and she lurched in agony. As she gasped for breath, the priest wove another spell. He grew in size, until he was easily the size of a large Ogre. But instead of truly taking the form of the giant-kin, Bargest retained his appearance of humanity. His armor and clothing grew with him, making Shoptim wonder in her dazed state

whether it was not she who had shrunk.

But no, as her head lolled to the side, she saw the two shocked Lathanderites did not seem any larger. A huge hand took her by the chin and turned her head back to face the cleric.

“I did not think you liked battles. Something about how they can turn on the smallest things?” Shoptim tried to speak but Bargest moved his hand up to cover her mouth. “You are a beautiful woman, Shoptim and I welcome your advances. In fact I am overjoyed at the thought of spending the rest of your life with you.”

The priest drew a knife and slashed open her tunic, heedless of the flesh underneath. Shoptim could barely feel the blade over the pain she already endured. He ripped the blouse free and looked over her bare chest. “No decorations? I was expecting you to be more interesting underneath.” He pulled her head up and drew his knife across the tattoos on her scalp. Shoptim tried to move, to do something, but his spell had brought her to the edge of death.

Suddenly Bargest roared and recoiled from the mage, shoving her away as he tried to stand. Shoptim rolled to her side and didn't see what was happening to the foul man. He thrashed and howled for mere seconds before she heard and felt his gigantic body slam to the ground next to her. A voice sounded in her mind, speaking the tongue of the Infernals. “You will not get out of the contract through some loophole. You are mine, mageling. Remember.” She knew the voice. There was no comfort to be had from this rescue.

Tears welled in Shoptim's eyes but she didn't allow herself to succumb to her emotions. She looked to Evandra and made her lips to move.

“Freedom.” The crippled mage looked at her in confusion. “Say freedom to release her.”

Eve pushed herself over to where the priestess lay bound in the magical bands. Shoptim drifted in and out of consciousness before she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes snapped open and she found Lurlin looking down at her.

“Who are you?” The Lathanderite pushed her to her back once more,

a knife in her other hand. “Are there others? Are you meeting others here?”

“Laurlin, I think... I think I may know who she is.” Shoptim looked over at Evandra. Her wounds looked a little less severe but she still held her right arm protectively against her body. She spoke to Shoptim. “You know Ehric, don’t you?”

The Wizard nodded slowly. Evandra limped over and knelt beside the Thayan. “Laurlin, can you heal her? She is the one who told us where Feldan was.”

The Lathanderite looked suspicious. “Very well.” Laurlin retrieved the iron sphere that Shoptim had used to take her prisoner. “Do you know how to make this work?” She handed the device to Evandra. The mage quickly determined the command word and soon the Wizard was securely bond. Only then did Laurlin use her spells of healing.

Shoptim’s head cleared and she spoke. “There are no others coming, at least for a little while, but you need to run.”

“And what will you do?” Eve asked.

“I will run as well. I was told to bring two Lathanderites back with me.” She chuckled, her mask in place once more. “Obviously that will not happen. So if you allow me to go free, I too will flee.”

Laurlin shook her head. “How can we let her go? Do you possibly trust her?” The priestess cast a simple spell. “Her evil is palpable, if not as horrifying as that beast’s.” She motioned to the corpse of the Cyst.

“She did save our lives, Laurlin. And she led us to Feldan.” Eve lapsed into silence as she thought. “She may also serve as a distraction to our enemies; give them someone else to hunt.”

“I do not like this. She should be redeemed or slain. Using her is not right.”

“We are not using her, per se. Perhaps, given freedom, she will find her own path to redemption.”

“There is not much time and I worry what that thing may have done to the others.” Laurlin sighed. “We will do as you say.”

Shoptim spoke again, now that their decision had been reached. “Have

you seen Ehric?"

"No, I was about to ask you."

"He was well when I saw him last. He survived the battle with the snakes."

"That is welcome news. What is your relationship with him?" Shoptim did not hear any hint of jealousy.

"We are not lovers. I think he wishes to redeem me as well." Shoptim laughed lightly. "I am a lucky woman to have so many concerned about my soul."

Laurin spoke solemnly. "You jest but you also speak truly."

Shoptim said nothing, letting the young zealot have the last word. So long as they let her go, she would gladly take their sanctimony.

* * * *

Okhamet screamed into the darkness but no noise came from her lips. It was the first sensation she had felt in days, a heavy weight on her bare calves, unmistakably a massive snake. She tried to move, but a vapor in the air sapped her strength. All she could do was quake as the head of the serpent pushed under her legs and continued to coil around her.

A voice sounded in her head. "I am sorry to have neglected you for so long." Fangs sank into the soft flesh of her abdomen and lower back. The shooting pain focused her thoughts for a moment. "Ah, defiance. But you are young and inexperienced, unfamiliar with true horror."

Fangs retracted and blood seeped from the wounds. The creature's head slid up her chest, tongue flicking out to taste her fear, even as its coils continued to wrap around her. "You imagine my visage before you. You think you are about to die." The snake repeated her thoughts to her as the coils tightened.

Okhamet felt her ribs flex near to breaking. The creature waited until she was forced to exhale, and then seized its grip. The wizard gulped for breath but the snake's coils were crushing. Okhamet panicked, her mind reeling, searching for some way to save herself. "You think this is the end, that your ambitions end here in my embrace."

A spark of hope flared in Okhamet and Verpith laughed in her mind.

“You look to me for mercy? We will see.” Okhamet hovered on the edge of consciousness when suddenly her mind cleared. The pressure remained on her chest but she no longer felt the urgent need to breathe. It was like a dream or... “No, child, you are not dead, not yet. You just do not need to draw breath.”

Okhamet was confused, panic still clouding her thoughts. It was not until she felt the snake’s maw engulf her head that she realized the horror had not yet started.

* * * *

A harsh pounding woke Meghun from a deep sleep. She heard movement from her parents’ room as she slipped out of bed. The pounded stopped and a man’s voice called out.

“Wake! Your lord and master commands your service.”

Meghun crept to the open window and looked out to find three men in armor standing by the front door. She jumped when the door to her room opened. Her father whispered urgently. “Hide. I will try to send them away, but whatever happens, do not come out.”

“Where should I hide?” Meghun looked quickly from side to side.

“Under the stairs. You used to hide there when you small.” Her father gave her a brief hug and led her down the stairs. When she was in place she watched him through a crack in the wall as he went to the door.

Her father took a deferential tone.

“Yes, sir. What can I do for you this night?”

“There is a threat in the mountains. Your Lord is raising an army to defend the outlying settlements.”

“We have some provisions we would gladly supply to your effort.”

The soldier ignored his offer and unrolled a small section of a scroll he held. “You are Master Graiman?”

“I am.”

“You registered your wife as foreign born and the census notes she is Fey. Does the son you had with this woman still live?”

“My son is alive but does not live with us anymore. There has not been a census here for many a year. Why, he has seen nearly three ten-years of

harvest now.”

“Who else lives here?”

“My wife, as you noted.”

“How many hands?”

“I am not rich as all that. There are no hands.”

“If you have no one capable of joining the fight, we will have to see what we can find to make up for the difference.”

“As I said, we have provisions, mostly oats and the like, in the barn.” He pointed behind the soldiers.

“Yes, we noted that but we do not intend to starve you. We will look around the house and see what we can find to fulfill your debt without emptying your belly.”

He started to protest but the soldier pushed him aside, motioning his charges to follow him. “You may stay here, I’m sure my men can find their way.” The farmer held his tongue, knowing further protest might just break the veneer of civility the captain maintained.

A few minutes later the two soldiers returned. The captain addressed them while keeping his eye on the farmer. “What did you find?”

“Nothing valuable. His wife must have Fey blood if she is anywhere near as old as this one.”

“Really? She is still fit?”

“Young looking.”

“Bring her down here.”

The farmer broke his silence. “No! You can’t take my Valice!”

The younger soldier spoke again. “One other thing. There’s a room upstairs, looks to be a woman’s room but there ain’t nobody there. I checked and the bed is still warm.”

The captain seemed to ignore the last bit of information and tried to sound sympathetic. “My orders are clear. The Ransar is looking for bodies or wealth, not food. If she is as Danner says, I have little choice.” He paused. “Unless there is another to take her place? Did you forget something in your dotage?”

“No, that room is for my wife’s kin when they come to visit. If the bed

was warm, the dog must have been up there.”

The soldier who had said nothing so far returned with Valice. The captain looked on approvingly. “You are a very lucky man Graimen.” He stepped forward and walked around the farm wife. “I don’t think she’ll be wielding a pike but I’m sure we can put her to good use.”

“Please, sir. I beg you. Take what you will but leave her be.”

“I’m sorry but I have my orders and I am duty bound to follow them.” He motioned to the soldiers. “Danner, take her out. Grogor, go upstairs and get some sturdy clothing for her.”

Valice spoke for the first time. “What are you doing? I will not go with you.”

“You will come with us. Your Lord Pristoleph requires your service and you are bound...” The captain’s head whipped around. “What was that noise?” Moving to the staircase, the captain began to tap at the walls. “I know you are in there, child. Come out now or Danner will use his axe.”

Meghun held very still but the soldier was not to be fooled. He kicked the wall hard with his thick-soled boot and a small shriek escaped her. “Forgot to tell me you had someone living under the stairs?”

“She is just a child. I did not know the strength of your honor, good guard captain. Meghun, it is alright dear, come out.”

Meghun pushed aside a wall board and slipped out of the small space. The soldier took her by the arm and pulled her roughly to her feet. He looked her over and spoke. “How old are you?”

“She is only thirteen years old, good sir. Too young for your purposes.”

“I am not speaking to you, Master Graimen. You have shown you can not be trusted.” Meghun forced herself to meet his gaze as the soldier turned back. “Tell me how old you are. Your parents have already lied to an officer of the Army. I will overlook their trespass if you are honest with me.” Meghun heard the underlying threat and her mind raced. “Quickly now, girl.”

“I... am eighteen.” Her father started to protest but Meghun hurried to speak over him. “I grew slowly because of Mom’s blood. Please, don’t take her.”

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“Eighteen? I joined the army at sixteen.” The captain squeezed her arm tight in his left hand and took her chin in his other. “Smile for me. Let me see your teeth.” Meghun complied. “Fine, fine.” Lifting her gown, he felt her thigh and stomach. Meghun bristled and pushed away but his grip on her arm was strong. “You must help with the outdoor labor?”

Meghun didn't answer the question but continued to struggle. The captain let her gown fall back into place.

“You are strong enough to be a help, not a hindrance. And as they say, battle is for the young.” He turned to Danner. “Release the wife. Meghun here will fulfill their debt.”

Her mother and father cried out but Meghun barely heard them as the captain led her from the house.

Chapter 21

Ehric turned and whispered to Binxin. “The camp is up ahead.” The night was clear and relatively bright, not ideal conditions for moving unnoticed.

The Shou woman nodded. She did reasonably well at moving quietly, though he credited it to her small build. She was not practiced in the craft.

“I will return as soon I make sure it is safe.” He motioned towards a small clump of trees. “You can hide in there.”

“You do not want help?” Her eyes were like black slits, unreadable.

“I don’t plan on taking any trails. Leave this task to me.”

She nodded and bent at the waist as she moved to her hiding spot. Ehric watched her go. His sister had lent the freed slave breeches and a rough shirt that fit the older woman snugly despite being too long in the leg. As a result, the outline of her body was plain, even when she crouched among the copse of pines. If they were going to spend much more time sneaking about, he’d have to do something to camouflage her better.

But he would worry about that when he returned. Looking up he easily made out the fist shaped spur of rock that marked the camp he and Yyll

had briefly shared. He hoped she had made her way back there after she fled the Lathanderites. If not, he really did not know how he could go about trying to find her.

All of these thoughts flowed through his mind as he floated upward on, and a part of, the still night air. It was only a few hundred feet to a bird, or a breeze, and he soon looked down on the small outcropping.

He saw a figure lying on the open ground near the lean to. It was not Yyll. Dropping closer he found the trespasser was a woman, dressed similarly to the cultist he had fought earlier. Her breathing was of one asleep and he decided to search some more before deciding on a course.

Most of the trail leading to the camp was narrow and treacherous but he found two more cultists lying in wait at a spot where the path widened for a few paces. Both of these women, and Ehric began to wonder if the cult was all women, were awake and alert. They held spears and wore breastplates of boiled leather.

Only three? Ehric rose higher and carefully looked about him. On the cliffwall above the lean-to he spotted another figure. She was lying on a narrow ledge of rock, plainly asleep. A thin rope was tied around her small waist and secured to a spike driven into the mountain. She wore only a skirt of linen and sleeveless shirt though she did hold a shortbow like a child clutching a blanket.

Looking down from the perch, he could easily make out the other sleeping woman, but the two wakeful cultists were around a bend in the trail. That was poor planning, he thought, but then he supposed they were constrained by the terrain.

Ehric made his decision. With a last look to be sure he hadn't missed yet another cultist, he descended on the girl on the cliffwall until his vaporous body nearly surrounded her. He let his spell fade and a moment later his weight returned. The girl woke in an instant, but Ehric's hand clamped over her mouth to muffle her cry of alarm. The cultist struggled as Ehric chanted. Seconds later, his spell drew the air from her lungs. The struggling slowed and then ceased altogether.

Ehric drew a knife and cut the rope securing the woman to the

mountain. Another spell made him light as a leaf in the wind and only then did he activate the flying cloak. He leapt from the ledge, the unconscious cultist in his arms, and flew in a roundabout path to avoid the would-be ambushers on his way back to Binxin.

The Shou woman was where he had left her. “Who is this? Another slave?”

“No, a cultist from the old temple. She was waiting with some of her companions at my camp.” When he actually said it, he felt dread. “They were waiting for me.”

“What of her companions? Do they follow you?”

“No, not yet anyway. I was able to take her unawares and the alarm was not raised.” Ehrlic laid the girl on the ground and doffed his pack. He quickly bound her arms and legs.

Binxin looked at him with her impenetrable gaze. “You brought her here to find out what she knows. How will you do this?”

“I won’t hurt her.”

“Do you wish me to possess her, to invade her mind?” Binxin straightened her back. “This is not a thing I would do lightly.”

“And I would not ask it of you. No, I will make her trust me and then she will tell me what she knows.” Ehrlic made his voice hard, trying to work up the will to do what he needed.

“You have this power?” Binxin actually took a step back. “You have done this before?”

“Once, but I know I can again.”

The Shou lowered her voice to a whisper. “She is not what you think she is.”

“What do you mean?”

Those dark eyes stabbed into him. “You hope that she is evil, that what you do is right because she is evil. She is just a person, and at your mercy.”

Ehrlic deflated. “I have to know what they are doing there. Why are they searching for me?”

“I understand, but you must always know what you are doing and to

whom. Then you may weigh your actions correctly.” Ehric nodded and longed for the days of fighting Orcs.

“We can’t do this here.” Ehric lifted the cultist, much as he had Binxin that horrible night, and moved downhill. They walked in silence but he could feel the mystic’s eyes on him.

When they had walked for an hour or so, the prisoner woke and began kicking. Ehric stopped and lowered the woman to the ground. Her eyes were wide but he wasn’t sure if it was anger or fear he saw in them. He decided it did not particularly matter if his spell was successful.

Locking eyes with the girl, he started to intone. She knew he was casting a spell, and it was definitely fear in her eyes now. He reached out and placed his hand over her heart. Immediately the woman sagged with relief and Ehric removed the gag from her mouth.

Her speech was unintelligible. He raised his finger to his lips to quiet the prisoner and reached into his pack. He pulled a partially burned candle from the large compartment and lit the wick.

“We can speak now.”

The cultist looked at him with comprehension. “You are the one we seek, the sorcerer of the mountains.” She struggled a little. “Why have you bound me?”

“I cannot return with you but I don’t want you to get in any trouble with your friends. I’m sorry but I can’t remember your name.”

“I am called Anuksum.” The girl’s brow furrowed in concern. “I think it is best for you to come back with me. The Wyrmlord was adamant that you be caught.”

“Do you know why?”

“No, he did not say. Did you steal from him?”

“Of course not. Did he ask you to find any others?”

“We already captured the snake woman. She fought but the others of her kind helped us. They took her back to our lord and ladies.”

Ehric was stunned. She had returned only to be taken by these cultists. And they were looking for him?

“Are you well?” Anuksum inquired.

Ehric stood and backed away. As he turned he found himself uncomfortably close to Binxin. “You know now who seeks you?”

“Verpith.”

“Will you trust me enough to tell me your tale?”

Ehric took the next hour to tell the story, starting at his capture. He left out nothing, and Binxin listened intently, only rarely interrupting to ask a question.

“So it is now clear that Verpith is the one who attacked you?” The Shou woman asked.

“I can think of no one else, but I still don’t understand how or why.”

“I think I may know how and that may lead to why.” Binxin paused as she worked through her thoughts. “Yes, I think it works. You believe Yyll truly loves you?”

“I do”

“Then that is the link Verpith is using. There are ways, horrible methods, to use her love to hurt you.”

“But why? He could have killed me outright at the Wizard camp but he seemed more amused than anything.”

“Something must have changed. The only thing that has happened since that time that we know of was your trip into the mountain with Pai and the Wizard Shoptim.” She took on a suspicious tone. “You did not say whether she found anything when she left you.”

“I don’t know.” Ehric thought about it for a moment. “I guess she could have hidden something from me.”

“Then I believe she has. Verpith must have reached the chamber and found what he was looking for was gone.”

“So I am his only avenue to find it.”

“Yes.”

“And he is trying to draw me back.”

“I believe so.”

“So what should I do?” Binxin was silent. “If he captures me he will surely learn of Shoptim, but if I don’t go, he will continue to use Yyll to lure me.”

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“He may give up eventually.”

“But then he will kill her.”

“Most likely. There is also the consideration of what he would do with this object that we think Shoptim possesses. You said there was an army in those caves, but even so, Verpith seems more concerned about retrieving this thing. What does that mean?”

“It means I need to warn Shoptim.”

“Do you really think that is wise? Do you trust Shoptim?”

“I do. She has only been helpful to me.”

“True, but have you ever been a threat to her? She might decide it is easiest to simply kill you, to break the chain linking Verpith to her. You have not described her as a good person.”

“I think she wants to be good.”

“Of course you do. She is beautiful and vulnerable. Perhaps you even pity her.”

Ehric's tone was defensive. “She is not like the other Wizards.”

“Maybe not, but will she push down her reservations and do what she thinks she must to protect herself? That is the risk you take.”

Ehric didn't want to believe Binxin but he feared her warning had a ring of truth. Shoptim had admitted to heinous acts with the defense that they she had no choice. Would she decide she had no choice this time as well?

“So then what can I do?” Binxin was silent and Ehric thought out loud. “I cannot leave Yyll to suffer and I believe you are right about Shoptim, though I wish it were not so.” Ehric sighed. “Which leaves me going to rescue Yyll, exactly what Verpith wants.”

“It may be this is our fate.” The Shou displayed no more emotion in the statement than if she had been commenting on the weather.

Ehric looked around as if for a way out and his eyes fell on Anuksum. “Perhaps she has more she can tell us.”

He relit the candle and spoke quickly. “What were you doing in the mountains? Why were you turned to stone?”

Anuksum straightened her back and spoke as if from a prepared text.

“We await the call of the Dragon Goddess. She will call us forth when the time is ripe to destroy the tyrant Gilgeam and bring Unther under her magnificent rule.”

Ehric thought a moment before answering. “How long have you been there, in the mountain?”

“I do not know. It was the year eight hundred and forty-two of the Tyrant God’s rule when we came to this place.”

It meant nothing to him. He was no student of history but he did know bards’ tales. “Gilgeam is already slain. Every bard says so, and has for many years.”

The Untheri’s eyes went wide and she shook her head. “This cannot be.” She looked him in the eye. “But you would not lie. Could you be mistaken?”

“As the bards tell it, a great five headed dragon appeared above the city Unthelass and slew Gilgeam. He is no more.”

“Then the goddess rules Unther?”

“All I have heard is rumors. The ancient empires are at war.” A distant clap of thunder sounded ominous in his ears.

He glanced to Binxin. “Another sign?”

“I believe it was thunder.” A small smile finally tugged at her lips. “Perhaps the Spirits wish to tell us it will rain?”

* * * *

Verpith gazed on the quivering Wizard lying before him. Her whimpering did not penetrate the magical silence imposed on her and if her eyes still functioned they would see nothing in the blackness of the chamber. “Pethiss had a simpler, some would say more elegant solution to controlling others, but it was insufficient.” He turned away from Okhamet. “Surely you would agree, Yyll.”

The Yuan-ti lay on the opposite side of the small room, nude but for a thick iron manacle around her waist. The chain holding her rattled as she lifted her head. Emotionless black eyes fixed on him, but Verpith knew her body was simply incapable of conveying what she felt.

“Pethiss controlled her subjects’ actions but she made a mistake in

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ignoring their minds... and as your Ehcric might say, their hearts.” He knelt next to Yyll. “He is coming for you. I am sure you have doubted in your despair, but you will see him again before you die.”

Yyll pushed herself up on her elbows. “Why?”

“He comes because he loves you, but perhaps you are asking a different question. You think I am being cruel, unnecessarily so?” Verpith traced the line of her jaw with a clawed finger. “No, Yyll. Ehcric robbed you of your pride, your true self, but I would have left it alone. I do this...” He pointed to the mage. “I do all of this because it is required.”

He reached out to stroke her back. “It will be over for you soon.” White scales flaked away as he ran his claws lightly along her spine. “You have served your purpose in life and you will be rewarded before the end.”

“Err-ith...” Yyll's voice was soft.

* * * *

Meghun stumbled in the thick mud and fell, the sodden pack on her shoulders weighing her down. Her arm sank nearly to the elbow, but she quickly scrambled to get free. A curse came from behind as a soldier moved to avoid stepping on her. She freed her arm but her foot came out of her boot as she rose. The shield of a passing swordsman knocked her back to the ground.

“You stinking whore. Get out of the way.” Meghun looked up at a fierce man. She screamed as he reached down and grabbed her by the hair. Her body came free of the mud for a moment as he lifted her and tossed her to the side of the trail. She hit the ground hard, only her pack saving her from a bone breaking landing on a flat slab of rock. When she looked back, the soldier was already many paces farther up the trail. The seemingly endless line of soldiers continued, heads down against the torrent of rain.

Desperate and cold, Meghun slipped the pack from her shoulders and sat up. Looking back down the trail, she spotted a man on a horse who was directing a company of men. If he saw her sitting by the side of the trail...she already had lash marks on her back from some other trespass of

unexplained rules.

Just as she was about to dash back to retrieve her boot, Meghun's eye was drawn to movement in the trees. She froze and stared through the pounding rain. A few seconds later she saw it again, a hunched figure moving slowly from behind a boulder. It slowly straightened and raised a bow.

"Watch out!" Meghun screamed and pointed to the woods. Heads came up but initially looked the wrong way, towards her scream and away from the threat. Swords eased out of sheaths and a moment later arrows streaked into the column of soldiers.

Meghun had only seen one figure lurking in the woods but by the sounds of men screaming, there were many more. A shaft hummed over her head from behind and took a man in the chest. Suddenly realizing the attackers were on both sides of the column and she was ripe target, the teenager dropped to the ground and scrambled behind the rock.

Another wave of arrows streaked in and felled more defenders. Most of the soldiers sought cover but she could hear someone ordering them to attack. She wondered why no one was shooting back but realized the rain was the cause. The archers had decided to keep their strings dry and only now were some of the men rushing to bend their bows.

A soldier directly in front of her yelled out and rose from a crouch, his sword out and held defensively. Almost immediately a figure leapt from the rock she hid behind, landing lightly even in the thick mud. The soldier started to swing his sword but the ambusher was faster. Some sort of weighted flail smashed the man's skull and then the figure turned and struck down another soldier trying to set his bow.

The ambusher cried out a challenge in a foreign tongue. Meghun was shocked to hear a woman's voice. The armored woman laid about her with her chained weapon, killing another soldier and driving the others into flight. Apparently satisfied with her work, she turned to retreat. Her gaze fell on Meghun.

The veiled warrior broke eye contact after a moment, dashing back the way she had come. She leapt over the huddled girl and ran into the

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sparse woods. Meghun twisted and watched her go, stout legs carrying her away before the soldiers could respond.

After a minute it was clear the ambush was over. No more arrows came from the woods and the clash of steel fell away. Meghun crept out from behind the boulder and crawled between two bodies to reach her boot.

* * * *

Ehric huddled under a slab of rock thrust out the ground at a shallow angle. Rain fell in heavy drops that obscured even his excellent vision. The patter of the downpour was interrupted by intermittent peals of thunder.

He shared the shelter with Anuksum; the bound girl resting her head on his shoulder. Meanwhile Binxin reveled in the rain. While he had huddled under rock, she had walked in the open and let the water soak her to the skin. Eventually she tired and came back to lie just in front of his shelter. She slept in the downpour, her long black hair waving in the runoff.

Ehric wished he could share her calm and contentment but the future weighed heavily on him. So much could go wrong, and he didn't even really know the consequences, beyond getting Yyll and he killed. He had gone over everything so many times, every possible scenario, and the ones that seemed most realistic were also the most horrifying.

Binxin's eyes opened abruptly and she stared at Ehric. Her voice was urgent. "Are you alright?"

"I'm..." Just then he felt his chest clench. Binxin was at his side in moments, pulling back his arm to press her fingers into the palm of his hand. At once the pressure eased and Ehric drew a deep breath.

"Thank you." Binxin looked up and released his hand. "How did you know?"

"His magic is foul, even the young sun worshipper could sense that." The Shou reached out to touch his face. Her fingers were cold. "I drained the vileness. You will be fine."

Ehric hesitated. "I want you to leave. Verpith is going to kill me. If I had the courage I might kill myself, but I must make the attempt to rescue

Yyll.” Binxin looked at him with an unreadable expression. “You know I am going to fail and I don’t want you to die with me. Take Anuksum and leave.” The captive had woken during Verpith’s attack but she said nothing, no longer could she comprehend what was being said. Silence followed while Binxin continued to stare at him with her dark sharp eyes. “Say something.”

She sighed and let her hand drop from his cheek. “You are right to worry; this snake man is powerful and ruthless. I can not say that we will be successful.

“But the decision is not mine to make, nor is it yours. The spirits brought us together.” She pointed to the tattoo under her eye. “This mark reminds me that I am still a slave, though the Wizards never truly controlled my fate.”

“I don’t care about your spirits. I do not venerate them and I owe them no allegiance! They do not control my fate.”

If she was hurt by his outburst, Binxin did not show it. “You may well be correct that the spirits do not control your fate, but it seems they know it. They know it and they’ve tied my fate to yours.”

“But why? Why would they want to tie you to me?”

“I cannot say.”

“Is it to make me do what they want? What do these spirits care about?”

“I truly do not know what they plan for me.”

“But you said there were signs.” He pointed to the scars on her face. “The ‘wisdom’ you had to give me, the slavery you would endure...” He reached for the neck of her sodden shirt. “What about the skin I protected here?”

Binxin recoiled from him and the rain pelted her once more. “You go too far in your mockery. I know you despair but you will not touch me.”

“Then tell me the meaning. Are you to give your heart to me? There isn’t time for a long courtship.”

Her composure returned quickly. “You wish to drive me away with clumsy insults.”

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“I will not be used by you or your spirits.”

Binxin stood. “I do not wish to stay here while you argue with fate. It is a sad sight to behold on such a beautiful day.” She began to walk away. “Besides, countering the snake’s magic is tiring and I have need of rest.” She curled up again, this time in a shallow puddle, her back to him.

Where Ehric had felt only despair, he now found shame added to it. He crawled out from under the rock and sloshed over to where Binxin lay.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes, of course you are.” Binxin did not turn to face him.

“I don’t understand you and your spirits. I just don’t want you to be hurt because of me.”

“I will not be hurt because of you. You do not command me.” Finally she rolled and looked him in the eye. “I have made it clear that I intend to accompany you. If you truly wish to stop me, I have no doubt you could. But know that you will not convince me to change my course.”

“Then I will not try.” Ehric stood. “Get some rest.”

Chapter 22

“It’s a small army.” Ehrlic drifted down and landed a few paces from the Shou and the captive. “Hundreds of men and horses, it looks like.”

“They are in the mountains?”

“Arrayed before the old temple.” Ehrlic continued. “I’m not sure but it looked like they were a mix of Thayans and the city guard.”

“You think we can use this to our advantage?” Ehrlic noted a bit of emotion in her voice. Perhaps she didn’t like the thought of a suicide mission after all.

“Well, if the Reds are involved, and I think they must be, then Verpith will have to help in the defense.”

“He could leave, abandon the temple.”

“But he wants me to find him.”

“So you are more hopeful?”

“I’d rather know that hope. We can circle around the mountain on foot and enter through the waterfall.”

“And what of her?” Binxin pointed to the cultist. Anuksum sat on the ground nearby, her hands tied in front of her.

“I think it is time we freed her. We moved largely at night and I suspect

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she has no idea where she is. It should be safe.”

Ehric lit one of Shoptim's candles and told Anuksum her fate. Looking into her large brown eyes as she realized she was being abandoned in the wild nearly broke him. It was then he remembered Shoptim's warning that his spells may be affecting him as well. He took control of himself once more.

“You will be fine, head north and you will come to a large road in a day or so.”

Tears threatened in the woman's eyes. “But what of my sisters?”

“I am sure they are looking for you as you were searching for me. Have faith that you will be reunited.” Gently he turned her away from him.

* * * *

Shoptim stumbled and fell to her knees, caught in a fit of coughing. The starling landed nearby but there was nothing it could do for her. The Lathanderites had given her freedom but that was all. The rest of her possessions were forfeit. Even her spellbook was stolen, now in the hands of that cow Evandra. The wind driven rain had finally stopped, but the cough it had brought was lingering.

She slipped a hand under her cloak and into her torn and bloodied tunic. Her skin was marred by the Cyrist's foul spell and Lurlin had been sparing in her healing. She tried to ignore the cracked and bleeding scabs, focusing instead on the rock lodged under her ribs. *Tiamat's treasure*. She laughed bitterly as she realized she would need a knife to remove it. That spell was lost to her along with the rest.

What drove her onward was the knowledge that she would be hunted. Evandra had taken the pebble that defeated scrying. Shoptim was in the open air, defenseless and alone, save for the starling. And the only place she could go that she could not be followed instantly was as dangerous a place as she had ever been.

The young Wizard pushed herself up as the coughing subsided. It was only a few more miles.

* * * *

Polum surveyed the battle from high in the air. The Innarlith forces had

been driven back a second time, but Polum deemed the losses acceptable. Pristoleph had been clear on which troops were expendable, and the Wizard strongly suspected the Ransar would be only too pleased to be rid of many of these men at arms.

The narrow trail leading up the mountain was easily defended by the archers on the plateau above. Despite the withering hail of arrows, a score or so of the men had managed to reach one of the few areas on the trail sheltered from the archers. While safe in that position, they could neither advance nor retreat. Polum looked on as women, only women were in evidence, clad in light armor and carrying spears moved to engage the knot of attackers.

Polum waited. These were just probes after all. The true fighting would come when the clerics of Kossuth finished their work.

When the elder priest had gathered his clergy, Polum noted their eagerness to fulfill their task. It was a job uniquely suited to the skills of the Firelord's faithful. If they were successful, he had every confidence that the cultists would be slaughtered.

A black sphere suddenly appeared around the trapped men. Screams erupted from the darkness and men fled, most heading back down the trail with a few crazed individuals trying to continue forward. The archers were proficient in their work and those men quickly fell.

Polum retrieved a scroll from his robes and read aloud. As the last word of text evaporated from the page, his vision pierced the dark globe. As he had expected, floating figures swarmed in the darkness, some huddled over the men they had drained of life.

The High Wizard decided to act. Drawing on his own strength, he weaved a complex spell. A brilliant flash erupted in the center of the spectral undead, instantly destroying the magical darkness and eradicating the swarm. The spear carrying warriors, along with a dozen or so of the archers, fell to the ground, covering their eyes. The plaintive wails of the undead wafted up to him but they lasted only an instant. The cheers from his forces below endured.

The clerics of Kossuth took the attack as a signal. Soon the sparsely

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wooded mountainside was dotted with living fire. Polum smiled as smoke from the wet woods smoldering began to obscure the battlefield from normal eyes. The Wizard's sight penetrated the haze. Looking away from the ground, he motioned to the initiates hovering near him.

“Do as you were instructed.” The dozen young mages, held aloft by potions, gripped their wands tightly as they fell into dives.

The first pass was devastating to the ranks of archers. Fire and lightning rained down among the cultists as they scrambled for what cover the terrain offered.

But the dragon worshippers reacted quickly. As the mages swung around for a second pass, the uninjured archers shot up at them. Only a single arrow found flesh and if that had been the full extent of the Tiamatans' response, the battle would have gone ill for them. But priestesses were interspersed with the archers, and their chanting was more deadly than the shafts whistling through the air. Polum scowled as three of the initiates plummeted from the sky, the magic holding them aloft dispelled. Only one of the young spellcasters was able to arrest her fall and she continued to use her destructive wand as she slowly rose once more. Polum reflected on how quickly battle separated the wise from the foolish.

Two mages were lost on subsequent passes but Polum saw that the attacks were having the desired effect. All attention was focused on the sky, even as thickening smoke obscured the peril they faced from below.

The Wizard launched a ball of flame to burst hundreds of feet over the battlefield. The magelings took the signal and withdrew, returning to hover near their master. Their soot covered faces were grim. “Take up your positions in the main force.”

As the mages drifted down and behind him, Polum focused his gaze on the clerics in the burning forest below. Izcot had led his charges to a carefully selected spot at the base of the sharp rise to the plateau. There the gathering of priests formed a semi circle in front of the wall of rock and began to chant.

It was time to draw out the defenders.

Polum took a moment to refresh his protections before descending into the thick smoke. Most of the cultists were having difficulty, Polum could see hands pressing their masks tightly over their mouths, but some of the priestesses had prepared counter spells. One of these called out to her comrades and pointed up at him as the Wizard drifted down just above the plateau.

Polum raised his staff and purple flames shot up from the ground in a wide ring around him. The priestess and at least ten more cultists were caught within the circle.

Four women advanced on him immediately, wielding short swords and spears. Keeping their distance were a handful of archers and an unarmored woman he took to be a sorceress. The priestess stepped to the side, circling him warily at a distance of five paces.

Polum expended more of the magic of the staff hurling a mass of sticky webs at the charging warriors. Three of the women tumbled to the ground in a tangled heap. The fourth, a stoutly built warrior with a thick sword, leapt over her companions and reached him just as the first arrows were loosed.

The Wizard shifted his grip on the staff to one hand and raised his bare arm to intercept the warrior's attack. Her bronze sword bent as it crashed into his protected forearm. Polum raised the staff for a crushing blow even as arrows bounced off of his robes.

Lightning shattered harmlessly into his back, arcing through his arm to the sword-wielding cultist. Her body lurched violently and crumpled to the ground as Polum turned to face his attacker.

He assumed the lightning had come from the sorceress but when his gaze fell on her slim form she was just completing a spell. A concentrated bolt of energy erupted from her palm. Polum willed the staff to absorb the magic, and the bolt streaked into the enchanted witchwood. Realization dawned in the woman's eyes as her fingers moved rapidly to weave a new effect.

The lightning, it seemed, had come from the priestess. "You want to play dragons and wizards?" Polum smiled at the veiled woman even as he

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noted the spell the sorceress had begun to cast. Unconcerned, he slammed the butt of the staff into the ground and spoke a charm. Arrows continued to occasionally rebound off his body. The priestess screamed a challenge and rushed forward.

A slash of light appeared in the air before him, widening into an oval plane. Polum called out a name and then let his feet lift from the ground. He was ten feet in the air when the priestess reached him. The sorceress finished her spell and she came free of the earth as well.

It seemed a wise decision to Polum. From the portal he'd opened a horde of hideous creatures poured forth. Set on stubby legs, the foul demons had no head but only a body split vertically by a mouth lined with razor sharp teeth. Dozens of the nightmares made flesh exited before the portal snapped shut.

The priestess started a spell but the first demon was upon her in moments. Resorting to her morningstar, she fought competently and maintained her composure, bashing aside two of the creatures and crushing a third under the heads of her weapon. But finally the numbers overwhelmed her and a demon maw closed on the full length of her leg. As she fell to the ground, they eagerly tore her to pieces.

The archers saw her fate and most chose to suffer the flames rather than face being consumed. Burning cultists ran screaming past reinforcements that had gathered around the ring of fire. Moments later the demons emerged, unscathed and lusting for mortal flesh.

As the chaos spread, Polum repeatedly cast rings of fire wherever the cultists gathered. In them he summoned various foul spawn of the Abyss or the Hells. Soon the former Wizard camp was utterly consumed by fighting. Still he waited for more formidable forces to emerge from the ruined temple.

* * * *

Ehric drifted just above the water, between sparse undergrowth that hugged the rocky banks and over the body of a young man. His blood dyed the stream pink. Screams came from behind, where cultists fought a small portion of the army Innarlith had sent. Occasionally he would

catch a puff of breeze that he assumed was Binxin, her body turned to air just as his.

They quickly broke in the open area near the waterfall, where he had laid a stricken Shoptim just days before. The area was well guarded.

Ehric counted nearly twenty people, all women, and all clad similarly to the priestess he had fought in the caverns. Where the woman he had fought had worn a white veil, the assembled priestesses wore a range of colors. Regardless of color, all had their faces covered with only wary eyes visible. Bodies littered the area as well, the aftermath of the initial assault by the city's forces. A handful of priestesses tended their wounded, but they seemed loath to use magic. Despite being in the form of vapor, Ehric took a circuitous route to the mountain opening. He skirted the edge of clearing before heading up the cliff face. There was no challenge.

Once inside he followed a thick rope trailing in the water to a ladder hanging down from the tunnel above. He hadn't seen the line running down from the waterfall, but it was clear to him that was how the priests had reached the base of the falls. It seemed doubtful they would be returning the same way.

The air spell still felt strong and Ehric decided to ascend into the excavated tunnel. A harsh white glow grew in intensity as he drifted up, until the illumination rivaled bright daylight as he finally reached the top of the ravine. The tunnel leading out to the Wizard camp was crowded. A line of worshippers, three abreast, led away toward the excavation site. Again, the group appeared exclusively female, though some were not as well equipped as the priestesses guarding the waterfall. Leather armor was more common than not and many wore no helmets and carried only simple spears. Faces were covered by undyed cloth for those at the lower ranks.

The finished tunnel leading into the large cavern was nearly empty. Ehric had already decided that if Yyll was here, she'd likely be further back in the complex where she could be protected. Turning away from the ranks of worshippers, he moved as quickly as he could deeper into

the mountain. He passed two young guards and proceeded until they were lost from sight due to a gentle curve in the tunnel. Looking ahead he could not see anyone either.

Ehric let the spell go and resumed his true form. He whispered to the air around him. "Just think about returning to flesh, if you will it the spell will end." A moment later Binxin appeared before him.

"The tunnel will end soon in the large cavern. If Yyll is there, I will have to return to well, my body, to cast an air spell on her."

"Then we all leave together."

"That's the plan."

"I will come to your aid if you have trouble."

"If that's what you think the spirits will for you." Ehric spoke lightly. Now that he was actually doing something, the fear he had expected was not there. "Remember, I can't cast these spells all day and there are three of us that need to leave this place." Binxin only nodded. "Alright then. Let's go." Ehric chanted softly and touched the Shou woman's arm. As she dissolved into the air, he repeated the spell on himself and started down the last leg of the tunnel.

The tunnel was shorter than he remembered. It was only a matter of minutes before he could see the cavernous opening ahead. They hadn't passed anymore guards but he spotted two women at the mouth of the tunnel. They were only lightly armed and armored. He paused just before the guards and looked into the poorly lit cavern.

A breeze pushed against him from behind and he suspected Binxin was trying to move past. Ehric let her prod him forward and they both passed through the entrance.

And then he was tumbling, his body returning to its physical form in a blink of an eye. Ehric stifled a cry and instinctively spoke the syllable to arrest his fall. An instant later he was hit from behind and Binxin tumbled past him to land hard on the stony ground below. She didn't move.

But others did. Two guards stood below on either side of the entrance and reacted quickly; one leveling her spear at Binxin's crumpled body

while the other looked up and called out in a clear, high voice. He couldn't understand her speech but it seemed obvious enough she was calling for help.

The first guard turned her attention away from Binxin, moving to flank the spot she expected the intruder to land, the other woman standing opposite her. Ehric released his spell, and his rapid fall surprised them. He landed hard but stayed on his feet, the Drow blade swinging out to deflect a spear from his right. The guard who had raised the alarm drove in from his left. It was a clumsy move and she overcommitted, all of her weight coming forward as she aimed for a killing thrust.

Ehric snapped his left arm down, his forearm knocking the spear head away from his body. The other guard pulled her spear back for another blow, but hesitated, not wanting to hit her companion as she stumbled forward. The Drow blade hovered, little more than a feather in his hand, in front of the guard with the readied weapon. Ehric forced the sword away from the defense and it reluctantly swung to meet the off balance woman. The keen edge sliced through her leather armor and the taut muscles of her abdomen.

The cultist dropped her weapon with a high pitched cry. She clutched Ehric's sword arm as she fell, his blade still buried in her midsection. The second guard slashed with her spear. Ehric could do little but twist his body and take the blow across his back as he was dragged to ground. Pain lanced through him and he landed hunched on one knee, his back to one guard and his arm trapped under the other. He chanted quickly as he threw himself over to his back.

A finger of lightning crackled down his swordarm, jolting the injured Untheri into releasing her grip. The sword slid eagerly from the deep wound and swept across his chest to deflect a descending spear. The guard screamed in frustration and then in pain as Ehric kicked her exposed knee. She stumbled back. The wounded guard lying beside him struggled in her suffering, pulling in her leg roll to her side. Her eyes were clamped shut as she tried to staunch the bleeding with her hands.

Glancing past her, he spotted one of the tunnel guards rappelling into

the cavern. The other must have gone for aid. He realized he had to end this quickly if there was any chance of escape. The guard still on her feet seemed to have come to a similar conclusion and kept her distance, waiting for reinforcements to arrive.

Ehric rose to press the attack. While she moved with the speed of youth, the guard's skill with the spear was inadequate to the task. Ehric harried her defenses, drawing a knife to supplement his attacks. Within moments, she was bleeding from shallow cuts to her forearm and thigh. As he knocked aside a weak thrust with his knife, Ehric slashed low and opened a deep gash just above the knee of her lead leg. The Tiamatan fell with a cry.

Before he could finish the work, a voice called out from behind. Whirling, Ehric found the tunnel guard screaming in a foreign tongue. She held a limp Binxin by her hair with one hand, while with the other she pressed a knife to the woman's throat.

Ehric froze. The Untheri at his feet scrambled backwards and out of his reach. The guard holding Binxin repeated her command but he resisted dropping his weapons. After an agonizing moment, he let the Drow blade fall from his hands. He muttered a spell as the knife fell. Better Binxin die quickly than...

The Shou woman slid from the guard's grasp, collapsing in a heap. Her long thick hair masked her face from his sight as he continued to cast.

"Ehric!" The tunnel guard yelled his name urgently and he realized what Binxin had done. Lightning formed on arms as his spell took shape. With great effort he forced his arms to shift away and to the cultist near him. She threw up her arms in defense, but the lightning surged into them, coursing through her body with fatal effect. Ehric gagged at the stench, but forced down his revulsion.

Retrieving his weapons, he ran back towards the tunnel. The "guard" was kneeling by Binxin's body. "Binxin?"

She looked up and pulled the veil from her face, revealing a youthful girl with a strong nose. "Yes of course."

"Are you alright?"

“The girl is weak in spirit and I will be able to hold this body for sometime. However, my true body is broken, though hopefully not beyond my skill to repair.”

“We need to hurry.”

“I know. Help me out of this armor. The flesh of dead animals is no aid in healing.”

Ehric spoke quickly as he cut the straps to the leather corset. “Can I just carry you, your body that is? Are you dying?” He pulled away the leather and let it drop.

“I think my back is broken but you are right. We must go. You carry your steel and I will carry my flesh.” Binxin the guard stooped and lifted her body. “I will follow you.”

Ehric looked around the cavern, trying to ignore the soft moaning of the wounded guard. Dim orange lights affixed to the roof of the chamber showed the true extent of the open space. Almost all of the mounds were now gone, with only an occasional lump of rock still dotting the floor.

Binxin spoke with the Untheri’s voice. “It is unnaturally dark there, is it not?” Ehric had spotted it as well, an area off to their right where the dim lights did not penetrate.

“That must be the place.”

Ehric ran across the chamber, quickly leaving Binxin behind. As he approached, the darkness became more obvious, a distinct region of blackness in the otherwise mild gloom. He caught a whiff of the pungent incense and came no farther. Sword set before him, he called into the blackness. “Yyll?”

“Err-ith!” Her serpent’s voice responded immediately and to his surprise his heart jumped.

“Hold on. I’ll be right there.” Ehric spoke pointlessly into the darkness. With a quick glance behind to be sure no new enemies approached, he began to cast. A fierce wind blew through the cavern and he heard the clang of what he hoped were metal braziers tumbling to the ground. The wind died down in a few seconds and Ehric tentatively entered the darkness.

“Err-ith, Err-ith.” Yyll called his name over and over again, her voice leading him to her in the black. As he came forward, he unexpectedly nudged something soft with the toe of his boot. Yyll’s voice was still some distance away. Ehrlic knelt and his fingers touched skin, not scales. He quickly determined it was a woman, her head shaved. “Shoptim?” There was no response. “There is another woman here. Is there anyone coming?”

The guard’s voice replied after a moment. “I see nothing but I can feel something approaching. Hurry.”

Ehrlic continued forward, marking his steps as he did so. His eighth step came down on Yyll’s tail. It shot up to coil around his waist, pulled him to her. He narrowly avoided impaling her as he landed in her arms, a forked tongue tasting his face.

Running his hands along her bare back, he found the iron band encircling her narrow waist. “Yyll, I have to turn you to air.” Cursing himself for not lighting one of Shoptim’s candles, he had to push hard against her shoulders to separate himself.

Yyll sighed and let Ehrlic push away. “Air. I’m going to change you to air.” Ehrlic hoped she understood and began to cast.

It didn’t work. He completed the spell, felt the magic flow into Yyll, but nothing happened. Then it hit him like a mace. She could have escaped by turning into a snake. The iron girdle must be magical.

“Yes, Ehrlic.”

At the sound of Verpith’s voice, Yyll’s slim body shivered in his arms. Ehrlic spun, blade in hand, but the darkness robbed him of a target.

“Yes, perhaps some light is in order.” Suddenly the darkness disappeared, and Verpith stood before him, flanked on either side by snake tailed warriors.

Ehrlic launched forward, sword streaking for the vile creature’s heart. Two swords intercepted him as the guardians moved with incredible agility. Verpith spoke in a dark tongue and Ehrlic felt his strength drain from him. The Drow weapon dropped from his open hand as he sagged to his knees.

Verpith pointed away to his right where Binxin's body lay sprawled on the ground. The guard slowly backed away. "You come to rescue your beloved but you bring another female of your species. And you have charmed yet another of my followers." He raised a clawed hand and spoke once more. The guard dropped to the ground with a small sigh, clearly dead. "Your magic can be so hard to undo." Turning his attention to the Shou woman, he raised his hand once more. Through the tears of frustration in his eyes, Ehrlic thought he saw her fingers twitch. "I wonder who she is, but I do not think I can allow myself the indulgence of finding out." A syllable later Binxin moved no more and Ehrlic knew she was gone.

Yyll's tail slid up from behind him, wrapping around his waist. She pulled him back, away from Verpith. The elder looked on impassively. "I told Yyll that she would be rewarded before the end. You are that reward."

Ehrlic was silent. Verpith continued. "I will get the information I need. Please indulge Yyll's passion for you."

"Candles." His breath came with difficulty.

Verpith paused a moment and Ehrlic felt him in his mind. "Yes of course. You may talk with her if you wish." He spoke briefly in the snake tongue and one of his guards moved to his pack. He noticed for the first time that she looked remarkably like Yyll. "Very good, Ehrlic. You noticed the resemblance. Please do not try to woo Yyriss, she has proved an able servant."

The snake woman lit a candle. As she set it in front of him, their eyes met. Ehrlic could see nothing in them, no emotion. He lost all hope then. Verpith droned. "Now comfort Yyll. You owe her that for taking her pride. If you do not resist me, you will feel no pain."

Ehrlic did resist but to no avail. Verpith scoured his mind as Yyll held him. He saw in his mind's eye an image of Shoptim, a memory of meeting her in the enclave. He glanced from Yyll to the naked woman on the cavern floor. Her skin was red and burned, as if by acid, but even though her face was turned away he could tell it was not Shoptim.

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“I’m sorry.” He wasn’t sure who he meant to address.

“Verpith is strong.” Yyll took his chin and turned him back to face her. “Thank you for coming back. He said you would but I was not sure.” She hugged him, both with arms and tail. “I did not want to die alone.” It took only a few seconds for Verpith to scour his mind.

“Interesting.” Verpith moved to the side of the stricken Wizard. “It seems I will extend mercy to this creature after all.” Turning back to Ehcric, his voice was grim and final. “There is a battle raging outside and while you have been an intriguing study, it is time you passed.”

Verpith raised his hand and hissed. Ehcric mustered what little strength he had and faced death. But instead it was Yyll that went slack, dropping him to the ground as her body fell atop him. The last thing he saw before Verpith cast again were her black eyes, wide and unseeing. Then there was nothing.

* * * *

Verpith turned from the dead and projected his thoughts. “I have the name. We can use the Wizard to reach her.”

“Then we will end this battle.”

“Yes, your Ladyships.”

With a nod to Yyriss and Heth, Verpith ordered his guards to transform into snakes. He let them coil around his arm and then floated up to the tunnel. There a young cultist stood waiting. The sweat soaked girl could not meet his fearsome eyes.

“We must break this siege and head east. Join your talon.” The girl nodded her head but looked past him to the chamber, where pain filled cries could still be heard from the wounded guard. “Go.”

The girl turned and ran. Verpith heard in his mind the Lady’s command that the reserve forces be sent from the mountain. He knew all of the talon leaders would hear it as well.

By the time he reached the ravine, the tunnel leading to the Wizard camp was rapidly emptying. Instead of following them, Verpith descended into the chasm. The pitiful screams of the humans reached him above the sound of the falling water. When he came to the mouth of

the stream, he looked out to find pitched combat below. Priestesses were all that remained of the defenders, and there were only a handful left, though the attackers had paid dearly for their gains. Dozens of bodies littered the ground, with many of them burned or hacked beyond recognition.

The priestesses were arranged in a semi circle with their backs to the cliff face. Rough looking men pressed from all sides. Verpith studied the tactics of the attackers but quickly determined they were simple swordsmen. He had no doubt the priestesses could have prevailed, if their divine magic had not been exhausted.

As it was a priestess near the center of the defenders slipped, and threw her head back as a sword cleaved through her soft metal armor. Swordsmen advanced into the gap, driving the mortally wounded woman back against the cliff wall.

Divided, the last of the dragon cultists were quickly overcome. The men, enraged by their losses, were merciless with the wounded prisoners. Verpith remembered being shocked the first time he had witnessed humans acting truly barbaric. The long years since had inured him to such feelings. Still, he took no pleasure in the sight and was preparing to leave when he heard a familiar voice from below.

Barsheh stepped from the sparse treeline, surveying the area. Her eyes passed over him but he had taken steps to ensure he would not be seen. Confident the area was secured, the Wizard returned order to the attackers. Some of the prisoners, those with the most severe injuries, were quickly killed. Of the remaining three women, Barsheh interrogated one while the other two were stripped of their armor and bound.

Briefly Verpith contemplated killing the woman, but rejected the notion. From his quick intrusion into her mind he knew her to be intelligent, logical, and ruthless... and hence predictable. She was far more useful to him alive.

Confident that all was ordered as he wished, Verpith cast a spell that took him to a predetermined location many miles away.

Chapter 23

Hyliph clutched her stomach, trying to stop the blood leaking onto the hot cavern floor. The reek of sulfur and burned flesh filled her nose. Sikset was only a few paces off, her body charred by lightning and devoid of life. Away near the far wall of the chamber she could just make out the bodies of another sister and the two intruders along with the prisoners she had guarded.

She whimpered as another wave of pain rippled through her. Why did no one come to her aid? The wyrm lord had passed her just moments before. It had not even spared her a glance. Slowly she realized that no one would be returning to this chamber. She had been left to die.

Hyliph prayed. She had witnessed many miracles performed by the dedicated clergy and knew the Dragon Queen could heal her. Hyliph petitioned the goddess fervently but no miracles came. Finally, as her eyes began to glaze and the chamber dimmed, the woman beseeched the goddess she truly revered. She closed her eyes, pleading softly to Nanna-Sin.

A presence came upon her a moment later and she opened her eyes to brilliant light. Dazzled, Hyliph raised a hand to shield herself and twisted away.

It was then she realized the pain was gone.

Her hands returned to her stomach and she found she no longer wore her armor. Frantically, her finger probed a stomach slicked with blood. The deep gash was closed, but a thick scar marked where the man's blade had opened her belly. Hyliph sobbed in relief, tears flowing freely down her cheeks as she sang the praises of Nanna-Sin in a wavering voice.

When her eyes adjusted to the bright light, Hyliph discovered she was no longer in the great chamber. The chasm leading to the underground stream was just a few paces away and the light was from the spell the priestesses had cast some days earlier. Slowly she took control of her emotions and rose shakily to her feet.

She felt as though she had spent a day hauling rocks. While the wound to her belly was closed, her muscles burned with fatigue. Deciding it was some effect of the healing, Hyliph tried to order her thoughts, to determine what to do.

She prayed, but her plea for guidance went unanswered. Despite the silence, Hyliph knew Nanna-Sin had saved her, chosen her as the outlet for Her miracles. The realization of divine attention settled on her heavily but Hyliph did not quail. The goddess' silence must mean she already had the guidance she needed.

Looking back toward the great chamber, Hyliph considered her fallen sisters. Were they her sisters any longer? Tiamat had withheld her mercy, rejected her faith as weak. Hyliph was shocked to realize she held no hatred for the dragon goddess. It was Hyliph who had chosen another, or been chosen, Tiamat had merely recognized that choice.

Her thoughts were interrupted by noises from the chasm. Men's voices echoed off the rock, and a sudden fear trembled through her. She had no weapons, no armor. Without another thought, the young woman dashed across the makeshift bridge and fled towards the surface.

* * * *

Polum immersed himself in the smoke and chaos, confident his spells would protect him. As his feet touched the ground, he felt a tremor run through the stone. Nearby he saw cultists fighting one another, even as

voracious demons tore into their ranks. Looking to the air above the battle, he spotted a demonic seductress he had summoned, her face a mask of glee as she pitted allies against each other. Polum smiled to himself, thinking of the chaos that would be coming.

A chime rang in his ear, warning him of an attack. Turning, he spotted the sorceress who had fled earlier descending towards him, her arms outstretched and crackling with magical energy. Polum respected her courage but had he not shown he was the superior magic wielder? The cultist released the energy she held and Polum prepared once again to absorb her attack with his staff. The sorceress did not repeat the same mistake. Instead she directed the magic into the ground at his feet.

The earth erupted, forcing him to drop into a crouch. Chunks of stone rebounded off of his protective barrier, draining much of the magic that powered it. Polum responded with a quick incantation, successfully targeting the spell holding the sorceress aloft.

The sorceress did not have time to invoke an arresting spell and hit the ground hard only a few paces from him. Polum had already begun chanting as the sorceress slowly raised her head. She started to intone her own counterspell, but her voice trembled. Both of them knew it would fail.

The high mage stumbled as the ground shook beneath him. With a brilliant flash a gigantic beast appeared behind the sorceress, surrounded by a small cadre of heavily armed and armored priestesses.

The monster was immediately recognizable to the mage. Its bulging serpentine body sprouted five long necks that ended in heads of varying degrees of beastliness. They all had a distinctly feminine appearance, with one looking very much like a human woman of Mulan extraction. That head was one of three that regarded him while two pairs of eyes surveyed the plateau.

Polum maintained his concentration and completed the spell even as the sorceress scrambled towards the titanic beast. A sinuous line of red energy flew from his fingers, striking the sorceress' slender calf. She writhed as his magic began to consume her. Polum quickly turned his

attention to the nagahydra and her minions.

The monster moved with surprising agility and speed, undulating forward. The human head extended up and gazed down on him from above, while two serpentine faces hissed out spells in rapid succession. A green ray flew from the beast, and Polum willed the destructive energy into his staff. It was then he noticed the spell devouring the sorceress had suddenly stopped, and Polum suspected he knew the second spell the creature had cast. He tried once again to invoke the power of his staff but it was too late. Polum was inside the region of antimagic the naga had created.

The archmage did something then he had not had to do for many years... he ran.

But a few of the priestesses were faster and cut him off, swinging their morningstars to drive him back. He parried a blow with his staff, and to his astonishment, the ancient staff cracked in his hands. Fury and fear fought for control of him but he suppressed them both. There must be a way out.

Polum twisted as a cultist jabbed at him. He lunged at the woman, driving his fingers into her throat. As the Untheri fell gagging, Polum wrestled the spear from her and spun to face his attackers. There were too many of them.

He was saved by the clerics of Kossuth. Their spells had been eating the very rock of the mountain and the foundation of the plateau was giving way. Cracks opened in the ground around him, deep fissures that widened quickly. To his left a cultist screamed as the earth swallowed her. Polum followed, throwing himself into the crevasse before the other priestesses could react. As he plummeted he sensed the weave almost immediately. It was a simple matter then to wrap himself in protective magic. Soon he was tumbling in the mass of crumbling rock, safe inside a cocoon of magical force.

* * * *

Hyliph raced down the tunnel, her muscles burning with fatigue. She came upon the rearguard forces and recognized one of the women as the

fourth guard for the great chamber.

“Linnet.” The girl turned and looked back with a shocked expression. She drew her veil down before speaking.

“I was sure you were dead. Where are Sekset and Malumnuk?”

“They were killed by the intruders.”

Linnet peppered her with questions. “Are you wounded? I heard screaming, and you are covered in blood. Where is your armor, your spear?”

“You heard but did not return?”

Linnet looked away. “I am sorry sister but the wyrm lord forbade it.”

“I was hurt but am healed. I do not know what have become of my arms.”

Linnet looked at her quizzically. “Here, you may take my knife.”

Hyliph took the weapon and continued. “The sisters guarding the falls have failed. I heard men’s voices in the crevasse.”

“We are moving now anyway but I will tell the priestesses.” Linnet started to move forward but paused and looked back to Hyliph. “I am glad you are safe. I should not have...” A deep rumble shook the tunnel, rapidly growing in intensity until the Untheri were being thrown to the ground.

“Run! Make for the Entrance!” The voice of a priestess boomed above the din. Hyliph clawed her way to her feet, holding the wall of the tunnel for support. She had stumbled forward a few steps when she heard a horrible scream from behind.

Turning she found Linnet lying on the ground, a jagged chunk of the mountain across the back of her legs. Another stone fell a moment later, narrowly missing the prone woman’s head. Hyliph threw herself on the ground and tried to get her fingers under the rock. It would not shift.

Between sobs of pain Linnet shouted. “Leave! It is justice.” A rock the size of her fist slammed into Hyliph’s shoulder and she fell to her elbows. Linnet looked her in the eye. “Go.”

Hyliph scrambled to her feet and ran, passing more bodies before she reached the tunnel exit. In the old temple she caught up with the

rearguard. They were near panic but somehow avoided trampling one another as they made for the open sky. She was the last to exit the mountain but her relief died as she took in the scene before her.

The plateau was gone, replaced by a slope of fractured rock that fanned out for hundreds of paces before her. Already the sisters that had been held in reserve, more than half the army, were flooding into the unstable terrain. Beyond the rock slide there stood an opposing army, now on the advance as well. They were not all men they faced, here and there stood pillars of living fire and other abominations impossible to identify. Over it all were the screams of the wounded, the cries of mortal pain.

* * * *

Meghun stood gaping as the mountain collapsed. She would have run, had turned to do so in fact, but a hand came down on her shoulder. "Captain said to keep an eye on you." Danner smiled. "Here, take this. You can cut the throats of the wounded." The stout man produced a long knife and handed it to her. She took it with a trembling hand. "The sorcery is almost done. Then it will be blade work."

Meghun said nothing but Danner kept his hand on her shoulder until the order was given to advance. "Follow me, girl. Stick close and finish any that I drop." His hand fell away and drew a long straight double edged sword. Banging it against his shield, he screamed an oath to Tempus and charged. Meghun forced her legs to move and stayed as close as she could to the thick set man. Her head was on a swivel, expecting her death to come at any instant.

But nothing happened for long minutes. When they reached the base of the avalanche, the advance slowed as men had to pick their way through the unstable landscape. Meghun had little trouble keeping up; she was young, carried little, and wore no armor to weigh her down.

"Arrows!" A cry went up and Danner raised his shield. Meghun huddled behind him as a hail of darts fell from the sky. A few men screamed in pain nearby but Danner was not among them.

"You've good instincts. Don't let yourself freeze up." Danner surged to his feet when the volley ended and continued the labored march uphill.

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In this manner the army of Innarlith advanced to close with their enemy.

Meghun ducked behind a boulder as another, smaller volley of arrows fell. Danner crouched a few paces off, continuing to rely on his shield.

She jumped as someone groaned at her feet. Looking down she found that she standing on a hand. Meghun nearly stood but she was not so startled that she forgot the arrows. The woman was covered in grit and had blended perfectly with the stones. Meghun shuddered as she opened an eye and looked up at her. Her mouth opened a moment later and blood dribbled over her battered lips. How many were buried here already?

“Here they come!” Meghun whipped her head around as Danner rose to his feet. Peering around the boulder Meghun saw perhaps a dozen warriors scrambling and sliding down the slope. They were all women. Veils masked their faces but Meghun saw desperation in their eyes.

Men from Innarlith shouted and met the charge with shields raised. Meghun turned back to Danner just as a cultist crashed into him. The woman wore strange leather armor that covered only her chest and a narrow strip running down her back. A band of linen wrapped around her as a skirt and road high to show nearly the full length of her bare legs.

She fought in a fury, her shield absorbing a blow from Danner's sword as the flail in her right hand smashed away the arrows sticking from his own. The stout Innarlithian grimaced and his face changed then from determination to despair. The cultist turned to look behind her, leaving herself completely open. But Danner was horrorstruck and did not move.

The air suddenly crackled with intense heat as the area was bathed in flickering orange light. Screams rose, men and women together, and Meghun looked upslope to see a maelstrom of flame. Soldiers and cultists turned their weapons from each other to face the common threat. Gouts of flame taking the rough shape of arms swept out and washed over the frail humans surrounding it. Weapons were useless either to attack or defend and within moments a great conflagration grew, consuming shattered trees and flesh alike.

Meghun huddled against the boulder as screams filled the air. She saw Danner flee down the mountain side, followed closely by the woman he had just been trying to kill. The elemental flowed past, its heat scorching Meghun's face and arms. She held her eyes tightly closed until the heat died away.

She leaned on the boulder to help her rise and looked at the carnage. A dozen bodies or more lay smoldering among the blackened rocks and burning trees. Turning to look back uphill, Meghun spotted another figure emerge from behind a jagged chunk of stone. Their eyes met.

She was a cultist, to be sure, but was unarmored and didn't wear a veil. For the first time she got a good look at one of these strange women. She was deeply tanned and Meghun supposed she would be considered beautiful by some. Despite the dirt and ragged clothing, she certainly had a regal appearance, a long narrow nose dominating her features.

Her tunic was torn and soaked in blood, though she didn't move as if she were injured. She held only a simple knife in her hand as she stared at Meghun. The cultist buried at her feet moaned softly and the woman with the knife took a step forward.

"Stay back." Meghun knew even as she said it that the woman wouldn't understand. She was surprised then, when the woman stopped her advance. The dark skinned girl pointed to the trapped cultist and spoke.

Meghun didn't understand the words but the meaning was clear. She wanted to help her companion. Slowly the woman knelt and placed her bronze knife on the ground. When she rose, she kept her hands open, palms up and stretched out in front of her. She took another step forward.

Meghun didn't know what to do. Perhaps she was a healer. It would explain why she wore no armor and was covered in blood. She risked a glance around her and found the immediate area was empty of combatants. It was just the two of them, the wounded woman at her feet, and the bodies.

Finally, Meghun lowered her own knife and waved the Untheri forward. The woman broke into a run and dashed to kneel at the injured cultist's

side. She scraped away the small rocks covering her body and spoke in comforting tones. The woman's limbs were horribly twisted and she made small pained noises when the healer pressed too hard.

It was too much for Meghun. With a last look around she moved to the healer's side and helped to free the ruined woman from her partial burial. The healer looked up and nodded her thanks, directing her to dig out the arm that was trapped under the boulder.

"I'm a fool." Meghun muttered to herself as she used the knife to dig out the small stones under the huge chunk of rock. "But this is better than cutting throats." She continued to talk as she worked. "'A threat in the mountains,' they said. More like a bunch of women to slaughter." Her anger rose as she worked frantically.

The healer touched her arm and when Meghun looked up, she was shaking her head. The trapped woman was staring into the sky with unseeing eyes. The Untheri reached out to close them and then glanced around. Meghun let out a curse that would have gotten her a sound switching from her mother.

Both women rose to a crouch and Meghun's thoughts returned to escape. Smoke obscured the battlefield but the most intense fighting seemed to be below them and off to the east. The armies had been compelled to confront each other head on, the terrain making it impossible to move a significant force to flank the cultists.

But maybe one or two could slip out that way. Meghun got the healer's attention and tried to introduce herself. Pointing to her chest she said, "Meghun."

The woman nodded and repeated the gesture. "Hyliph."

Meghun forced a smile and raised her hand to point away to the west. "We can escape that way."

The Untheri paused in thought, looking back down the slope to where the clash of weapons mixed with the screams of challenge and pain. Slowly she returned her gaze to Meghun and nodded. Together the two women ran from boulder to boulder, seeking a path out of the madness.

Epilogue

Barsheh strode into the great chamber, flanked by fully armored knights. She passed a corpse of another of the cultists and noted she appeared to have been killed by magic. More bodies littered the ground away to the right and she motioned to a knight to investigate.

Her eyes swept the cavern, taking in the details quickly. The lava could hold some secrets but she had not prepared the necessary spells to search in molten rock. No, it appeared the only thing of immediate interest here were the dead.

She followed the knight to the three bodies. Another cultist, but this one showed no signs of violent death. More magic. Her eyes fell on the snake, shackled and chained. It was not at all what she expected to find. Were the snakes not in league with these dragon cultists? It was possible it was a simple matter of disobedience but why go to the lengths of chaining up the offender? She had rarely had cause to question her choice of magical study but she now wished she knew more of the necromantic arts.

“Mistress. This one still lives.” The knight knelt beside the last of the bodies, a woman unbound and nude. She was hideous. Her skin

appeared nearly melted, and Barsheh suspected acid. But despite the wounds, when the knight rolled her to her back, she recognized her.

“Bring a healer.” She pointed to one of her guards. “Give her a potion.”

The healing salve was sufficient to bring the woman back to consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open, but one was milky white and blinded. “Mistress...”

“Be calm Okhamet. Your wounds will be tended.” Was it an oversight, letting her live? She would be questioned thoroughly, of course, but Barsheh had hoped to learn something that could be exploited now.

She turned away from the apprentice and her eyes fell on a sword. The Wizard knelt and lifted the black blade. “Drow?” Her dark eyes narrowed. “Shoptim,” she whispered.

* * * *

Tewli looked up at the tall towers with wonder in her eyes. Her grip on her husband’s hand tightened and they shared a smile. It was finally over.

Waterdeep was as beautiful as the bards said and seemed to exude security and peace. Fayla was just ahead, the young woman flanked by two city guards in colorful tabards. They led the small group through the city streets with a confidence she found comforting.

Spires thrust into the air, glistening in the bright light of the noon sun. She overheard the city watchman speak, “The Spires of Morning, Dawngreeter. I hope you may find your rest within.”

Fayla nodded, but was too overcome with awe to speak. Even though she felt no particular affection for Lathander, Tewli too was struck by the beauty of the temple. She couldn’t imagine what the young priestess felt when she looked upon such a monument to her god.

When Fayla finally shook herself out of the moment, the small company continued to the broad steps leading to the temple doors. There they were met by temple guards, a man and woman in identical red and yellow robes. The young priestess made her greetings and the female guard came forward to wrap her in a tight embrace. “Your sister is safe.”

The man gestured to the gnomes and Rana. “Please enter and find

refuge in the Morninglord's light.”

Tewli turned and scanned the city streets, not sure exactly what she was looking for. Nearby Milliflim sobbed softly and Tewli's thoughts turned to Ehrlic. She knew there was little hope he would find Sillum alive, but she found herself praying the kind man would someday find his own peace.

Cast of Characters

The Graimen Family

Ehric - Sorcerer and woodsman who lives in the Firesteap Mountains.

Meghun - Ehric's sister, a tall skinny girl in her mid teens.

The Adventurers

Rhonain - A Cleric of Lathander, on a mission of import in Innarlith.

Evandra - Arcane devotee of Lathander.

Vajir - Knife fighter and rogue with a troubled past.

Mere - Archer and scout.

Kendal - Fighter and moral absolutist.

Feldan - Halfling scout who goes missing.

The Thayans

Shoptim Nuln - Newly raised Red Wizard assigned to the Innarlith Enclave, a Transmuter.

Polum - Chief Wizard of the Enclave, an Evoker.

Barsheh - Polum's apprentice and lover, also an Evoker.

Okhamet - A young apprentice Wizard.

Solugum - A Diviner assigned to the Enclave.

Lidhra - Guard assigned to the excavation site.

The Drow

Nizrim - Drow mage with remarkable ability to command spiders.

Aarasta - Dark elf of surpassing beauty.

Sisrelle - Another of Nizrim's guards.

The Innarlans

Bargest - Cleric of Cyric, large and insane.

Pristoleph - Ransar (ruler) of Innarlith.

Laurin - Young priestess of Lathander, orphaned as a child and taken in by the church along with her sister Fayla.

Fayla - Younger sister of Laurlin, also dedicated to the Morning Lord.

Danner - Warrior in Innarlith's army.

Finnele - Cleric of Sharess.

The Gnomes

Glip - Leader of the gnomish slaves.

Awanda - Glip's wife.

Tewli - Young pregnant gnome, married to Porpagil.

Filbrim - Blacksmith.

Porpagil - Young gnome with a pregnant wife.

Flippippsomme - Rogue and superior sneak.

The Slaves

Pai - Shou human, enslaved for many years by the Red Wizards.

Mengkau - Tuigan warrior taken captive during the great war with the horde.

Binxin - Spirit Folk woman from Shou Lung.

Lune - Shoptim's personal slave.

Rana - Blond haired slave of unknown heritage.

The Snakes

Pethiss - Sorceress, she appears fully human.

Verpith - A cleric with an interest in maps and behavior.

Yyll - Young scout, a tail walker.

Malcathrya - A Sorceress and leg walker.

Heth - One of Verpith's guards, a tail walker.

Yyriss - Yyll's sister, also a tail walker.

The Followers of Tiamat

Hyliph - Third wife to a general in Gilgeam's Army.

Anuksum - A lay worshipper and archer.

Linnet - A lay worshipper, friend of Hyliph.

An Excerpt from Book II of *The Hunter's Heart*

Okhamet woke with a start. She'd had another nightmare, this time involving a blast of living air dragging the breath from her lungs. She lay panting in her bed for a few moments as she oriented herself. Soon her eye adjusted to the darkness and she able to make out the interior of her chamber at the Enclave.

It was a small space, with barely enough room for two beds and writing tables. But despite being arranged for two occupants, she was alone. The acolyte with whom she had once shared the room had not returned from the battle with the cultists. Many of the apprentices had not survived the chaotic battle but those that had were now much closer to attaining the status of "Red Wizard."

Sleep would elude her, she knew, and Okhamet decided not to fight her insomnia. The bed groaned as she shifted, as did she. Her time with the Yuan-ti had left lasting effects. The young wizard slipped into a full length robe, intentionally dressing in the dark. Pulling up the hood, she let what was left of her face sink into the deep recesses of the fabric.

The corridors were nearly empty; she passed only a few weary looking guards who came to attention as she passed. The door leading down to the dungeon was well guarded, of course, flanked by two very large men in heavy armor. They challenged her as she approach.

"Identify yourself." The man's tone was flat and she knew little of his own will remained.

"I am an apprentice." Okhamet sighed as she pushed back her hood. "My name is Okhamet."

The guard had no reaction to seeing her face. He paused as if he were listening to something only he could hear. "You may enter, Apprentice-Mage."

The heavy and heavily enchanted door swung open and Okhamet donned her hood once more as she passed between the massive men. She was greeted on the other side by the jailor.

“Mistress.” The creature dwarfed even the men guarding the door, its shoulders scraping either side of the spiraling staircase.

“I wish to make a purchase.”

“Of course.” The Minotaur bowed and backed down the short flight of stairs. “What do you desire?”

The stairs opened into an expansive chamber, supported by thick columns of stone at regular intervals. It was full of cages. Magic kept the place from being a cacophony of sound, but the sight of dozens of creatures screaming soundlessly was unnerving.

“You have a sylph?”

“We do. It is with the other humanoids. Follow me.” Even hunched as he was, the Minotaur’s horns carved little furrows in the ceiling of the chamber. Okhamet swept through the stone dust he left in his wake.

There weren’t many humanoids. A single human lay curled in the bottom of a cell, not even raising his head as the jailer and Wizard passed. The next cell contained a female wild elf. She wore only her tribal tattoos and from the way she stood rigidly in the cage, it was clear she was ensorcelled. They were like deer, impossible to cage safely.

An empty cage stood before them and the Minotaur bent to open the door. “Show yourself.”

A moment later the occupant became visible. It was exactly as described in the scholarly tomes. The elemental quivered in the cell, its delicate wings vibrating with fear. It was undeniably beautiful but alien at the same time. White skin shimmered with color like an opal. The eyes were large and angled sharply, overshadowing the rest of her features.

But it was the wings that drew her eye. Even if she didn’t know the uses of those wings in magical creations, they would still have been a wonder to behold on purely aesthetic grounds. They stood out from its slim torso, nearly double her height in span. The dragonfly wings were translucent, but like her skin, shimmering with iridescence. It was a pity Okhamet

couldn't afford them.

After a quick inspection, the apprentice asked the price. "This specimen is in particularly good condition. Master Polum requires two thousand weight in gold, one thousand five hundred for the wings alone."

"Does that mean she is only five hundred without the wings?"

The Minotaur snorted, obviously taken off guard by this proposal. Up until now, Okhamet had been impressed with its fluency and intellect, but it appeared it did not adapt well to new developments. "That makes sense." He paused, thinking. "That must be what he intended."

"I agree. You may take her wings. I will need the collar as well, of course." The thin band of silver around the slave's neck would force her to obey commands from the person wearing the matching ring. It was a standard arrangement for outsiders and other creatures that were hard to restrain.

The Minotaur grunted acknowledgement, still harboring doubts about the deal. "Follow." Both she and the slave complied. It was worth five hundred gold to learn the secrets of manipulating air.

Okhamet would be prepared when she found the man who had delivered her to the snakes...

The Firesteap Mountains, home of Orcs, Ogres, and Ehric Graimen. He has pledged never to let them unite and threaten his home again. But when a new peril rises in the mountains, his life is thrown into turmoil.

Now his heart belongs to an enemy and still others pull at his sense of duty and obligation. Ehric knows he is losing control of his life, but even he cannot fathom the question that will determine who will live and die.

Who will be the *Fates' Guide*?