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The daylight shone down bright on Sandpoint and the fields around Sandpoint. The past week had been nothing but rain and the ground was over saturated with the water. It was great to finally see the sun shining on the city that had survived the Mad Queen of Thistletop. Just a couple of miles south of the cliff where the two women sat, the city was going about a relatively normal day. Everyone seemed to have calmed down from the events and while mourning still hung in the air it was not as horrible as it was before. Which was good for the people of Sandpoint, of course, but also for the two women as one of the Heroes of Sandpoint was finally able to rest.

And that is what Valtyra did.

Valtyra looked just as the other woman remembered from that day. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a tail that poked out from underneath the pirate hat on her head. Bangs fell down long enough to cover her eyes if she let them. However today they were hanging loose behind her ears. The armored coat she wore was open and its tail flap lay softly on the ground. A white button-down shirt covered her torso, the first few buttons undone and the white was interrupted by dirt she had no time to clean. Her black leather tights were surely getting soaked sitting on the edge of the cliff as she was, but it did not seem to bother her.

Which was one of the things Shayliss came to love about the woman.

They had been sitting on the edge of the cliff for the past hour and that smile Valtyra wore did not fade even once. It was great to see her finally happy and talking about stories from her days on ship. Some of them were unbelievable yet Shayliss wanted to. Especially the story about a water hag, broom handle and an overabundance of beer.

“The ship rammed into The Valiant head on,” Valtyra explained, “and the force of it shook the whole ship to its core. But that was my chance.” She used hand gestures to help her explanations, “So, using the cut rigging, I flung myself into the fight. The opposing sailors rushed at me but they made the mistake of ignoring the storm around us. Most of them slipped and I cut down the others with ease. Keeping up my momentum, I moved up to the wheel where the captain stood. He fought well, I’ll give him that, but it was obvious that he was not skilled in fighting

weather like that. I cut him down and claimed the ship as my own.” She turned to look at Shayliss, “That’s how I won my own ship and used it to arrive in Varisia.”

Shayliss’s jaw dropped and her eyes flashed in excitement, “That cannot be true.”

The half-elf gave her a cocky grin, “You don’t believe me?” The grin turned into something more sensual, “I know you were staring at me during the raid. You should know well how I fight.”

Heat flared up Shayliss’s face and she sharply looked away. Valtyra let out a belly laugh which only increased Shayliss’s embarrassment.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell your father.” Valtyra said once she had calmed down, “He would kill me. Probably with my own rapier.”

Shayliss’s mouth curled up slightly at that. She absolutely knew that her overprotective father would at least drive the half-elf away. He was already worried about Katrine, her older sister, after all.

They remained silent for a while, just listening to the breeze blow through the trees and the far away shouts from the newly made Firelord army. There were many new emotions flowing through Shayliss and she had no idea how to handle them. Damn hormones.

“Have you ever thought of leaping off of this cliff?”

Shayliss blinked at that and turned to regard the woman. The half-elf was no longer looking like the woman she remembered from that day. Her hair was now ragged, her eyes glazed over, and her clothing ripped to shreds. Blood flowed from many injuries including one through the head and one through the heart.

“What?” Shayliss stuttered.

Instead of responding, Valtyra slid off of the cliff. Her body fell down, down, down. The cliff changed from something that was only a few feet to the bottom to something that was miles and miles high. Something that would be certain death.

Shayliss screamed bloody hell down at the falling form. The space that Valtyra fell quickly shifted before Shayliss’s eyes. Emptiness became the stone of a cavern. The cliff became flat ground, and the only light around her was from various

torches set in scones attached to the walls. She found herself inside of a metal cage barely large enough for her and robbed people were walking toward her. She could not see their faces through the shadows their hoods created which only elevated her fear.

Metal clanked and stone scratched as Shayliss tried to crawl away. The cage was too small though. She could only struggle as the lock on the cage sprang open and her arms were roughly grabbed. As the robbed people did so, they started muttering under their breath something that Shayliss could not understand. She flailed, trying to make them let go. But she had become malnourished and weak. She could do no more than inconvenience them.

Before she knew it, her back slammed against stone and her arms were held down by manacles. The chains clanked and jangled, but did not break. They felt searing cold to the touch, as if they had just come out of an ice storm. That did not stop Shayliss from struggling, though, as the mutters became more and more clear.

“She has died. She has died. Sacrifice. Sacrifice.”

The sound of heated metal sizzling came to Shayliss. Her body froze in fear. Her head turned to the side to find a robbed man holding onto a branding iron. It was a long metal pole with a wide end. While she could not see the design at the end, she could imagine it being pressed into her skin. Normally, the iron at the branding end would be only orange hot as anything hotter would seriously harm the farm animal. Yet, this one the robbed man was holding was white hot. The area around the heat was warping in and out from the intense heat and steam. Shayliss was surprised that the iron was not melting into molten pools.

Realizing what the robbed people were doing, she tried to struggle even harder. Primal instinct drove her actions and the only hope she had would be to break the chains holding her down. She may be immediately caught again, but it was something. The metal bit into her skin as she strained. The pins holding the metal chains to the stone cried metallic shrieks as they bent. Just a couple of seconds and she would be free. Just a little more!

It was too late.

The robbed people forced her back down and pressed the branding iron into her chest. There was nothing but blinding white pain. It shut down her senses and she could not even hear herself scream. She could not feel her voice strain. The stone

under her seemed to fall away and she could not see the robed men and women around her. It was unbearable and she thought that she was on her way to death. However, her senses started to slowly return.

Just in time for the wall of the cavern to crumble under the weight of a large form. Two large forms in fact. One was an ancient silver dragon. Its scales were broken, cracked, bloody and pulsing with a mythical light. The other form, slamming the dragon to the ground, was a demon Shayliss had never seen before. It had a demonic curved longsword and a fifty-foot-long whip. The blade came up to slice down upon the dragon's neck. The dragon turned to regard Shayliss completely ignoring the blade about to sever her body.

“You will find her. I will guide you.”

A scale fell off of the dragon, bounced off of the stone ground, and landed on top of Shayliss's chest. It rhythmically pulsed with a soft silver light. A whisper entered her ears through the pain.

“Find her.”



Shayliss woke up with a jolt. She was no longer in the cavern. No dragon was talking to her and no demon stood there slaying. Instead, she lay curled up in a fetal position on her side. The bed under her was very soft, very warm and very wet from the gallons of sweat pouring off of the woman. On top of her, covering her body completely, were the multiple covers of the bed which were also soaked. She could feel her body shaking with fear at the memories of the nightmare. That damned nightmare she was never able to get rid of. The same one for a year now.

Her chest flared up with pain and her body curled up into that fetal position even more. The brand on her skin did not glow, pulse or otherwise interact. But the pain it caused was something demonic. It was as if something was trying to kill her from the inside. Ever since the ritual the brand was a constant burn. Nothing she had seen or read about would help get it to go away. A cleric she went to in secret even said that he had not seen anything like it. He suggested going to a more capable church, possibly one of Sarenrae as they had more experience with healing magic, but she declined it. She was uncomfortable letting him know about the brand. She was not going to go somewhere else to tell them about the brand. Especially if all they were going to say was the same thing he just told her.

The young woman was about to get up when she felt someone place a hand on her shoulder through the covers and shake her.

“Shayliss dear? Are you awake?”

Shayliss shifted her position on the still soaked bed to look out of the blankets and to the newcomer. It was a female Strix, a race of humanoids with midnight black skin and feathered wings of pure white. This woman had silver hair flowing freely down her head, elegant plate armor, longsword and tower shield. Attached to the weapons belt going across her chest was the holy symbol of her patron deity: the goddess of valor and honor Iomedae. Shayliss knew that symbol was also on the longsword and tower shield. The equipment was meticulously clean and maintained as they did not have a speck of dirt nor the tiniest scratch.

The Strix’s red eyes were turned down slightly in worry, “Shayliss?”

Shayliss shook her head and sat up, “I’m fine, Strune.” Her voice was strained and cracked. It came out as barely a whisper.

“Are you sure, dear?” Strune reached out to touch Shayliss’s head. Shayliss flinched slightly instinctively but that did not stop Strune, “Fever nightmares. Horrible things. Can you get some water down?”

Even though it made her feel like a pathetic child, Shayliss nodded. Strune smiled slightly and headed downstairs. Shayliss was still sitting on the bed, thinking, when the Strix returned with two mugs almost overflowing with water. The red-haired woman’s mouth tugged slightly at that, “I don’t think I need that much water.”

“You never know.” Strune answered with that same smile, “Better to have it and not need it.”

Shayliss shook her head in disbelief and took a sip. The water was cool, smooth and refreshing. It automatically started to break apart the parchiness she felt in her throat and before she knew it, the sip became a gulp which became a complete emptying of the mug in one sitting. She then reached out for the second mug and threw that down in the same manner. Her belly felt as if it was stretching but it was a pleasant feeling.

“I told you.” Strune teased. Her face turned down a bit, “I was worried. Armasse is about to start. I hadn’t seen you so I thought to check in and make sure you were alright.”

Shayliss groaned. She had completely forgot about the whole reason she wanted to come to Kenabres: The Armass Festival.

“Yeah. I’ll be down in a few minutes. We can go together.”

Shayliss rose from the bed and stretched strained and sore muscles. She had to work out a couple of cramps created by her nightmares but she managed to stand straight with very little stumbling. At first she was confused as her clothes and armor were not where she had thrown them last night. After another day of no success, Shayliss just threw her clothes on the chair next to the shuttered window and immediately went to bed. But now her equipment and clothes were not there.

Seeing her confusion, Strune let out a delicate cough and pointed at the dresser. Shayliss followed the point to find laying on top of the mirrored dresser were Shayliss’s equipment. All of them were shining with recent washing and a lot of the burrs and scratches were gone. It was a very telling clue about what happened to them.

Shayliss gave the Strix a suspicious eye that was returned with a sunny smile.

She stepped up to the mirror and could not help but look at herself. The focal point of her attention was her bright red hair. It was noticeably tangled and not as vibrant as it should have been. Red fell down to cover one side of her softly curved face and further down to messily curl at her shoulder blades. Her eyes, or at least the one not covered with long bangs, were once shiny and captivating but the stress and strain of two years have dulled them. The fact that the iris was dark blue did not help any.

Without the armored coat on, it was easier to see the hourglass figure Shayliss had even though it was not much. The feminine curves that were there before were filling out and widening into lean muscle. That same muscle started to stretch out the tanned skin of her limbs from her constant training and it was still a strange sight for her. A merchant’s daughter who became an adventurer. Something born out of fairy tales but never expected. At least, until she came into the woman’s life.

Her attention was drawn toward her jawline and neck. Two scars were visible there, one on either side of her face. Her left scar jaggedly ran from her jawline to above her ear. The other scar shot down her cheek to near the nape of her neck, running right above the jugular. She remembered how close the blade was to cutting into that vital artery. Shayliss grunted and shook her head trying to focus back on the present.

As the red-haired woman started pulling on her shirt and pants, she could see Strune giving her a thoughtful look in the mirror. She ignored it at first, uncomfortable by the attention. Yet, she could not ignore it anymore when Strune asked, “You really care for her. Don’t you?”

Shayliss knew exactly who she was talking about. The memories that surged through the young woman were strong and some were very awkward to show in front of a devout warpriest. She tried to hold back the reactions as she asked, “Hmm?”

Strune’s mouth ticked up, “Valtyra. She is really important to you, isn’t she? You rarely talk about her, but you sometimes sleep talk. And your actions speak volumes.”

Shayliss looked down at the dresser where her armor, grappling hook and blade still lay, “My actions?”

“Not many would travel all the way from Varisia just to find one woman.” Strune focused on the woman’s face, “Even if she is a lover.”

Shayliss tried to hide her face while putting on the armored coat. Straps snapped shut and leather slid through metal buckles almost inaudibly, “They don’t?”

“No. Especially not to the border of the Worldwound. Most people not already living here avoid it like the plague. But you walk into the literal hellfire just to find one woman.” Strune shrugged, “It is very telling.”

“She is not just one woman.” Shayliss said in a whisper. It was a sudden statement that her mouth did not warn her about and she hoped that the Strix did not hear it.

Strune nodded, “Thought so.” When Shayliss finished with various weapon belts and pouches, the Strix waved her hand at the door and asked, “Ready?”

Without answering, Shayliss opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

Shadowshine, a black horse with red eyes, huffed as Shayliss tied his reins to the pole. He had been very restless throughout the ride and, as usual, loved to give the woman problems. It was done to amuse him and Shayliss learned long ago to just go with the flow. She patted his side twice and he gave her another huff practically saying Go away now. Strune chuckled at seeing that, “Has a bit of attitude, huh?”

“Yeah,” Shayliss said, “Like someone else I know.”

With a last pat she readjusted her equipment that got shifted from the ride and followed the winged woman. Clydwell Plaza was settled not far from The Valor Sword Inn Shayliss rented in the Old Kenabres District. Situated right in front of the Cathedral it was named after, St. Clydwell Cathedral, it was the place to hold festivals, plays and other events, rare as they may be. Two rectangular pools of clear water stretched out from one side of the long plaza to a third from the other end. It is at that last third where Armasse would be held. Benches were set up in a circular fashion, like a coliseum. There were enough seats for the whole city, even though people would have to get close and comfortable with those they sat next to. In the center of the coliseum was where the various plays, contests and fights would happen. It was rugged with a red and gold rug with very elegant and regal designs weaving in, out and through it.

Strune directed Shayliss to the stands where they managed to find seats in the front row despite the fact that they were almost late. Looking out into the center, she can see two tents at the edge of the circle. One held a market stand made into a judge’s booth. Two men and two women, all with the dress and air of nobility sat at the stand talking to each other. Smiles were plain on their faces and a couple even laughed at what might have been a joke. The second tent was completely covered so Shayliss could not see inside of it. Yet, the symbol of Sarenrae was on the cloth of the tent and clerics, priests and paladins were walking in and out of the tent. All had the holy symbol of Sarenrae clear on their armor, clothes or equipment. Shayliss suspected that the tent was a medic’s tent for the contestants and fighters.

Strune saw where she was looking and confirmed, “That is the Healer’s Tent. While the rules of the contests and fights help prevent major injury, there are still times when it happens. That is what the multitude of clerics are there for.”

“That is what I figured.” Shayliss said, her gaze moving around, “I knew Armasse was popular, but I did not think it was this popular. The whole city must be here.”

“It wasn’t at first.” Strune responded with real pride in her voice, “It was just a test for those who wished to be a Crusader. But as the Worldwound has grown and become more dangerous, the people wanted something to help entertain themselves.” She waved her hand at the makeshift arena, “It became this festival to give people a sign. And it works. You did not see it as you have only been here for a week, but except for the month leading to Armasse, Kenabres is down on morale. Festivals are rare and plays are even rarer. One can feel it in the air. Everyone wonders if this is going to be their last day alive. This is the one time where the people feel joyous and excited.”

Shayliss’s eyebrows shot up at that. She had experience with that during the events of almost three years ago. The Mad Queen of Thistletop’s raid devastated the emotions of Sandpoint until the Heroes of Sandpoint killed her. Then the serial killer months later brought that right back down. As far as Shayliss knew, there have been a few more attacks on Sandpoint, but allies she left behind managed to kill the major villain behind it all, apparently a resurrected Runelord. There was even a book written by someone who joined the group after she left that told the whole story. Shayliss had it in her backpack back at the inn, but had not started reading it yet. She visited recently and everything in Sandpoint was back to normal. But she could not fathom having that kind of morale crush all year except a month for a city this large. Kenabres was five or six times larger than Sandpoint. That must be the effect of being on the border of the Worldwound, the home of the demons on Golarion.

Strune nodded at her expression, “Yeah. It can get really bad here. Only the support of the Crusaders and the guardian dragon Terendelev keeps people from losing all hope.”

“Guardian dragon?” Shayliss asked, “Kenabres has a guardian dragon?”

“Yeah. She has been here for as long as anyone remembers, keeping the city safe.” Strune looked around, “She could be anyone here. She does not like to keep to one appearance for so long. One time, as a joke, she mimicked me. Confused the darkness from my sister.”

“Wow. I would like to meet her.” Shayliss whispered in wonderment.

Shayliss continued to look through the crowd, hoping to find the blonde hair and blue eyes that was so familiar. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Strune staying respectfully quiet. There were plenty of people here: merchants, nobles, armored Crusaders and plenty of normal townsfolk. She even noticed a couple of adventurers here to watch the spectacle. However, after a minute of swift looking, she did not find what she was looking for. Yet, she did find where the combatants, actors and festival staff were standing ready to go out on stage.

Seeing where Shayliss's gaze stopped, Strune asked, "See her?"

Shayliss shook her head. The disappointment rose in her but she caught it on the way up and forced herself to ignore it, "No, but I see the others."

"They made it then? Good."

It was hard not to miss the others of the group that travelled to Kenabres together. Mordria was standing with her red scaled arms crossed in confidence. Her body was one of a beautiful seductress, especially with the near scraps of hide "armor" covering her body, if one could ignore the red skin, scales at her arms and legs, and the horns poking out of her head. Oh, and the blindfold covering awful looking scars. Even without sight, she was looking around the audience as if she could see each person clearly. She even waved at Shayliss and Strune which threw the red-haired woman off balance.

Kaira, next to the Tiefling, was inspecting her gear. She rubbed her hand across her swordbreaker dagger, feeling for flaws, cracks and making sure the blade was sharp. Then she did a similar thing with her armor, rubbing her fingers across the leather, metal chains and green cloak. Some of the males in the staff group were staring at her doing that. Yet, they all turned back around when they found the white wolf with beautifully maintained fur and piercing blue eyes lying next to her growling at them. Kaira looked down at Blueeye in confusion but that was all the reaction she gave. Shayliss was surprised when the human huntress did not look at her bow. Was she really that confident in herself?

Snaga, the massively scarred half-orc, was kneeling on the ground. He was huddled in on himself, careful of his spiked gauntlets, like a child wishing the world would go away. The huddle and his cloth armor emphasised his muscles and scars which was most likely the cause for everyone keeping away from the group. When Shayliss looked closely enough, she could see his mouth moving, muttering to himself. Or, it looked like he was muttering to himself. While she did not know

the man well yet, Shayliss knew that he was in fact talking with his eidolon, Nephelim. But why was he not fused with the creature? She knew for a fact that if he was given a choice, he would be fused with the creature all day.

She could even picture the eidolon. It looked like a half-orc like Snaga, skin grey like stone. However, it wore armor that was a contradiction of itself. It was ever shifting however it carried the same themes throughout. Half was metallic plate that shone with light as if from heaven itself. The other half, however, seemed to swallow that light with its abyssal nature, leather that was black and blood red. A hood of shifting colors covered its face and the shadows it created prevented any from seeing its face except for its mouth, which was feminine with small tusks poking out.

“Strune?” Shayliss asked.

“Yes dear?”

“Why is Snaga not fused with Nephelim? It is strange.”

The Strix gave her a smile, “Because it is against the rules.” When she saw Shayliss’s look of confusion she continued, “When fighting in the trials, the rules state that a fighter must forgo their best strength. So, for Snaga, his greatest strength is his eidolon and the confidence he gains from being fused. And for Kaira, she cannot use her bow. Which means she has to fight close quarters combat with her companion.”

Shayliss’s expression of confusion turned into skepticism, “Why?”

“The Crusaders like for potential recruits to prove themselves. What better way to prove yourself then to fight without the strength you rely on? Or even fight with your greatest weakness? And when you win fighting as such, then it is even better, isn’t it?”

The skepticism did not fade, but Shayliss dropped it. She was not ever going to understand how that worked out. Since she was not participating, it did not really affect her anyway. Yet, she was very curious.

“I wonder what my grea-”

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There was nothing. No feeling. No sight. No sound. She could barely even hear her own thoughts as they raced with questions. It was a very sudden and abrupt transition between talking to Strune at Armasse to now... doing whatever she was doing. Her first thought was that she was dead. That had to be it. There was nothing she could perceive at this point so there could not be anything else to her existence. But, if that was true, then how could she think?

As if the world was answering her, her senses slowly started to return. First, it was pain as her heartbeat sent pulses of pure agony racing through her head. Badum, badum, badum went her head threatening to burst from the inside. Then came the pain from her chest the brand ever burning. Right now, though, she was strangely glad to feel the pain. It was a confirmation that she was indeed alive.

From one side of her, she could figure out left from right yet, she could hear the sound of stones clinking against stone and a wall threatening to landslide. It sounded far from her, yet it echoed as if she was in a large enclosed space. A cavern maybe? All around her came groans, grunts of pain, and calls for help. She tried to move but either her body was still unresponsive, or something was on top of her body pinning her to the ground.

Sudden light flared from various cracks in front of her face. While the light was only able to touch a fraction of her sight it still blazed in her eyes and burned. She had to immediately close her eyes and grunt in pain. All around her more grunts of pain sounded off.

“Sorry!” A familiar feminine voice echoed from far away.

It took her a couple more minutes, but she was finally ready to force the rocks on top of her off. She placed her hands flat against the surfaces above her and pushed. Muscles strained but made little progress at first. However, she continuously put more and more pressure on the rocks and was eventually able to slide the rocks away. They fell with a crash and she was suddenly able to breathe completely. Coughs exploded from her as air returned to her system as well as the massive amounts of dust.

With the light, Shayliss was able to finally see where she was. Like she thought, she was in a large cavern. The ceiling and far walls of the cavern receded into darkness. To Shayliss’s left, there was a large pile of rubble that occasionally shifted causing rocks and small pebbles to fall in a mini landslide. She had to

control her breathing as she noticed arms, legs, and other body parts of people inside of the rubble. There were so many.

“Shayliss!” A woman called from the other side of the cavern, “I need help!”

Shayliss struggled to stand up and moved as fast as she could toward the voice. Strune was the focal point of the light, having cast a spell onto her holy symbol. She was kneeling next to a pile of rock and Shayliss could hear her whispering to someone.

“We are going to get the rocks off of you.” Strune was saying, “Just try to relax and don’t move.”

“I understand.” Another female voice whispered back. Her voice was calm but Shayliss could hear the strain of pain in it. She may have gotten injured in the fall.

When Strune noticed Shayliss had arrived, she nodded, “Alright. We need to make sure we do not injure her any more. Go slow and place the rocks a good distance away.”

Shayliss nodded and positioned herself. Strune counted down from three and they heaved. Like Shayliss, Strune must not be as strong as she normally was, but together they managed to lift the rock and set it aside. They continued this process for about five minutes and all of the rocks were off of the woman.

Like Shayliss, she was more masculine than feminine, but she was much more leanly built and generally smaller. Short brunette hair would have fallen to the nape of her neck if it was not already in a messy heap on the stone. Simple leather armor covered her body and a longbow was strapped to her back. Most of the arrows in her quiver were broken and her leg was bent in an unnatural shape. It was obviously broken.

Strune snarled under her breath and said, “Find some wood and rope in the rubble. If my spells don’t work we’ll need to get a brace for her and a walking stick to lean on.”

Shayliss nodded and moved for the rubble while light from Strune’s spells lit the cavern up even more. It was difficult for her to ignore the limbs sticking out but she did manage to find enough good pieces of wood, cloth and rope to make a splint and walking stick. However, she was pleased to see that it was unnecessary

when she returned. The woman was standing up, if favoring one of her legs, and talking quietly to Strune.

“I know it doesn’t hurt, Anevia.” Strune said, “But even so you will not be able to walk properly on that leg until we can get it regenerated.”

The woman, Anevia, nodded, “Of course.” She turned to Shayliss, “Do you mind if I can use that stick as a walking cane? It will help keep me from tiring out so fast.”

Shayliss immediately dropped everything except the walking stick and handed it to her. She thanked the pair but could not say anything else before a cry rose, “Stop helping that freak and get me out!”

Anevia let out a massive sigh and placed her palm on her face. Strune did not seem to notice her as she rushed for the man who called out. Hesitantly, Shayliss followed and Anevia joined her. Below a very small pile of rock was an average sized man who seemed like he was not unfamiliar with food or beer. His red and white robes were so fine under the dirt that he had to have been a noble in the city. Dirt caked his almost bald head but otherwise he was most definitely uninjured.

Strune’s eyes narrowed as she noticed that but did not hesitate to start pulling off the rubble. Shayliss was very tempted to remain on the side but she sighed and helped. It was of no effort whatsoever to get the man out. Throughout the process he was yelling, insulting and generally ungrateful. Even when Strune helped him to stand up he kept running his mouth. Anevia silently limped away toward the last pile of rubble which the other companions were kneeling around.

“Finally!” The man exclaimed to the Strix, “I have to wonder how you made it through Armasse last year with such sloth!”

Strune’s silver eyebrow twitched up in annoyance but all she said, without a hint of sarcasm, was, “I apologize if I insulted you, Horgus. As you may notice this is not exactly normal.”

He stared at her face for a second then shrugged, “I guess you have a point. But I may request to do better next time. Especially when we are dealing with freakish thieves and conspiracy theorists.”

Shayliss noticed that Anevia shot her gaze toward the man and was about to throw out some insults of her own but Strune cut in easily, “I understand how stressed

you must feel but this is not the time to be pointing fingers or throwing insults. This process will go much easier if we can at least tolerate each other long enough to get out from wherever we are.”

Shayliss had enough of the noble at that point and turned to help with the last survivor. However, her eye passed over the caved in rubble pile again and something flashed at her. Normally, she would have just ignored it and moved on. But there was something hypnotizing to it. As if the flash was calling to her. It flashed again. And again. And again.

Before she knew it, Shayliss was standing in front of the rubble pile, in front of where the flash was. Barely poking out of the rubble, she found a silver object. It was triangular and had some runes etched into it. Without realizing it, she was pulling at it, not even worrying about the consequences of possibly sending the rubble into a true landslide. Yet, when she finally yanked it out no such landslide happened.

Instead, it pulsed slightly in her hand. It was a silver dragon’s scale with runes etched all over its surface. Something tugged at the back of the young woman’s mind. A memory fighting to become a visible thing. It was like a man pushing and shoving through a large crowd to reach a specific point. The members of the crowd were thoughts and mental blockages and the man was this memory.

Suddenly, she remembered.



“-test weakness is.”

It was a question that Shayliss did not really want to speak out loud. She barely even wanted to think of it as she knew the answer. In fact, it was plainly obvious to her what her greatest weakness was and coming to terms with it was something she was not mentally ready for.

Strune did not seem to understand her facial expressions this time. Her mouth opened as if she was about to answer the question but her words were drowned out by the sudden uproar of cheers. The pure force of the noise threatened to crush Shayliss coming from all directions as it did. The strix turned to look toward the center of the arena and clapped in an enthusiasm the red-haired woman had not seen in the week or so that they have been travelling together.

Shayliss followed her gaze and watched as an armored man stepped out onto the rugged floor. The armor was of the style that was common with most of the Crusaders: plates of metal that covered chest, shoulder and waist. A skirt of cloth and leather fell to slightly below the man’s knees and gauntlets of layered metal plates covered his hands. At his side, strapped to a loosely hung weapon’s belt was a longsword within a very well kept sheath and at his back was a tower shield of metal and wood reinforcement. His leather, knee-high boots hitting the rug would not have been heard even without the crowd.

Once he reached the center of the arena, he waved at the crowd for a second before pulling off his helmet. Under the helmet, one could clearly see the contrast of tanned skin and white receding hair. A bushy moustache fell around his mouth and partly down into the neck of his armor. Scars lined his face, the worst one being the deep gash that raced diagonally up his cheek. It was a horribly deep one that could have only been healed by a cleric or other holy warrior. Yet, it did not detract from his wizened features. Shayliss could imagine how handsome he must have been in his youth.

Despite his age, he was moving and waving without any sign of wear and tear on his body. And his voice was something that was created to be carried along troop lines.

“Welcome citizens of Kenabres to Armasse!”

The crowd went wild again, this time even louder than before. Shayliss wondered how they could be so loud. The power of this festival and the hope it brought its attendants must have been strong.

While they cheered, Shayliss leaned over to Strune and asked, “Who is that?”

Strune, while clapping, leaned toward her and answered, “Lord Hulrun, prelate of Kenabres.”

“By the audience’s reaction, I assume he is well liked?”

She nodded, “Everyone loves him. The citizens practically begged him to take up the position.”

“Today,” Hulrun continued once everyone quieted down, “We celebrate those who came before. Those who are. And those who come after. We watch as brave men and women prove to us that they have the will and commitment to fight alongside their brothers and sisters in arms. We also watch stories to excite, to hope and to cherish. But most of all, we come together and share the hope that our gods and goddesses bring upon us every day.”

He pointed at what seemed like a random point in the city. Shayliss could see nothing over the high walls that separated Old Kenabres from its adjacent districts, “Once our clock strikes noon the festivities will begin!”

The crowd cheered again and everyone waited for noon. Judging by the sun, Shayliss estimated that they only had five minutes to wait.

Unfortunately, that noon never seemed to come.

Two minutes later, a bright light shone from the west, Shayliss’ right. It was enough to shift and elongate Hulrun’s shadows sharply. The darkness caused by his body washed over the cathedral and covered it by the lack of light. The light was as if the sun was coming up from the wrong direction.

Everyone turned to see a pillar of red-orange fire, bright blue lightning and pitch black smoke. The lightning was unnatural, spiralling up with the pillar of fire instead of shooting outward. Black smoke roiled in a circle as if being blown in all

directions. A mere second later, tremors shook the ground violently enough to crack the bleacher's supports but not enough to break them entirely. People screamed and panic started to rise where cheers were only moments before.

But no sound was louder than a roar of pure hatred and rage. The roar shook Shayliss to the core and the primal instinct to run and hide shot through her system. She looked up just in time to see a form, a halfling woman with commoner clothing, rise into the air on wings just starting to pop out of her miniscule back. As Shayliss watched, the tiny woman swiftly shifted into an ancient silver dragon. Her scales glimmered in the great light as she raced like a dart toward the pillar of fire.

Strune, staring in shock at the dragon, muttered a word that Shayliss could only read from her lips, "Terendalev."

"That was Terendalev?" Shayliss asked as she was repeatedly shoved and hit by the fleeing citizens of Kenabres.

"That is the Kite." Strune continued to mutter, "The pillar is coming from the Kite. But that would mean..." Her sentences trailed off as her train of thought apparently hit something she did not like at all. Her dark face blanched as one last word escaped her lips, "Wardstone."

As if her words were the cue, another roar from Terendalev cut through the noise. This time, it was answered in kind by another bestial growl. Shayliss turned to look and saw Terendalev being chased by a demon the size of five men.

His skin was the shade of blood just spilled from a body. Massive, bat-like wings spread out to three times his body width and four horns curved from his head, two from the top and two from his jaws. Each horn had a series of metallic rings wrapped around them and their tips looked like they could skewer a hundred bulls without issue. Four orange eyes came down in diagonals from the horns and he had no nose. Instead, his mouth opened to cover two thirds of his head.

Gleaming black plates covered his torso and legs and more covered his burly shoulders. His legs were backward kneed and ended in hooves like a bull. Muscles that made any body-builder feel ashamed that they had not worked out enough stretched his skin which only added to his frightful appearance. But what was the worst were his weapons. In his left hand was a longsword the length of a bridge and with a blade that ended in a sharp wedge that could cut a feather or a mountain equally. In his right hand was a fifty-foot long whip that seemed to be made out of

pure fire. There was no substance to it but it was masterfully controlled as the demon snapped it forward.

Only Shayliss's quick thinking prevented Strune from falling backward in pure surprise and horror. The red-haired woman could feel the Strix's body shaking uncontrollably. With barely a whisper, Strune said, "Khorramzadeh."

The whip of fire shot forward and prepared to wrap around the dragon's foot. Terendalev, with the grace given to a cat instead of a five story creature of heavy scale, spiraled to the side letting the whip only grace her side. She then curved around and sent a plume of icy steam raced for the demon. The demon endured the blast of winter that sent shivers of cold down Shayliss's spine and raised his whip up to slam down.

Instinctively looking down the whip's path of attack, Shayliss found that if Terendalev dodged the attack, the fire would crack down upon those in the staff corner who were immobilized with fright.

Without hesitation, she vaulted over the railing of the bleachers and ran as fast as she could toward the staff yelling, "Move out of the way!"

She was too late. All the staff did was stare at her in confusion as the whip came down on top of their heads. Many were crushed under the weapon's supposed weight. More were burned to death by its immense heat. Those who survived had severe burns and missing limbs.

Shayliss stopped in reaction to the sudden brutality. In one second, all of those men and women were lost. The rest were at risk of dying too.

From the corner of her eye she could see clerics still at the healing tent. Strune flew to stand beside her and her other companions were running from where they had been, near the judge's tent. Shayliss was briefly relieved that they still lived.

"Mordria, Strune and Snaga," she said, "Get those injured toward the healer's tent! The rest of us will-"

She was interrupted by more tremors and the sound of stone crumbling to gravel. Everyone in the group turned to see that rips were starting to form in the ground. Demons of all shapes and sizes then started pouring out of them like water from a

fountain. Screams of demonic joy rose in the air followed by screams of terror and sounds of combat.

“Go!” Shayliss yelled, “The rest of us will cover them! We need to protect the injured and the healers!”

The group moved to follow Shayliss’ orders. Each of the stronger ones of the group grabbed two staffers and as a mass shuffled them toward the healer's tent. Others, if they could move, joined with the group while Shayliss, Kaira and Blueeye protected them against the demons who had sensed weak prey.

It was obvious that the situation around them frightened the group as a whole. The shifting of winter cold and summer heat from above was a constant reminder that the only reason they were alive right now was because of the ancient dragon willing to protect them from the worst. Without that protection, no one would be alive right now.

However, that did not mean the fight down below was easy. Babaus, Invidiaks, Nabasus and more rushed at the group trying to find easy targets. To their surprise, they found that the wall of Shayliss, Kaira and Blueeye was hard to break through. Especially when Strune and Snaga assisted with their occasional spell when they could spare the attention. While fighting, Strune was telling them how to avoid the worst of what each demon had to offer and Shayliss used that information to direct them forward.

They could only get halfway toward the tent before the worst happened.

A roar of pain shook the air above and Shayliss had the chance to look up at the sky. Terendalev, the guardian dragon of Kenabres, fell. She crashed hard into the Cathedral of St. Clydwell and could not get up again before Khorammzadeh slammed her back into the ground. The balor lord’s crash sent a rift racing through the plaza.

And right under the group’s feet.

The ground opened to swallow the group whole. Demons were able to fly upward, but stones and injuries prevented Strune from doing the same. Only darkness was below the group and Shayliss was sure that it would be certain death that finds them.

However, while Khorammzadeh stood over the silver dragon with sword ready to sever, she turned toward the group. The image was the same exact one from her dream. A taloned hand rose and an arcane rune formed. Shayliss could feel the magic take hold of her and soften her descent.

The last thing she saw before the ground closed again and darkness took hold was the demonic longsword cut into scale and flesh. The ancient silver dragon's head fell.

Terendalev was dead.



Shayliss stared down at the runed scale. It pulsed slightly with subtle power. As it did, she understood the gift that Terendalev had given her. She could use the scale to levitate in the air. It was not the power of flight, but it was probably the best that she would be able to get without powerful magic.

She kissed the scale and closed her eyes, “I will protect them for you, Terendalev.”

The scale pulsed again then faded. That is when she noticed more flashes in the rubble. With work, and caution around the limbs, she found four more scales, each with different runes etched into them and each with differing pulse rhythms. But she could feel that each called out toward a person in the cavern. She looked back to find that Strune and Mordira were just starting to help a third survivor stand up.

He was a tall man with long white hair and a thinness that some would consider frail. Long ears poked out of the hair showing his elven heritage. His blue, maroon and black robes with white fur were ruined from the attack and fall and the staff next to him was elegant but dirty as well. However, that was all tame compared to his face. Blood caked practically every spot of skin that was not already covered with layers and layers of bandages soaked with even more blood. The only things uncovered by bandages were his mouth and nose which he used to breath in shallow breaths of pain. Strune and Kaira must have run out of strength to heal the man.

In Shayliss' hands, the scales each seemed to be pointing toward a specific person: Mordira, Strune, Snaga, or Kaira. It was as if the scales chose each of them to hold and use their power.

She started walking back toward the others.

“I know it hurts.” Strune was saying, “We will take care of you as soon as we gain back our strength.”

The elf nodded, “I understand. We need to get moving. There is no telling what kinds of dangers are lurking here.”

Strune smiled while Horgus growled in annoyance, “Of course Aravashnial.”

By then Shayliss returned to the group and silently started handing out the scales in reverence. Each of the chosen looked down at the scales and seemed to remember. Strune closed her eyes, filling with tears, and started whispering a silent prayer to Iomedae. While Shayliss did not hear all of it, she understood that the woman prayed for Terendalev’s safe passage to the afterlife as well as the safety of them and those who survived above. Snaga, silent as ever, closed his fist around the scale. However, she could feel the pure anger that radiated like heat from his body. It caused her to take a small step backward. His reaction, coupled with the fact that he was currently merged with his eidolon, Nephelim, the creature a translucent outline over his body, was something that Shayliss did not want to unleash.

Mordira looked down at the scale and she did not try to hide the anger in her body. Her sharp teeth snapped together in a snarl and she said, “I will kill that demon.”

Kaira, however, fell into a thoughtful haze. Blueeye did not seem to understand what was going on with his master, but he seemed to be able to sense something. He padded over to her side and sat down leaning against her leg. She patted his head twice then shook herself back into reality.

Shayliss expected the others to make some kind of comment. Especially the grumpy noble. Yet, minutes passed and everyone was silent. None of them made a remark and Anevia was even praying along with Strune. That surprised Shayliss but she did not mention it not wanting to break the reverent silence.

When it was done, the others seemed to have gathered themselves enough to move on. Shayliss had planned what they would do in the meantime silently with Aravashnial. They had decided to have Strune, with her light, and Mordira, with her darkvision, take the ends of the group. The three survivors would stay in the middle. Shayliss and Kaira would take lead behind Strune while Snaga watched the rear with Mordira.

Before they moved, though, Aravashnial said, “I need someone to help guide me. I cannot see anything.”

Anevia quickly offered, “I’ll do it. You all need all of the focus you can get to help us all get out of here.”

Horgus nodded and Shayliss had hoped he was finally willing to tolerate the others. Instead, he looked daggers at Anevia and Aravashnial, “Also, to help me escape any dangers the cavern may hold,” he emphasized the word ‘dangers’, “I will reward you with one thousand gold.”

Shayliss blinked at that. While she was not doing this for the money that was a lot to just throw at the group. The man really wanted to get out of here. And was really suspicious of the other two.

She shook her head and said, “Let’s get going. We have a long trip ahead of us.”



The caverns were silent. Shayliss had expected to be hearing something from the world above, assuming the demons were still assaulting the city. Some thuds, shaking, or cries from further in the tunnel maybe. However, the only sounds they heard were the drips of moisture and the group's footsteps. Maybe Shayliss wanted those noises. It would mean that she at least had an idea of what was ahead of them or behind them. The silence was worse for its uncertainty.

It was quite impressive how well the others seemed to be handling the situation. There were no cries of hopelessness, no outbursts of anger, nor attempts to flee. Instead stood the determination to survive and the occasional prayer to Iomedae. The steel will of the traveling group was strong. Even when facing against one of the most terrible foes on Golarion.

Yet, Shayliss could feel the fear about to burst from her body. As they moved away from the first cavern and the rubble pile of limbs, Shayliss' authoritative side started giving room for it. She had no idea what they were walking toward and walking from. What will be up on the surface when and if they found their way out? The denizens of Kenabres' underground may not be friendly and they had to be prepared for it. Shayliss knew that she should be making some sort of plan for some sort of contingency. All she could think about though, strangely enough, was if Shadowshine had managed to escape. The horse had the worst kind of attitude she had seen in any kind of beast, and barely seemed to tolerate her or his previous owner, Valtyra. But his safety was on her mind.

That is why, when the group ran into a three-way crossroads of tunnel, she almost slammed her nose into the wall. She caught herself in time and turned around to see that the others were more interested in the tunnels than her almost failing at basic observation.

To her right, the rest of the group's left, the tunnel continued until it reached a cavern about half a mile on. Normally, they would not have been able to see the cavern, even with Strune's light, but within the cavern came an unnatural green glow. The light showed a building that reached beyond the top of the tunnel made of well-cut stone. To her left, the tunnel continued into darkness that Strune's light could not penetrate. Which meant it most likely ran for a long while yet. Either that or it was just barely outside of the light's edge.

“What do you think, Shayliss?”

Shayliss almost jumped at the sudden voice. She turned to look at Strune who was giving her a significant glance. As if she was trying to tell the red-haired woman something. It was not hard to see what message she was trying to send after a couple of seconds. Despite what Shayliss had been thinking about earlier, the group was looking ragged. The companions she had on her trip to Kenabres were all fine, somehow, but the others did not look so good.

Anevia, standing next to the blind Aravashnial, was holding herself hard against her walking stick. While she was trying to control it, Shayliss could see the heavy exhalations she was making and the sweat pouring from her hairline, exhausted from the fifteen minutes of walking. If Shayliss listened very closely, she could hear the stick shaking lightly against the tunnel floor causing tiny flecks of stone to roll away.

Aravashnial was standing tall, the image of a leader. Yet, the blood from his wounds was starting to flow again, mixing with sweat, ripped open by the constant motion. His face was paler than normal and he was catching himself from slumping over. Like Anevia, he held his staff against the ground to hold himself up.

Horgus did not bother with hiding his condition. His breathing was heavy and rang along the stone of the tunnels. The floor of the tunnel dirtied his robes as he sat and sweat was pouring from his face. He had no injuries to speak of but he was obviously just as tired as the others. While she would love for him to suffer a bit more for his annoying attitude, she knew that her conscience, and Valtyra, would hate her for it.

“We make for the building.” She said, “We all could use a bit of rest.”

Strune nodded in approval and turned to Aravashnial, “Do you agree, Aravashnial?”

The elf nodded his head without hesitation.

They all returned to formation and Strune led the way toward the building. As they walked closer and closer to it, Shayliss started getting more and more details from it.

It was a temple. Twenty feet tall, the building was fortress like with no windows and walls of, like she saw earlier, well-cut stone. By its size, it was most likely a one or two room temple and Shayliss could barely see the frame of a door on its left wall. However, the thing that stood out the most was the large, ten-foot tall carving of an upside-down hammer. It was beautifully done too with designs cut into the head of the hammer and the strips on the handle. Whoever carved it made sure to add the fine details to it as if it had been an act of devotion.

“It’s the symbol of Torag.” Strune said.

Behind Shayliss, Kaira was nodding her head in agreement. Mordria stepped up and asked the question that was probably on everyone’s mind, “Why is it here? And why the unnatural glow?”

Strune’s mouth curled down into a frown, “I fear corruption. Be ready for anything.”

With that, everyone drew their weapons. There was no growl from Blueeye yet, but Shayliss looked back and saw that the wolf’s eyes were narrowed. He sensed something was in there.

“Anevia,” Shayliss said, “Guard the others. Wait for us to give you the all clear.”

Anevia made sure she had an arrow nocked and readied, “Understood.”

Anevia was definately military. Despite her debilitating injury and exhaustion, she did not back down from an order or even hesitate to obey it. Even if it did come from Shayliss, who was self-trained and only fought a relatively few major battles. Did the woman really trust her that much? Or was her stress and strain causing her to run on instinct without thought for anything else?

Shayliss shook her head. She needed to focus.

Mordria and Strune led the group as they walked around the temple toward its only door. They had to circle the building completely as rocks piled in front of the opening to the left enough to block their movement. When they got to the door, Mordira opened it slowly and checked it before stepping inside.

She had stepped into the temple's antechamber. Stone benches that were once beautifully designed lay broken against the walls of the small room. Dust covered every surface possible in thick layers and a small altar stood at the other end. It was dust covered as well, but other than that it was unmarred. There even remained some water within the altar. When everyone crammed into the room and shut the door, only Strune's holy symbol illuminated the place.

"There is definitely something here." Mordira muttered, "Even I can feel it."

Blueeye let out a low snarl in response. Kaira nocked an arrow into her bow and pulled it halfway back. They obviously felt it too.

"Do you know what it is, Strune?" Shayliss asked.

"It could be a number of things." Strune answered, "Without looking at it, I cannot tell you anything more than it is most likely the source of whatever is corrupting this place. My first guess is demon from the attack above."

Shayliss let out a soft curse, "Alright. Mordria and Strune, up front again. Kaira and Saga, get ready to provide support. We need to either pull it back outside or push it further in. There is no room to fight in this tiny space."

The others nodded and stepped up to the stone door that led further inside. Before they could open it, though, a strong force slammed into it from the other side.

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The force of the blow shook dust from the door frame and threatened to tear the door down. Blows came from the door again and again and again. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. It was rhythmic like a war drummer banging out a marching tune.

Or a body trying to shoulder a door down.

"Get ready!" Shayliss yelled, her voice more high pitched than normal, "Let it break through."

Mordria took a step back from the door and held her arms out at a slight diagonal. As if she was preparing to give someone a bear hug. Her legs widened and she placed one further back to brace herself. After she got into her stance, she even

took one more step back so she was almost right up against the wall. She knew how to handle a charge.

Sure enough, when the stone door crumbled into pebbles under the weight of some kind of creature, she tensed up. When that same creature, some sort of undead being, sprinted right for the fiendish woman, she pulled herself back so most of her weight was on that rear foot. When the undead creature collided with Mordria, she clamped her claws around one shoulder and one upper arm. This stopped the undead's charge abruptly and it started snapping its rotted but sharp teeth at her.

For a second, the woman held it in place. Then, when she knew she had a good hold on it, she started slowly shoving it backward. Either it did not notice or did not care. As she pushed it back, it continued to try biting her and clawing her with its long nails. Any hit she did not outright dodge she took the brunt of. Each hit she grunted and snarled but did not show any sign of weakness. Even when blackish blood started flowing from injuries to her arms, face and bare chest she only held on.

The problem, though, was with Mordria so close to the creature, no one else could get a hit in or else dare risk hitting her as well. So, until she got the creature fully into the nave of the temple, she was on her own.

“Once you get it inside, break from it and move back to prevent it from escaping.” Shayliss said, “Everyone else, flank it. Don't let it overpower you and don't underestimate its strength.”

Mordria grunted as another claw managed to rip a line into her skin. Now she had a lot of small lines of blood that slashed this way and that on her upper half. However, she had managed to get the creature into the room.

“On three, break.” Shayliss yelled as the group made their way into the room and into various flanking positions.

“One!”

Mordria started moving up the aisle of pews within the nave. The creature finally got what was happening and tried to pull away from the fiendish woman. She held on, grunting in effort as well as pain. Its motions became frantic and unnatural. Bones crackled and tendons snapped. She still held on.

“Two!”

The sounds of a bowstring being pulled and arcane words muttered came from the corners of the room. Strune was starting a prayer to Iomedae and her weapon glowed with a golden radiance. Shayliss tightened her grip on her hook and blade. She stood across from Strune ready to flank the creature from the pews. It tried to push Mordria forward, but she held her ground, her talons struggling to hold onto the ruined rug underneath.

“Three!”

Mordria, with a last huff of effort and shove, forced the undead creature away from her. As it stumbled backward in surprise, Mordria backpedaled until she was at the doorway. She took up her stance again, ready to grab the creature again if it decided to bull rush her.

Shayliss and Strune, as the creature was just recovering its balance, rushed for it. Seeing that Strune was the obvious threat, the creature tried to attack her. Shayliss whipped her grappling hook around once then snapped it forward. The metal claws latched onto something within the undead creature and she pulled without hesitation. The pull stunned the creature and prevented it from being ready when Strune’s blade, glowing with Iomedae’s grace, came hammering down. The blade cut deep and if the undead had vocal cords it would have been screaming. Instead what remained of its teeth rattled painfully, the sounds echoing around the room. Yet, it was not deterred.

It turned around, pulled out the grappling hook, and leapt for Shayliss. The red-haired woman tried to brace herself but was way too slow. Undead flesh met living as the creature landed a solid punch into Shayliss’s ribs. She hoped that the sounds of cracking bone was from its undead form rather than her chest. That thought was exchanged for another as she was sent flying into one of the many broken pews angled differently than the others. Her back slammed hard into the back of the seat and she heard the strain of old wood.. If she had been only a couple of inches lower, the seat would have shattered and crushed her spine. Instead, her back was only sore along with her butt after gravity let her down not so gently.

The creature again lunged for Shayliss, managing to dodge another slash from Strune in the process, and placed itself right above the woman. A horrible stench plumed out of its mouth as it opened to chomp her neck. She let out a scream but

before the undead creature could attack, an arrow pierced its soft skull. It turned to see Kaira pull back another arrow and fire. That arrow barely missed but it had gotten the undead's attention.

That is when Shayliss struck. She was not able to get a good angle of attack because of the pew she still sat on, but she thrust her blade forward and felt the resistance build as metal slid into its chest. It rattled again and did not know if it should attack Shayliss or Kaira.

Its confusion was interrupted when a blob of acid sailed through the air and hit its back. Rotting flesh sizzled and the undead being turned to charge at Snaga with a rattle of rage. Instead, it was face to face with Strune who slashed at its belly. Flesh sizzled more and white fire blazed across its body. The rattling intensified but it clawed twice at Strune anyway. One strike hit, cutting into one of the gaps in Strune's armor. The other bounced off of metal and left scratches.

Another splash of acid dissolved away even more skin and then an arrow came into replace what had disappeared. But that did not stop it from using its greater than normal strength to shove Strune aside and rush for Snaga. While the half-orc did not know how to handle a charge as well as Mordria did, he knew to stop his spell casting and switch to his fists. The spiked gauntlets glimmered in Strune's holy light as he pulled back a fist and thrust it forward. Bone crunched under the half-orc's fist and the blow stunned the creature.

"Kill!" Kaira snapped.

Happy that he was finally able to join the fight, Blueeye let out a howl as it charged for the creature. It turned to the new combatant but was too stunned to do anything as the white furred beast lunged for the creature and bore it down to the ground. With a savage twist and growl, the fight was over. The wolf spat out the hunk of rotted meat and flesh it had torn out of the creature's neck and trotted back over to Kaira.

Now that the combat was over, they could hear noise from outside. Loud noises.

Fearing the worst, Shayliss yelled, “Strune! Go!”

Strune was already moving though. Her plated feet clanged against the stone of the temple as she ran as fast as she could outside. Mordria and Kaira, with Blueeye, were close behind, rounding the corner of the antechamber to head around the back of the temple. Slower than them, Shayliss and Snaga took the rear.

When she left the confines of the temple, she could more clearly hear what the noises were: shouting. But the shouts were not mixed in with other combat sounds. They were on their own which made Shayliss wonder what exactly was going on. Rounding around the last corner of the temple, she got her answer.

Out in the courtyard of the temple stood Anevia, Aravashnial and Horgus as they were when she entered the temple. Anevia’s bow lay unattended on the ground along with the arrow that was nocked into it. With the way it was positioned, Shayliss suspected that she had tossed it aside.

The archer was leaning forward in anger, her face red and contorted into a snarl. In her line of sight was Horgus, face also reddened but also shocked, as if he had been suddenly slapped. He moved forward with his hand upraised but by then Strune had reached them and made herself a barrier between them.

“You dare call me faithless you dirt-chomping thief?” Horgus snarled, “I do not know why the city tolerates such a combination of freak, promiscuous harlot and gold-palms.”

“Excuse me?” Anevia fought to get past Strune. Despite her strength and balance, the strix was having a difficult time holding the woman back. “I guess I should not be surprised that one that hides his faith, if he has one at all, would go to insulting one’s lifestyle. Especially since hiding one’s faith is just as if they were consorting with demons themselves.”

“No wonder you and your freak of a lover get along so well. You both spout on utter nonsense!”

By then Shayliss had reached Anevia's side. The red-haired woman did not say anything, but pulled Anevia back from the conflict. Anevia was anything but willing and fought tooth and nail to try and hit Horgus. That struggling, plus the woman's awkward leg, made it difficult for Shayliss but she eventually got the woman toward a pile of rocks. As she directed Anevia to sit, the crippled woman was just then starting to cool down. Her breaths were coming out hard and in long hisses.

"I do not understand that man." Anevia growled, "Who does he think his is to say such things?"

Shayliss looked up at Horgus. He was having what looked like a conversation with Strune. His face was still red and he was yelling at the strix. The two women were far enough away that the echoes did not bounce to them, but Shayliss could imagine what the man was saying to Strune. She, in a great show of willpower, only calmly listened to Horgus' ramblings.

Mordria and Kaira had moved to the entrance of the courtyard to watch for anything that wanted to attack. The fiend-blooded woman looked as if she wanted to punch something while Kaira remained carefully neutral. Snaga, like a child who wanted to get away from two parents fighting, made his way to the temple, shutting the door once he was inside. At this point, it was only Strune and Shayliss who were involved with the fight.

"I know what you mean." Shayliss said, "What started it?"

Anevia put on a very fake and overblown imitation of Horgus' voice, "You are really slowing us down. It may be best to part ways."

Shayliss narrowed her eyes, "Ah." She turned to look at Anevia, "How are you holding up anyway?"

Anevia sighed which seemed to let loose a lot of her tension, "I don't know. The idea that my home is being destroyed an unknown distance above me is killing me."

"It is about your husband as well, right?"

The expression that formed on Anevia's face made Shayliss instantly regret asking the question. It was something that she had seen many times in the mirror. A look

of pure pain and anguish about the unknown state of a loved one. Shayliss was about to get up and leave Anevia alone when the woman whispered, “Wife, actually.”

Shayliss blinked in surprise but shifted her weight back down to be sitting.

“How did you know?” Anevia asked.

Shayliss sighed, “I am in the same boat. My love has been missing for two years.”

This time it was Anevia who blinked, “Two years? You have really been searching for her for two whole years?”

“What else am I supposed to do? Just let her go?” She shook her head, “I can’t.”

Sure you can. She did it to you. If you keep trying to hold on to something that volatile, you will die. Your damn chest is a testament to that! Shayliss’ chest burned with hell-fire and it took all of her willpower just to hold back her grimace of pain.

She barely noticed Anevia shake her head furiously, “Oh no! I did not mean that! It is just a surprise that someone can hold so much devotion. I am actually kind of jealous.”

“Strune said sort of the same thing.” Shayliss responded with a cracky voice, “Said that not many would do such a thing. Especially with a destination so close to the Worldwound.”

“I have to agree. It takes a lot of bravery to come out here.” Anevia said quietly.

Or ignorance.

Shayliss shook her head and looked up. Horgus, still talking with Strune, had finally calmed down. He was talking at what seemed to be a normal volume and Strune had a smile on her face.

“We may be close to calm now.” Anevia muttered, anger still hinted in her tone.

Shayliss nodded, “We will give Strune a bit longer then head on. I want to get out of these caves as soon as possible.”

As soon as she finished her statement, Horgus moved away from Strune to sit on a rock himself. Shayliss motioned for Anevia to stay seated and moved over to the Strix. With each step, the red-haired woman could see the details of strain that marred black skin. Creases had formed on her forehead and did not seem to go away no matter what expression was on the woman's face. Her hands were clenched tighter than they should have been and her eyes were downcast. Those dark lips moved as if she was muttering to herself. However, when Strune saw Shayliss walking toward her, she made a visible effort to control herself.

"Trouble getting him to relax?" Shayliss asked in a whisper that should not have traveled far even in this cavern.

Strune nodded slightly, "Yes. But my words seem to be working. How can I help you, dear?"

"I was just wondering when you think we will be ready to head out."

"Oh, it won't be for a few hours yet." She said it in a very matter of fact tone. As if she had just said that fish could swim.

Shayliss blinked, "What do you mean?"

Aravashnial, who had been sitting down nearby, perked his pointed ears up and turned toward the pair's general direction like a dog who has caught an interesting sound.

Strune gave Aravashnial a smile, "You think I am going to leave this temple corrupted as it is? No! I am going to spend the time to consecrate it and return it to what glory it was at before."

Shayliss sighed. She should have seen that coming. There was no way a devout follower of any god would leave a temple in a ruined state. But she tried to fight it anyway.

"What about the surface? The longer we stay down here, the more we risk rising up into nothing."

It was only there for a fraction of a second, but Shayliss saw the flash of pain and worry fly across the strix's face. Seeing it sent a pang through Shayliss but she did

not try to back down, “Look at them.” Shayliss waved a hand at the three survivors, “You can see the strain on their faces. They want to get home!”

Strune did. That flash of emotion grew, but she shook her head, “No. I know their pain. And I wish to return as fast as possible as well.” A sudden steely will entered her. It straightened her back and contorted her face into something fierce, “But I will not abandon holy ground such as this.”

Blue hot fire blazed within Shayliss. The anger entered her head and flowed over her vision. Her hand clenched into a fist and she nearly slammed it into the woman’s face. It must have shown on her face as Strune took a cautious step back.

The brand burned furiously as she growled, “If the demons succeed at their plan, whatever it may be, there will be no holy ground to sanctify.”

Strune stared at her for a second, but then said with an iron hard voice, “I will not back down.”

Shayliss felt the fire blaze and spark like a forge. Yet, something in her mind clicked and that forge started to die down. If she was not going to back down, then might as well help get the work done faster.

“Fine.” Shayliss growled, “Let’s get it done and over with then.”

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Eight hours of hard labor later, the work was done. Strune had been muttering prayer after prayer under her breath. As she did, a soft glow seemed to emanate from her and everything she touched. Shayliss had moved rubble to the walls of the room, keeping any of it out of anyone’s way. She worked silently, trying to keep her annoyance from boiling over, the brand burning ever more. Anevia had even come to assist, muttering her own prayers. She did not glow like Strune did, but that did not demotivate her. With her leg, she could not do much, but what she could do she did with a will.

Horgus kept to himself, completely out of the room. He sat on one of the surviving benches in the antechamber, hands on his chin, staring at what he probably thought was total nonsense. Aravashnial sat next to him, hands clasped together as if waiting politely. The others were out and about, either scouting around waiting just outside the temple.

By the sixth hour of work, Shayliss, Horgus and Aravashnial were all out. Shayliss was asleep leaning against the stone door leading to the antechamber. Her breaths came out in tiny snores and a spittle of drool was inching out of her mouth. Horgus was curled forward as if he just toppled over and Aravashnial leaned his head back against the wall.

It was only Strune and Anevia left standing. They were taking a small break before continuing the last stretch of work. Each sat on a stable pew pushed against the walls of the room.

“I saw you two arguing.” Anevia whispered.

Strune looked back at Shayliss and nodded, “Yeah. That girl has a fire in her.”

“I was surprised.” Anevia said, “She normally seems so meek and timid. Yet I could practically feel the heat from her.”

“You weren’t right in front of her.” Strune let out a small chuckle, “When she gave me that look, I thought she was going to pounce on me right then and there. It was as if she was a demon ready to tear at my throat.”

Anevia let that sink in for a bit. She shook her head, “I saw her at the attack. Even then she kept a cool head about her. The anger she showed only hours ago was something different.”

“I think she holds back her emotions. Bottles them up like a potion. That’s why when she nearly attacked me you could feel it about to burst.”

Anevia shook her head again, “I don’t think so. Have you ever noticed her suddenly flinch, as if something was burning her?”

Strune blinked and turned to look at the sleeping girl again, “No. I haven’t.”

“She did it twice while we were in the tunnels and at least once while we talked. So, I have been watching her a bit while we were cleaning up here.”

“Oh?” The strix turned back to look at Anevia, “What did you see?”

“It is not obvious,” Anevia said looking down at her open palms, “And she works hard to hide it. But when she bends down, you can get a glimpse at her chest.”

Strune’s face started to heat up in embarrassment, “Oh?”

Anevia laughed, “Don’t worry. I have a bit more excuse than you do.” She sobered up quickly, “On her chest are scar lines. Like something was branded onto her. Like she was cattle.”

“Could you see what it was?”

Anevia shook her head and let out a slow breath, “No. I do have my fears though.”

Strune nodded, “I see. But why do you bring it up in the first place?”

“Because she may be in danger. If something has an influence over her, it is only a matter of time before she succumbs to it.”

“And it may explain the sudden rage.” Strune said, “Making people angry or depressed are the most popular ways for demons to influence someone.”

“We need to keep an eye on her.”

Strune looked back, “Maybe. For now we keep this to ourselves. We don’t want to scare her.”

“Damn. I was afraid of this.”

The group all huddled at what Shayliss assumed was the end of a tunnel. However, since Strune dispelled her light the world around the woman was just pure darkness. Her eyes were not strong enough to pierce the darkness, even after five or so minutes of waiting. Whatever her eyes missed, her ears picked up on something in front of them. Slurping, sucking sounds came from multiple sources, like octopodes trying to walk on land. What made it more unsettling though, was the fact that none of them sounded like they were on the ground.

“You said they were darkmantles?” Shayliss asked in a soft whisper.

Soft footsteps sounded as Kaira stepped up to Shayliss’s side, “I cannot see them.” She said in the same level of volume, “But those slurping sounds are the sounds of the darkmantles’ suction cups on the rocky surface.”

“She’s right.” Mordria added stepping up to Shayliss’s other side, “I can see them squirming on the ceiling and along the statues.”

Shayliss and Aravashnial both perked up at that.

“You can see?” Shayliss asked. At the same time, Aravashnial asked, “Are they First Descendant Statues?”

Anevia placed a hand on Aravashnial’s shoulder and spoke quietly to him. Whatever she said to him was enough to keep him calm. If he went on a lesson now, the darkmantles would surely hear them.

“Of course I can see.” The half-fiend huffed, “Just because I have a blindfold does not mean I cannot see.”

Shayliss blinked at that. She opened her mouth to say that the point of having a blindfold on was to become blind. However, that thought led to other uses for a blindfold. Which then led to a reddened face. So, she instead shook her head and sighed, “Alright. How many of them are there?”

Mordria took a quick look around and said, “Five. All of them are hanging from stalactites.”

A soft curse escaped Shayliss’ lips, “We cannot get the drop on them. Not if only a couple of us can see in this darkness. So, speed will have to do what stealth cannot.” She turned to Strune, “When I give a signal, recast your Light.” She then turned to Kaira, Snaga, who stood in the far back silently, and Anevia, “As soon as you can see, choose a target and fire. It would be good to find the same target but any of them will do. The other fighters will rush in. Take them down as fast as possible. While we have numbers, they have better vision. Don’t let them flank you.”

“Do we need so much planning and tactics?” Kaira asked, “They are small and we outnumber them.”

Shayliss turned a glance at Kaira, “Don’t underestimate an enemy. I learned that the hard way.”

“From what?”

“Ogres.”

Kaira blinked, “You were telling the truth then? I thought you were being funny.”

Shayliss shook her head, “Nope. They were real ogres.” She turned back, “Get ready, Strune.”

Kaira was giving the woman a dubious look while Strune gave a soft grunt of affirmation. Bowstrings were being pulled back while the sound of claws against scale rung out. The sizzle of acid from Snaga was the confirmation Shayliss needed that everyone was ready.

“Go!” Shayliss hissed.

Bright light flared up and despite being ready for it Shayliss had to blink her eyes a few times to recover. Anevia, Snaga and Kaira, however, did not. Arrows sailed past Shayliss’ ears while a glob of acid was lobbed over her head. When Shayliss could see again, she saw one slimy creature falling to the ground being eaten alive by acid.



Before it was completely devoured, Shayliss could see that it was basically an octopus on land. Eight tendrils spread out evenly from the bottom of its tube-like body. Red eyes as narrow slits sit on either side of its body. However, that is where the resemblance ended. Each tendril ended with a pair of sharp hooks and the tendrils were stuck together by large webbing like a frog's toes. In the center of the circle the webbing made, a large maw ringed with hundreds of sharp shark-like teeth gapped open.

The other four darkmantles turned to look at the charging fighters and let out muffled cries. They then leapt out from their rock perches and tried to land onto a single fighter. Mordria managed to dodge out of the way, the darkmantle landing onto the stone with a sickening squelch. However, the others were not so lucky.

Shayliss felt the creature crash into her like a wagon and she was nearly sent off of her feet. Without hesitation, the octopus-like thing started biting hard. Its teeth sunk in deep into her shoulder and its hooks pierced her skin wherever they could. Her already sore back had companions in pain as her whole torso started saying that it was in agony. She hooked her grappling hook rope onto its holder and tried to use that hand to pull at the thing.

It held tight, its hooks sinking in even deeper, like a fishing hook within a fish's mouth. Blood flowed and stained her shirt while she fought the darkmantle. She was getting nowhere with the thing fast as any motion pushed the hooks and teeth into her skin deeper and deeper. Next to her, she could hear the snarls from Blueeye as the beast participated in its own dance of death. He had an even harder time than Shayliss did, since he could only use his fangs which could only barely reach the darkmantle attached to his side.

“Blueeye!” Shayliss yelled, “Stay!”

The white wolf did not listen. He continued to spin in place, trying his best to get at the thing attached to him. Thankfully, Kaira saw what Shayliss was about to do and she ordered, “Sit!”

Blueeye, surprisingly, immediately obeyed. With more growls and snarls, he practically slammed his rear end onto the ground. Shayliss did not hesitate for long. Fighting against the hold the darkmantle had on her, she raised her blade in an awkward hold and swung it down. The blade barely nicked the creature's skin but it did the job. The darkmantle detached itself from the white fur of the wolf...

And attached to Shayliss's legs.

"Not even Val was this clingy!" Shayliss growled.

She was in a bad spot. The new darkmantle was wrapped one hundred percent around her legs so she could not move. Its hooks pierced into her virtually unprotected legs and even more teeth took chunks out of her skin. The one on her upper body shifted a bit to make sure she could not use her arms. She tried to break free but only received deep lines of open flesh and muscle.

Two blurs, one white and one red, raced by her. She was jerked back and forth by the impacts against the darkmantles and they let out cries of pain. Yet, they did not let go. If anything, they pushed in deeper. Shayliss, who had been trying to hold in her screams, opened her mouth and let out a howl of agony. Mordria and Blueeye rushed in again and Shayliss felt the impacts again. The creatures still hung on which pissed Shayliss off.

With a roar of anger, she pushed out against the darkmantles again with no success. She tried again with nothing to show but more wounds. Her wrist twitched to try and thrust her blade in. There was no angle in the world that would have let her hit one. Two more impacts made her drop said sword. It clattered to the ground.

However, the impacts also forced her against the wall.

With another roar of pure rage, she spun around and slammed one of the darkmantle's body against the wall. A cry of pain and a satisfying squelch came soon after and she could feel the creature fall from her torso. It tried to right itself, but Shayliss bunny hopped into the air and came down onto it. Another squelch and the last breath of the creature met her.

The darkmantle on her legs hesitated, which allowed Shayliss to land a swift punch. The attack surprised the creature and it fell to the ground. With legs suddenly free, she raced for her dropped sword. As she grabbed it, the darkmantle was about to launch itself at her again. With a cry, she lifted her blade and swung down. She felt the resistance of metal against flesh as blade cut deep. The corpse of the darkmantle landed a few feet behind her.

Shayliss turned around to find that her companions were taking care of the darkmantle who managed to stay clung to Strune. She was about to rush to help them when three different impacts slammed into her already complaining back. At

the corners of her eyes, she could see purple-white energy evaporate and as she spun to face the newcomer, she saw a dwarf reaching into a pouch at his side. She never saw Snaga do the same, but she knew that it meant he was about to cast another spell. She knew that if he succeeded, she would most likely not survive the attack.



Without hesitation, slowed by her injuries, she charged at the man. On the way, she pulled out her grappling hook and snapped it forward. The metal head flew through the air and connected with the dwarf's lower arm. The blow was not really harmful or debilitating but it served its purpose of preventing the dwarf from throwing another spell.

At least, that is what she thought. With a dark smile he raised his hand and a glob of acid sailed forward. She managed to duck under it but could feel miniscule specks of it hit her face and burn. Red splotches formed on her cheek but she ignored them as she thrust her blade forward. The dwarf nimbly dodged the weakened attack and squealed, "You will not take me! I won't let you!"

Shayliss blinked and halted her assault, "We are not here to take you anywhere."

"Lies!" He yelled. His voice then lowered to a crazed mutter, "Lies lies lies. You lie. I won't let you take me."

With a swift motion, he thrust his open hand forward, fingers pointing, muttered something under his breath, and three purple-white bolts of energy shot forward as if from a gun. Shayliss tried to deflect the bolts with her blade but she knew what spell he used was. Magic Missiles, while not the flashiest or deadliest spell out there, was the most accurate and most likely the most known. They never missed nor will they ever. So, a sudden sense of dread filled Shayliss as the trio of bolts crashed into her.

She was flung off her feet and slid on her back. There was no telling how far she flew but she felt every rock and pebble that was sent under her. However, they were the main reason she managed to stop her progress. She tried to rise but something went wrong between her brain and her limbs. Neither her fingers nor her feet twitched as she asked them desperately to move. Like she thought before, she did not last against a second spell.

Shayliss did not even notice when someone hooked their arms under her shoulders and started dragging her away from something. She no longer felt the rocks under her and the sensation of being dragged faded away into nothing. The same started happening to her vision. Before it went completely black, she saw a woman with wings of white kneeling over her. The strange thought that it was an angel entered her mind. It was then interrupted by the feeling of warmth coursing through her whole body. Sensation returned to her body in agonizing slowness and it was a few seconds before she could see again.

Strune knelt over her letting out a soft prayer. Shayliss could not hear the words the woman said, but she could read the occasional Iomedae on her lips. Blood flowed down dark skin and more were being halted by something. Maybe she was healing the both of them. The sudden need to cough overwhelmed the woman and she let out wheezing hacks. Strune bent over a bit more and smiled, "Good. Get up when you can. We need your help."

As if to agree, a glob of acid sailed above Shayliss and landed a few inches away. The woman jumped at that which nearly sent her to her feet anyway. So, she fully rose and watched as the dwarf took on five different experienced fighters and survived.

Mordria and Blueeye, working in tandem now, went in low trying to sweep the dwarf's legs from under him. He threw something into the air, muttered a word, and was suddenly flung into the air by some unknown force. Struggling to steady himself, he then waved both hands back and forth in front of his body. With another word, his whole body, clothes and all, started moving back and forth violently, mimicking his hand motion.

Just then, two arrows shot through the air, wind whistling in their passage, and looked as if they would slam into the dwarf. However, they just whizzed right past him without dealing any kind of injury. With a cackling laugh, he cupped his hand and flung another glob of acid down upon Mordria and Blueeye. It was intercepted by another acid ball and their collision helped protect the pair from damage.

Strune lifted off on wings of white and charged for the levitating dwarf. Her blade shone against the light of her Holy Symbol as she swept it in a diagonal arc. The dwarf acted as if he was slamming his hand down on an invisible table and he was violently send down back toward the ground. He did not hit the ground, but he lowered enough to avoid Strune's rush. It did put him in range of the half-fiend and wolf, though, and they were swift to lash out. Claws and fangs ripped into the

dwarf but he barely seemed to notice as he launched himself back up. Blood flowed from one wound but that was all he had.

As he sailed back upward, he thrust his fingers forward again and more purple energy lashed forward in a trio of energy bolts. This time, each one found a separate target, curving in their trajectory. One slammed into Strune who was sent off course and would slam head first into the ground if she did not correct herself. A second thrust toward Mordria who took the attack hard. The only reason she did not go flying like Shayliss did was because she held onto the ground with her claws. The third wrapped around Shayliss and crashed into Anevia. The woman, unstable with her awkward leg, was sent further into the tunnel she stood in. Kaira tried to grab her but failed and Shayliss could hear various grunts.

Gritting her teeth, Shayliss had enough observing and grabbed her grappling hook again. With it and her blade in hand, she swung it like a lasso once before snapping it forward. The metal claws closed around the dwarf's left leg and without hesitation she pulled hard. She was hoping that he would be sent to the ground after being taken away from his levitation spell. Instead, he was just sent toward her but at the same elevation. Yet, it allowed for Snaga, fused with Nephalim, to come out of nowhere, leap up and pull the dwarf down by main force. Both forms came crashing back down to earth and Snaga then slammed the dwarf down again. The dwarf snarled incoherently and thrust another acid glob into the orc's chest.

Shayliss expected to hear more flesh being devoured by the acid. However, she only heard a cry of pain not from Snaga's voice and some of the otherworldly outline of Nephalim dissolve. Snaga remained untouched. He let out a guttural growl and slammed a spiked gauntlet into the dwarf's face again. Blood spurted from the corpse's face.

After recovering from that massive fight by Strune and Kaira's healing magic, making sure everyone was still in one piece and scouring the dwarf's campsite in the next cavern over, the group continued moving forward. As they did, Aravashnial talked about the statues they found in the first cavern. Apparently, they were supposed to depict those from the First Crusade who were supposed to have left the surface to live under the ground. Abyssal energies from the initial battles had corrupted the crusaders and their children started to be born malformed, fiendish, half-creature. They left their homes in order to raise their children outside the scrutiny of the surviving crusaders.

"No-one heard from them since." Aravashnial continued, "People started to assume that they all died. Yet, there are statues."

Horgus let out a sigh, "Who cares about those mongrel freaks? Your only concern should be getting out of this hell-hole."

"There is nothing wrong with understanding one's past." The elf answered, "Especially if those mongrelmen still live. There is every chance that--"

Kaira raised her hand for silence and Anevia squeezed the elf's shoulder for silence. The group stopped and Shayliss turned to look at the huntress, "What is it?"

The woman stood still, her eyes staring at the darkness ahead of the group. Her eyes had no chance of penetrating it, especially with Strune's light. However, those green orbs twitched and jerked as if tracking prey. Horgus let out a hiss but before he could say anything, Kaira whispered, "There are people ahead of us."

"Can you tell who?" Shayliss asked.

Kaira gave her an annoyed look, "There's a difference between determining animals and people by hearing. The only thing I can tell is that they may not be completely human."

Shayliss sighed, "Fine. Let's approach with caution. They may just attack without asking questions first."

Getting a nod from everyone except Horgus, who just huffed out an annoyed breath, she led the group forward. It did not take more than a minute, even walking at their slowed pace, for the group to enter yet another cavern. It was so large that Strune's light could not shine on all of the walls. Yet, what it could touch were all cracked and damaged. The ceiling was also out of the light's reach, but the walls all curved up in such a way that the cavern was most likely domed at the top.

That was not as important as the collapsed structure near the center of the cavern, just within the light of Strune's holy symbol. At one point, the structure may have been a tower. However, now half of it was collapsed to one side of the remaining base. At the rubble, two forms knelt at its edge, clawing at the stone and wood. Shayliss could only make out the sounds of what may have been a call and response between the two and something within the rubble.

Strune, on her wings, was about to launch herself toward them. However, Shayliss managed to grab her ankle just in time. At the strix's twist and look of confusion, she said with a grunt of effort, "They may be scared. If you just charge to the rescue, you may make them frightened enough to attack first and ask questions later."

Strune narrowed her eyes, "So, we just leave them?"

Shayliss shook her head, "Of course not! But we have to be careful about it. If we spook them too much, then there will be no helping them one way or another."

The strix stared at the woman for a bit but then relaxed, "I understand."

Shayliss sighed inwardly. If Strune had wanted to, she could have easily gotten free of her grip and charged after the people. Granted, there was the chance that nothing would happen, but at this point Shayliss did not want to risk it. They were all injured and another fight may not go as smoothly as the last one did.

Waving the group forward, Shayliss sheathed her weapon and moved at a walking pace. Her posture and attitude were to make it clear that she was not a danger to those ahead. A glance backward showed that Kaira and Strune were doing the same. Mordria, while trying, had very little success on the account of her claws and scales. Yet, she did her best to look friendly. The others had weapons sheathed but only walked as normal. For Anevia and Aravashnial, it was because they could not do much else with their conditions. Snaga and Horgus's motivations for not

showing friendly body language were unknown, but at least they were not openly hostile. It would have to do.

It was not until the group was about halfway to the people next to the rubble when they were heard. The pair sharply spun around and took a cautious step back. From behind them, a muffled cry for help could be heard. Strune was visibly holding herself from just rushing to the rubble pile.

One of the pair, a man whose whole body was literally split in half between elf and lizard with a single horn sprouting from his elven half, stepped forward. His body language was uncertain but ready to fight if needed.

“If your intentions are ill, we ask you to move on and leave us in peace.” His voice was raspy yet his Common accent was very eloquent. As if he had been sent to a high-priced teacher, “If they are good, then perhaps you can help. As you can see, misfortune has befallen us.”

The second of the pair, a woman who had a severe hunchback, nodded eagerly. Her face was warped with numerous tumors which gave Shayliss the idea that she could not speak at all. Yet, her nods and hopeful straightening of her body was a clear indication of her emotions.

Horgus let out a disgusted hiss as soon as he clearly sees what the pair were and took two steps back, “You cannot trust them! Just look at them. They are mongrel freaks. They could be dangerous to my well being! We will be better off leaving them and continuing on.” The pair glared at the noble which made Horgus back up even more, “See? Look at how they stare at me!”

“I say they have a right to.” Mordria growled, “I suggest you keep your mouth shut if you do not want someone to do it for you.”

Horgus glared at the half-fiend but the combined looks of her and the pair seemed to force him back into silence. Aravashnial was acting as if he was observing the cavern, even though there was no way for him to do so. Anevia must have spoken to him. She, for her part, only looked upon the pair in quiet pity.

“I apologize for him.” Shayliss said giving them a small bow, “We do not mean you any trouble.”



“Far from it.” Strune added, “We wish to assist you.” She waved her hand at the group, “As you can see, we have plenty of hands to help move the rubble.”

The mongrelmen looked at each other then the first said in a careful tone, “We would appreciate the help. But would he be doing anything?” He pointed a malformed finger at Horgus who acted as if he was just stabbed.

Strune shook her head, “Not if you do not wish him to.”

Horgus huffed, “Good. I would not do it anyway. Would not want to be near you filthy creatures.”

“Horgus! That is enough!” Shayliss snapped.

The man stared at her in shock for a couple of seconds but then turned his back to the group. Shayliss let out a large sigh and said, “Again, I apologize. Shall we get started?”

With looks of skepticism the mongrelmen nodded, “Thank you. Our friend is stuck under this rubble and we have not been able to get her out.”

Shayliss carefully steps forward to look at the rubble, “Under that large slab there?”

The mongrelman nodded, “Yes. It is too heavy for us to lift on our own. And when we have tried it almost slipped and fell upon her. She’s always been able to resist pain but even she would not be able to last against something that large and heavy.”

“Yeah. I think about six of us will be able to get a hold on the rock.” She turned to the group, “Mordria, Snaga, Strune, come on up. Careful of shifting rock.”

The half-orc’s eyes widened in surprise but followed the others as Shayliss led them plus the two mongrelmen up toward the slab. As she got closer, she could get a bit more detail from it. Like she had expected, it was a large piece of nothing but pure stone. Fortunately for the woman underneath of it, there were other pieces of rock that braced it to an elevated position. Yet, the tiniest bit of force could cause the braces to slip and crush her.

Shayliss would have to get the stronger of the group at those braces. All they had to do was hold up the slab long enough for the woman to crawl out. Assuming she was not injured. Just the thought of the strain of holding the rock was enough for her back and arms to start hurting. She ignored them and knelt down next to the slab, making sure not to touch it.

“Hello?” Shayliss called, “Can you hear me?”

A silky smooth feminine voice answered from under the rock, “Yes. I can hear you.” It was shaky from fear and cautious yet it sent sensation through Shayliss’ body. From a quick glance, she was not the only one who was affected. Strune and Snaga both fought sudden shivers and Mordria’s hands clenched to release some kind of tension or energy.

Shayliss shook her head and said, “Are you injured?”

A second passed before the voice responded, “No. Not enough to hinder me.”

“Alright. What we are going to do is lift up the slab high enough for you to escape. Do not rush. Doing so will risk you being even further trapped and possibly crushed. Once you are out and clear, let us know and we will drop the slab.”

“I understand.”

Shayliss nodded mostly to herself and said to the others, “Snaga, Mordria and I will, grab the rock at those brace points.” She points a finger at each brace, “The rest find room to grab the rock yourselves. We lift on three.”

The six of them moved to get into position and placed their hands under the slab. When she saw everyone ready she counted down, “One. Two. Three!”

Right as she said three, everyone there started straining against the rock. Shayliss could not speak for the others, but she could immediately feel the pressure on her muscles and back with little progress. Within seconds they were screaming at her to stop. That they needed rest. With all of her mental fortitude, she ignored them and continued to lift.

What seemed like an hour later, she could feel the rock start shifting. It was rising up ever so slightly and contrary to what she expected, it started getting easier to

lift. The rock rose another inch. Then another. Finally the voice below said, “I can get out.”

“Go!” Shayliss answered, her voice straining like the rest of her body.

From under the rock, she could hear something scrabbling. She was not on the side that the voice was coming out of, so she could not see anything but grey surfaces and the other five straining faces.

“I am halfway out.” The voice reported an eternity later.

“Keep going! Remember, don’t ru-”

Something happened. The rock in Shayliss’ hands started tilting toward the mongrelman able to speak. He let out a cry of fear and tried to hold the rock back but its massive momentum would not stop now. It would crush both him and his friend.

“Strune!” Shayliss called.

The strix, who was standing next to the mongrelman, acted out of instinct. She reached out one hand and tried to help him hold back his imminent death. Strune was too late, though, and the rock continued to slide down. But then it was stopped by something. A second later, the voice from under the rock called, “I got it!”

Shayliss let out an explosive sigh, “Regain your hold on the rock. Keep moving. We are almost done!”

The process continued on for five more minutes, but Shayliss finally got the call, “I am out!”

“Alright!” Shayliss said, “Everyone, gently lower the slab. Let’s not cause a landslide.”

With great effort, the six slowly lowered the slab until they could feel it touch the rubble pile. Then with even more effort they slid their fingers out from underneath and gently moved away. Being careful, they all made their way down from the pile and regrouped with the others.

The woman they saved was stunning. While one of the mongrelmen had lizard features and the other had tumors on her face as deformities, the only thing that the woman had were swollen knees that were also backhinged and purpling skin. Other than that, she could have passed as a normal person.

“Thank you.” She said reaching out a hand to shake, “I owe you one.”

Shayliss hesitated for a brief second before returning to reality and shaking the woman’s hand, “It was nothing.”

The woman gave her a sultry smile, “With all that straining you did, it did not sound like ‘nothing.’”

Shayliss let out a small gulp that she hoped was not noticeable, “I would not worry about it. We succeeded in the end.”

The woman continued to hold Shayliss’ hand, “We did indeed.” She gave one last shake and let go, “I do not believe we have introduced ourselves. My name is Crel. My friends,” she waves her hand toward the other two mongrelmen who were conversing with the rest of the group, “are Lann and Dyra. Lann is the one who has been speaking for the pair.”

Shayliss took that in, “I see. I am Shayliss.” She then pointed to each of the group and spoke their names. When she was done Crel nodded, “If I may be so bold, why did you all come down here?”

With a sigh, Shayliss explains what had happened on the surface and their journey in the caverns underneath Kenebres. When she was done, the three mongrelmen were all paying attention and held wide eyes.

“That must be why the tower fell.” Lann said, “That massive blast must have been what caused the collapse. I still remember how strong those quakes were.”

Dyra nodded slowly and Crel turned her attention to the ground, “So many dead.” She looked back up, “You want to get back to the surface, right?”

“As fast as possible.” Was Shayliss’ near immediate response.

“We can assist you with that.” Lann answered, “After all, we owe you one. We can lead you to our home, Neathholm and introduce you to our Chief. I am sure he would be glad to help.”

Horgus let out an overblown sigh but Shayliss cut him off before he could do anything else, “Of course. We would greatly appreciate any help.”

Crel smiled and said, “Follow us.”

Nearly an hour later, the group struggling just to put one foot in front of the other (excluding the mongrelmen, who had energy to spare for the rest of them), they arrived at a small cavern. Throughout the trip, Aravashnial had been asking various questions to the escorts, but when he saw what was in the cavern, he halted his stream of questions. Anevia let out a gasp of surprise and even Horgus fell silent.

The cavern was circular, about forty feet in diameter. Fungi of all kinds grew in thick layers along the walls and floor. Some of the fungi followed the multiple tunnels that led out into the darkness and the smell of it made everyone cough. But what was more interesting was what was within the cavern. Two bodies lay dead in the middle of the cavern next to a pile of ropy green fungus. The fungi were starting to cover the bodies, but Shayliss could still see that they were Crusaders.

“The spore-cougher is finally dead.” Lann let out a breath of relief, “We don’t have to worry about it.”

“Good.” Kaira said, “I would not want to meet a basidiron in its home lair. They could be very deadly.” She waved a hand at the corpses, “As you can see.”

“How dare you make light their deaths?” Anevia growled.

Kaira shook her head, “I do not. Honestly, I am surprised that they managed to kill it.”

“They are Crusaders of Iomedae. Do not belittle their skills.”

Shayliss moved forward, no longer paying attention to the two of them. Stepping onto the fungi was a very strange experience. She had expected sounds of squishing and the sharp increase of odor. However, all she got was a weird sensation under her feet and the instinctual urge to look down and make sure she was not stepping on animal droppings.

She knelt down toward one of the corpses and examined it. The person was a crusader in life. They wore the typical armor of Crusaders which had the icon of Iomedae pressed or engraved into it. Chain mail protected what the plate could not and it looked like while the plates were badly damaged, the chain could still be

used. Lying nearby the body, almost covered completely by the fungi, was a simple glaive, a weapon smaller than a normal sized polearm and able to be wielded in one hand. That gave her pause. She looked closer and saw that the left hand of the corpse was covered by a spiked gauntlet.

“Strune?” She called out.

“Yes dear?” Came her answer, scratchy with the need to cough again. Shayliss sympathized. She had to fight to not do the same.

“You said that worshipers of Iomedae wielded longswords, right?”

“Typically, yes. However, there is no divine law that requires one to do so.” There was a thoughtful pause, “Why?”

Instead of answering, Shayliss asked, “Which god do worshippers bear glaives and spiked gauntlets?”

There was a couple of minutes of silence from the Strix. During the pause, Kaira moved to the basidiron’s corpse and rummaged in it. The others had moved carefully through the room and waited for the pair at the tunnel that must have led to Neathholm. Shayliss continued to examine the body while waiting for Strune’s answer.

“No god that I can remember.” She whispered, barely audible. The fact that she could not think of the answer must have worried her. Especially considering her upbringing.

Anevia added, “I can’t think of one either.”

Anevia’s answer seemed to let Strune relax a bit. The lack of knowledge burdened both of them, however it helped Shayliss understand. Whatever these people were before they died, they were not Crusaders. They may have worn the armor of a Crusader, but there was no way a Mendevian Crusader would not wield their god’s Favored Weapon.

Shayliss spotted something that shone briefly within the corpse’s pouch. She carefully reached in, ignoring the fungus that had managed to start growing within it, and pulled out a metal object. It reminded her of the holy symbol on Strune’s armor except that this one depicted a bull’s head with red gemstone eyes. In three

fingers, she looked at it from all angles before tossing it to Strune, “What about this?”

The strix caught the object without issue and it did not even take a second for her eyes to narrow in fury. Anevia glanced at it as well and turned away in disgust. Shayliss’s eyebrows rose, “I assume you know what that is then?”

Strune snarled and chucked the symbol as hard as she could across the room. The symbol squished fungi as it hit then fell to the ground again, “Baphomet.”

“Who?”

“Baphomet,” Strune repeated through tightly clenched teeth, “The Demon Lord of Minotaurs.”

Anevia sighed, “I was afraid of this. There had been rumors of cultists of Baphomet infiltrating mercenary groups. However, this is not just a mercenary group. They have actually infiltrated the Crusaders.”

Aravashnial, behind Anevia, had a huge smile on his face, “My findings were not false then!”

The group turned to him and Anevia said, “I guess not.” She sighed again, “Do you remember what you found?”

The elf shook his head, “There was not much to it anyway. I had hypothesised that there were members of the cult in the city and narrowed their bases down to three different locations. I was not able to do much else because of the blocks to my research.” At that, the man tilted his head toward Horgus. How he knew the man was there, Shayliss did not know, but Horgus only snorted. While he had not said anything, his attitude pointed to the fact that he did not care one bit about anything going on around him at that moment.

“Very well. We can speak of it once we find shelter and rest.” Anevia said. She bowed to the mongrelmen, “I apologize for the delay. Please, let us continue.”

Lann nodded and waved his hand. The group walked down the tunnel and from behind them the mongrelman said, “We are not far away.”

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Lann was correct. Fifteen minutes later, the group found themselves in front of a set of stone doors. They were large enough for ogres to fit through and had etching carved in them. Shayliss had not seen any like them before, but she assumed that they told the story of the mongrelmen. Of being cast down into the underground to found a nation below Kenebres. Of the monstrous people they had become. Yet, if Lann, Crel and Dyra had shown her, they did not seem to mind their lives. In fact, they acted like anyone else on the surface did.

I guess I should not be surprised. Shayliss thought to herself, Bubnug and his goblins have been doing great. At least, according to his scrawled letters to me. Ameiko taught him to write and that they found a mage to send the messages to me. So, why couldn't other 'monstrous' races of Golarion do the same? Especially since these guys seem to have been doing it for centuries.

She was brought back to reality when a voice barked, "Halt!"

Shaking her head, she put her attention on an armored mongrelman. He held the features of a human but one of his arms was three times his size while his other arm was smaller than normal. His face was also baggy as if he was overweight, but the rest of his body was fit. The woman next to him looked similar to Dyra except that her whole body was covered in tumors. Her general size gave Shayliss the impression that she came from a family of halflings or gnomes.

"Uplanders are not all-" The mongrelman was interrupted when he noticed the three companions the group had with them.

"Lann, Dyra, Crel!" He exclaimed and moved forward. The trio mirrored him and they gave each other hugs, "When we heard the shaking, we thought something horrible happened to you! The Chief was reluctant to send you help in case the traitors were the cause."

Crel gave the guard a smile, "No, Sucril. The tremors were from the surface." She waved a hand at the group, "We were helped by these fine, and rather pretty, people." The woman turned to Shayliss at that remark which made her face match her hair.

Sucril nodded, "I see. The Chief'll want to see them." He turned to his partner, "Get those doors open, Grei."

Grei saluted and shuffled over to a lever attached to the wall. With effort, she pulled it down and gears started moving from within the walls. It took some time, but eventually the doors slowly moved on their own. Light came from the other side of the doors, bright enough to force Shayliss to shield her eyes. When she could finally see again, she looked down upon a brightly lit city.

The city consisted of over two dozen structures that sit on top of a one hundred foot irregular circle of land. Surrounding that land was a lake that filled the rest of the two hundred foot wide cavern. The light from open windows reflected off of the clear water lake, creating a lot of the light that Shayliss fought against. Bioluminescent fungi covering the walls, lake floor and ceiling of the cavern maintained the rest of the light. The fungi, instead of smelling awful or being created from a monster, only gave the cavern light and a welcoming feeling. Shayliss could feel herself walking forward on her own.

Lann took the lead as the group walked down a flight of stairs and onto the ground floor of the city. They crossed one of many bridges that led to one of many tunnels back out of the city. Shayliss could only stare at wonder at everything within the cavern. The other surfacers in the group, excluding Horgus, did the same. Horgus had his arms crossed and his back hunched. He did his best to not look at anything as if he was a stubborn child.

As they walked through the city, mongrelmen, women and children all walked the streets, talking, shopping and playing. However, when the group got close to them, they all stopped what they were doing and moved to the side. The expressions on their faces were not fright but great apprehension. Most likely the only thing keeping them from running was the fact that they were being escorted by Lann, Crel and Dyra. Shayliss had a feeling that otherwise the city would be in a near panic.

Lann led them up a set of stairs that rose up to what could have been considered a manor compared to the rest of the buildings. It was the only one that had multiple floors, three to be exact, and it was wide enough to fit two of the others. Yet, its outside materials did not look any more special or elegant than the rest. Except for its size and the guards at its doors, it could have been any other building within Neathholm. The two guards in front of the manor gave Lann a smile when he finished climbing the stairs.

“You have returned!” One of the said, “I’ll get the Chief for you.”

Before Lann could open his mouth, the guard was gone. The door closed shut and Shayliss blinked, “Wow. They really adore you, huh?”

Lann blinked as well, “I guess so.”

Within a minute, the guard returned and waved them toward him, “The Chief will see you.”

The group walked into the manor and found themselves in a long hallway. A long and damaged blue rug ran down the center of the hallway. Two doors on each side led to other rooms and each door had a small stone table next to them. Each table held various items on them that do not hold any function but most likely holds personal significance. At the end of the hallway was a three-way fork. A set of double doors was set into the wall facing the hallway.

Lann led the group up the hallway and to the double doors. He was about to knock on the doors but they opened when his fist was only a couple of inches from the surface. The doors opened up into a throne room. The blue rug continued from the hallway all the way down to the throne. Stone columns line the rug and rise up into the ceiling. Guards stand between each column and watch as the group steps forward toward the throne.

Sitting on the throne was an overweight man that mixed rat and human. Short white hair stood up in spikes as if from a lifetime of pulling it back in stress. Wrinkles mar his bloated white skin and sharp yellow fangs poked out of his mouth. One silver eye was enlarged and misty while one ear was rat-like and furred. Yet, he also held himself with an air of wise leadership. He had been in that chair for decades and held much experience behind his human eye.

His large mouth turned up in a great smile as he watched the group walk down the rug. With unsteady legs, he rose and clamped a hand with elongated fingers on a walking cane.

“Welcome, friends to Neathholm!”

Lann stepped forward and gave the man a very human-like and formal bow. When she saw that Crel, Dyra and Strune were doing the same, Shayliss decided to follow their lead. She was taught that a lady ought to curtsy, bending at the knees with arms out to the sides. Yet, she did not want to offend, so she bent down in a bow. It was very uncomfortable and most likely showed various pieces that should not be shown, but the Chief was pleased anyway.

“I see our guests are polite ones.” He comments with a hefty laugh, “Please stand. I am not so formal.”

Shayliss stood back up immediately but she noticed that Strune made it a point to stay bowed for another second before standing herself. But Lann remained bowed as he said, “Chief Sull, these men and women are from the surface. They saved Crel’s life and have information about the surface that I believed you needed to hear.”

Chief Sull lifted one white eyebrow, “Oh?”

Lann finally stood straight as Shayliss stepped forward to stand next to him, “Yes.” She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and collect her thoughts, “Yesterday, at high noon, the demons of the Worldwound attacked. They destroyed the wardstone within Kenabres and then attacked the populace. Terendalev, the guardian dragon of Kenabres, is dead. Her last act was to save us from falling down here to certain death before the demon Khorramzadeh cut her head.”

The man in front of her listened and then took a minute to think. When he spoke, it was a tone of voice that held a mix of worry and thought, “That must be the great quake that we felt down here. The wardstone is destroyed?” He turned to look at Shayliss to confirm.

Strune made another bow, “As far as we know. The demon attacked Kenabres with one of the largest forces it has seen in decades if what we saw was any indication. I assume that means the Wardstone Barrier has been destroyed or at least disrupted.”

The Chief nodded with each statement, “Then this spells trouble for everyone here. And I now see why their numbers have increased.”

Shayliss tilted her head slightly, “Whose numbers?”

Strune gave the woman a rather surprised and angry look but the Chief only turned to regard her, “Over the past four months, I have been getting reports of increased numbers in the humans who have allied with the mongrel traitors. However, yesterday, the reports returned saying that a great fraction of the forces here have moved to the surface.”

“The cultists.” Anevia gasped, “Like we saw before.”

“Has to be.” Shayliss muttered, “They hid down here, where they were nearly certain no one would notice,” she looked up at the Chief, “other than you anyway.”

“We would have warned you if we could.” Chief Sull’s voice held apology, “The traitors were smart. They built a base in the most direct and safest tunnel to the surface. I could not risk my men to that nor the horrors that could be found down here.”

“We understand.” Strune beat Shayliss to the punch, “Even with the warning, I doubt there would be much that could have been done.” The strix’s voice lowered with each word, as if unwilling to believe what she was saying. Shayliss felt sympathy for the woman. She knew that no matter what you say, there are some people who would do nothing out of confidence or sinister motives.

“Chief Sull,” Kaira said, “Can you please tell us about these ‘traitors’?” At Strune’s annoyed glare she returned it with stubborn resolve, “If we are to return home, we need to know about what stands in our path.”

The Chief smiled at Kaira, “I see. If you are to return to the surface as swiftly as possible, then you must go through their base.”

He waddled back to his chair and sat down as steadily and safely as possible. When he was comfortable again, he let out a sigh, “I will not bore you with our past, but ten years ago, a group of my citizens and citizens of other mongrelmen tribes broke off from their homes. Driven by unknown forces, they moved further toward the surface and banded together. A couple of years later, they had built a base in those tunnels and had surfacers with them. They would attack occasionally and killed any scouts that I sent to observe them. We had to be more discreet and cautious about gaining information from them.”

“So,” Kaira said, “They are mongrelmen who have allied themselves with humans from the surface. That’s all I need.”

“Chief Sull,” Shayliss asked, “Would you allow us to rest in your city? Tomorrow we will move on toward the surface.”

He gave her a thoughtful look, “As long as you fulfill two requests for me.”

She bowed, “Of course.”

“One,” he raised a finger, “give the surface a message for me. ‘The mongrelmen of Neathholm understand the danger that the demons represent and we will stand alongside any who would fight them. We have not forgotten our people’s past and we hope neither have those who live above us.’”

Shayliss nodded, “We will certainly send your message.”

“Two.” He raised a second finger before leaning forward in his throne. His face contorted into something of anger and an animalistic ferocity and Shayliss could see the expression mimicked in the guards around them, “Two, kill those traitors who dare betray my people.”

The room heated with the pure emotion that the mongrelmen around the group exuded. Even Lann, Crel and Dyra radiated the anger of their people. Whatever the traitors did, it angered a whole nation. The fact that they attacked the surface only seemed to elevate the tension. Shayliss would have taken a step back but with it all around her she was not sure she could have. It felt as if she was being held in place by the power of it. A quick look around showed that the rest of the group felt the same.

However, she only nodded, gave one last bow and said, “Of course.”

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Lann, at the behest of the Chief, led Shayliss and the group to the wing of rooms they were allowed to stay in. He had also been told to tell them that anytime they were in the city, that they would have these rooms to use. It was very generous for him to do, but Shayliss also reasoned that he did not get many guests down here.

Most likely only representatives from the other tribes. So the rooms must be empty for most of the year.

She entered her room and immediately lay her weapons and armor down onto the bed. The temptation to join them was strong. Exhaustion from the previous two days was wearing down at her and she could feel her legs shaking. Yet, she knew that it would be hard for her to sleep right now with all of the thoughts in her head swirling around. So, instead, she headed for the door at the other side of the room. It led to a balcony and she leaned on its railing watching the city below.

Shayliss had no idea what time it was. She was not even certain that it was the seventeenth. But, by how the city was still bustling with trade and conversation that it could not have been any later than seven or eight at night. If Neathholm mimicked the surface cities, then right now was about what it would be like for the work hours to be done. People walking home, doing any shopping along the way and talking with neighbors, friends, family and merchants. Even the small town of Sandpoint, where she grew up, had activity similar to this. It was strangely comforting. This strange city had familiar happenings with her home. Or what was her home.

The brand hissed and seared against her skin. She bent over as if to hold the pain back and it took all of her willpower to keep herself from falling over the railing. Teeth clacked together and a small grunt of pain escaped her mouth.

Why? Shayliss could not help but ask, Why must I go through this pain? I have not seen any sign of her for two years now. What makes me think that I could actually find her?

She shook her head, Because I lo... love her. Right? I am supposed to do whatever I can to make sure she is safe.

Ah. Uncertainty. Doubt. Fear. You sense it. You know it is there. There is no need to keep going through this, right? Maybe you should get out while you can. Get your head on straight. If you asked, I am sure that the mongrel king would let you stay in his city. All of this fighting and suffering is doing nothing but distracting you.

It was tempting. Ever since Valtyra left, all Shayliss had been doing was fighting and searching. While there were a couple of stops along the way, one of them giving her this damned brand, she was just fighting battle after battle just to find a

woman that may not even be alive anymore. No human being should have to go through life like this. Right?

She felt that the correct answer is an immediate 'duh' but she was not sure. The attack upon Kenabres reentered her mind. It was savage, elemental, unyielding. Even when she did what she could to defend those who were injured by the flaming whip, she could feel the pressure of the demons on her group like a dam threatening to overflow. One mistake and they would have overtaken her. So, should she not try to fight that brutality?

Of course not! The voice inside her said, Let those who are better trained and more knowledgeable fight the demons. You are just one woman. The Worldwound has been there for centuries before you were born. Could you really fight against that?

I don't know. Maybe that's why Val came up here. To 'redeem' herself.

Her inner voice sighed, which seemed weird to Shayliss given that it was only a fragment of her mind. She did not expect to be having a conversation with herself. She especially did not expect herself to be annoyed with her.

We turn right back to her, huh? Herself asked, Why are you so fixated on her? Just because you got to roll in the hay does not make you so close and in love with her.

The sarcastic tone of her mind took her aback. Then the rush of memory stunned her with awkward embarrassment. Thankfully, she did not need her mouth to speak with herself. A) I am not fixated on her and B) I do not love her just because of that!

Laughter, You just contradicted yourself. And proved my point.

Shayliss actually felt herself grind her teeth, Whatever. The point is that I love her. We have shared many experiences and pain. I trust her with my secrets and I with hers.

And what did that accomplish? Great, you can fight. But when it came time to 'save her' she instead ran away from everything in her life. Including you. She never tried to contact you, nothing was left at your home in Sandpoint, your father would burn anything that would have been left there anyway, and you now have an eternally burning brand on your chest. Just like you were cattle. Is she really worth all of this?



Shayliss did not have an immediate reply. While she did not like it, she could not readily refute what herself, of all people, put out to the table. She gritted her teeth and remained silent.

That's what I th-

“Shayliss?”

The young woman felt herself leap into the air in shock and nearly fall over the railing. Instinct and muscle were the only things keeping her from toppling over and toward the hard stone below. If she was just one room over, she would have hit water, but at this height she was not sure if that would be any better.

She spun swiftly to see the still limping Anevia behind her. Like Shayliss, the archer had taken her armor off and wore a simple white shirt and skirt. It was a bit surprising to see Anevia in those clothes. They made her look like a housewife instead of a militant archer. Shayliss thought that it looked good on her.

With one hand on her walking stick, Anevia raised the other, “Sorry. I did not mean to surprise you.”

After taking a couple of seconds to recover and to calm her racing heart, she shook her head, “No. It's fine. I've just been distracted. How are you?”

Anevia sighed and leaned herself against the rail, trying to take the weight off of her leg, “I don't know. Confused? Worried? Scared? I am not sure if I can put it to one thing.”

“Is it about your wife?” Shayliss asked in a whisper. She almost immediately regretted asking the question. But Anevia just nodded, “I think so. I know she can take care of herself. She is a Crusader after all, and proven herself capable too. But...”

“But it doesn't stop you from being concerned.” Shayliss finished for her, “Yeah. I know what you mean.”

Anevia gave Shayliss a questioning look, “You have someone like that as well, don't you?”

Shayliss hesitated and Anevia continued with, “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that.” Shayliss whispered, “It’s just...”

Understanding washed over Anevia, “I see. Can I give you some insight that I was given myself once upon a time?”

“Sure.”

“Actions speak louder than your words or thoughts. Think back on what you have done rather than said or thought. Let those actions guide you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that no matter what you say, no matter what you think, your actions speak for your true self. If you hate the homeless, yet give them ten gold pieces everytime you walk by them, you cannot truly hate them, right?”

“I see.” A slight hesitation, “You wanna know who I strangely miss?”

“Who?”

“Shadowshine.”

Anevia tilted her head, “Who?”

“Our horse. It is the most ill-tempered, attitude-filled, self-centered horse you can find on the face of this planet. Yet I am worried about it escaping all of the conflict above.”

Anevia let out a belly laugh, “I know what you mean. I had a cat like that. She ran away and I spent days crying about her. Came to found out that she just went out for an extended hunt for fun.”

Shayliss was about to respond when a loud cheer rose from somewhere below them. She could almost feel it in her toes and her head snapped around in reaction. Anevia only continued to chuckle, “Why don’t we see what is going on downstairs? It would be a nice distraction.”

Shayliss thought about it for a second before nodding, "Sure."

With Anevia taking the lead, the pair left the room and walked downstairs to find what fun they could. Shayliss did not know about Anevia, but she was almost certain it would be the last bit of fun they would have for a long while.

Standing in front of the traitor's base, Shayliss wondered if ignoring 'herself' was such a great idea. The previous night had been hours of fun, laughter and play. They had tasted the exotic drinks the mongrelmen brewed from the bioluminescent fungus, which managed to give the drinks a strangely sweet taste. They danced the rather awkward and strange dances that the mongrelmen made look elegant and beautiful and they even learned a new card game the mongrelmen had created. Shayliss felt the corner of the massive box the mongrelmen handed her poking at her back through the backpack she had also been given for holding the game's collection of cards. Even Snaga came from his self-entrapment of a room and observed.

But seeing what the group would have to face to get home, she felt the sweat pouring down her face.

In front of them the base was not very impressive. Just a stone wall that had lines of wooden spikes in front of it. Barricades normally meant to keep out charging horses or other beasts during a siege. However, while they would not really kill people, they were still a good deterrent. Two mongrel guards paced back and forth in front of the simple wooden door that was the only thing other than two torches set into the stone wall. As bases go, it did not really strike a foreboding or horrible vibe. It was not the thing that made Shayliss sweat.

What made Shayliss sweat was what was behind the base. Or, more specifically, the unknown aspects of it. If Chief Sull was right, this was the last structure that stood between the group and Kenabres. They were about to find out what happened during the multiple days that they were underground. And she could see the fear on all of their faces. She was very tempted to just drop everything and run.

"What is the plan, Shayliss?" Strune asked.

Shayliss shook her head and actually studied the base. The others of the group were not going to just sit down here while their city was under attack. Both her conscience and memory of Val would hate her for just leaving them to their fate.

The guards moved back and forth in a straight line, occasionally looking into the darkness toward the tunnel. However, this must have been near the end of the shift.

Both guards were very lazy in their motions and the occasional sigh. They were tired and ready to get back inside to rest. If the group was going to attack, now would be the best time.

“Anevia, Kaira and Snaga, you’re on sniping duty. See if you can take them both down swiftly. The longer we keep them from ringing the alarm that they are certain to have, the better. Mordria and Strune, you are on the frontline. Keep them from pushing past to get to the archers and mage.”

A sudden memory hit her. The memory of Snaga beating the dwarf mage down with the power of his eidolon backing him up. While part of her did not want to risk it, she decided to put her faith in his strength rather than his magic.

“Actually, Snaga, you are with Mordria.” She turned to find the half-orc’s face contort into surprise in the torchlight, “You took down that dwarf with your strength, not your magic. I need Strune and myself in the middle to rotate out if needed and to heal. So, I need you to fill the spot that Strune is not in.” She hesitated, “If you think you can do it that is.”

Snaga continued to stare at her with that surprised expression. Shayliss was worried that she had broken him somehow when, while holding that expression, he gave her a nod. She was not certain, but she thought that under its hood, Nephalim was smiling. It was strange to see that disconnect when they otherwise seem to be a single entity.

Shayliss nodded back and said, “Archers, get ready and fire!”

Anevia and Kaira both spun from around the tunnel’s bend and opened fire. Each chose a different target and arrows sunk deep into each. Yet, both were still alive and standing. They were both about to let out a yell but just then Mordria and Snaga rushed forward. The half-orc was not as fast as the half-fiend, but they both managed to get to the guards before they were able to call out. Spiked gauntlets and claws met abyssal-altered flesh and seconds later both guards were down for the count.

“Go go!” Shayliss hissed, “Through the door before they get suspicious.”

Mordria nodded and placed herself right at the door before throwing it open. Fast as lightning, she ducked to the side as a longsword thrust through the doorway. She then twisted her body, reached a clawed hand out, and spun. The body of a

mongrel guard was sent arcing through the air right for Snaga. It was obvious he had not been expecting it, but he managed to pull a fist back and slam it forward to meet the mongrelman. Bone snapped and the body crashed into the far wall.

“Force them back!” Shayliss yelled. How had they known about the attack? She thought that the front two guards went down quietly enough, but the mongrelmen still knew an attack was underway. Maybe they were just paranoid by nature. “Archers, move forward but do not fire until you have a clear line of fire!”

At that, the rest of the group moved forward to stand behind Mordria and Snaga. This was the exact situation Shayliss wanted to avoid. If they had been able to throw open the door and rush an unexpectant foe, then they would not have to worry about being bottlenecked at the door where only one of them could attack at a time. It was the same theory with fighting that undead creature days ago. In fact, it was the exact same.

“Mordria! Remember the undead!”

There was a stunned second from the half-fiend, but then she understood. With two quick motions, she gripped the mongrelman’s wrists with two hands. Other blades came in to slice at her shoulders, but she took the brunt of the attack well. Muscles tensed as she then shoved the mongrelman away in a show of pure strength. That shove gave her the opportunity she needed to move into the room. Which then allowed Snaga to move in and take another mongrelman.

Where Mordria used swift motions to get in close and reposition her foes, Snaga and Nephelim used power. One massive fist came crashing down like a runaway wagon and all the mongrelman could do was scream before mass and muscle collided. Surprisingly, the mongrelman still stood and he sliced left-right-left trying to cause some kind of injury. Instead, more of that magical liquid fell from the image of Nephelim and while Snaga showed no reaction, Nephelim snarled in pain.

With a yell of anger that was very familiar to Shayliss, he raised both fists clasped together and slammed it down at the mongrelman’s head. The mongrel dodged, barely, and slashed upward. Wind whistled and magic liquid fell, but Snaga only turned the downward strike into a sideways swing, spiked gauntlets shining in the torchlight. Another attempted dodge, but this one did not succeed as well. Spikes left stripes of parted flesh on the mongrelman’s face and he growled. The growl died abruptly when two arrows with different fletchings pierced the mongrelman’s head.

By then, the other two mongrelmen became a force of four. The door to one of the hallways going deeper into the base was thrown open and four mongrelmen stood in a line in front of it. Strune, Shayliss and Mordria all fought them while the second door out started to fling open.

“Snaga!” Shayliss yelled, “Switch!”

The red-haired woman brought her longsword up to a guard. Metal clashed with metal and with ease managed to shove the mongrel’s weapon aside. With a fling of her grappling hook, the mongrelman was stunned long enough for her to spin around with Snaga. He took her place and she ran for the door which was just fully opening.

Instead of a mongrelman, a human wearing large plate armor with the symbol of Baphomet on his chest appeared in the doorway with a greatsword. He held the weapon in two meaty hands and made it clear that she was not going to be allowed to get by him if he had anything to say about it. The thought that maybe she should have just let Snaga handle him flashed through her mind, but it was too late now. She would just have to deal with it on her own.

With a flick of her wrist, the grappling hook sailed forward and crashed against the heavy armor. She had meant for it to latch on the plate so she could pull but instead it left three small dents. The man was not even staggered as he reached and grabbed the rope of the hook. A small tug from him and she was flung from her feet and toward him. Gods was he strong!

Not wanting to meet the awaiting tip of the greatsword, she twisted her body mid-air and felt the blade slash against the imbedded armor in her coat. Yet, the force and mass of the blade was enough to slam the armor into her side. Air escaped her lungs in an explosion and she was stunned enough to not realize when the greatsword came down at her head. Greatswords were not meant for such close quarters fighting and because of that the greatsword missed.

With a growl, the man let go of the rope and pulled back the arm to punch. Shayliss recovered enough to duck under the punch. The joints of one knuckle scratched at her head and a thin line of blood quickly formed from her hair. She grunted but used the momentum of her rise to swing her longsword upward. Sparks flew as it scratched against the plate and the impact shook her arm to the core. Yet,

she would not stop as she flung the hook again to try and wrap it around the punching arm.

Somehow, she managed to do so. The hook latched onto its own rope and Shayliss yanked. Not expecting it, the man stumbled to one side and struggled to remain upright. She then used that moment to take a stab at a bare spot between two armor plates on his other arm. Her accuracy was nearly perfect and the blade slid between the plates to stab.

Blood flowed and the man howled. The greatsword fell from limp fingers, but he did not hesitate to swing his arm at her. Armor crashed into her head and she was flung to the side. She did not realize it when her body hit the stone floor and the man raised a foot to come stomping on her head.

Snaga saved her.

The fused half-orc barreled into the man like a runaway wagon sending both into one of the sturdy walls. His gauntlets flashed as they pulled back to swing. The guard ducked under the punches and sent one of his own into the half-orc. He stepped backward from the blow and more of that magic liquid fell from him. Now that Shayliss was sort of recovered, she could see that Nephalim was much fainter than she was before. There was not much left covering the half-orc and she felt that if Nephalim disappeared, that the man would not have as much strength as he does now.

Shayliss slowly rose to her feet to find that her worry was unnecessary. The guard was just slumping to the ground as three arrows pierced him. Two stuck out of his breastplate and one was in his shoulder. None of them were fatal, but with those plus the blood loss from the arm and some additional dents from punches, he had not had of a chance.

Snaga stood there, breathing heavily for a second, before leaning against the wall and muttering under his breath. As Shayliss watched, the outline around Snaga filled and solidified. More and more of Nephalim's features returned and while it was not completely filled, it was better than it was before.

The others were moving to the doors of the room, making sure no other mongrelmen or cultists entered. After a minute, none did, and Strune took that time to examine Shayliss.



“You really know how to take a beating, don’t you?” The strix asked with a small smile.

Shayliss sighed, “I guess I learned from the best.”

“At least it is not as bad as it could have been.” Warmth flooded through Shayliss’s body with Stune’s hands as the source, “I won’t be able to get you healed completely, but you should be able to last through this mission.” She hesitated, “Assuming you have had enough of taking on men obviously stronger than you.”

“No promises.” Shayliss answered and stepped toward the door on the right from where they entered, “We need to do a full sweep of this base. Since the mongrelmen almost solely came from the other door, this must not lead out. Let’s search it quickly then move on.”

The rest of the group nodded and positioned themselves at the door. It had swung back, only remaining open by a small crack. Shayliss counted down from three and Mordria swung the door back out to slam against stone. No one was in the next room which was some kind of dining room or meeting room. A table stood in the center of the room with chairs lined around it. Cabinets were placed against the walls and the only other feature of the room was a hole in the ground with a rope ladder hanging down.

Shayliss motioned for the group to climb down the ladder with Mordria and Snaga first. They did so with those in the back keeping an eye out for reinforcements. It was a slow process getting everyone down the ladder, especially since it hung loose and threatened to break from its holdings with each step,

It led to a hallway similar to the entrance of the base. Walls of spiked wood lay out in front of the entrance of some kind of room. Yet, no guards stood within the hall. Shayliss blinked at that. Why were there no guards here, a perfectly reasonable defensible position? Were they afraid? Or was there something waiting for them on the other side of that door?

She motioned for everyone to move forward. When they arrived at the door, she placed an ear on it. The wooden door must have been thick, because she could not hear anything behind it. Yet, she backed up and muttered, “Open it carefully.”

Mordria nodded and braced herself. She then started pushing the door slowly open. On the other side was a definite meeting room. A long table ran the center of the

rectangular room with chairs spaced all along its length and heads. Sheets of paper and parchment lay scattered carelessly on top of the table and candles stood in holders at every fourth section of it.

Behind the table were four forms. Two were mongrelmen, one wielding two rapiers and one holding a bow with its string pulled and arrow nocked. A third was a tiefling with a longsword and dagger. The fourth was a human woman wearing the armor of the cultists and a glaive gripped tightly in one hand.

“So,” the woman said, “you are the intruders.”

Strune stepped forward and pointed her slightly glowing longsword at the human woman, “Stand down. There has been enough blood drawn.”

The woman smirked, “You entered my home, and the home of my men, a mere two minutes ago. And you start making demands? How typical of such a noble holy warrior of Iomedae.” As she said that last sentence, she rolled her eyes. Her voice dripped with sarcasm, “Please, give me more orders. Convert me to your righteous cause.”

Strune narrowed her eyes, “You mock me.” Shayliss could feel the anger pulsating from the strix. She almost took a step to the side to get away from the heat.

The human woman let out a bark of a laugh, “Of course, you arrogant child! You think that waltzing in here and killing my men gives you the right to force my surrender? Like I was an unruly dog that must be put down? I thought that Crusaders would have more sense than that.”

“It is not that I lack sense.” Strune said, “It is that I am merciful. I am giving you what may be your only chance to flee.” To add a point to her statement, she deliberately stepped away from the entrance. However, with the mass of the group, there was no way the entrance would be completely open.

Seeing that, the woman laughed, “It looks like your allies do not agree. The teamwork in display is so dazzling.”

Strune growled and started a heated response. At that point, though, Shayliss had stopped paying attention. Her attention had focused on one of the mongrelmen. Specifically, the one holding dual rapiers.

He was lean with sides that almost formed a feminine hourglass, Two legs were back-hinged and his shoeless toes were swollen with multiple blisters. Instead of arms, he had tentacles that wrapped around each other to make something mimicking arms and hands like an octopus trying to become a human. The rest of his body was one of a dwarf with scars and markings showing even more of his malformations. Half of his silver hair was just gone while the other half waved

down to his shoulder. The cloth shirt and pants he wore were two sizes too large and hung down his frame.

Rapiers were very familiar weapons to Shayliss. These, however, were nearly memory inducing. Their blades had not been taken care of, and the only reason they still seemed sharp were because of the etchings set into them. Small light pulsed from the etchings and she knew that if she touched them, she could feel the tiny amounts of energy leaking from them. The etchings continued down from the blades and into the elegant mesh that curved down to form the handguards. While they would not have protected from thin blades such as other rapiers, they did well to protect against weapons such as maces and longswords. The handle was made from black leather wrapped around an elongated cylinder of metal and nothing on the blades were scratched or damaged.

Weapons with enhancements are not that uncommon, especially with adventurers. Nowadays, it was pretty much the standard when one gained enough money to do so as enhancing weapons guaranteed their indestructibility and increased damage as well as gain the user some fun abilities such as flaming weapons and the ability to use spells without years of study.

Why did this mongrelman have those specific ones, though? How did he get them? The implications that flashed through her mind made her torn between attacking everything in sight and curling up in a ball and crying. She was about to burst. Her grip tightened on her longsword and she subconsciously took a step forward.

Everyone's gazes turned to her and she jumped slightly when she realized it. So, she went along with it and growled, "Where did you get those?"

The room fell silent. Almost everyone in the room had expressions of great confusion which were all aimed at her. Only she, growing angrier, and Kaira, calmly holding her bow nocked and ready, were different. After a second passed, and she had gotten no response, Shayliss repeated while stepping forward, "Where. Did. You. Get. Those." With each word, she twitched her blade, now upraised at the rapier-wielding mongrelman.

The mongrelman audibly swallowed and stammered, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Shayliss snarled and stepped forward again, "Bullshit!"

The cultist woman interposed herself between the mongrelman and Shayliss. Before Shayliss could react, a fist slammed into her belly and forced the air out of her lungs in one large blast. Letting out a small gasp of pain, the red-haired woman was sent into the air about a foot before being thrown back down to earth by a hand on her back.

Shayliss, in an amazing feat of determination, did not let the flecks of blood shooting from her mouth stop her from thrusting her longsword upward at the cultist. The attack was not as fast as it could have been, but she felt the satisfying resistance of metal against metal and heard a couple of chain links hit the stone floor. Instead of following up the attack on her, though, Shayliss sprang from her prone position to charge the rapier-wielding mongrelman.

Surprised by the sudden assault, the mongrelman could only lower one rapier to block an upward arcing swing. Sparks flew and Shayliss tried to force her way further into the mongrelman's defenses. He had recovered, though, and held her back. With a growl, Shayliss pulled her other fist back, ignoring the swinging metal hook wrapped around it, and thrust it in one of her hardest punches.

The mongrelman ducked the blow and sliced the other rapier, she was not going to think of it as his, horizontally at her rib cage. She had to disengage from him in order to nearly throw herself under the attack which gave him the opportunity to stab downward. Pain flared in a line down her side but she largely ignored it as she twisted around to arc another swing at him.

This time, the attack landed, drawing a line of parted flesh and blood across the mongrelman's torso. He stumbled backward and Shayliss took the opportunity to flick her grappling hook forward. It slammed into his chest, sending him further offbalance and leaving bruises forming under his cloth shirt. Shayliss pressed the assault, swinging both blade and hook at the mongrelman, try to even further imbalance him and eventually kill him.

However, the mongrelman knew it. He kept interposing the rapiers in her way until he could recover his balance. At that point he then started to turn the fight against her. What advantage she had was lost and then returned as he sent attack after attack at her. While she technically had two weapons, they were not effective together. Those rapiers, though, were and he knew that too. The barrage of attacks pushed Shayliss further and further back until she finally hit one of the stone walls. And the attacks just kept coming.

Not even Valtyra went for the brute force side of her fighting style. She kept it fast but precise, attacking at obvious weak points until the enemy weakened then made one final, fatal attack. Granted, it had not always worked, but that was her preferred style. The mongrelman, though, just swung the weapons however he pleased and if he could draw some blood, so much the better. It was brutish and rather effective.

Shayliss took a quick glance toward the others, hoping that one of them was close enough and willing to help her. She found, though, that they all were focused on the other three in the room. Mordria and Snaga held the attentions of the human cultist and the tiefling while Strune held her ground against the other mongrelman trying to take precise shots at those in the rear guard. Those in the rear guard just peppered whoever they could shoot at the moment. And none of them even looked her way.

Gritting her teeth, she knew that if she was on her own, she could only push forward. She had to be aggressive in her attacks as well. But she could not be careless about it either. Carelessness would be her downfall just as swiftly as if she just kept doing what she was doing now.

So, Shayliss studied her opponent. After a couple of seconds, she realized that her original thoughts about this mongrelman's attacks were wrong. While he was brutish about it, it was not just random swinging. She was not sure if he even noticed it, but there was a pattern to his seemingly erratic attacks: Up-left, down-right, middle, middle, uppercut, thrust, thrust then right back to Up-left to repeat the cycle again. Sure, there was the occasional change in pattern, but he would then go right back to it. Now that she saw his pattern, she could exploit it.

With a grunt of effort, she slid one attack aside, ducked under another, getting a neat slice across her shoulder as she did, and then threw her whole body forward. It was something that the mongrelman was not expecting. In order to make sure he was not thrown to the ground by her attack, he had to take a few steps back which halted his attacks. Letting out a snarl, Shayliss thrust forward. The mongrelman was not ready when the blade slid neatly into his chest. He gasped out a couple of puffs before his body went limp, the rapiers falling to the ground.

Shayliss took a second to breathe from the intense struggle before turning to join the fight happening on the other side of the room. She found, though, that the others were just finishing the fight themselves and were wiping blood off of weapons or searching for missing arrows. Seeing that, Shayliss returned to the mongrelman and started pulling the weapons belt with the rapiers' sheathes off of

the corpse. Looking closely, she could now see that she was indeed right. They were the rapiers she recognized. The crest she had placed on the butt of each handle was there as if they were just carved.

She heard footsteps behind her. The metallic clinks and whisper of air were enough for Shayliss to know that it was Strune stepping up to her, the woman's wings flapping slightly with each step.

"Can you tell me why that could not have been a civilized discussion?" The strix asked, her voice hard and tinted with anger.

"You know she was not going to just back down." Shayliss answered as she tugged one last time. The weapon belt scratched against the stone and flesh before flinging upward with momentum.

"That is not the point." Strune nearly growled, "I could have made sure that no more bloodshed happened if you did not just up and attack that man."

Shayliss wiped off the dirt, grime and blood from the weapons and sheaths with a cut scrap of her shirt sleeve, "Do you know what these are?"

Some of the strix's anger shifted into confusion, "Uh. They are weapons. Rapiers. So?"

Shayliss stood up, sheathing the weapons and showed them to Strune, "These are not just rapiers." She took a deep breath to control her emotions, "They are the first signs I have had in almost three years. They are Valtyra's."

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It had been awkward to do it, but a minute later, Shayliss had the rapiers attached to her waist, both blades at her right hip. The weight of all of the weapons were trying to pull her down, but she knew that it would only take about a day before she got used to the feeling. Besides, it was worth it.

That done, she helped the others look around. They were looking at the room to the right of where they came in. From the brief glance she got, Shayliss thought that it was a small kitchen or butchers area. She figured they had that side taken care of, so she moved to the other side of the meeting room where another door stood, cracked open. Shayliss opened it the rest of the way to find that it was a bedroom.

A crude bed stretched from the back left corner toward the center of the room. The frame and spring box was simply a slab of stone rising from the ground that was naturally made rather than being carved out. A mattress that used to be white but was now completely caked in dirt sat on top with a simple blanket and pillow on top of that. It was wrinkled and dirty from constant use and no washing.

To the other side of the room, set against the wall, was a desk. It was made of hard wood that was also covered in dirt. Only the surface used for working was kept relatively clean. Papers were strewn on top of it and a pen and inkwell sat to one corner. They both look rarely used.

Looking through all of the sheets of paper and parchment on the desk, Shayliss found none that were relevant to what was going on. At least, until she reached the very bottom. There, a letter address to 'Hosilla' sat bent, creased and ripped. Yet, it was still legible. Whoever 'S. V.' is, his handwriting was rough, hastily done, and in all capital letters which gave the impression that either the person was in a rush, or was an aggressive writer or person.

'HOSILLA,

YOU WILL REMAIN, FOR THE TIME BEING, IN KENABRES. BUT KNOW THIS, THE CITY'S DAYS ARE NUMBERED. SEEK A PLACE OF SAFETY - THE UNDERGROUND DEN OF YOUR MONGREL LACKEYS SHOULD SUFFICE TO KEEP YOU SAFE FROM THE DEVASTATION TO COME. I SHALL ASSUME COMMAND OF DREZEN SHORTLY, AND ONCE VORLESH HAS FINISHED WITH THE WARDSTONE AND KENABRES IS NO LONGER OF INTEREST TO US, YOU ARE TO RETURN TO MY SIDE. EXCELLENT NEWS REGARDING THE SALVAGE OF YANIEL'S SWORD AS WELL AS THOSE OF OUR NEWEST PRISONER. BRING THEM WITH YOU. WHILE THE PRISONER'S BLADES ARE NOT OF HOLY MAKE, THEY WILL JUST BE AS USEFUL AS YANIEL'S WHEN WE CORRUPT ALL THREE. BEFORE YOU LEAVE FOR DREZEN, STOP BY THE THREE SAFE HOUSES (NYSERIAN MANOR, TOPAZ SOLUTIONS AND THE TOWER OF ESTROD - THE PASSPHRASE REMAINS 'I'VE NEW MATERIAL FOR THE ARCHIVES,' FOR NOW) TO ENSURE NO EVIDENCE REMAINS BEHIND.

MAY LORD DESKARI AND LORD BAPHOMET WATCH OVER YOU!

S. V.’

By the time she finished reading the letter, the others were either in the room or right outside. Turning around, Shayliss could see that they were all looking at her questioningly. She handed Strune the letter who read it aloud for the others. As the strix read the letter, Shayliss bent down to look under the desk. There, she found a large wooden case. It was heavier than she expected and she let out a grunt as she dragged it out and placed it on top of the desk.

It was a very elegant and expensive case. Dark wood sheened in the little light they had in the room and gold clasps could be seen holding the case shut. Examining it closer, Shayliss could see a lock keeping the clasps in place. Her mouth opened to ask about a key when she was interrupted by Anevia.

“We have to bring this to the Eagle Watch. If we can get to these safe houses, then we may be able to learn more.”

Aravashnial nodded, “I would be interested to learn what could be found at the Tower of Estrod. It is interesting that they would choose that location for a safe house.”

A small sound of shifting stone made Shayliss turn to look at Horgus. She noticed that he was hiding a reaction to the note. However, she was not about to get him talking. He would just throw insults left and right without giving much help.

“Did anyone find a key?” Shayliss asked, “This case is locked.”

Kaira pushed her way to Shayliss from the rear of the clumped group and held out a dirty gold key, “From the woman.”

Shayliss nodded and took the key. As Kaira returned to the back, she fumbled at the lock. The thought that the key was the wrong one crossed her mind when the lock did not pop after a couple of seconds. But then, there was a snap of suddenly disappearing resistance and the metal of the lock sprang open.

Excitement shot up Shayliss’s body as she grabbed the lid and slowly pushed it open. Inside were piles of different coins: gold, silver, copper as well as some platinum, some magical scrolls, and some gems. However, the most impressive item was another case. This one was undeniably a sword case because of its shape and relative size to the outer case.

Shayliss pulled the sword case out and opened it. Inside was a sheathed sword of elegant and masterful make. It was a longsword with a curved silver hilt. Inset in the center of the hilt was a diamond and the leather wrapping of the handle was painted gold. Its sheathe was not any less elegant with spiral and curving gold metal pieces set onto dark leather.

At seeing the weapon, Strune stepped forward. With a stunned expression, she reached out and grabbed the handle of the blade in shaking fingers. The sheathed blade came out of the case easily and Strune stared at it closely.

“Strune?” Shayliss asked.

“Radiance.” Strune responded in a quiet voice, “The blade once held by Yaniel.” She pulled the blade out of its sheathe. The weapon came out smoothly and with barely a sound, “It would have been great to see it as it shone with Iomedae’s grace.” Her lips curled down into a frown, “But why is it here instead of the Grey Garrison?”

“It must have been taken.” Anevia answered, “Keep it for now. If the letter is to be believed, they were going to corrupt it. We cannot let that happen.”

Strune nodded. With little effort, she attached the blade to her weapons belt. It was as if the blade was meant for her.

The base had grown quiet since the group's fight with Hosilla, the human cultist. It was as if her death stopped the alarms and fighting all together. Shayliss knew that was not true. The mongrelmen were just waiting for the group to poke their head out from around a corner carelessly. That way they can send arrows into the group's skulls.

So, Shayliss ordered a careful march through the tunnels and back up into the first room. No ambush awaited them and no sudden cries echoed throughout the cavern. Which only made Shayliss's nerves jangle more. Moving slowly and with extreme caution, she had Mordria lead the group as she was the quietest and the best close quarters fighter they had.

The first room they had entered was some sort of trophy hall. Worked stone walls of the rectangular room held a number of hooks, nails and string. There were a few that were not being used, but all of the others kept up preserved bodies of dire rats, lizards, vipers and bats along other various critters and beasts that could be found within the caverns underneath Kenabres. Platforms were crafted from stone that held various parts of animals, mostly claws and fangs but also a couple of sheets of pulled scales and a piece of fur skinned from possibly a rock panther. Two swiftly abandoned bed rolls lay by one of the corners not so covered with carcasses.

When Kaira entered the room, she made disgusted sound and seemed to want to rip all of those displays off their walls or pedestals. Shayliss watched as she controlled herself and forced her body to keep moving forward. Her eyes did not look over any of the animals. Blueeye did the same, keeping his nose to the ground and his eyes to his nose. It was obvious that the 'trophy's' angered them. Most likely because in this state, the bodies were not used to repair clothes, or eat, or as accessories. The hunter in the pair screamed for them to do something about it. Yet, they ignored it and continued up the ladder on the other side of the room.

The second room was some sort of nest. Random collections of junk: paper, slivers of wood, old gear, leather and so on, were packed into various piles along the four walls of the room. Blood stains marring the surfaces of those piles as well as some splatters on the wall gave Shayliss the impression that this was a feeding ground as well as a nest.

Without a word, the group passed through the room along the path built for people to not trample the piles, and found themselves in a long tunnel that ran for about thirty feet. A flicker of hope rose in Shayliss's chest. Maybe this was the tunnel out. Did they finally make it to the surface? What would they find? Kenabres standing tall, managing to hold out against the demonic threat? Or it flattened into nothing but ash and ruin?

Either fortunately or unfortunately, her questions would not be answered right away. The tunnel opened up into yet another room. This one was the largest in the whole base, rising up about fifty feet and spreading out to about the same distance in all directions. And right in front of them was undeniably a maze. Ten feet in front of the group was a stone wall that rose up thirty feet and only had one opening into it.

“Did they really have to build a maze in here?” Mordria asked in complaint.

“It is a pretty strong defense mechanism.” Shayliss answered, “Make sure those coming from the surface are slowed while archers attack from the balconies.” As she said that, she pointed upward to where what had originally looked like flat wall opened up into areas large enough for mongrelmen to stand in.

Mordira looked up as well, “Huh. I thought that was just a wall.”

“I did as well.” Shayliss looked around, “But that also means that those wanting to get out would have a difficult time. I wonder-”

She was interrupted by a series of growls emanating from within the maze. Her back stiffened and she could feel eyes on her even though she could see no one. Everyone behind her reacted in the same way which made her feel less like a scared child.

“What was that?” Shayliss asked behind her.

Strune let out a deep breath, “Dretches.”

A chill went up Shayliss's spine. She had heard of the Dretch Demons. They were among the lowest ranking demons, if not the lowest. Yet, that did not mean they were weak and pathetic. If one was not careful, the bully demons could tear a man in half. They were not to be taken lightly, despite their relative power to the other demons.

“They were placed within the maze as another defense from the surface.” Shayliss muttered, “Which means we are going to have to get past them.” She looked to Strune, “Any suggestions?”

The strix shook her head, “They have us at a disadvantage in there. The narrow spaces and our large group will hold us back rather than strengthen. And while they are not the brightest candles, they will know how to use those to their advantages.”

Shayliss sighed, “We will ha-”

Yet again, she was interrupted. This time, it was by the alarm bells behind the group. With those bells, yells and battlecries echoed throughout the complex, bouncing up to the group. The force of the noise was almost enough to stagger Shayliss with its mere presence.

“Damnit!” She growled, “They were waiting for us to get here.”

Her mind raced. She had to figure out how to get the group safely through the maze. The problem was, the mongrelmen and cultists would know the maze inside and out. Not only that, but with dretches on one side and the force approaching from the other, they were effectively trapped. Going into the maze would only pin the group while only being able to use half of their members to defend themselves. No matter what, they would be overwhelmed. There was only one thing they could do that had any reasonable chance of survival.

“Strune and Kaira!” She barked turning toward each as she said their name, “Get into the maze. Keep together and find your way out. Kill the dretches as you do and then get back here. You will lead us out.” She then faced the entrance to the room where a mass of shadows could be seen getting larger and closer, “The rest of us will buy you time. Form a line, shoulder to shoulder. Protect each other.”

As she was finishing the last orders, people were moving. Strune and Kaira grabbed their weapons and ran for the maze’s entrance. Seconds later, Shayliss could hear more growls and yells from inside. The others, besides Horgus and Aravashnial, formed a straight line right in front of the entrance to the room. That was the only place where they had a hope of containing the fight. Metal scratched against metal and leather as blades were pulled from sheaths. Mordria and Snaga each let out primal snarls and the others gritted their teeth in fear and battlelust.

They were only there for a second before the horde of mongrelmen and cultists crashed onto them.

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The next ten minutes would be the more strenuous, difficult, and thoughtless ten minutes of Shayliss's life. She had no idea where all of those mongrelmen and cultists were hiding, nor how they had enough room in the base for them all, but the force arrayed against Shayliss's group numbered near one hundred. Shayliss was numbered almost twenty to one. The only thing she had going for her was that her group was better trained and more experienced.

A scaled mongrelman with an oversized maul ran up to Shayliss first. With a yell the man raised his weapon up to come crashing down upon her yet she ducked down low, preventing him from getting a good hit, then stepped forward. Her blade thrust up with her motion, sliding neatly under the man's rib cage. He died before she even pulled the weapon back out. Which took a few seconds as it got stuck on something.

As she worked on the weapon two more people, one mongrelman, one cultist, took the opportunity to jump her together. The cultist's glaive swung down in a diagonal arc that would have cut deep into Shayliss's shoulder while the mongrelman went with the more precise option of sending a thin-bladed shortsword into her heart.

Shayliss flicked her grappling hook forward to crash into the mongrelman's chest. The blow staggered him enough to send his attack wide of her. As she did, she fell to the ground as low as possible and felt the glaive's blade shave off some strands of hair. Changing the direction of her momentum, she twisted, pulling her longsword out of the corpse, and sliced at the glaive. Wood cracked, but did not part, from the force of her attack. While the glaive did not break, it was sent flying from the hand of the cultist who stared at it in surprise for a quick second. That second ended when Anevia, standing to Shayliss's right, sliced right through the cultist's neck. The woman then gave Shayliss a hand getting onto her feet again.

Shayliss then pulled the woman aside from a double bladed axe aimed to half her. The motion caused Anevia to snarl in discomfort as she was forced to step hard on her awkward leg. With a mutter of, "Switch," Shayliss rotated herself using Anevia as the axis. She then raised her blade up to block a second attack which sent a powerful shock of sensation up her arm. Forcing the feeling away and making sure

she did not drop her weapon, she shoved the axe aside weakly but firmly and pulled herself in close to the ape-like mongrelman. So close, the mongrelman could not get an accurate attack going which allowed Shayliss to throw herself into a thrust without worry. The blade cut in deep and the ape mongrelmen let out a burbble before falling limp to the ground.

This time, Shayliss was able to jerk the blade out of the body on the first try. But she was not able to do it fast enough. She did not know it when another cultist shoved a glaive at her. A deep line of parted skin and blood formed on her back as the blade slid under her armored coat. Grunting in pain, Shayliss spun toward the attacker and slammed the weapon down with her longsword. Stone shards broke from the ground at the glaive's hit and it stunned the cultist. Shayliss then elbowed the cultist's head, kned her belly, and slashed her chest. The cultist fell and right behind her was another cultist. Before Shayliss could deal with him, he was sent to the ground by a spiked gauntlet. Snaga then punched the fallen cultist and elbowed another behind him.

Their line had become more of a mass, yet somehow they were keeping the enemy at bay. The group was exhausting fast, though. Pain was crawling all over Shayliss's body from the slash on her back, and she could see that the others were bleeding from countless wounds. It was undeniable that numbers were kicking their asses. The fight had only been going on for maybe two minutes, yet Shayliss had almost met death five different times.

“Where the hell were they?” Shayliss muttered, ducking from yet another attack.

They are not coming. The voice in her head whispered, They saw the exit and fled. Why not do the same? You are dying. You need to get some help. There is no way to do that down here. Go up! Find a cleric!

Without realizing it, she had turned her body toward the entrance of the maze. It had given a mongrelman with two hand axes a chance to hit her back, but Snaga intercepted the worm woman with two right hooks that sent her to the ground. Shayliss did not see it though, as she watched Kaira run through the maze's entrance with Blueeye right behind her. When the huntress saw that Shayliss was looking at her, she stopped and waved her hand toward herself in a ‘come on’ gesture.

“Make a fighting retreat!” Shayliss yelled, “Tighten up and back up slowly! We will ease ourselves into the maze one at a time!”

The fighters of the group started making cautious steps backward, continuing to hold their ground against their opponents. The mongrelmen and cultists followed closely, trying to move around and flank with little success, and pushing forward more and more. Those who were not fighting hoofed it. Horgus did not help Aravashnial, but Shayliss figured that the elf was using Horgus's loud and heavy breathing or foot-pounds to orient himself. Kaira stood at the entrance of the maze, letting the two non-combatants through, and assisting in getting the rest of the group to the maze. She was the main reason the mongrelmen and cultists were not able to flank.

When the group finally made it to the maze, Kaira made sure that she led them forward. Then the group pushed themselves in a single file line to slowly make their way through the maze, using Kaira's guidance and the people next to them in line making sure that they did not make a wrong turn. As they did, Snaga, who was the last to enter the maze, fought to hold the foe back. Shayliss moved around one corner and into another intersection as she had no choice but to listen to Snaga fight.

After what seemed like an eternity, Kaira said, "This is the last turn! Strune!"

The strix, apparently at the very end of the maze, let out a grunt of effort and Shayliss watched as she curved over the group, above the space between the maze walls and the ceiling, and dove like a catapult boulder down within the middle of the mass of enemies. Cries of surprise and pain rose from them and Strune added herself to the combat.

"Go go go!" Kaira yelled.

Now that the enemies had a new, and more dangerous foe to face, they paid no attention to the fleeing fighters. Seeing that, Shayliss yelled, "Run!"

All hell broke loose as the tired and injured party turned and raced for the end of the maze. Kaira and Strune had timed it so that it was obvious where to go. Just around the corner to the right and straight ahead. At the other end of the path, a tunnel leading up into darkness opened up. Shayliss sprinted for it and then turned to watch the others do the same. Once everyone was out of the maze, Kaira yelled, "Strune, come on!"



In a near reverse of her dive into the fight, she rose up on white and red wings and flew toward the tunnel. Her black skin was marred with numerous wounds and speckles of blood fell to earth as she flew above everything. When she landed, Shayliss could see that her armor and shield were dented and damaged. Yet, she landed gracefully and led the charge through the tunnel. They now had plenty of space between themselves and the enemy so they did not worry about caution as they ran at a full sprint into the mouth of the tunnel and up to the surface.

Ever since they fell into the tunnels and caverns underneath Kenabres, Shayliss had done her best to make sure she did not think about what may have been happening within the city. It would have been a great distraction to the battles of life and death she had been a part of in the past three or four days. But, since they had left the maze and its horde of mongrelmen and cultists behind, she could not help but put the condition of the city in the forefront of her thoughts.

Had it managed to fight off the army of demons that descended and ascended upon it? Were the people even now working to rebuild their homes? When the group emerged from the tunnel, would they walk into the bright light of day and see that their fears were ungrounded?

Or, was the city gone? Wiped off the map with nothing but ash remaining? Were there no survivors, or only a few that could only pray that their deaths were quick? Would one of the strongest cities against the demonic nation still be standing, or fall like all of the others that tried to stand against it?

Shayliss did not want to find out which was true. Glancing at the other members of the group's faces told her that they were having similar thoughts. Even Horgus remained quiet and contemplative as they hiked the last few feet toward the entrance of the tunnel. Red-orange light poured from the opening and did not allow any sight beyond it. The only way they would know for certain was to pass through the light onto the surface.

A sigh escaped Shayliss's lips, a bit shaky with exhaustion, pain, fear and anxiousness, "We won't do much just staring at it. Let's go. Mordria and Strune, up front."

The pair moved toward the front of the group and led them out into the open world.

The sun's light blinded Shayliss and it took a long time for her eyes to readjust. However, as they did, she could start getting information from her other senses.

First was the feeling of heat. It washed over her like a beach's surf and threatened to form sweat on her forehead. Her body was not sure of how to handle it after days within the relative cold of the tunnels and the sensation of it adjusting to the

sudden change in temperature crawled up her spine and made her shudder. The only thing that could have been causing so much heat was fire. The city of Kenabres was on fire.

That assumption was reinforced when her nose picked up the strong stench of smoke. It billowed into her nostrils and seemed to push her skin outward. She had to cough to push it out which only let more in as she had to suck in air to breathe. The back and forth of air and smoke continued until she finally was able to control it. Her method of controlled breathing and holding her hand to her face was not perfect, but it was enough to reduce the need to cough.

When her eyes finally adjusted to the light, she could see that the city was still standing despite the pillars of smoke rising into the air. Cries and roars echoed into the black clouded sky and even though the light blinded her, Shayliss saw that the sun was not poking out of the mass of cloud and smoke. Flying within the darkness above were shapes of various demons and vultures circling the city and its districts, occasionally diving down to attack an unsuspecting form on the ground.

“It’s chaos.” Strune muttered as she watched another flying shape dive and a very distant scream cried out, “But, it seems like this is not the full demonic force. They left maybe a day ago, leaving stragglers to do as they pleased.”

Anevia grunted in agreement.

“We will have to move carefully through the city, then.” Shayliss said in a hushed tone. She had not purposefully spoken quietly but the scene in front of her seemed like quiet voices were necessary, “Anyone have any ideas?”

Horgus was the first to speak, letting out an impatient growl, “Our contract still stands. You have to take me back home. And I demand that you do it first!”

“I would like to visit the Blackwing Library.” Aravashnial said. His tone was as if he was hesitant and apologetic to say it, “I have friends there and want to make sure they are alright.”

Anevia looked as if she wanted to say something, but stopped herself. She was afraid to say where she wanted to go, and Shayliss knew exactly why. So, she asked the woman, “Do you want to check up on your home?”

Anevia only nodded, giving Shayliss a small and gracious smile.

“If we pass my home,” Strune added, “I would like to look in as well. But we must also get a move on. If we just stand around we make easy targets of ourselves.”

Shayliss agreed, “Which is the closest stop from here?”

Strune took a second to think, waving her hand in the air as if marking points on a map only she could see, “If I am right, then it would be the Blackwing Library, about twenty blocks north east.”

Shayliss nodded, “Alright. Let’s move then. We’ll hit each spot as we head for any sign of people.”

With that, she headed out, leading the group of tired and wounded people who were losing morale by the second into a city besieged by demons who were willing to ‘play’.

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Apparently, the demons were closer to the center of the city. On the way to the Blackwing Library, the group only ran into two different groups of enemies. One was a pair of cultists searching for another target. The other was a group of Dretches, humanoid demons built fat and strong. Large circular mouths with rings of sharp teeth hung constantly open and their green-blue skin looked like someone who died of frostbite. Both groups were easily dispatched, mostly because Shayliss’s group had the advantage of surprise, and they continued forward.

With their speed, it took about half an hour to reach the Blackwing Library. There, they found an interesting site: the Library was the only one majorly damaged on the block.

A hole was formed on the front right corner of the building with stone and wood still falling down. Fire raged on the ceiling which threatened to send even more materials to the ground. The massive front double doors were bashed in as well as the frame around them. Crackling fire sounded from within and the building looked as if it was about to fall apart. Yet, the buildings around it were virtually untouched. There were some burn marks from the fire and some cracks from explosions. But other than that, they were still standing.

“Why did the demons target this place?” Shayliss asked.

Strune stepped forward, “The Blackwing Library is the most complete collection of demon-slaying books in the world. Or... was.” She sighed, “It’s not much of a surprise. Without this knowledge, we will be at an even greater disadvantage.”

“Should we see about saving as many books as possible?”

Strune shook her head, “No. It’s too late at this point. We need to make sure no one is still alive in there then move on.”

As they were talking in whispers, Aravashnial went abnormally silent. He could not see the building, but he looked on as if he could. The bandages around his eyes, which were bloody and dirty from their adventures underground, started wetting with tears. However, he stood tall, forcing himself not to curl in on himself.

“Let’s do it.” Shayliss muttered after observing Aravashnial’s reaction, “Quickly.”

Strune agreed and turned to talk with the others. Before she could get a couple of steps, though, a shout came from within the library. Shayliss’s body suddenly tensed, waiting for the arrow that would pierce her head. She still stood after a second, so she relaxed a bit and paid attention to the library. The shout came again and this time she was able to understand what the person was saying.

“Would you stack those damn books faster?”

Another voice sounded from the library, but it was way too muffled for Shayliss to understand. She did understand, though, the loud smack that came right afterward.

“Don’t talk back!” The first voice yelled again, “And move faster!”

Shayliss heard enough. She waved the others to follow her and charged into the library. Strune was only one step behind her while the others had to work to catch up. The pair of them ran through the front doors and found a strange scene.

The bookshelves of the library had been blasted against the walls, most likely from the same attack that tore the hole in the ceiling. They were on fire, their contents slowly being taken up and burned to ash. Next to one of the bookshelves were four people of various races, all wearing blue robes, tied up and gagged. All of them turned to face Shayliss and she could clearly see the fear in their eyes. In the center of the library, now mostly bare from the attack, was a circle of books. In the center

of the circle was another robed woman who was shakily stacking even more books on top.

At the outside ring of books were four men: three tieflings and a human. Brown hair spiked up like grass on the human's head and even more hair flowed down his chin and around his mouth. His large forehead had splatters of blood as well as his shield, war mace, and shoulder plates. Under the blood were his flat eyebrows that seemed to express little and his brown eyes were careless and dull. Covering his body were silver plates with a gold trim and the shield on his back held the icon of Iomedae etched into it.

Seeing that, Strune grew furious. She started marching forward, drawing her blade as she barked in a voice that echoed throughout the library, briefly cutting out the sound of crackling fire, "CHALEB SAZOMAL!"

The human turned his upper body to face the fiery woman while the tieflings rotated fully to hold up shortswords, their leather armor scratching slightly, "Ah! Strune. It is so wonderful to see you."

"What in Iomedae's name are you doing, Crusader?" Strune spat out the title like it was a worm in her mouth. She completely ignored the tieflings.

Chaleb gave her a large smile, "Oh, just having a bit of fun! In our current state, we all need some entertainment, don't we?"

The primal snarl that erupted from Strune's throat caused everyone but Chaleb to back up. Shayliss felt it like a heatwave, sending golden light radiating out in all directions from the winged woman. For a brief second, she looked like an angel of vengeance, ready to smite down all in her way.

"You seem so angry." Chaleb said like a father teasing a daughter, "You should not be surprised by this. Haven't I always said that I fight for the winning team?" He stepped forward, holding his arms out as if to gesture at the world around him, "And I have found them."

"You dare betray the men and women you fought beside?" Strune asked, "The home that welcomed you with open arms?"

Silence. Then Chaleb let out a small chuckle which quickly rose into a full belly laugh, "Nieve. You don't get it do you? This is not a play! This is real life! You cannot just direct the world as you wish like a hero of legend! That is not how the

world works!” With his smile, he unsnapped his mace and shield from their clips, “And I will show you why.”

Strune gritted her teeth. Then her back straightened, “Very well. I call a Duel.”

The man blinked at her, “You would fight me one-on-one? I know you were a prodigy, but you were never able to beat me in training. What makes you think you can do it now?”

“You decline, then?”

He shook his head, “Of course not. I will kill your arrogance as well as your body.”

Without another word, they lifted their weapons and charged.

Radiant light erupted from Strune's blade as she swept it in a horizontal strike aimed right at Chaleb's head. The attack had nearly been perfect. Wind whistled as Radiance cut through it and Shayliss could feel the power behind the attack. There was no hesitation, no doubt, no loss of purpose. Strune understood and was willing to kill this man, an ex-Crusader and ex-paladin.

She was not very knowledgeable about the paladin order, or any of the other holy orders. However, it was common knowledge that when a paladin abandoned his duty, his purpose, his drive, they Fell. All fallen paladins lose the power granted to them by their patron god or goddess and essentially became a normal person.

So, when Chaleb managed to interpose his shield between himself and that deadly precise strike, Shayliss took a step back in reaction. Even with the power of Iomedae on Strune's side, the man could hold his ground against her. He shoved her blade to one side, throwing the woman off balance, and pulled his mace up to slam into her chin.

Strune did not flinch. She side-stepped the mace and held her shield up high. Metal rang out and screeched against metal as the mace made a return swing down at her head. The shield blocked it, but Shayliss could see that the strix's arm was stunned with the power behind the blow.

Swords and axes did not have the power behind them to deal more than a few scratches or the occasional gash on metal plates. However, the mace, with its bulk and shape, could punch dents or holes in armor. Even if they did not, the sheer brutality that they bring to a fight would stun any person, make them stagger, or temporarily paralyze a limb as what was happening to Strune's arm.

With Chaleb's choice of weapon, he had managed to even out the playing field. Strune had the power of her goddess behind her, but he had a weapon that was made for this kind of fight. The strix knew it too.

But she did not back down as she went in low to swipe at Chaleb's legs. The ex-paladin slid his feet back, avoiding the sword, but putting his body in an awkward position. Strune saw that and changed the path of her attack mid-swing,

sending it upward to meet with his arcing torso. Sparks flew from Chaleb's armor and the man grunted with surprise.

Yet, he raised his arm and threw it down, slamming the head of the mace into Strune's back. Metal crunched and Shayliss hoped that bone was not mixed in there. The warpriest let out a cry of pain and spittles of blood hit the ground. The blow nearly sent her to the ground, but she managed to keep herself up and threw herself to the side. A second attack crashed into the stone, leaving cracks rather than hitting the now-weak spot in Strune's back.

As she rose, Shayliss could see light play against a massive dent in the woman's back armor plates. She was surprised that Strune was managing to stay upright with the metal of her armor pressing hard into her, nonetheless charging right for Chaleb again. Her blade was still glowing with bright light, pushing back the shadows of the fire all around them, as it came arcing down at Chaleb.

This time, he was not able to block or avoid the attack before it slashed his upper arm, severing chainmail links and rocketing them in all directions. When Strune moved out of her line of sight to the man, Shayliss could see blood flowing in and out of the remaining chain links and some of his skin showed from the three inch gash. Chaleb let out a growl and looked down at his new injury, "There's a first time for everything."

The man braced himself to launch back into the fight. Behind him, Shayliss could see motion. Locking her eyes on the spot right behind his shoulder, she watched as Chaleb stepped forward, deliberately blocking Strune's view from what was happening. Yet, in doing so, he allowed Shayliss to see it.

Behind him, the tieflings were on the move. Throughout the fight so far, they had just stood where they had been when Shayliss's group entered the library watching the fight. Now, though, with Strune and the others distracted by the duel, they were stalking over toward the librarians tied up. Slowly so the sound of metal on leather could not be heard over the roaring fire, they drew their weapons and focused on the helpless men and women. Even if Chaleb lost the match, they would make sure they completed what they came to do.

Gritting her teeth, Shayliss said nothing as she crouch-ran toward the tieflings, making as little noise as possible. She hoped that someone noticed her actions and supported her, but the duel was just getting heated up and very distracting. It would

not be a surprise if no one else noticed the tieflings. So, until she had confirmation that she was not acting alone, she had to assume she was.

She was halfway to the tieflings, making a wide berth around the duel, when she made her move. It would have been better to get closer, but the tieflings were only steps away from the librarians and she had no more time to wait.

Grabbing her grappling hook with practiced motions, she swung it up to close around a ceiling support. As she did, she jumped up, planted a foot against a burning bookshelf, and bounced off of it. That motion gave her the necessary height to swing on the grappling hook and kick out at the closest tiefling.

He had no idea what was happening as a human boulder catapulted herself into him. Combat boot met cheek and the man was sent flying into another bookshelf. The support Shayliss was hooked to broke with a crack and Shayliss lost all of her forward momentum almost instantly. Her butt crashed hard onto the stone and she knew that she was going to be feeling it for days.

Yet, she did not have time to think too hard about it as the other two tieflings spun on a heel, raised their weapons and sent them sailing toward her sitting form. Instinct kicked in and Shayliss suddenly found herself pulling one of Valtyra's rapiers out of its sheath to block both attacks. Without as much metal to absorb the power of the attacks, the shock that raced up her arm was more potent than she was used to and it caused her to almost drop the thin blade.

She held onto it with pure nerve and rolled out of the way of two more attacks. Her tailbone complained with each touch of the gradually heating stone under her, but she tried to ignore it as she rose to her feet. There was just enough time to get to her knees before she had to deflect two more attacks. These tieflings were relentless with their attacks, wanting to get her out of the way fast. They also noticed Shayliss's weakened state and like any predator tried to take advantage of that. She had to put them down before they managed to flank her or push her into a corner.

Behind her, Strune let out another cry of pain mixed in with more metal bending and breaking. She was not faring any better than Shayliss was, apparently.

The tiefling on Shayliss's left slid further to the left, trying to get out of her line of sight. Shayliss responded by taking a step backward and to the right, putting both tieflings at the corners of her sight. She then took two more steps so that she was

closer to the librarians. This also let her see the third tiefling, who was only just then getting to his feet, shaking his head to clear it. A bruise was already forming on the cheek that she kicked and he would probably have a bump on the head from slamming into the bookshelf.

Both of the opponents right in front of her lunged forward, trying to send their short swords into her belly. She twisted so the blades slid against her armored coat rather than enter her guts. The coat protected her and she thrust her rapier to try and hit the right tiefling's eye. He was swift enough to prevent partial blindness, but the thin blade sunk into his cheek and out the back of his head. While not a fatal injury, it was bleeding profusely and must have been distracting.

He cried out in agony and stumbled backward. Those cries were soon cut short by an arrow slamming into his skull from high up. Shayliss glanced over passed the still dueling pair to find Kaira readying a second arrow to lob over the fight. How she had managed to aim so precisely in this flaming library and over a chaotic fight to headshot a staggering target was something that Shayliss would never figure out.

Seconds later, a loud mix of growls and barks rose from a white sooty form as it plowed headfirst into the third tiefling, who was trying to get around the fight and toward the librarians. He let out a cry as Blueeye took him to the ground. The tiefling reacted by throwing the white wolf over him, but Blueeye landed on his feet and charged again.

Distracted by the newcomers to the fight, Shayliss did not notice the tiefling still standing in front of her raised his shortsword to strike until it was already halfway toward her head. There was no time to dodge or block it. By the time her head turned to it in reaction it would already be entering her skull. Thankfully, though, a fireball sailed through the air from behind the tiefling and slammed hard. The explosion from it threw Shayliss back, sliding into the group of librarians with a series of grunts of complaint.

She shook her head, trying to clear it, when she saw a form running toward her. With a grunt, she raised the rapier in her hand and was about to swing it down when the haze over her eyes cleared and the librarian within the circle of books was only a couple of steps away. Shayliss halted her attack instantly and slowly pulled the weapon down.

“Are you alright?” The young woman asked.

Shayliss nodded, “A bit banged up, but I’ll be fine. How about you?”

“The only thing injured is my pride.” The woman shook her head, “I need to get my friends freed. Could you watch my back?”

“Of course.”

The woman then ran for the other librarians, grabbing a shortsword from one of the tieflings’ bodies, and started working on the ties. Shayliss stood guard, looking out toward the three tieflings while glancing occasionally back at the duel.

Both combatants were beaten, bloody, and ready to collapse. Strune had many dents, holes and some pretty awful looking wounds on her back, shoulders and one leg. She was hovering in the air and her profile showed her grimace of pain. The injured leg, Shayliss finally noticed, was hanging loosely in the air. Her shin bones had most likely broken in half by one of Chaleb’s attacks and the armor at that spot was dented to the breaking point. No matter what, Strune was not going to be walking correctly on that leg until they got it taken care of. Flying around and letting it just hang was not good for it either, but it was better than trying to fight on one leg.

Chaleb was not much better off, if any. Overall he had less wounds number-wise. Yet, they were all severe and long, threatening to hit vital arteries or completely sever a limb. Strune actually did manage to do just that as Chaleb’s shield arm was gone, sliced off at the elbow. At this point, his armor was covered in red blood, only tiny spots of silver or gold remained. Yet, he still stood. He should be on the ground, bleeding out, but he still menaced Strune with an upraised mace.

The strix sailed further into the air, avoiding the much weaker than normal swing that came at her, and dove down. It was a strange looking motion with her loose leg, but it was no less deadly as it sliced diagonally into Chaleb’s chest. He had tried to dodge, but his reaction time was way off. The blade cut through a weak point in the armor and dug deep. He was sent to the floor and could not rise again. But he was not dead.

Strune sailed down slowly, landing on her good foot, and stared down at the man. Chaleb was chuckling, spitting out gouts of blood with each exhalation. Cough racked his throat and lungs every couple of seconds, but that did not stop him from continuing to laugh.

“See?” He coughed out, “I told you.”

Strune just stared down at him, her expression a mix of pain, anger, sadness and stubborn pride. It was one that Shayliss had never seen on the woman before. She normally held an attitude of joy and laughter with a hint of thought. Now, Shayliss felt as if she was looking at a different person.

“You have gotten your due.” She whispered.

More coughing laughter, “At what cost, Warpriest?”

Strune said nothing. She just raised her blade, tip down, to stab into the man’s heart.

Shayliss wanted to scream, to run, to tell the woman to stop. Was it really worth it to kill him in such a manner? They could get information, bribes, even a hint of where to go next. But her legs would not move.

The man betrayed his people. Her inner voice said, The price for that is death. It always has been, always will be. This is necessary.

She could only watch as Strune, a devout Warpriest of Iomedae, brought the blade down. Chaleb struggled for a second. Then went limp.

Their footsteps thudded against stone as the group marched from the smoldering remains of the Blackwing Library. After two hours of work and tons of magically conjured water, they had all managed to get the building from an inferno to ashes and scarred ruins. Seeing that their work was done, the group had decided that they needed to move on. Horgus had been practically chomping at the bit to get home and Anevia, while not outwardly agitated, kept to herself.

“Finally that suspicious mongrel dog is gone.” Horgus muttered.

“Since we have now met a race of people calling themselves ‘mongrelmen,’ it may be a good idea for you to change your insults.” Anevia answered with heat.

“I could go back to the insults I was using before you freakish wh-”

“Let’s try to keep quiet while we walk down the streets of a demon occupied city, please.” Shayliss shot back. She aimed it mostly at Horgus, but Anevia got some of it too. The woman forcefully shut her mouth while Horgus continued to mutter, under his breath this time.

Strune, now hovering above the stone street so she did not have to walk on her now splint and wrapped foot, whispered, “Are you sure it was alright to leave Aravashnial there?”

Shayliss glanced back at the group, then up at the library. When they had finished calming down the fires, the librarians all begged for Aravashnial to stay. Without his eyes, he could not fight, but Shayliss figured he would be more like a security blanket to the frightened men and women. A man who could lead if needed, and direct them to safety.

“You saw them.” Shayliss whispered back, “They could barely keep from just hanging onto him while we dealt with the fire. And after nothing would keep them from him. It was better to leave him there where everyone was comfortable rather than try to force all of them out into the horrible open.”

The strix seemed to think about that for a second, “I guess. But I still don’t feel alright with it. I would have liked to guarantee their safety.”

“We could not have no matter what. A smaller group can move through the city much quieter and faster than a large group. And while he may be blind right now, Aravashnial can take care of himself as well as others.”

She sighed, “Fine.”

Shayliss looked at her, “How are you holding up, by the way. That fight took a lot out of you.”

Strune flinched with some kind of emotion that Shayliss could not place, “I am fine.”

The state of the woman’s armor and body said otherwise. They did what they could for her, but everyone’s reserves were running dry, and after taking care of the worst wounds, there was not enough healing magic or potions to go around. Strune and Kaira were both magically tapped and overall their mundane healing skills were not the best. So, while she could move, there was still every chance that Strune would just fall to the ground limp as her body gave out.

The armor she wore, that was once pristine and shone against the sun, now was bloody, bent and holed, even after they took the time to straighten out all of the dents with Chaleb’s mace. Numerous wounds still oozed blood through cloth wrappings, and those wrappings were nowhere near safe as they still had the soot of the library. And her leg would be out of commission until they could get some sort of priest to restore it. Shayliss asked if she could do it herself, but Strune had said she could not since she does not have the energy nor enough grace from Iomedae. Shayliss had no idea what she was talking about, but she did not push it.

“I am sure.” Shayliss’ tone said clearly that she knew the opposite.

Strune sighed, “There is nothing we can do about it now.”

“True.” Shayliss nodded, “So, you will be in the backlines if we have to fight again.” At Strune’s sudden glance she raised a hand, “You are at the point of exhaustion and you will not be able to fight well with your injuries.” She pointedly looked at Strune’s leg, “Don’t try to be a hero. And don’t let your pride rule your actions. We need you alive and whole.”

Like she had room to talk when it came to being prideful. But she decided at this point it would be better just to tell her not to do it, rather than listen to that advice herself.

As if reading her thoughts, the strix woman gave her a small smile and said, "I'll take it into consideration."

"Good." Shayliss said loftly, "While you rest, Snaga will take your place on the front lines." She turned to look at the very quiet half-orc, "Is that alright?"

Snaga's eyes widened for a second like a deer in the path of a runaway wagon, but nodded.

Shayliss nodded back, "That's settled. Where is the next place to go?"

Strune thought about it for a second, "Horgus's manor."

The nobleman behind them let out a soft breath and Shayliss could barely hear, "Finally" hiding within it. Shayliss ignored it, "Will we make it before nighttime?"

While the sky was covered by black storm clouds and smoke, it was not hard to tell that the world was growing darker by the second. If Shayliss's guess was correct, it was about an hour or so before dinnertime. And her guess was only partially determined by the rumbling in her stomach. Only partially.

"Barring any other distractions, yes." Strune said, "Even at our slower pace it should not take more than an hour."

Before Shayliss could answer, a mass of horse whinnies cut through the air in pitches that contrasted against the low hums of fire and battle further into the city. Seconds later, five horses rounded the corner of an intersection a block away and charged like Hell itself was chasing them.

The breed and sizes of horse was varied among the group. However, the lead horse, running as if it was directing the pack forward, was very familiar. Black hair was turned even blacker by the fires and red lines of blood shone on its sides. Lean muscle showed against skin held tight by malnutrition and even from so far away Shayliss could hear the pumping of air in and out of its nose. Yet, it was the eyes that told Shayliss who it was. Those red eyes belonged only to one horse.

“It’s Shadowshine!” Shayliss breathed in shock.

Behind the pack, shapes turned the same corner and charged down the same street. They wore the very stereotypical outfit of robbers: leather armor, leather pants, hooded cloaks and daggers or bows as weapons. Normally they would not be able to catch up to the horses, but all of the beasts were injured and exhausted. While fear was giving them (except for Shadowshine, who may not be able to feel fear) energy, that energy would run out soon. She had to do something fast.

Before she knew what she was doing, she rushed toward a pile of debris fallen from one of the nearby buildings. Taking the pile as fast as possible, she grabbed and flicked her grappling hook at a hanging support or signpost, she could not tell which. The hook latched on securely and she took a leap off of the top of the pile. Shadowshine saw her and raced forward even faster so that he could be ready. At the bottom of her arc, the support broke with a crack and flung the woman more forward than upward. Yet, it was enough for her to reach the horse.

She landed hard and could feel the vibrations race up her body. Grunting in pain, she spun herself on the saddle so she faced forward and drew her longsword. The robbers stopped and stared at her in surprise and a couple in lustful admiration.

“Back off.” Shayliss growled, twitching her blade menacingly.

The robbers all stared at each other. Only a second passed before they all seemed to come to a silent agreement. They stepped forward.



Shadowshine was not having any of it. He let out an angry whiny and rushed forward head down. The robbers line was broken by the horse’s charge, and Shayliss swung her longsword by her side, trying to get one of them on the way. She felt her blade hit something but did not have the chance to see what before Shadowshine was at the other side of the line about to make a second pass.

When the horse galloped for the group of robbers again, she was ready. Raising her blade and rotating it so it pointed toward the ground, she waited for the right moment. However, the robbers were smart this time. None of them got close enough to the rampaging horse for her to attack any of them.

But it did make them good targets for Kaira and Blueeye. Arrows sailed through the air, slamming into the robbers with thuds and cries of pain while the blur that was Blueeye crashed into one robber, sinking his fangs in deep. Blood flowed as the wolf then chose a second target. With a bark, he sank claws into the straps of the robber's armor, sending the leather to the ground. Two more swipes and the robber followed his armor.

Shadowshine, not to be outdone by a dog, leapt forward toward a robber and then began to brutally stomp down upon his body. Shayliss could not pay attention though as two of the robbers reached out toward her to pull her off the horse. She cracked the hilt of her sword against the head of one, sending familiar vibrations of shock up her arm, but the other succeeded in throwing her off balance. The saddle prevented her from falling off, but she had to fight to keep straight on the horse. Shayliss threw elbow after elbow against the robber pulling her down. Eventually she was able to stun the now flailing robber enough to make him let go as Shadowshine continued running around the field of battle.

The woman straightened herself just in time to duck from two arrows aimed right at her face. They sailed past her and sank into the ground between her and her charging allies. Mordria, with her fiendish legs, leapt clean over both horse and rider to land like a harpy on one of the robber archers. Blood flowed from her claws raking against skin and spun in the air as she roundhouse kicked the next in one clean motion. Without missing a beat she lunged for a robber exacting revenge and pulled his arms back in a complex grapple.

The hold prevented the robber from being able to avoid a spiked gauntlet to the face. Holes were punched into the man's cheek, but that did not stop him from rotating, using Mordria as a brace, and slammed two feet into the half-orc. Liquid exploded from Snaga's fusion and Nephalim's mouth curled into a snarl. Snaga stepped forward and sent a right hook into the man's belly. The pure power of the blow surprised Mordria and she let go of the robber. Showing some kind of sense, the man bolted at the first chance.

Unfortunately for him, Shadowshine was not one to let a threat escape.

With the cry of a banshee, the black beast spun around and sped forward, fast as any demon. The robber knew what was after him and Shayliss could hear cries of panic between hoof-beats and her own heavy breathing. However, he was smart enough to duck within an alleyway too narrow for Shadowshine to follow. Not letting a mere inconvenience stop him, Shadowshine continued forward and around

the corner to a street that paralleled the alleyway. The horse's speed and injuries made it so that Shayliss could only hold on while the beast directed where they went.

"I now know how Val always felt." She muttered, the words clipped by the horse's up and down motion.

She turned her head and watched the burning and destroyed buildings whoosh by her, looking for the robber. There was no sign of him, and she despaired that he had somehow managed to get away. Yet, two steps later, she saw a black shape out of the corner of her eye. Shadowshine saw it too. For some reason, the man lost his sense and decided to cross the street a dozen yards ahead

He reared up, angled himself toward the robber, and charged. Again, Shayliss could only hold on as the beast moved like one of the creatures flying above. This time, the robber did not see his death coming. It was only when the horse was a couple of feet away that he turned and watched as hooves rose and crashed down upon his skull. Shayliss did not want to see the bloodstains on his hooves.

"You know, we really need to work on your self-control." She muttered.

Shadowshine let out a half-snort and shook his head.

Shayliss sighed in defeat, "Let's meet up with the others and see about your injuries."

She tried to grab at the horse's reins, but found that they had been torn apart. The leather straps fell down only a couple of inches from the bridle cleanly. During the initial invasion, they must have been sliced by a blade of some sort. It explained in part how the horse was still alive. So, she had to make due with grabbing ahold of the horse's mane. But before she could direct Shadowshine, a screech barely discernible as human shot through the air like a lightning bolt.

Shayliss jolted up and down in the saddle as Shadowshine raced through the debris filled streets of Kenabres. Thankfully the horse directed itself around the obstacles and toward the scream they heard because Shayliss did not think she would be able to with how fast the beast was moving. It took all of her concentration just to keep on the saddle.

About five minutes later, Shadowshine shot through an alleyway and entered a large Square. Kenabres had at least one Square in each of its four districts and they all bore similar characteristics. About six hundred thousand square feet, the modest sized Squares were typically bustling with people either moving from market stall to stall, conversing by the center statue, or walking pets. Yet, with the attack of the demons, it was barren save for around the statue. Each statue depicted one of the good-aligned gods or goddesses. This one was a statue of Iomedae, the goddess of Justice and Honor.

Standing in a semicircle about fifteen feet from the statue was a line of ten Crusaders. Their silver and gold armor was dented, dirty and in various forms of dishevelment. They stood with their hands at their chests, palms together in prayer, and if Shayliss concentrated she could hear the barely audible mutterings. A couple swayed slightly back and forth, which allowed Shayliss to see beyond them.

Curled up at the base of the statue was a human form. Blonde hair sprawled all over the feminine head and shoulders while dirt covered her simple white cloth shirt and brown pants. Next to her, about to topple over, was a brown bag that had semi-rotting food poking out of it. Shayliss could not see her face and she too far away to see if the body was moving. But, at that point, it did not matter.

With a short shout, she kicked Shadowshine forward. The horse obeyed and the clomping hooves echoed among the buildings. As if she was not making enough noise to alert a horde, she yelled out, "Stand aside, Crusaders!"

The Crusaders all turned to her, halting in their prayers, and made a hole for her to ride through. Turning around took Shadowshine a second longer than normal as he barely had enough space without clomping all over the prone woman, but as he did, Shayliss drew her weapon and barked, "What do you think you are doing, Crusaders?"

The men and women now surrounding her turned to stare at each other in surprise and confusion. Small whispers waved back and forth along the line and Shayliss could only pick up lines such as ‘What do we do?’ and ‘She must be one of them.’

Her patience was about to disintegrate when one of the Crusaders, a man about her size with a tower shield on his back and axe at his waist, stepped forward. With eyes set in grim determination, he placed his left hand on the head of the axe, whose butt was angled toward the ground, and looked up at the mounted fighter.

“My name is Tarron,” the long ears poking out of his black hair twitched with his introduction, “proud Crusader of Sarenrae.”

It took a second for Shayliss to realize that the man was politely asking for an introduction from her. Even though the fire of anger was roiling in her chest, she gave him a small bow, her eyes not leaving his face, “I am Shayliss, visitor of Kenabres.”

Tarron’s unnatural blue eyes narrowed slightly in annoyance but he recovered surprisingly quickly, “If you are a visitor of our city, then you must have been a part of the initial attack. Is this true?”

Shayliss blinked at that question. Out of all of the responses she planned on, this one was not one that she had expected. Her answer stuttered at the beginning, “Uh. Yes, I was.”

What the hell was he getting at?

“Then I was right. You were the one that led the group of injured.” He gave her a small bow, “I must thank you for that.” When he straightened again his eyes bore into her, “But you should know the danger that the demons present. As we stand here, dozens of citizens are attacked and killed by those monsters.” With each word, his voice grew and grew until they threatened to throw Shayliss off of Shadowshine.

Petting the horse’s neck, Shayliss said, “Sure. Of course, that’s why I am still here. But why does that mandate this girl’s death?”

Shayliss could not be sure, but she thought that she heard a slight shudder from the prone girl. The man did not seem to notice it, though, “As a visitor, I doubt you

have heard of this. But, there is a tale passed down from mother to child about a blade that can be given the ability to kill demons with ease.”

The mounted fighter’s eyebrow twitched at that and she could not help but pull the corner of her mouth into a smirk, “And let me guess: A virgin’s blood is a key part of the process.”

Her voice oozed sarcasm. There had been many stories about how virgin blood could cure any illness, bring back the dead, power the most powerful spells, and kill any manner of beast including the undead, outsiders and, of course, demons. But they were all just stories. Either meant to entertain or were just pure misinformation. Everything in her heart told her that they were all lies. Or, at least harmless.

The Crusaders, one and all, gave her looks that would have killed her if allowed. Tarron was more controlled about it, but she could certainly feel the fire burning from his body.

“You dare mock the only thing that can save us from this evil?” Swift as the wind, the axe at his side was pointing at her body, ready to swing. A second later, the other Crusaders followed their leader.

Shayliss froze. They were serious about it? Were they really going to kill this girl just because of a damn fairytale? Did they lose all sense? Maybe they did. This attack was something that defied everything they believed and they were desperate to fight against it. So desperate that they would find their first hope and cling to it in a death grip.

You mean just like yourself? Something within her practically sneered, Clinging to the hope of her survival and rushing to the frontlines of a centuries old war just to see her again. Admit it, part of you just wanted to see her one more time before you cut ties with her forever.

Trying to ignore the burn, she growled, “Do you really believe this wife’s tale? Do you really believe that one girl’s death would end all of this?”

“It is no tale!” One of the other Crusaders, a woman under a full-head helm, yelled, “It is what will save this city!”

“She is one of them after all!” Another growled, “That is the only reason she would stop us! She even said she was a visitor, not a citizen. We must kill her before she destroys our home!”

Shayliss could feel her teeth grinding together. She did not want to kill them. She did not want to kill anyone. There were enough of people turning against each other during this crisis. They should have been binding together instead of pursuing obvious lies. Her grip on the longsword loosened. Its tip fell and pointed at Tarron. Taking it as a threat, the elven man snarled and prepared to attack.

As he took a step forward, a light flashed at the corner of Shayliss’s eye. Half a second later, something thunked into the stone in front of the elf and he flinched. It was an arrow with a familiar fletching. That was enough to bring Shayliss back to the present and she yelled out, “Don’t!”

Everyone froze. Tarron’s expression went from one of anger to one of surprise quickly and he took a step back from the arrow at his feet. The other Crusaders also became hesitant to move forward.

“Please stand down.” Shayliss begged, “None of us want any innocent blood on our hands. Instead of fighting each other, we should be working together against the demons!”

Tarron shook his head, “That is what we are trying to do. Her sacrifice,” he pointed forcefully at the girl still prone, “will save countless lives.”

“No it won’t! All it will do is stain your blade with an innocent woman’s blood and bring you one step closer to the demons.”

The man’s face reddened again, “You dare-”

He was interrupted by an arrow sinking through his head. Shayliss flinched away from the blood and watched as the limp form fell to stone. There was a second of shocked silence. Then, nine Crusaders all bared their weapons as they charged forward.

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The fight was done within minutes. As soon as the second arrow found its mark, the others of Shayliss’s group charged in on the backs of the injured horses. Seeing

that they were flanked, the Crusaders tried to retreat, but could not with the advantage being mounted gave Strune and the others. Not a Crusader left the square. Even Anevia joined the fight. Yet, as the Crusaders fought for their lives, Shayliss stood aside.

She had tried. All she wanted was the Crusaders to stand down so no-one would die. After seeing Chaleb fall to Strune's blade, she wanted to make sure that Kenabres did not lose any other capable fighter as well as any good natured souls. So, she fought tooth and nail to save not only the girl but the Crusaders as well. And now, that hope dwindled as the blood soaked into stone.

Surprisingly, Shadowshine had stayed back as well. He pranced around, antsy to get into the fight, but instead of throwing himself in as usual, he just stayed in place. Shayliss did not even need to hold him back. Maybe they were finally getting along?

Her chain of thoughts were broken when Anevia rode over to her, the horse she was on barely keeping up.

“Thank you.”

Shayliss blinked, “What?”

Anevia gave her a sad smile, “Thank you for trying to help them. Even though they were driven by falsehood, they had good souls. I even knew a couple of them by name. It is horrible to see them go and even worse to see them pushed to the brink.” Anevia looked down at the pool of blood, “I know Iomedae will give them the peace they deserve.”

Shayliss glanced down as well before forcing her gaze back up. Her voice was unsteady and weak, “I am sure of it.” There was no conviction, though.

The scout stared at her for a second. She then seemed to shove away the doubt with a shake of her head and dismounted. By then, Strune had cut the bonds on the prone girl and was helping her stand.

“Are you alright, miss?” Anevia asked the girl.

Now that Shayliss had room to focus, she could see that the girl was more masculine than feminine. With thick limbs, wide face and no hourglass figure the



only way she could tell that the girl was a girl was, of course, her chest and long blonde hair.

The girl nodded her head, “I am fine. Only thing hurt is my pride.”

“Good. Do you need help getting somewhere safe?”

“No.” She shook her head softly, her face scrunching up as if in pain, “My family is hiding a couple of blocks away. I was heading back from getting food when I was attacked. But I did hear some things while I was out.”

Strune’s eyes widened, “Oh?”

“I am sure a lot of the things I heard are wrong. But, one thing that brings me hope is that the Eagle Watch still stands. I heard that they have taken refuge in Defender’s Heart.”

At that, Anevia stepped forward, “Did you hear anything else? Do you know if Irabeth, a half-orc Eagle Watch captain?”

The girl shook her head, “I am sorry. But I do not know anything else.”

The scout sighed, “I understand. Thank you.”

“Please keep safe.” Strune added, “As soon as we can, we will send men and women to escort you to a safer place.”

The girl nodded as she bent to pick up the bag of food, “Thank you. I will let my parents know. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to make sure that I get back to them. They must be worried.”

With a small bow, the girl retreated toward the eastern exit of the square. As soon as she was out of earshot, Anevia let out a small sigh and turned toward the rest of the group. Shayliss saw the effort to push down her worry in the scout’s eyes.

“I say we should keep moving. No doubt the blood here will attract the demons. We do not want to be here when they arrive.”

The others nodded, especially Horgus who had an expression of impatience, and turned to head out of the square. Shayliss stared at Anevia and Strune, both

mounted on their horses again, for a second before letting out a sigh of her own and kicking Shadowshine into motion. The black horse responded and seemed to be ready to leave.

Overhead they could hear the high-pitched excited cries of demons.

The rest of the trip to the Horgus's Manor was relatively uneventful, not that Shayliss was really paying attention. She watched blindly as the group easily dealt with a couple of robbers and a demon that managed to sneak up on them. Her blade had not risen to do battle but Shadowshine did. Shayliss could feel every impact against flesh vibrate through her body but did not react to it. The thoughts running through her mind were trapped within that square.

So, it took her a couple of seconds to realize that the group had stopped. In front of them was a metal gate that reached from one side to the other and then sharply turned forward. It was designed in a style that had only just recently appeared in the world's eye which meant that the owner paid a lot to redesign what was there before and to have it done very quickly. If it was not for the demon attack, the black metal would have been gleaming beautifully. Now, though, it was coated in a layer or two of dirt and scorch marks.

The manor the fence surrounded was enormous, even in terms of other manors Shayliss had seen. The largest before this was probably the manor of a noble turned ghoul that Valtyra and her allies raided. Shayliss had not physically seen it, but Valtyra's description of it made it seem impressive. The manor in front of her could have held four of the nearby homes in their prime.

What was stranger, though, was the fact that it was virtually untouched. The buildings neighboring it had been burnt, cratered and otherwise damaged. Yet, the manor had some scuffs and the occasional missing brick. It was as if the demons did not think it was worthy to attack despite its scale and arrogance.

Seeing this, Horgus immediately fell into a tirade of cursing and insults. However, he opened the gate and allowed the party on their horses to enter the grounds. His voice more than his actual body led them up the path to the front door and then inside. Even more grumbling could be heard about the fact that the horses were brought in, with some coaxing, as well. But it seemed not even the self-centered noble would turn away the injured and exhausted beasts. Shayliss was reluctant to give the man some respect for that.

The inside of the place was arguably less flashy and impressive. A red carpet covered the floor and gold detailing poked out from under the walls. Bright white

paint covered every wall and ceiling and was almost flawless. Chandeliers hung from expensive golden bases and the chains reaching down from the bases swayed back and forth almost imperceptibly.

“Of course no one’s here,” Horgus muttered, “Because why would they do their damned jobs and keep this place safe? I hope they are not hiding in the vault, or else there will be hell to pay.”

“Would you rather them stay here and die or ensure their safety by running?” Strune asked.

“Also,” Mordira added, cutting off the angry noble’s next retort, “your manor is only standing because of the fact that they all took off.”

Shayliss blinked, “What do you mean?”

Kaira snorted, “The demons left behind only want to sow chaos. They cannot do that if there are no people to witness it.”

The white furred wolf next to her let out a sneeze as if to confirm what she said.

Horgus opened his mouth to argue, but then shut it again. With an annoyed grunt, he continued moving forward. His comments and opinions of the people around him became barely audible mutters and whispers as he led the group further into the manor.

Like he said, the manor was completely devoid of other people and it unsettled Shayliss. Not because the place was abandoned, but because it looked as if the owners had just stepped out to have dinner out. The furniture, decorations and curtains were all untouched by the conflict outside. Only a thin layer of dirt and dust showed that there has not been people in this manor for a few days now.

That became more prominent the further down the group went. At least, until they reached the massive metal door of a vault. Just by looking at it, Shayliss could tell it was an expensive metal that would be hard to break through. Granted, it was not the blue tinted adamantium, which was literally impossible to destroy, but the vault’s metal was probably as close as a noble could get to it. That vault would certainly be able to hold off any straggling demons in Kenabres.

Pulling out a key from his pocket, Horgus walked over to the bottom right corner of the door and inserted it. He then twisted something that appeared. Sliding metal, clacking locks and spinning gears vibrated the room. After half a minute of that, the vault door split into two and both halves slowly parted to the left and right.

From behind the doors, a golden glow shone and it was not hard to tell what was behind them: mountains of gold, valuables and more. Shayliss did not think she had ever seen as much gold, even when Valtira came back on her quests for Sandpoint. It was unbelievable. The piles towered over her and the end of the vault was covered by even more. Not only that, but there was space to spare for the whole group and their horses with extra.

Horgus stepped inside, pulled out a pouch, and knelt down at one of those piles. A few seconds passed before he stood back up and handed the pouch over.

At Shayliss's confused gaze, he said, "Your payment."

With a soft 'ah', Shayliss took the pouch and put it with her other belongings.

"Now that you have done your job, go." He said as he turned back for the vault.

"Wait, Master Horgus." Strune called, "I have one last request for you."

The nobleman stopped in his tracks and turned slightly to face the Strix. It was as if he already knew what she was about to ask.

"Will you allow us to rest up in your vault for the night?"

The man narrowed his eyes, "Why?"

"It is getting close to sun down, even if we cannot tell it. Not only that, but this is the safest place we'll be able to get to. It is just one night and we are out of your hair."

His mouth opened up to immediately deny us. Yet, his narrowed eyes tracked to behind the group where the horses were barely holding together as they had not been able to bind the beasts' injuries. He snarled but tilted his head toward the vault inviting them inside.

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Four hours later, the group found themselves sitting around a set of three lanterns in the most clear spot of the vault. With their injuries treated, the horses all stood to the side asleep while Shadowshine guarded them. His eyes darted between all of the two-legged occupants and the door of the vault as if he was ready for anything to attack.

Shayliss, leaning against one of the many piles of platinum coins, could not help but smile at that. She felt that she learned a little more about the horse in that moment. Maybe he was just a house-dog, protecting the homestead for his master. In his case, though, he was probably his own master and he just took the other horses under his wing.

A small yawn from right in front of her jolted her thoughts back into reality. Mordria, her head resting on Shayliss's crossed legs, clicked her pointed teeth together as her mouth closed. Seconds later, she pushed herself onto her side and curled up a bit. With a smirk, Shayliss patted the tiefling's head.

She expected Strune to make some sort of comment. However, the Strix woman had been silent since the vault doors closed. Shayliss turned to look at the woman. Her white wings folded back and her head was bowed. At first, Shayliss thought she was asleep like most of the room, but the corners of Strune's mouth would occasionally move with mouthed words.

"Praying then." Shayliss muttered while absently patting Mordira's head.

Looking around, she realized that besides her, there was only one other person awake. Kaira and Blueeye were curled up together across the group of lanterns from Shayliss, their bodies slowly rising up and down with their breaths. Anevia was using a tiny pile of coins to brace her leg as she made a pillow of some of the group's supplies. Horgus sat just beyond the ring of light and finally left his stubborn pride enough to fall asleep.

The only other form was the one of Snaga, ever silent but, as he proved below Kenabres, ferocious. It was different from the typical idea of magi Shayliss had since childhood. While he could use magic, it seemed as if it was holding him back more than anything. She watched as he scrawled upon multiple sheets of parchment. The light was not strong enough to show her what he was working on, but his mutters and expression told her that he was concentrating with all of his mind.

Suddenly very curious, she gently moved Mordria off of her lap and slowly inched her way toward the half-orc. He did not notice her approach until she was almost right next to him. When he did, he flinched hard and Shayliss scooted back a couple of inches, "I'm sorry."

Half a minute passed before Snaga relaxed again and shook his head.

Taking it as a cue, Shayliss scoots even closer to the man. She glanced toward the parchment pile next to him. There were diagrams, arcane writing and notes written in a rough and harsh language. While she could not understand it, she recognized the symbols of the orcish language. It would not have helped even if she could have read it. Everything on the pages were chaotic. She was surprised that he could understand it all.

"What are you working on?" She asked with genuine curiosity.

For a while, nothing but the sound of pen to paper and breathing could be heard within the vault. Shayliss waited for his answer, but eventually figured that he was not going to say anything. Right before she finally gave up, his rough voice muttered, "Device."

She nearly flinched in surprise. Her gaze shot toward him and she asked, a little too enthusiastically, "Device? A device for what?"

The twitch of his mouth into a smile surprised Shayliss again, "Secret."

Her eyebrows shot up. Maybe she had not gained his trust yet? Without realizing it, she was looking up and down his arms, seeing all of the scars built up onto his dark skin. She should not be surprised. If his past was what she expected, then it will take a long time before she gained it.

"I'll leave you to it then." She said as she started to get up.

However, a hand reach up to grip her forearm. Shayliss stopped and looked back at Snaga. He was avoiding her gaze, but muttered, "Hook."

Shayliss blinked, "Hook?" She looked down at her grappling hook, "Do you want to know why I use it?"

Snaga shook his head twice, “See?”

Her mind raced trying to figure out what the man wanted. Realization dawned on her a second later and she reached down, “You want to see it?”

He nodded as she pulled the loop of rope from her side and passed it to him, “Here.”

The shy and quiet half-orc nearly snatched it from her hand and stared down at it. Shayliss sat down again and watched as he turned the rope this way and that, narrowed his eyes at the thin lines of magic running through the rope, and pulled the metal hook open and let it close itself with a snap. Every once in awhile, he would make a note or two on his parchment before continuing to examine the tool.

It was amazing to Shayliss how fast his attitude changed. Just a few minutes ago, he was nearly paralyzed by her presence. Now, he was furiously writing down various things about her hook while constantly muttering to himself. She tried to hear what he was saying, but even the words she caught sent her head spinning in confusion, so she stopped trying.

She did not notice when her eyes closed to the sound of pen on paper.

It sounded like her old life.

The city of Kenabres was much quieter the next day. Which unsettled Shayliss to no end. Before it was expected to hear demonic screeching, yells, screams and burning buildings even if what remained in the city was those demons who just want to have fun with their prey. Now, those sounds could still be heard, but they were far off and sparse. Granted that did mean the citizens would be safer and the demons probably had their fill for now. But Shayliss could not help but feel a surge of apprehension shoot down her spine.

“You feel it too?”

Shayliss nearly jumped in the saddle at Mordria’s voice. The tiefling woman was riding to her left, her eyes sliding left and right whenever they passed an alleyway. Her mount, a beautiful but ragged brown haired horse that looked more burly than the typical horse.

“Yeah.” Shayliss nodded, “It is way too quiet for a city besieged by demons.”

“That’s a good thing.” Strune said from in front of Mordira, “It means we should be safe traveling to the next stop.”

Kaira’s head turned to look at our surroundings, “Maybe. It could also mean that the demons are waiting.”

Strune shook her head, “Demons are not that smart. I have never met a demon who actually plans out an ambush.”

“You mean like how they did not plan out the attack on Kenabres?” Mordria asked in a low voice.

“We do not know it was planned.” Strune responded, “Demons have attempted to destroy Kenabres for centuries. It weakened the Wardstone to the point where they could attack.”

Shayliss could not help but believe that Strune was just making excuses to comfort herself. Instead of fighting back against it, she just let it slide, “Whatever the case,

we need to stay focused. Any opening gives them a chance to attack. We are not in the best shape to deal with a concentrated attack.”

The others seemed to agree as they continued on in silence. Resting in Horgus’s vault was something that the group desperately needed. Yet, Shayliss could still see the dark rings around their eyes and their relaxed muscles. If a mob of demons attacked them, they would not stand much of a chance.

Shayliss halted her gaze onto Anevia. Of course, she was the same as everyone else, yet she was not paying attention at all. The scout’s gaze was ahead of them, but there was a glaze over her eyes, focused on nothing. Her mouth was curled downward slightly and it is fairly obvious what she is thinking about. Shayliss remembered seeing that kind of look from Valtyra when they first started talking.

She slowed Shadowshine down to match with Anevia’s speed, “Hey.”

Anevia did not respond. She did not even flinch in reaction. There was no sign that she noticed Shayliss’s approach. That worried Shayliss more than the idea of a demon ambush. She turned to Snaga and grabbed his attention with an arm wave. At his questioning look, Shayliss tilted her head at the scout and mouthed, “Watch her.” The half-orc nodded and moved closer to the scout.

Shayliss nodded in approval and kicked Shadowshine back up toward the front of the group. Before she could reach it, the sound of shattering glass mixed with a woman’s scream resounded down the street.

“Strune! Mordria!” Shayliss barked.

Both women nodded sharply as they kicked their horses into motion. They raced forward, disappearing around a corner. The others followed behind, running into sounds of demonic screeching and human grunts. Shayliss watched as a rack of clothes is thrown from the window of a store. It crashed against the building across the street spilling the ripped and dirty clothes all along the sidewalk.

“Keep an eye on her!” Shayliss yelled to Snaga as she and Kaira dismounted.

The pair and Blueeye rushed into the front door of the store. Shayliss had to duck under another rack of expensive clothes as it was launched from the store while the other two sent themselves to the side to avoid it. When she straightened back up, she saw a giant hunchbacked half-rat spin to face her.

With a screech, it leapt at her with elongated claws extended. Metal slid against metal as she pulled her longsword from its sheathe. Sparks flashed from contact with the demon's claws and she held them back with her arm. With her other arm, she slammed a fist into her opponent's snout. While the blow did no damage, it stunned the creature enough for her to gain some distance.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of red skin and black blood. Mordria managed to sink her own claws into the creature. It stepped forward to balance itself then twisted around to swipe at Mordria. She ducked the blow and slid deeper into the demon's defenses. As the demon's arm arced from its attack, the tiefling grabbed its wrist. Yanking with all her might, she tried to throw the creature's balance off again, but it was not having it.

It planted one of its feet into the ground and used the other to kick out. Mordria had to let go of its wrist in order to dodge the attack. Letting out a laughing squeak, it prepared to attack a pair of elves who were cowering behind a register counter. Strune placed herself in between the pair and the demon, holding up her shield in defiance.

At the same time, three forms blurred from either side of the demon. Two arrows from Shayliss's left sunk into the demon's side while a white wolf from her right bit down hard and pulled at the demon's forearm. The squeak became a screech and the demon raised its other hand to claw the wolf.

Shayliss had no time to think. She leapt onto a still standing clothes display and launched herself into the path of the claw. Her blade managed to catch the hand, but the force of the attack slammed her into the floorboards. Yet, her daring move prevented the wolf from being skewered. With a blast of breath shooting out of her mouth, she forced herself to scramble back from a second attack. The wood between her legs splintered from the demon's claws and a sudden spasm of fear shot through her body.

A soft thud and whine came from the other side of the store. Kaira let out a growl and Shayliss watched three arrows sail over the demon. She was about to call out to Kaira to focus, but those arrows let her see something that would help.

“Strune, stay where you are and shield them!”

Before waiting for a response, she pulled her grappling hook off of its clip and awkwardly flung it up at the ceiling. It took her two attempts, but she finally succeeded in wrapping the rope around one of the horizontal support beams. Praying to whatever god was listening that it was not a load bearing support, she pulled as hard as she could.

The cracks already formed in the wood expanded even more, the lightning shaped lines shooting through the rectangular beam completely. With a loud pop, the beam tilted and fell at a diagonal toward the ground. Crushing displays lined up near the register, it grazed the demon's back before slamming into the floor. While it dealt no significant damage to the demon, it blocked the way to Strune and the elves.

Screaming, the demon reached out to the beam. Yet Mordria, claws extended, grabbed its robes and hauled. The demon was way too heavy for her to pick off the ground, but she was able to put enough force to make it stumble away. As it did, it struck out, leaving gashes into the tiefling's shoulder.

Shayliss rose to her feet and felt her right knee buckle. Fighting to stay steady, she placed herself in front of the fallen beam. Behind her, Strune whispered, "A little more warning next time?"

"I did warn you." Shayliss hissed back, "Do you know what this demon is?"

"An abrikandilu." Strune answered almost immediately, "A grunt in a typical demonic army. The only things to know are that they hate beauty and their own reflection as well as their attacks can mar beauty and destroy a person's self-worth."

"Now I understand why it's here." Shayliss muttered.

Her gaze shot up as a display was flung into the air toward her. There was no time to think. She raised her blade toward the display, aiming its tip right for the wooden support pole. Wood splintered as the blade wedged itself into the pole. The momentum was too great, though, and Shayliss was sent into the beam behind her. Yet, she was able to redirect the pole from landing onto Strune and the elves.

"Is there really no weakness?" Shayliss asked.

The strix shook her head, "No. Its one of the reasons that the demons use them as front line forces."

Shayliss cursed under her breath. She then called out, “We have to flank it! Kaira and Blueeye, together. Mordria, pair with me!”

Kaira and Blueeye were already flanking the demon, the archer standing against a cracked wall shooting arrows made of magic and the wolf latching onto the demon’s robes. Mordria, however, was on the same side of the demon as Shayliss. Black blood was flowing down her back and she seemed as unsteady as Shayliss felt. Yet, when she noticed Shayliss approaching, which still confused the woman, Mordira gripped the demon’s hunchback and flipped over it.

As the demon recovered from that maneuver, Shayliss rushed in and slashed upward. Its robe ripped and black blood started flowing down its body. With a scream, it spun around to claw at her face. That gave both Mordria and Blueeye the opening they needed to attack in unison. Fangs and claws sunk into the demon’s flesh and it let out more screeches of pain. It was certainly weakening, but that does not stop it from reaching out to grab Shayliss.

Its clawed fingers gripped a couple of plates within her armored coat and lifted her off the ground. Before she could get her blade up to attack, the demon spins around and sends her flying at Mordria. The tiefling was about to move in for another attack, but she skidded to a stop in order to catch the flying woman. She was not able to keep her balance, though, and both toppled to the ground. Shayliss got to her feet as fast as possible and only had a second to raise her blade. She felt an impact against the metal. With a grunt of effort, she worked to keep the claws from reaching the still prone Mordria.

As she did, the other two fighters rushed in to attack. Shayliss could feel the demon’s strength weaken as the others took that chance. She was surprised when the demon only fought to push her down. It no longer tried to attack any of the others. So, the rest of the fight was a simple matter of her holding back the claws. Within half a minute, the fight was done and the demon fell to its side.

As it turns out, Snaga is very particular when it comes to his fashion-sense. At least when it comes to noble fashion.

Once the body of the abrikandilu was disposed of, the elven pair, who owned the store Fine Fittings, invited the group to choose one of the surviving outfits for each of them. It was their way of saying thanks for saving their lives. When Strune tried to argue, they would not take no for an answer. So, she relented and the group took about half an hour to make their choices. About twenty of those minutes was taken up by Snaga.

Shayliss, a girl who grew up in one of the most rural settlements in the nation of Varisia, never knew clothing other than dirty aprons and linen shirts. That is why, when the store owners pulled out the three remaining clothes displays, and she saw the quality of the clothes, the air left her body. The cloth nearly shone in all colors of the rainbow and more. And she was the first one to choose.

Overwhelmed, she had trouble deciding. Yet, she did find an outfit that Valtira would definitely love, a black coat, white shirt and black tights. Next to that was a black dress with silver trim and elegant design that reached her ankles. So, with as much of sleight of hand as she could manage, she snagged both of them. She believed that she succeeded, but the looks from both Kaira and the female shopkeeper told her otherwise. No-one said a word.

Strune did not take nearly as much time. She approached the display, glanced at it, and pulled out a beautiful knight's finery of blue and gold. Kaira did the same except pulling out an unexpected blouse-skirt combo of green and brown. With Anevia, she just pulled out a random shirt-skirt combo of red and blue. Mordria had similar enthusiasm when she picked a blouse-tights outfit of red and black.

Snaga, however, walked around the display. He stared at it with a concentration only seen when he works on his diagrams. Muttering to himself, he circles the display over and over and over again. After ten minutes of this, the elven pair step forward asking if he needs assistance. In a shocking action, Snaga holds his hand up for silence. When Shayliss was about to burst from impatience, he finally picked out a knight's finery, similar to Strune's, made with dark red and gold fabric.

With outfits in bags, Strune steps up to the elven couple and asks, “Would you like to accompany us? We will be able to protect you until we get to safety.”

The man shook his head, “We will be fine. Waiting for assistance will be better than burdening you with our presence.”

“We do not mind, really.” Strune answered, “We can-”

“Do not worry.” The woman interrupted, “We were just caught off guard when that demon attacked. Holding off until the Crusaders come will not be an issue.”

Strune’s glance shot down to the ground. It took her a minute to say what was obviously difficult, “Until we learn more, you cannot trust the Crusaders. We have met with at least one who...”

The elven pair’s eyes widened at her clenched teeth, “Understood. We will be careful.”

With that, they bowed and moved to the back of the store. Seconds later, Shayliss could hear a door closing and multiple locks clicking shut.

“Come on guys.” She said, glancing at Anevia, “We have another stop to make.”

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Anevia’s house was a simple one floor construction at the southern edge of the Gate District. Grey stone was supported by wooden beams reaching from floor to roof. One window was on the front side of the building yet the inside of the house was dark. A corner of the roof had been destroyed by some kind of blast but the rest remained intact.

When she saw her home standing relatively strong compared to the others in her neighborhood, Anevia let out a loud sigh of relief. Yet, Shayliss could see the cords of tight muscle running up and down the woman’s neck and shoulders. The fear of what she is about to walk into was plain in her body.

Shayliss, who had been riding next to Anevia since they left Fine Fittings, put a hand on the woman’s arm. She squeezed the tight, tense muscle underneath and asked, “Will you be alright?”

Anevia looked sharply at Shayliss's face and swallowed hard, "Yes."

Shayliss did not believe that for an instant but nodded, "Stick by me."

Anevia's eyes widened, "Do you think something is in there?"

"No," Shayliss let out a small and meaningless chuckle, "But we don't want to have gotten you to this point only to be careless."

Another swallow and nod.

"Mordria, Snaga." Shayliss said in a low voice, "Go first. Strune and I will take rear guard. Kaira, Blueeye and Anevia, take center. Remember, this is a tight space, so be careful if something does happen."

Without another word, everyone dismounted and drew their weapons. Matching Anevia's slower speed, they stepped up to the front door and Mordira reached out. With loud creaks it opened into a L-shaped dark room. It was a nearly bare sitting room with a round table around the right corner. Five chairs surround it with a tall candle set inside of a rusted gold candle holder and a placemat was at each chair. The candle would have been the only source of light if it had been lit.

To the left, set against the wall were two doors. Both were cracked open with one leading to a bathroom and the other leading to a bedroom. The bedroom was trashed. Papers strewn all over the room, more candles tumbled over and out of their holders, the bed in disarray and wood from a broken chair splintered all over the floor surrounding a wooden desk.

Seeing the bedroom, Anevia sharply inhales, "Irabeth?"

Mordria and Shayliss exchanged a glance. Shayliss nodded and both Mordria and Snaga stepped into the bedroom. Before they completed their fifth step, an invisible force barreled into them both, throwing the pair backward. Shayliss found a flash of red rush by her before a form stopped right in front of Anevia.

A scream pierced the air as Anevia fell back in shock. Blue-grey metal raised upward and then shot down toward the prone woman. Golden light shone as Radiance came up from below to block the halberd. Recovering fast, Mordria reached out, gripped the back of a dark red chestplate, and threw the person inside



the armor away from Anevia. As the form stumbled back and forth, trying to regain their balance, Shayliss caught brown-green skin and rotten yellow teeth.

“You.” Anevia huffed out.

The armored half-orc chuckled with the deepest voice Shayliss had ever heard, “You recognize me. That’s nice of you.” He stood up straight, “I just hope your bitch of a wife will as well when she finds your body.”

Mordria and Snaga returned to their position between the half-orc and the rest of the group. Shayliss gritted her teeth, her anger radiating.

“Such anger.” The half-orc muttered, “I know that feeling well.” The hand gripping the halberd tightened, “And now,” he launched himself forward, “You’ll feel it with your blood!”

Light flared as Radiance arced up to deflect the halberd again. With a growl, the red-armored half-orc stepped back to regain his balance. Before he was able to launch another attack, Shayliss flicked the head of her grappling hook at his face. Only quick reaction saved him from a stunning blow, but the attack did its job well. It gave Shayliss a chance to pull Anevia back by her leather straps.

The scout was deadweight, her shock so great that the only signs that she was alive were her soft breaths. Shayliss grunted with effort as she practically threw the scout onto the bed of the bedroom. Anevia made no reaction.

“Shayliss!”

Shayliss spun around, blade held up, just in time to deflect a blue-grey halberd. Sparks flew from the connected weapons lighting the half-orc’s burly and scarred face. Two more strikes thrust at her and she was barely able to parry them aside. She was surprised at his quick attacks. They were virtually invisible and she could only guess at where they were coming from.

Ducking down to avoid a swipe to her head, Shayliss pulled her foot back and thrust forward with her longsword, aiming the blade at the armored chestplate. When the tip was about an inch from his body, there was a flash of purple-white light and Shayliss felt her arm get tossed aside. This causes her shoulder to slam into whatever spell he had over himself spinning her out of control.

She could only watch the blade of the halberd descend upon her head. A swift tug to the half-orc’s arm sent the trail of the halberd from her head to her arm, leaving a medium sized gash. Trying to ignore the pain racing up and down her limb, Shayliss rolled from her prone position to a kneeling one. As she did, Snaga slammed a gauntleted fist into a red-tinted helmet. He then grabbed the halberd-wielder’s face and shoved him out of the bedroom.

“I’ll stand at the door.” Shayliss yelled, moving toward the doorway out of the bedroom, “Keep him in the sitting room.”

Snaga, after tossing the halberder into the fireplace, positioned himself close to the bedroom door. Mordira, nearly mirroring him, stood next to him ready to hold the

halberder back. The rest of the group surrounded the half-orc, flanking him at every opportunity.

Shayliss would have thought that the half-orc would try to take care of those surrounding him first. That way, there would be no-one to fight him when he charged for the bedroom. Yet, he seemed fixated on Anevia. Using his halberd to shove Strune aside, he rushes right for the bedroom door. Shayliss held her longsword up in a parrying stance but there was no reason to. Mordria and Snaga both reached out. Mordria grabbed the half-orc's chestplate while Snaga used both hands to grab the halberd.

This time, they do not let go. They struggle against the half-orc, making sure he cannot break their line. At the sound of a straining bow, he ducked down. At the same time, he tugged hard at his halberd. Neither Snaga nor Mordria expected the motion and were sent to the ground as well. Behind them, Shayliss found the flash of an iron tipped arrow. Letting out a small yelp, she ducked to the ground as well and felt the arrow sail over her head.

She looked up in time to see the half-orc right in front of her again. Her blade rose up to meet the axe-like blade. There was no way she would be able to hold back the weapon for long. Not only was she injured and tired, but the pure weight of the weapon was pressing down upon her. As if listening to her thoughts, the halberd suddenly disappeared and the sudden loss of weight threw her off balance. Sparks showed that Strune had approached from behind the half-orc and he spun to attack. Blade met shield and Shayliss watched Strune stumble backward.

Attempting to use the half-orc's attack against him, Shayliss lunged forward aiming for a small gap in his armor plates. She managed to get past whatever spell he had on himself and her blade sank deep into his side.

Screaming in pain, the halberder spun back around, raising his weapon to slam down upon Shayliss. At the same time she raised her longsword, the twang of a bowstring pierced the air. The arrow entered the halberder's hand. As he screamed again, Shayliss could see the arrowhead poking out of his palm. That does not stop him from making an awkward one handed attack. The shaft of the halberd slammed into Shayliss's side and her head then connected with the wood of the doorframe.

The half-orc then twisted around and arced his weapon back into the sitting room, catching Mordria and Strune off-guard. Snaga had managed to duck until the arc

and rose with an uppercut. The spikes of his gauntlet cut into the halberder's chin, leaving trails of blood. The impact also sent him off of his feet and he failed to land properly. This gives Strune the chance she needed to thrust Radiance forward. Shayliss saw the light pierce the half-orc's heart and come out the other side.

Yet, he continues to struggle, reaching out to punch at Strune's arm. When that does not work, he reaches out to grab the blade impaling him. Failing that, he goes back to her arm, until the last of his life leaves him.

“Her blood.” He rasped, “Her blood her blood.”

Once the halberder's body was searched and tossed outside, Shayliss worked to calm Anevia down. The scout, after recovering from her initial shock, started stammering endlessly about various random seeming topics, but Shayliss was able to pull the pieces together to understand what was going on.

That half-orc was Vagorg. He was a devout cultist of Xoveron, the patron of nabasu demons and gargoyles. Bringing terror everywhere he went, Vagorg was planning the complete destruction of a neighborhood in Tymon when Anevia's wife, Irabeth, finally caught up to him. She had been chasing the fellow half-orc all across the River Kingdoms for months, always arriving just in time to help the settlements and camps recover from the attacks. However, with a stroke of luck, she captured Vagorg before he lit the fuse on barrels of explosive powder.

For the next three days of travel, Vagorg spoke to Irabeth, trying to convince her to let him go. He used their shared heritage as half-orcs to gain sympathy. Yet, Irabeth was only more determined to leave him with the authorities. Her putting him in prison was about two years before she and Anevia met.

By the time all of that information got through her lips, the scout was feeling more like her normal self. She rose from the bed and looked around the house, the effort to put her mind back together obvious on her face.

"She's not here." Anevia muttered, "The bedroom is a mess. Bedroom."

Her expression suddenly brightened with hope and she ran around the bed to the wall. Shayliss watched as the scout squinted her eyes at the stones, her pupils darting back and forth. A mintue later, Anevia let out a breath of joy and reached out toward one of the stones. Mortar broke off and cracked onto the floor as the stone slid from its hole. Behind the stone was a small wooden box with elegant carvings. Compared to the rest of the simple house and its furnishings, the box looked priceless.

Anevia's hands shook as she turned to set the box on the bed and flipped up the latch. It opened with hardly any sound to reveal vials of colored liquid, two of pinkish red liquid and three of a silver-blue hue. Under the vials was a folded piece of parchment with nearly illegible writing as if the note was written in a hurry. Her

hands shaking even more, Anevia pulled the note out as gently as possible and read it to the group surrounding the bed.

“I pray to Iomedae every night that you are either with me in Defender’s Heart or that you find this note. Once our guardian fell and our forces broke, I led our remaining men and civilians to the inn to make a last line of defense. I left all the potions I could get in here for you, two of healing and three of invisibility. Do not forget about Silverstrong.”

Tears glistened in Anevia’s eyes, “She’s alive.” A soft sigh, “She’s alive.”

Mordria frowned softly, “‘Do not forget about Silverstrong’. What does she mean by that?”

“I am not sure.” Strune answered with a confused tone, “There is nothing I can really think of that has the name or nickname Silverstrong.”

Shayliss stared at the word. Possibilities rushed through her head. A flower? No, typically flowers are not nicknamed with powerful words like ‘strong.’ The same thing for a city, except it is a bit more believable. She turned to Anevia, “Is it a pet name?”

The scout shook her head, “No. I’ve never heard the word before.”

“So, it is not a nickname for anything between you two.” Shayliss muttered, “Is it a nickname at all?”

“It can’t be.” Strune said, “If it was a memorable nickname, then she would not even need to put it in the note, not to mention tell her not to forget it.”

“It has to be of some sort of import-” Shayliss stopped herself when the realization suddenly hit her, “It’s a password.”

After a moment of thought, Strune and Kaira nodded at the same time. “It’s our safeword.” Strune said, “To get into Defender’s Heart.”

Shayliss put a hand on Anevia’s shoulder, “Well, let’s see about reuniting you two.” She turned to the others, “Let’s head out.”

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The closer the group rode to Defender's Heart, the less demonic presence could be felt or seen. Not only that, but Shayliss could feel her body relax more and more, as if there was an aura of peace over that section of the Gate District. Yet, they did not see any sign of guards. Which worried her. If there was a decrease of demons, then she would have expected an increase of Kenabres guards.

Were things really that bad?

She did not have time to worry about it. As they turned the corner for the road that Defender's Heart stood on, a crossbow bolt sailed through the air. It left a small graze on Shayliss's cheek and a voice yelled out, "Halt!"

The group's horses reared up and let out soft huffs. Shadowshine felt as if he was ready to charge for the attacker, but Shayliss pulled hard on his reins and held him back.

"One more move and we will fire!"

"Silverstrong!" Came Anevia's voice.

Her voice did not finish echoing down the road before the whispers of the guards reached Shayliss's ears. Anevia must have been pretty well known among them.

"Come forward, friends." The guard called, "Get the captain down here, now."

Anevia kicked her mount forward and, after a moment of hesitation, Shayliss directed the rest of the group to follow. Two buildings down was a worn structure of stone and wood. Miraculously it was relatively steady. There were three floors and guards stood at every other window. While a few of them held crossbows out toward the sky and street, the rest were whispering and watching in awe.

A stable boy ran out to grab the reins of the groups horses and direct them toward the stables barely visible behind the inn. He was not even around the corner when the front doors bust open and a massive figure stood in their frame.

She was a half orc, her unarmored head giving off both the experience of a frontline warrior and the gentleness of a devout priest. The plate armor covering her body shone with a golden light and held nothing but sharp angles. A broadsword hung down her waist and was covered by a large hand. But it was her

tusked smile that caught Shayliss's focus. That smile was genuine in a time of turmoil.

“You made it.”

With that, the form of Irabeth ran forward with uncontrollable joy and nearly tackled the shocked Anevia to the ground. But the scout only laughed and hugged back. Right behind Irabeth were three winged forms, two males and one female. It did not take Shayliss long to realize who they were as they mimicked the half-orc in rushing toward Strune. Both families have been reunited.

After a minute of reunion, Irabeth turned to the rest of the group, “You must be the brave adventurers who helped save my wife.”

Shayliss stepped forward and gave her a small bow, “Yes, though she did not need too much assistance.”

Irabeth let out a small chuckle, “Maybe so, but I cannot ignore what you have done. Please, come inside. I am sure you want to rest, but I need to hear anything you can tell me first.”

“We understand.” Shayliss gave the half-orc one last bow before following her inside.

Irabeth's finger taped down upon the paper-covered desk over and over again. Her other hand was placed to cup her chin in thought and her eyes stared down at the note the group found within the Mongrel Lair. The group sat either in chairs or on the queen sized bed within the cramped inn room turned office.

"This changes things." Irabeth mutters after five full minutes of silence, "We now have a chance, something we did not have up until yesterday."

She rose from her chair, placing the note onto her desk, and turned to look at the others. While she was trying to contain it, to give off the air of a commander in control of her emotions, it was easy to see the excitement rising up within her.

"Not only did you survive the attack on Kenabres and return my wife to me, but you also saved two men that could provide great help to the Crusade, gained the support of a nation unto itself, and gathered valuable intelligence about our enemy." Her massive head shook in disbelief, "It is remarkable. With this, we will be able to go onto the offensive after days of holding our ground."

Shayliss rose, "If I may ask, why have you not gone on the offensive yet? There are people out there still who are struggling to survive and losing hope by the hour."

The paladin's tusked mouth turned up slightly, "I know and I wish I could. But this is all I have under my command." She waved her hand out toward the rest of Defender's Heart, "With so few numbers, I could not risk sending them out on what could be suicide missions. I needed them here to protect those we know are alive and with us." Her expression shifted slightly to a small smile, "But, if what you say is true, and the demons are starting to dwindle in the city, then I may be able to send small teams out there to get people back here. If you can mark on a map where you found those survivors you ran across, then I can get them home."

"What about the Mongrelmen and Templars?"

At that, Strune perked up from her polite, but exhausted, posture. Irabeth glanced at the strix before returning to Shayliss, "I will send a team with our best diplomat to the First Descendants to talk about their assistance. As for the Templars, we

need to be careful. While we need them taken out, they are paranoid by nature and ready to kill.” Her gaze goes over the group as a whole, “But I will not send you all. You have done way too much already for us.”

This time Strune got to her feet, “But-”

Irabeth put a hand up, stopping Strune’s next word, “Trust me, if you are willing, I will be glad to have your assistance.” Her smile widened, “But I think you all need rest. Please, take the rest of tonight and tomorrow off. Rest, recover. We can talk afterward.” She tilted her head toward their packs sitting next to the doorway and gave Shayliss a wink, “Maybe you can even teach my men the game the First Descendants showed you.”

Strune opened her mouth, hesitated, then nodded in surrender, “I understand.”

“Good.” Irabeth bowed, “You are all dismissed, except for Shayliss. I want to talk to you a bit more.”

With various forms of bows, or silent departure in Snaga’s case, the group excluding Shayliss left the room with their packs. Right outside the door, there was a young dwarven girl in the uniform of an army servant or flagbearer. She gave the exiting group a bow and waved an arm down the hall toward the left. Strune gave Shayliss a last glance before closing the door behind her.

Once the door hit frame, Irabeth let out a small sigh, “I knew I recognized you.”

Shayliss blinked in surprise and turned to the half-orc, “What do you mean?”

Irabeth stepped up to Shayliss, close enough to force Shayliss to look slightly up to meet her gaze, “You spent two weeks before Armasse searching for someone. While you never talked directly to me, you spoke to many of the Eagle Watch and word reached me.”

She turned toward her desk and rifled through some of the papers on top. After a minute, she finally pulled out a worn looking sheet with writing and bloodstains on it. With slight hesitation, Irabeth passed it over to her.

“I sent a scout out after the attack to find out what the demons did with any captives. This is the report I got back.”

Shayliss's hands shook as she took the parchment and glanced over it. She knew exactly what Irabeth was getting at and the thoughts racing through the girl's head were not pleasant.

“Captain,

As expected, many of those that the demons capture do not have much time to realize their fate before they are killed, sometimes eaten, sometimes not in that order. Yet, there is a small group of demons who have chained various citizens to each other hand and foot. They lead the captives out of the Gate District toward the north, making a huge circle around our base of operations. From the city, they continued north far beyond Kenabres. I did not follow under your orders, but my suspicion is that they returned to the Worldwound through Vilareth Ford. Unfortunately, there were many women matching your description of the target, so I could not confirm that she was there. I was found out, though, and had to fight my way back into safe territory, so excuse the bloodstains.

Scout Harington”

Shayliss lost her breath. There was a chance that Valtyra was within the Worldwound now. The desire to dash out of the inn and chase after her was strong. So strong that she felt her body shifting her weight toward the door. She caught herself and forced her body to freeze.

“I know how you feel. There would be no shame in leaving now.” Irabeth put a hand on Shayliss's shoulder, “And I know you are skilled enough to do it. You saved my wife after all. But I would suggest waiting and resting first. You would be no use to either of you if you died because of poor choices and sleep deprivation.”

Shayliss bowed her head, trying to calm herself, before nodding, “Of course. You are right.”

Irabeth let out a small huff, “Yeah. Come on. I'll show you to the room we've prepared for you.”

Shadowshine let out a small huff of breath as Shayliss pulled him to a stop. As she predicted, there are even fewer demons prowling around the streets of the ruined city, but she still ran into some trouble reaching the building she now sat in front of. It managed to remain standing, even though physics and logic would dictate it be all over the street at this point. Massive holes had been blown out of the first floor and some of the second. What was not destroyed had deep gashes, scratches, and burn marks. No matter where one looked, they would find ash in layers.

Shayliss was not optimistic as she dismounted the black haired horse. She patted his side more to reassure herself than him, readjusted her equipment for the fiftieth time since she left Defender's Heart, and walked forward. Each echo of her steps made her heart beat heavily and sweat started pouring down her face. There were two hopes that kept her moving forward. One, that what she was looking for survived the attacks and two, that no-one else found it. Not only was it important to her, but it would be embarrassing if anyone else found it and knew it was hers.

She crossed over the threshold of the Valor Sword Inn and a blast of rotten and burned smells slammed up her nose. The sudden change of air quality caused her to cough out loudly. She was afraid that her coughs would alert others to her presence, but they were drowned out by raucous laughter from the second floor. Despite her need to continue coughing, Shayliss froze in place.

"Look at this!" A gruff male voice called out, hint of laughter still in his voice, "Ain't this a beaut!"

"Ooooh." A deeper than normal feminine voice glided down from the second floor as well, "She looks good."

"I'd certainly have some fun with that. Look at the sketch-work! Not only is the woman great to look at, but the drawing is perfect as well."

Heat not caused by the burned building around her pulsed from her cheeks. All of her fears came true. Two people had found her bag. While that meant it survived the attacks, it also meant that she would have to barge into the room, practically announce herself as its owner, and demand it back. That will not end well for her, no matter if she got out of it unscathed.

A shock of apprehension and fear shot through her body, paralyzing her. Should she just get out? Come back another time and hope that they leave the bag there? But it has her precious stuff in it. She has to get that back. Her indecision was shattered when she heard very interested grunts from above.

“Oh wow.” The male whistled, “This guy went all out in his sketches. Look at those curves!”

After a few moments of silence, the female responded, “You want to keep it?”

“Damn right I do!”

Shayliss sucked in a breath. She knew exactly what they were looking at. The heat in her cheeks flared even more and her brain nearly shut down from the embarrassment. Her first instinct was to just bolt. There was no way she could show her face after what they just saw. But then something else shoved aside her embarrassment: anger.

How dare they take her stuff and paw through it? Did they have any sort of decency? She was about to show them the errors of their ways.

Pulling her longsword and grappling hook out, she carefully made her way to the central stairs of the inn that led up to the second floor. While she tried her best to keep quiet, the damage the building sustained made it hard to do, especially when some of the stairs threatened to disintegrate under her feet. Thankfully, though, the two bandits were too busy staring at her stuff to notice.

Stopping to take a calming breath right outside the door of her room, she then spun around and aimed her longsword at the two forms she found inside, “Don’t move!” It was meant to be a loud bark of command. Yet, it came out as a squeak of embarrassment as she saw the papers they were holding.

Both forms shot up to their feet and drew their weapons. The left form was a tall, female half-elf. Her long, rounded ears were covered by medium-length blonde hair that looked ragged and tangled. Her leather armor hung loose on her body and Shayliss could see her skin doing the same. The spear in her hands was rusted and could break apart at the slightest touch.

The right form was a stout dwarf holding a warhammer and shield. His black hair was pulled back in a ponytail poking out from underneath a battered metal helm. Matching the helm, his full plate had many dents, scratches and gashes as if he fought off a horde. If he was in the city during the attack, then it would be no surprise.

Despite the pair's condition, they had a glint in their eyes that spoke of their experience. Shayliss was suddenly apprehensive about fighting them.

“Who are you?” The half-elf asked with suspicion.

There was no way Shayliss could answer truthfully, so she tried to growl, “I said don't move!”

The dwarf suddenly smiled, “Ah. Meldi, I think we found our artist.”

Shayliss could feel her heart sink to the soles of her feet. At that, the dwarf's smile widened even more, “Yepper. Now, don't feel embarrassed, girl.”

The heat continued to pulse in Shayliss's cheeks, “Who said anything about-”

Meldi cut her off, “Don't try to deny it.” The half-elf's ears twitched in amusement along with her mouth, “It'll save you a lot of trouble.”

Shayliss gritted her teeth in annoyance. Those two were having way too much fun at her expense and it was not pleasant.

“Now, don't get angry at us, girly.” The dwarf held his hands up, “We only found the bag. You were the one that left it out in the open.”

Her teeth ground together even harder. The temptation to bash in the dwarf's face was a great one. Seeing that, he lowered his hands but kept his smile, “There is no shame in embracing your... let's say ‘wild side’ every once in a while. Gods know I do.” A small snort from the half-elf widened the dwarf's smile farther than humanly possible, “Besides, the artwork is wonderful. Exquisite line work and proportions. So, I have a proposal.”

Shayliss blinked at that. It was a one-eighty from what she was expecting. So, instead of going on the offensive, like she probably should have, she asked, “Proposal?”

The half-elf nodded, “Yep. In the right hands, these could sell for a lot of coin. So, we will take them and not harm you.”

The curiosity turned right back to anger, “Excuse me?”

Meldi’s eyebrows lower, “Did you not hear me? I said that we won’t be return-”

She was interrupted by a grappling hook slamming claws-first into her face. The force of the impact sent her off of her feet and crashing through a weak spot in the flooring. Sounds of cracking wood and breaking supports blasted from below and the dwarf stared at Shayliss who was pulling back her hook.

Shayliss gave him a pleasant smile, “Want to say that again?”

The dwarf growled and charged shield forward. Shayliss leapt to the side, still in the hallway, allowing the dwarf to hit the wall behind her. As he pulled hard to dislodge his shield from the wall, she flicked her grappling hook again. The metal claws opened this time and latched around the dwarf’s shield arm.

With a yell, he threw his arm backward trying to send Shayliss off of her feet. Because of the enhancements on her grappling hook, though, all he did was pull the rope taut. With quick inspiration, she decided to just let go. The dwarf cried out as he was flung from his feet and landed onto his back. Surprisingly, despite the weight of his armor, he managed to bounce back up to his feet before charging back at her.

This time, Shayliss did not have her grappling hook to work with, so she ducked the mace swing that came next. At the diagonal swing, she arced up her blade to knock it back from the base of the mace’s head. Wood splintered from the impact and Shayliss had a hard time yanking her weapon back out. That gave the dwarf time to reposition himself with his shield out front.

He held his ground as Shayliss swiped twice. Metal impacted metal and Shayliss let out a growl. There was no way she was going to get through this. There had to be something. As she defended herself, she looked around her surroundings, trying to find anything that would help. However, the dwarf saw this and fought even harder. Shayliss lost more and more focus on her surroundings as the mace swung down harder and harder at her. Each blow would have been a fatal one, or at least one that would break bones, if she let it. And she was no longer able to defend

herself completely. Some of the force of the impacts broke through and left bruises on her skin, even under the armor.

In order to keep anything from landing on her, Shayliss started to step backward, making sure she grabbed the grappling hook from the ground. Wood creaked with each step and threatened to break under her. Which gave her an idea.

As she moved down the burned and destroyed hallway, she paid attention to the sounds she was hearing under her feet. They were different, sometimes normal creaking sounds, some louder cracks and some hardly anything at all. She was trying to listen for a series of loud cracks, the sign of a weakened floor. After a minute, she finally found it. She then stepped back a few more times and did her best to hold her ground.

It did not take too long. The strain of combat, demonic attacks and weight of the dwarf's armor was too much for the floor. Wood shattered and the dwarf suddenly leaned toward his left as his foot broke through. Granted, he only had a moment of hesitation and surprise, but that moment was enough for Shayliss to lunge forward and thrust her blade into his chest. It was not a fatal blow, but it was enough to give them the message of 'don't screw with me.'

The dwarf understood the message and dropped his weapon. When she saw that he no longer could fight back, she sighed, sheathed her weapon, and ran around him. She had not heard anything from the half-elf, so she assumed that the fall knocked her out. Seeing that all opposition was dealt with, she grabbed her bag, made sure all of her belongings were in it, and left.

Mordria's mind was racing. How had this happened? She had started from such a great position! The cards had all shown her the path to victory. Yet, here she was, sweating in nervousness. There was nothing to do but to wait. The finishing blow was coming soon. At least, if her opponent realized it was there. Mordria prayed to whatever god may be out there that she could pull out of this alive.

There was a crowd around her, everyone either holding their breaths in anticipation, or whispering softly to themselves. "Is this it?" "Was the immortal demon about to lose?" It added to the tension that she felt inside. She tried to hold in the anxiousness, but she could see that her foe noticed it. The woman knight's eyebrows narrowed in thought. Mordria practically heard the question in her head, "What was she so worried about?"

The Crusader looked down at her hand, holding three blue and red backed cards. In the center of the cards' back were the crest of Mendev, the nation that Kenabres sat inside: a checkered shield with two Swords of Valor near the left and right edges. Her eyes roamed over the cards, examining the icons and text on each closely. Then, the light of realization fell over the woman's eyes and she placed one of her cards onto the four-by-four grid that consisted of the playing field. That card set off a series of effects that pushed the playing field toward her favor.

Mordria, her stomach falling into her legs, looked at the board. Then to her cards. In her sight, everything was in various shades of red and black, but she was able to use that contrast to see the cards and their text well. It was something that took her years after the demon took her sight to finally get down, but now she barely noticed it as she poured over her options. However, no matter how much she stared at the cards and their effects, she could not figure out how to make the last turn work in her favor.

With a sigh, she glanced over at the three flat gems, two flipped over to its dark side, the last still shining strong. Mordria hesitated, not wanting this to be her first loss, but seeing the futility in making the pain last longer than it should, she flipped over the shining gem to its dark side. The game was over.

All the Crusaders around their table let out a cheer, some yelling out phrases like, "Finally taken down!" and "Pay up!"

Both participants of the game stood up and shook each other's hand. The Crusader tried to hide how awkward she felt about it, but Mordria could feel it in her muscles and see the creases in her face. She did not blame the woman, though. Tieflings were always considered devils in the eyes of 'normal' people and it took the Crusaders a couple of days to get used to her enough to let her teach them Argus. Besides, she was used to it by now.

"I am up in my office all day doing paperwork," a gruff but playful voice called from the stairs, "and what do I come down to? My men standing around instead of guarding! What do you all have to say for yourselves?"

All of the Crusaders stood at sharp attention. Mordria found Irabeth, still in her golden armor, walking down the stairs and toward the group. That let her see Shayliss out of the corner of her eye pouring over a thick book. At least, she was before the half-orc stepped on the stone floor.

One of the Crusaders, a rank lower than Irabeth, by the crest on his pauldrons, gave her a sharp salute and barked out, "Ma'am! We have been learning battlefield tactics by playing games of Argus!"

Irabeth stopped in front of the Crusader, her arms crossed in front of her and her eyebrows tilted down as if she was annoyed. Yet, she could not hide the smile on her face, "Oh? And what have you learned?"

"Ma'am! That we all are not good enough to outplay Mordria." He turned his head toward the woman Mordria just lost to, "Except Elie here."

Irabeth raised her eyebrows and looked to Elie, "Oh?" Her gaze then turned toward Mordria, "Well, how about I test that?"

The Crusaders all stiffened in surprise while Mordria widened her eyes, "Huh?"

Irabeth gave the tiefling a tusked grin, "Or are you afraid?"

Mordria blinked once before she shook her head and returned that grin with her own sharp teeth, "Not at all."

The whispers built back up as Irabeth gently pushed her way toward the table to sit down. Mordria cleaned up the last game, returning the cards to their respective

decks and flipping the gems to their shiny side. Then, she unpacked the long rectangular box that the game came in. Five decks of equal size, each with a different backing, were placed in a row in front of Irabeth.

“These are the decks we will be using.” Mordria explained, “There are five factions, each deck is one faction.” She pointed to the far left, “Mendev, they focus on healing and boosting their allies with the power of their faith.” She pointed to the next in the row, “Mongrelmen, or the First Descendants. They specialize in ambushes, hiding in shadows until it is time to strike. Next is the Shackle Pirates. They are not the strongest, but they use the terrain to their advantage and are masters of both land and sea. The Varisians use magic and might to add flexibility to their plans. No matter what is thrown at them, they will have some sort of answer. The last,” she pointed to the last deck, “are the denizens of the Worldwound.” At that, the Crusaders seemed to tense up and grind their teeth. All except Irabeth, that is, “They use their numbers and strength to their advantage. They are never afraid of sacrificing their allies to win.”

Irabeth, who had been nodding throughout Mordria’s explanation, asked, “Alright, what is the grid?”

Mordria leaned back so the paladin could see the whole board, “The grid is the battlefield. The first round, we shuffle and draw the terrain deck.” She acted out her explanation, “It consists of fifty-four cards, but we will only be using the first nine each round. These cards have various terrain features on them. For example,” she pulled the first card from the deck, “this is a sea card.” She showed it to Irabeth, “And there are special effects and weaknesses for various cards when they are placed on a Sea Tile, as it is called on the board.” Mordria then drew and showed Irabeth the cards, placing each on the board next to the last placed.

“I see.” Irabeth whispered, “And I assume we fight each other until one side gives in?”

“Pretty much.” Mordria nodded, “You can always give up the round of your own volition. You also lose the round by having no more cards to play. When a new round starts, you can choose to keep what’s in your hand or discard them. However, you will always return to your hand size of seven. The first one to lose all three Control Gems,” She points to the flat gems, “loses the game.”

Irabeth nods, “I see. Then, I will choose the Shackles Deck.”

Her choice seemed to shock the Crusaders around the table. Yet, Mordria expected the captain to choose the Shackles or Varisia. Every other Crusader she faced in Argus chose Mendev, most likely because it most aligned with their training and it was their home. Irabeth, though, seemed to value using the environment to her advantage. It could be seen in how she sent out her scouts and placed her guards. They used the urban environment of the ruined Kenabres to the best of their ability.

“I’ll go with Varisia, then.” Mordria answered, pulling the deck toward her.

She never used the Varisian deck, but she figured she would need the flexibility that Varisia provided. She shuffled the deck and drew the seven cards required. Looking up, Mordria saw that Irabeth was already strategizing. But, Mordria could not tell exactly what the woman was thinking. The half-orc hid her facial ticks well. Mordria could only see what cards she was looking at.

This was going to be a hell of a match. Seeing the challenge in front of her, Mordria grinned.



An hour and a half, five rounds, and a headache later, Mordria stood up. She had lost again. Irabeth proved to be a great tactician, using rather unorthodox strategies to get around Mordria’s units and counters against her Spell Cards. Mordria’s two wins were rather lucky, finding a weak point in Irabeth’s strategy at the last moment. Sweat of nervousness was pouring down her head, and she could see beads of sweat forming on Irabeth’s green skin.

Irabeth stood up, stretched stiff muscles, and reached out a hand, “That was wonderful!”

Mordria grinned and gripped her hand, “I don’t think I’ve had to concentrate that much in a while.”

Irabeth returned Mordria’s grin, “You would make a good captain.”

A bark of laughter escaped Mordria’s mouth, “I may have the brains, but I don’t have the will or patience.”

“Maybe one day.” Irabeth let go and bowed, “I have work I need to finish. If you will excuse me.”

With that, Irabeth turned on a heel and walked back to the stairs. Before climbing up, though, she turned to look at the grouped Crusaders, “Watch rotation is in five minutes. I expect to see fresh faces in here!”

The Crusaders all gave her a textbook salute as they moved toward the stairs as well. Whispered conversations about the match could be heard moving with the group. In a few seconds, the only ones in the tavern area were Mordria, Shayliss, still reading her book, and the inn’s owner, preparing for the relieved shift’s meal.

Mordria sighed in exhaustion and started putting away the game. Sliding the lid of the box shut, she left it on the table for anyone who wanted to play. She then walked over to Shayliss and sat down. In her red and black vision, Shayliss’s eyes were pouring over the text of the book, apparently a theory book about some kind of magic. It was easy to tell that the woman was forcing herself to stay awake.

“Hey.” Mordria said, not so awake herself.

Shayliss jumped in surprise and starting breathing heavily. When she realized that it was just Mordria, she let out a long breath, “Sorry. Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“That is obvious.” The corner of Mordria’s mouth ticked up, “Why don’t you rest? It is getting close to midnight.”

There was a flash of something in Shayliss’s eyes. It was something that Mordria had seen many times before: the look of rage. Not the happy-go-lucky ‘I need to punch a wall’ kind of angry. It was the ‘I am an inch away from murdering you’ kind of anger. Something Mordria did or said triggered it, and she flinched back, about to ready her claws to attack. However, the woman in front of her shook her head and all traces of rage vanished.

“It is?” Shayliss tried to look outside, only to realize that the first floor windows were too boarded up, “I guess I was so engrossed in the book.” Rubbing her eyes, she stood up, “I should head up to my room. Good night.”

Mordria nodded and watched with caution as the woman closed her book with a bookmark marking her place and climbed the stairs to her room. Waiting a few minutes, Mordria followed her, stopping at the second room to the left of the stairs.

She knocked lightly on the door. Seconds later, a groggy Strune rubbed her eyes, in a creepily similar way to Shayliss, and asked, “What is it?”

Mordria gave the strix a serious gaze, “We need to talk.”

“How is the ‘sneak in and take them by surprise’ plan working now?” Strune asked, an annoyed tone in her struggling voice.

She stood at the very bottom of the spiral stairs leading up to the ground floor of the tower. Two cultists, wearing black robes with red threading and embroidering, lashed out from their spots a couple of steps up from her with their glaives. Her shield blocked both attacks, each letting loose with a shower of orange sparks as they connected. Not even the light shining from the sparks would let her see under the hoods, the surely artificial shadow obscuring everything but the tips of their noses. The only thing she could tell were that they were both elves by the long ears threatening to rip from their hoods.

Hearing a grunt from behind her, Strune turned as fast as she could make her weakened body move and raised her shield. More sparks shot out as a great force slammed into her shield, nearly sending her to her knees. The tiefling pulled back his morningstar, a spherical mace with spikes jabbing out of it, and held it over his head, ready to bash down upon the horribly defenseless strix woman.

The twang of a bowstring saved her. An arrow, with green and brown fletching, pierced the half-demon’s hardened forearm, spilling black blood onto the stone floor of the Tower of Estrod’s basement. Following the arrow was a white furred form leaping at the man. He pulled his mace down across his body so that the wolf’s jaws closed around the wooden staff of the mace. They jerked back and forth a couple of times before he tossed the wolf aside. It landed on its side on top of the makeshift desk, sending both wolf and wood crashing to the ground.

“I say it is working a lot better than your ‘charge in’ plan would have.” Kaira growled, “They were obviously expecting us, and watchful prey are impossible to kill.” She pulled back her prepared arrow and let loose at the cultists on the stairs. Both of them managed to avoid the shaft but it gave Strune the chance she needed to get to her feet, “At least we were able to get them in a rather disadvantageous position before we attacked.”

Huffing out pained breaths, Strune started muttering a soft prayer to Iomedae. She could feel her patron goddess answer through the palm of her hand, which started glowing with a pulsating golden light. The concentration needed to form the holy

spell was too great and the cultists let out laughs. Their glaives bit into her armor, the metal staving off most of the damage. However, she could feel some blood flow from her side. That did not prevent her from completing the prayer, though, and she pressed her hand against her own chest.

Holy energy coursed through her body, destroying some of the foul magic the tiefling attacked her with. Strune could feel her strength returning slowly. However, the damage the tiefling did was too much for one Lesser Restoration to heal. So, when she stood back up to face the cultists on the stairs, she could hold her shield without shaking, but her body was still ready to crumple.

The tiefling was now focused fully on Blueeye. With a naturally hoarse yell, he swung down the morningstar two handed. One of the spikes on it left a line of red forming on the white fur, but Blueeye did not even notice it as he went low and latched onto the tiefling's ankle. As if she had read the wolf's mind, Kaira let loose with an arrow that sank deep into the other ankle. The arrow did not trap him to the floor, but it effectively crippled him. So, when he tried to kick the wolf away, he had to place weight onto the now injured ankle and almost stumbled.

Strune saw her opportunity and took it.

With a struggling yell, she spun around raising her blade. The cultists behind her saw their chance and stabbed forward with their glaives. Both landed hits, piercing through her armor and shallowly digging into her back. She did her best to ignore them as she swung her weapon downward onto the tiefling.

Metal met wood, letting out a deep thunk and sending wood splinters outward. The tiefling let out a laugh as he twisted, throwing the warpriest away from the stairs and toward the center of the room. She landed on her shoulder, nearly sending it out of socket, and her breath blasted from her lungs followed by groans.

“You think that you can fight me, Faxon, in your state, worshipper of doomed gods?” He limped toward the fallen strix, “The pantheon of gods will be destroyed, molded and reshaped! The Demon Lords will see to it!” Strune rolled onto her back to find the morningstar falling toward her face, “And you will see it from the Ethereal Plane, unable to save your precious goddess!”

Strune watched as the morningstar fell. Then she found that Faxon was falling as well, influenced by Blueeye's ability to trip his foes. With effort, she threw her head to the side, feeling the stone where it was before shatter and hit her cheek.

What little breath she had escaped again when the tiefling fell right on top of her. She could feel him struggle, but she used the last of her strength to tighten her hold around him.

“Tell your men to back off.” She growled, “Or by Iomedae’s light I will burn you right here and now.”

To add to the threat, she started praying to Iomedae, louder than she normally does. Answering her prayer, her hand started glowing with that golden light again. Normally, Strune did not prepare this particular spell. But, knowing that she would be a part of the teams sent out to investigate the Templar bases, she added a prayer for Inflict Light Wounds just in case. She knew that it would not kill the tiefling, but she hoped that she could either threaten him, or stall until Kaira was ready to help her.

Her hopes were squashed when he let out a soft laugh, “You think that a threat and a light show will work on me?” Without any warning, he placed a hand on her head and hissed out a word.

Pain. Indescribable pain coursed down Strune’s body. It shuttered uncontrollably, her voice coming out in soft rasps. Yet, she did not release Faxon. With a raspy cry out to Iomedae, she gripped naked, scaly flesh and released the spell held in her hand. She had expected a cry of pain from the form on top of her, but instead all she got was another laugh.

“Let him go, Strune!” Kaira yelled.

Letting out a growl, Strune did the exact opposite. Enduring the pain the tiefling was sending at her, she pawed around her, trying to find Radiance. After an excruciating amount of seconds, she finally found the grip of some kind of weapon. Without even looking at it, she palmed it backhanded and thrust it into Faxon, who was just laughing away as he kept his hand on her head.

She heard the splatter of blood against her gauntlet and felt some droplets against her cheek. The laughing was replaced with gurgling chuckling. Faxon’s head, now listless, dropped onto her’s and an inaudible whisper could be heard before he breathed his last.



“Do you have any idea what a ‘Nahyndrian Crystal’ or who ‘Vorlesh’ is?” Strune asked.

The horseshoes of Landria under her clomped against the charred and cracked stone of Kenabres. Saddlebags to either side of the horse were full of feed for the horse as well as the supplies the pair retrieved from the Tower after killing the rest of the cultists. Kaira rode next to her, Hawthorn letting out a horse huff from his nose. Blueeye, between the pair, let out an answering bark.

“No idea.” Kaira answered, “Why do you ask?”

“Both are mentioned in this missive from a...” she looked down at the crumpled parchment in her hand, “‘Minagho,’ yet another name I do not know.”

Kaira shook her head, “If you do not know, there is not much we can do about it now. We can ask Irabeth when we return to the inn.”

Strune sighed, “I guess so.” She folded up the parchment and placed it inside one of the books she grabbed out of interest from the Tower, “But as a Warpriest of Iomedae and a Crusader, I should know about them.”

Kaira blinked, “Even though we only just heard about them?”

“Maybe I have read about them before.” She retorted defensively, “I took my studies rather seriously, you know.”

“That, I have no doubt.” Kaira answered.

Strune gave her a sideways grin. Ever since she and Kaira worked together to get her strength back after Faxon sapped it away, she had been a lot more peppy and energized, “I actually have a question for you.”

Kaira nodded, “I was wondering why you asked me along.”

Strune flashed another grin, “Besides your hunter skills?”

The hunter nodded, “Yes. For attacking a tower, you could have easily taken Mordria or Snaga. Even Shayliss would have been a better pick than me. All of them have close quarters fighting experience. At least better training than me. So, you had a goal for bringing me with you.”

Strune raised her eyebrows, surprised, "Wisdom. I like that." She took a deep breath, "I wanted to ask why you wanted to join the Crusade."

Kaira did not hesitate, "What do you mean?"

"Well," Strune hedged, "I already know, or can work out, the motivations of everyone else. Shayliss said with certainty that she was not going to join the Crusade at all. That she only came with me to find her lover. But I have a feeling that Iomedae has another plan for her. Snaga, silent as he is, is also an open book. His past and present brought him here to determine exactly who he is. Mordria is most likely trying to stave off the stigma of her race and I was born into it by generations of strix before me."

She turned to look at Kaira, "But you are not so easy to figure out. You hide yourself behind layers of subtle misdirection. Your eyes give me nothing, and you do not seem to have much motivation for being here."

Kaira said nothing. For long minutes, the only thing that could be heard between them were the clomps of hooves against stone and the small pants from the wolf. Strune was about to say something else when Kaira finally piped up.

"You want to make sure I do not betray the Crusade. Is that it? Chaleb and the Corrupted Crusaders in the square are eating at you more than Shayliss."

Strune did not respond. She did not think she would be able to without snapping at the hunter or burst out crying.

Seeing her reaction, Kaira nodded, "I understand." She looked up to the sky, "I am looking for someone."

Strune blinked and gazed at Kaira, "Someone? Who?"

Kaira moved her gaze down to Blueeye and says nothing. But Strune was able to find the answer she needed from the hunter's eyes. This was the first time that those orbs were vulnerable and she was able to practically see into the woman's soul.

"I see."

“What do you mean?” Kaira asked, returning her look to Strune.

“You are unsure of who you are looking for. And uncertain of why you are. There is conflict in your eyes now.”

Those eyes locked back up, returning to their neutrality, “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Strune only nodded and remained silent as they rode back to Defender’s Heart.

Moonlight streamed through the wooden shutters covering a window facing out into the destroyed districts. It lit the mostly dark room, laying against its single twin-sized bed, the bedside table with its piles upon piles of paper and worn brown carpet. The only other source of light in the room was a large candle on top of the desk surrounded by even more piles of paper. The paper has diagrams, arcane notes and nonsense scribbles covering them and most of them also have a broad X slashed through them.

Snaga dipped his quill into the ink vial. The vial was almost empty and he knew it. He was also sure that he was close to the solution he was looking for and was not going to stop now. As he marked down some more notes, his mind was flying through his thoughts, trying to solve the enhancements that would make the device he was designing work.

In his furious line of thought, he lost concentration on his writing. After a minute of writing, he looked onto what he just wrote. It was correct for the first dozen sigils, but then he saw the incorrect line. If he had tried to actually place the enhancement on the device, it would fatally overheat at the first use. Not only that, but the line of ideas he had been chasing was completely wrong. It would not have worked, even if he wrote the enhancement correctly.

With an animalistic growl, he scratched an X onto the parchment so hard that it ripped. Seeing that, he let out an even angrier snarl and crumpled the parchment into a tiny ball. He then tossed it at the wall. The paper bounced off of the wall but he did not notice it as he snapped up another sheet of parchment to start over.

The feather quill was in the vial, about to touch the ink inside, when loud laughter erupted from downstairs. Snaga flinched hard, sending quill and vial both tumbling onto the floor. Thankfully the vial was empty enough to prevent any of its ink from escaping, but the laughter was the half-orc's breaking point. Angry, Snaga shot out of his seat and aimed himself toward the door. He was going to go downstairs and give the men and women down there a piece of his mind.

There was a sensation that started at the base of his neck and gently slid down his spine. It was a familiar touch and one that usually gave him comfort. This time,

though, it was just enough to make him stop. With a sigh, he lowered the hand that was reaching out for the door handle.

“Don’t do this to yourself.” A feminine but rough voice whispered in his ear.

Snaga turned around and sat down at his desk again, “I have to finish it.” His voice was hoarse sounding. Not because he was ill but because it was a voice not used to speaking, “Maybe Yalvik’s Theory on Heatless Friction is not what I need.” Not bothering to pick up the dropped quill and vial, he grabbed a replacement set from the desk drawer and scratched notes on the new sheet of parchment, “It could be that a thin layer of protective material should be woven into the rope. But that would mean I need to find someone skilled with ropes.”

“You’ve already lost vital sleep trying to chase this project. You know that not only you lose effectiveness when you stay up like this, but I do as well. We are one and the same when we fuse and I am sure that a major battle is in our near future.”

Snaga nearly snapped the quill in half in annoyance. They have done this song and dance before, especially when he got caught up in a project of his. Not only that, but he knew that she was right, damnit. The power of fusing with an outsider the way that some Summoners can has been studied in Absalom and Varisia for a couple of decades and it will most likely take a few more decades for them to make any headway. But, it was clear that while the power to Fuse is great, the risks in doing so are great as well.

“I know.” He sighed, “But I am on the verge of figuring it out! I am sure of it!”

He could feel it when she took on her ethereal form behind him. There was no need for him to turn around and see the mix-match of angelic and corrupted armor nor the pudgy cheeks that lends itself to creasing when she smiled. He could even imagine the bags under her shining eyes if she was as tired as she sounded.

“You are wearing yourself thin, dear.” Nephalim said with obvious worry in her voice, “You have not gotten much sleep since the night in the vault because of this project of yours. Please don’t stay up all night again. You know what happens when you exhaust yourself.”

He blinked and looked outside, as if seeing the moonlight for the first time, “What day is it?”

“The twenty-fifth of Arodus.” Came the simple answer.

Snaga let out a sharp breath of surprise. Had so many days passed already? He looked down at his trash basket which not only had even more paper from his writing but also the remains of food that he did not remember eating. Damn it, Nephelim was even more right.

“Maybe you’re right.” He said, not wanting to admit it.

As he rose from his seat, he could now feel his muscles twinging and straining. The eidolon smiled at that and seemed to rise with him, even though he was sure that it was only a Sending. Typically, eidolons cannot send images between planes so relatively soon bonding with a summoner. Especially ones with the ability to touch another physical object. Yet, somehow, she had been able to do it since the first day they met. Snaga never figured out why and Nephelim either could not tell him or truly did not know. Maybe the bonding ritual helped with it.

“Of course I am right, fool.” She answered with a teasing tone.

Snaga gave her a snort and a tired smile before heading toward the other room. Irabeth had managed to grant the group the inn’s best rooms which included a bathroom of sorts. It was not a fancy bathroom, but it contained a large washbasin with a water pump built into the floor, a drain in the center of the room just in case water fell out of the basin, and a toilet that was basically an outhouse with a deeper hole to keep the stench as far away as possible.

He undressed himself and started pumping water into the wash basin. It was cold and he could feel the chill race through his body as he sunk into it. There was no way for him to get warm water without talking to the inn’s maids and butlers, but he was fine with that. The cold water should help focus his mind until he laid down. At least it was a lot better than the life of fire he lived.

And that was the only thought that was needed for the rush of memories to overtake him. Memories of red-hot, white-hot, and blue-hot iron pressed against green skin. The searing pain and sizzling of flesh. Memories so palpable that Snaga felt as if the last five years of his life were just a dream. That his freedom, his fight, his allies, were illusions created by a mind begging the world to let him go. He looked up to the face of the man that let it all happen, the scarred blonde haired human that pushed the branding iron closer to his skin. That held the dagger which bit deep. The one who gave him his name, orcish for ‘slave.’

Then, there was a soothing presence. He was back at his cell, moonlight streaming through the bars of his cell. During his nightly call out to whatever power exists out there, he finally got an answer. A goddess of golden and purple light descended into his mind-scape, a realm he imagined to get away from the pain. A place of peace. He would never know if he created her appearance himself, or if it was her natural look. But he remembered the rush of emotion that filled him as she formed in his mind. And it continuing as he realized that it was not just his imagination. Nephelim, the goddess, had come to save him.

Something touched his back and he returned to the real world, Nephelim behind him. She pulled her hand back from his spine and gave him a worried look, “You are about to break the basin.”

Snaga looked around. His hands were clenched hard against the edge of the basin. The metal loop was bending inward slightly and the wood was starting to crack against the strength of his fists. Slowly, he released his grip and relaxed, letting the cold water race through him again.

After an hour, he finally stepped out and dried himself with the towel provided to all rooms. Nephelim watched him the whole time, making sure that he did not have another attack. When he returned to the main room without issue, she relaxed her vigil and looked back to the desk. Her eyes flashed across one of the sheets of paper that was completely finished. It was a diagram of the outer shell of the device Snaga was designing.

“Are you sure you can finish it?”

Snaga followed her gaze and nodded, “I will.”

“There are many planes surrounding each other in orbit. We, humans, half-elves, dwarves and more, live in the Material Plane where the energy and geography of all the other planes intersect and join together. These energies create the forces we know such as gravity, thermal energy, and most notably of all, magic. Using these energies, a skilled magi can create their own planes and dimensions. They are usually unstable and last for seconds. However, with the right spells they can be made permanent.”

Shayliss's gaze moved over the page of arcane sigils and notes. She could feel her eyes losing focus, her mind unable to grasp the concepts that Planes, Planar Creatures and Theories of Existence supposedly 'introduces.' It could just be that she had no training or innate magical talent. Or she could be tired from the approaching winter. But she felt that it was more the fact that the author had no idea how to dumb down complex topics like the dimensions that make up our world so that anyone could read it. Sure, the introduction was fine, but they quickly shifted gears and Shayliss could not make the mental hurdle to follow. Her knowledge of the subject was so basic that she always confuses the Astral and Ethereal Planes.

Placing her bookmark into the book, she laid back against the headrest of her bed and rubbed the palms of her hands against her eyes. It was a feeble attempt to stave off the headache that was forming at her forehead. If anything, she made it worse. A sigh escaped her mouth and she flung herself off of her bed. Muscles screamed as she contacted the floor, causing her to stumble a small bit.

“Damn demons.” She muttered like an old woman, “Making me fight them endlessly.”

Shayliss stretched, the muscles tensing up even more, her calves threatening to tangle. Yet, it helped reduce the discomfort. As she did, she could hear shouts and yells from below. She smirked at that, “The red demon Mordria strikes again.”

A second later, the shouts suddenly stopped. Her stomach fell when she realized what that meant. Especially when the shouts of joy were replaced by barks of orders and stomps of various kinds of greaves.

The familiar bootfalls of Irabeth approached Shayliss's door and the half-orc opened the door, "Grab your allies. We must talk." Her voice was tense and commanding. She assumed her role as a captain.

Five minutes later, she and the rest of her group were standing within the cramped quarters of Irabeth, who was sitting on the edge of her desk. Next to her, standing with his hands behind his back was a tanned man in his seventies. His skin was practically defined by wrinkles only broken up by what was almost a fatal wound running from his neck down into his robe and an eagle leg tattoo on his cheek. His neutral expression gave him the appearance of a stiff and rude man, but he gave each person a nod as they entered the room.

Once she saw that everyone in the room has gotten acquainted with each other, Irabeth gave the group a tense smile, "I must thank you again for all that you have done, even during your supposed rest. But," her gaze lowered in embarrassment, "I must also ask you to do even more."

Shayliss tilted her head, "What do you mean?"

Irabeth turned her body around and reached out to grab some papers stacked on her desk, "As horrific as recent events have been, we've," she motioned to herself and the man, "come to realize that they are, in fact, merely a prelude." She stood up with enough force to toss some of the ignored sheets of paper onto the ground, "The razing of the Kite, the destruction of our wardstone, Terendelev's murder, and the assault on the city were nothing more than goddamn opening gambits!" Her voice rose higher and higher until it reached a crescendo and Shayliss could see that she was holding herself back from slamming her fist into her desk.

Strune did not look any better. The warpriest was gritting her teeth, using the force of her jaws to release the tension in her body unsuccessfully. The other members of the group were carefully holding back their emotions. Snaga was the most successful, crossing his arms over his chest. His eyebrows were the only sign of his anger. Mordria and Kaira both were moving restlessly, as if they wanted to just run outside and fight whatever they saw.

Shayliss stepped forward before anyone could do anything destructive, "Opening gambits? They have a plan?"

Irabeth sighed, "Yes. The Worldwound is on the march in a more concentrated assault than we've seen since the fall of Drezen decades ago. It's fair to say that the

Lord of the Locust Host is finally making his move.” When she mentioned the Lord of the Locust Host, something in Shayliss’s chest wiggled around uncomfortably, “While the Templars of the Ivory Labyrinth were scattered, those who serve the Lord of the Locust Host himself remain concentrated in Old Kenabres. What we’ve heard from within the barricade they’ve erected is ominous.”

“Barricade?” Shayliss narrowed her eyes in thought, “They have a base of operations here besides the Templar hideouts?”

Kaira responded, “The Grey Garrison. Despite its name, it is a museum that holds relics of past Crusades.”

Shayliss blinked in surprise at Kaira who simply shrugged.

Irabeth continued on, “The cultists are waiting for something, and based on our own information and what the teams taking out the hideouts recovered, it sounds like the vile witch Areelu Vorlesh will soon be coming to Kenabres. And it appears that we’ve determined what she intends to do.”

She refers to the sheets of paper in her hand, “When the wardstone was destroyed by the Storm King, it exploded and destroyed the Kite. The network along the border failed, but did not fade completely. I believe this is because a significant portion of our wardstone still exists, and that the cultists have taken it to the Grey Garrison in Old Kenabres. From what we’ve learned, they’re hoping to engineer a way to somehow reverse the field generated by the wardstones-essentially, to use our own greatest defense as a devastating weapon.”

A loud gasp of surprise came out from Shayliss. The man gave her an approving look as she said, “Dear gods. They’ve managed to gather all of the Crusaders at the network. It’s an obvious result of their massive attack.”

Strune glanced at Shayliss with a questioning look, “Why does that matter? It just means that our defenses are at its best, right?”

The sinking of Shayliss’s stomach quickened, “That is true, but they have also created a trap that we have walked right into.” She stared right into Irabeth’s eyes, “Reversing the border will essentially do what it has done to the demons to us, right?”

Irabeth nodded right as Snaga let out a snort of agreement, “Correct. We have lined up for the slaughter. The only hope we have is the fact that Vorlesh is seeking some sort of great power, most likely the Nahyndrian Crystal. With it, she would turn our greatest hope into a terrible nightmare. But that also means that she is not here, and that they are not ready to enact their plan yet.”

Shayliss’s stomach slammed into rock bottom, “You want us to go in and destroy the wardstone fragment.”

Silence filled the room for a second. Then, with the confidence of a leader, Irabeth gave Shayliss a respectful, slow nod.

Before her head returned to its resting position, Strune yelled, “Excuse me? You want us to what?”

Irabeth does not react to Strune’s outburst except to give her an apologetic look, “I know that is not what you wanted to hear from me.”

“You do know what will happen if the Wardstone Barrier falls, right?” Strune asked, only barely controlling her volume, “The Barrier is the only thing keeping the demons from overrunning the rest of Golarion! If it falls, then the demons have free rein to go out and do whatever they please!”

“I know. But the results of Vorlesh’s plan is even worse. At least if the fragment is destroyed, the Crusaders still survive to fight another day. If Vorlesh succeeds, then we won’t even have that certainty. If we are lucky, then they will all be dead. If not, then we will have mindless abominations wandering around as the Abyssal energy courses through their bodies destroying any semblance of their humanity.”

Strune gritted her teeth, “Then why can we not just steal the wardstone and protect it?”

Shayliss sighed, “Unfortunately that is not an option.” At Strune’s annoyed look she continued, “At this point, in its current state, the Wardstone is only a liability. As long as it remains, it can be used against us.”

Strune stared at Shayliss for a couple of seconds before letting out a growl, “Fine.”

Seeing that the group was in agreement, Shayliss asked, “How are we to destroy the fragment? Wasn’t it created by a god?”

Irabeth gave Shayliss a small smile, “Not quite. It was the Herald of Iomedae, the Hand of the Inheritor. And I know what you mean. Quendys here,” she motions to the man, “has something that will help.”

The man stands up straight and reaches behind him. Hidden by his robe was a pure white rod of wood. Its handle was made from a twisting pattern and right above the handle the rod split in half. Within the two prongs of the rod was a green, irregularly cut emerald. When he passed it to Shayliss, she could feel the power that was coursing through the object vibrating against her hand.

“That is a Rod of Cancellation.” Quendys explained, “I had to work on it some, but it should cancel out the power of the wardstone. Otherwise, you would have to physically destroy it, which is near impossible for anyone other than a powerful mythic creature.”

Shayliss nodded and slipped it in her sword belt, “How do we use it?”

“All you have to do is touch it against the wardstone. Then, hopefully, it will work its magic. It has multiple charges just in case it fails the first time.”

Shayliss nods, “What is the plan for getting into the Garrison? I assume that the demons are bottled up in there, protecting the wardstone.”

“You are correct.” Irabeth said, “According to Kaira, they have concentrated most of their forces in the Garrison. Yet, there are small units still roaming the city.” She pulls out a map of the city and unfolds it. As if being pulled, the group moved to her desk and looked over each other’s shoulders, “Here, here and here, scouts report that there are still demons moving around. The plan is to go on the offensive, sending groups of Crusaders out to raise havoc at these spots. This and other activities of the Crusaders will gain the attention of the defenders and force them to send forces out to meet us. That is when we will attack the Garrison while it is at its weakest.”

Shayliss glanced at the half-orc, ““We?” Does that mean you will be joining us?”

“Assuming you will have me.”

“Of course,” Shayliss gives her a grin, “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Good. Then, we will-”

There is a series of hard knocks on Irabeth’s door. Shayliss and the others reached for their weapons. Irabeth did not, but her voice came out weary, “Enter.”

A helmeted Crusader wearing the crest of a squad captain walked in and gave Irabeth a textbook salute, “Captain! An army has appeared at our door. They say they are mongrelmen who are here to help.”

Irabeth’s eyes widened, “That was fast. Chief Sull can get work done.”

“I have a feeling he has been ready ever since we talked to him.” Shayliss said, “He seemed to have more of an idea of what was going on than a normal person.”

“That’s the feeling I got when I met with him too.” Irabeth agreed. Her next sentence was aimed at the Crusader, “Let their captain come up and talk with us.”

The Crusader saluted again and hurried down the stairs. Moments later, irregular footfalls echoed into the office and Lann appeared in the doorway.

“It has been a while, hasn’t it?”

Shayliss gave him a smile that she could not hide, “It’s good to see you, Lann. I did not think you would be leading the First Descendants.”

He gave her the best smile he could, “I didn’t either.” He walked forward, “Do we have a plan of attack?”

Irabeth ran him through what was already talked about. At the mention of destroying the wardstone, he did not seem to react. Instead, he just listened to Irabeth’s explanation and at the end asked, “Where do you need us?”

“We will need you to help us attract the demons. Not only that, but while we are inside the Garrison, we will need forces to keep the demons from coming in and flanking us.”

Lann nodded, “Understood.” He looked down at the map, “With your permission, I’ll place my forces here, here, here and here. The remaining will be at the Garrison surrounding it here, here and here. We will keep the demons at bay as long as possible.”

“Any estimation?” Shayliss asked.

“Maybe a few hours. We have not had such a large battle in decades, so it is hard to estimate exactly.”

“That’s all we can hope for.” Irabeth folded the map, “Alright. We head out in half an hour. Lann, get your men in position. You’ll be heading out first as you can move fast and silently. Attack as soon as you get the signal.”

Lann gave her a salute and walked out of the room. Irabeth then turned to the Shayliss and the rest, “We will also move before the rest of the Crusaders. We need to be in position when the offensive starts.”

“I must say, Irabeth,” Shayliss whispered, crouched in the mouth of an alleyway looking out onto the Grey Garrison, a squat grey stoned building that lived up to its name, “when the Crusaders need to, they can turn the heat up.”

Seconds before, Irabeth had given the Crusader groups her signal: an arrow, lighted with a spell, shot straight into the air. Shayliss had watched its progress, sailing up for dozens of feet before curving back down to sink into the ground a few feet away. Once the arrow connected with the ground, holy energy spread out through it, aiming for the partially destroyed Clydwell Cathedral across the district from the Grey Garrison. It raced with crackling energy up the charred stone, weakened wooden supports, and into the golden shine of the Symbol of Iomedae stabbing into the top of the dome.

The Sword of Valor was missing half of its hilt and all of its handle, yet when the energy reached into it, the whole structure flared up with golden light. The light formed in a way that completed the rest of the Symbol, as if it had been untouched by the demons. Golden radiance filled all of Kenabres, letting all within it, both demon and mortal, see its brilliance.

Irabeth stared up at it, eyes widened, “That... was not me.” She blinked, “She’s watching over us.”

Before Shayliss could ask what she meant by that, a huge explosion shook the city, nearly knocking her down. Then a series of battlecries overlapped each other, originating from multiple areas of the city, letting the demons know that the Crusaders meant business. A loud response arose from the Grey Garrison and Shayliss watched what looked like a legion fly out from the building as well as flashes from teleportation spells.

Irabeth muttered, “Give it a few seconds. Make sure that everyone that is going to leave, leaves. We cannot afford to get flanked or face an overwhelming force.”

Shayliss nodded and held a hand up with all fingers outstretched. She counted down slowly. Once her fist closed completely, Irabeth, Mordria and Snaga all rushed forward with their weapons or limbs ready. A second later, Shayliss, mounted on Shadowshine, and Strune, with her wings, followed suit. Soon after,

Shayliss could hear the massive storm of footfalls as Kaira, Blueeye, and an army of Mongrelmen archers follow. As they moved closer, Shayliss could get more and more of the details around the Garrison. Including the two human-seeming demons standing guard.

They were both inhumanely obese, skin stretching farther than skin is supposed to. Not only that, but they were only covered by the scraps of pants and holding glaives. Something about them were familiar, but she could not figure out why before the frontliners crashed into them.

As the group approached, they clanked their glaives over the front doors, gave them a disgusting grin, and the right demon asked, “Are you here to turn yourselves over to Deskari?”

Irabeth ignored them and started the fight by ducking below a swing of the right demon’s glaive then sweep her blade upward as she bounced back up. She then tried to bring her weapon back down upon its head, but metal met wooden staff. By the effort the paladin was exerting, the demon was stronger than its appearance explained.

Snaga came in from the side and slammed a spiked gauntlet into what would have been the ribs of a normal person. The force of the blow staggered the demon, allowing Irabeth to recover her weapon and step safely back. A glaive comes down in a crescent arc aimed at Snaga. He raised his gauntlets, blocking the blow, and sending both sparks and magical liquid into the air. The form around the half-orc faded a bit from the impact.

Mordria, however, was handling the second demon all on her own. Instead of going on the offensive from the outset, the tiefling went in low, keeping her body as small as possible to dodge the first attack of the demon. She received a gash on her shoulder, but it gave her the chance to reach up and grab at the glaive. Once her grip was set, she twisted her body sharply trying to disarm the demon. However, instead the strength of the pair fought against each other until the weapon itself split in a shower of wood. Hesitating for a split second, Mordria slid away from the next attack which would have split her like the glaive and sunk her claws into the demon’s wrist. She then used all of her strength to get in close and stab into its other wrist. Successful, she held the demon there, visibly shaking from the exertion.

Shayliss knew exactly what she was doing and spun in her saddle toward the archers, "Archers, aim at the left demon!" She then turned to Strune, who was floating next to her trying to find an opening, "Do you have any offensive spells?"

The strix shook her head, "I only prepared support spells."

"Alright. Then stay back. I don't want any of the arrows to hit you and Mordria both."

Strune gave Shayliss a sharp look, "You are intentionally harming Mordria?"

"Do I want the arrows to hit her? No. But look at her. She is intentionally holding the demon in place to give us a chance to hit it without worry."

"Except the worry of harming our companion."

"She made her choice and is doing so to let us get through the front doors." Shayliss answered as arrows arced up over the pair's heads and toward the demon.

It saw the rain of destruction that was coming down upon it, but was unable to dodge it. Dozens of arrows sunk into skin and all of them passed through it. Which grabbed Shayliss's attention. With bodies, both demon and human, there is way too much material in them to allow for arrows to just pass right through unimpeded. Meat, bone, skin and blood all stand in an arrow's way and stop it within the body. Yet, these arrows acted as if all the bodies had in them was blood, which was now splatting like rain into the dirt.

Strune noticed it too and halted whatever she was going to say to Shayliss, "That's not right."

"Do you know what these things are?"

"I..." She hesitated, "I don't think they are demons."

After giving the archers the order to fire again, Shayliss gave her a side-glance, "What do you mean?"

"I'm not too sure. But I've heard of demons that can use bodies to hide themselves. I wonder if these are just meatshields for them."

Metal screeched and crunched as the right demon sent a fist into Irabeth's chestplate. The damage was not enough to poke a hole in the armor or pierce her skin, but the blunt impact of the blow would have certainly cracked a rib or two. Snaga rose to his feet from where the demon had slammed him seconds before and barked out an arcane word. A glob of acid formed in the cup of his hand which he then pressed against the demon's skin. Instead of yelling in pain as Shayliss expected, it just gave him an ugly and unnatural grin. The demon on the other side of the front doors did the same thing with Mordria.

Their heads exploded.

Out of the fountains of blood lunged two worm-like creatures. They worked their way out of their hosts and splatted upon the ground. Then they charged forward toward Shayliss and Strune, ignoring everyone and everything else.

As if excited to finally be a part of the fight, Shadowshine rose onto his hind legs, let out a loud whiny of challenge, then rushed forward to meet the two worms. Shayliss let him, preparing her blade and hook for combat. Seconds later, Strune followed, keeping low to the ground with blade and shield aimed forward.

One of the worms leapt up into the air, its jagged toothed mouth open to bite down into Shayliss's shoulder. She twisted her body in the saddle and swiped her blade at a diagonal over Shadowshine's head. However, Shadowshine moved at the same time, spinning around to kick out at the worm. This caused Shayliss's attack to miss, but his attack hit. She felt the impacts race along the horse's body and up to her head aggravating her headache.

"Damn it, Shadowshine!" She growled.

The horse gave an unapologetic snort as he completed his turn and ran forward to stomp the worm into the ground. It recovered quick, though, dodging his hooves and lunged up toward his side.

Hesitating for only a second, Shayliss slashed out with her longsword, creating a deep gash in the worm's skin. Her attack sent it off-course and it instead landed under Shadowshine. Before the horse could try his stomping routine again, the worm rushed out from under him and prepared to attack again. This time, an arrow thudded into the ground next to it, prevent its next attack.

With a tiny yell, it lunged for Kaira. Blueeye met it halfway and took it to the ground, rolling a couple of times. They landed with the worm on top and it latched its teeth into the wolf's shoulder. Blueeye yelped and bucked the worm off of him before returning the favor. They went back and forth like that twice before Blueeye leapt backward, allowing Kaira to loose the decisive arrow.

Shayliss turned around to find Strune slicing the other worm in half, "We're clear out here."

Shayliss nodded and dismounted. Before she could start ordering, Irabeth yelled out, "Shayliss, over here!"

Shayliss ran up to Irabeth to find her kneeling next to the two human bodies that the worms burst out of. One of them looked very familiar. It took her a second to realize, "That's Lord Hulrun, isn't it?"

The half-orc sighed, "Yes. The vermlleks took his and Nyserrian's bodies to use as a sick prank." She gave Shayliss a significant look, "None of the Crusaders should or need to see this. We can tell them once the battle is over."

"Agreed." Shayliss turned toward the mongrelmen, "Could we have four men to help us move these bodies?" As four volunteers step forward to comply, she adds, "Take care with them, and make sure no one else sees them until the end of the battle. We will have a funeral for them then."

The mongrelmen gently pick up the bodies and move them away, "The rest of you, guard the door. Make sure that we are not flanked and that we have a secure escape route just in case." At her group, she said, "Let's go. Snaga and Irabeth in front, Strune and I in the middle, and Kaira and Blueeye rear. Remember that we need to punch a hole in their defense and reach the top of the Garrison where we are sure that they are holding the stone."

With a loud boom, the doors of the Grey Garrison closed. And the place was silent. Not even the sounds of war outside could be heard. Shayliss had expected the demons to be pouring in through the woodworks to try and get at them. But after waiting a full minute in tense anticipation, nothing happened. It made her nervous, like a mouse who knows it had just walked into the cat's den but could not find the cat.

“What now?” Strune asked, sword and shield at the ready.

Shayliss glanced around the tiny foyer, trying to analyze the possible entrances and working to ignore the two bodies of Crusaders pinned to the wall in front of her by blades. There was, of course, the exit back outside, but there were also two doors. The left one led to a meeting hall where she could see portraits of people slashed and a table flipped over. To her right a door led into some kind of shrine.

“Keep your guard up and move toward the shrine,” Shayliss answered, referencing the mental map of the Grey Garrison Irabeth showed her before the attack started, “There should be a set of stairs beyond it that will lead upward.”

The group moved to head toward the shrine when Blueeye let out a loud bark of warning. Shayliss turned in time to see six tieflings round the doorframe leading into the meeting room with shortswords and axes bared upon Kaira and Strune. The pair were too slow to react and could only feebly get their weapons ready and watch the blades fall.

Mordria and Snaga, however, were able to throw themselves in front of the tieflings and deflected the attacks away. Snaga took a couple of hits, more of that magical aura dissipating, but he returned the favor with a punch to two of the tiefling's bellies. Mordria managed to hold back one blade but two more descended upon her and bit deep.

Blueeye rushed into the fray, latching his fangs into the calf of a tiefling, nearly sending them both to the ground. With an angry yell, the tiefling swiped his shortsword into the wolf, but only met air as Blueeye circled to his back to attack again. As her partner did that, Kaira took two steps back, carefully aimed her bow,

and fired. The arrow soared the five feet and cut across the tiefling's neck, leaving a black line of blood.

Shayliss was about to join in the fight but heard Strune yell, "Shayliss!"

She did not need any more warning than that. Combining a duck and side step, she avoided the claws that were aimed for her head. Without looking where she was aiming, Shayliss arced her longsword upward hoping to sever the arm the claws were attached to. Her attack missed but it gave her a chance to rise back to a standing position.

In front of her were two Abrikandilus, the same kind of rat-faced demon who attacked the tailoring shop. They let out hoarse cackles before raising their claws to attack Shayliss and Irabeth, who were closest to the right door before the ambush started.

"Strune, help the others! Irabeth, we need to keep these two in place."

The paladin of Iomedae was already holding her shield up to block the claws as she said, "Understood!"

Shayliss again sidestepped the demon's attack but not fast enough to completely avoid it. Two of its claws managed to leave long gashes down her arm, shriveling the skin around the injury. With the attack she could feel some of her confidence drain out of her body as if it was pulled by the claws.

Ignoring the strange sensation, she let out some of her grappling hook's rope and swung it upward. The metal hook crashed into the underside of the demon's snout, sending it reeling backward stunned. Shayliss followed up with a quick thrust to its neck. Her blade left a line of blood running diagonally upward from its chest to the back of its ear, but it was not a debilitating injury.

While flailing to recover its stance, the demon swiped at her chest and arms. Most of them were weak and unaimed which allowed Shayliss to deflect them off of her armored coat and blade. Yet, one left four shallow streaks across her belly, shriveling the skin and weakening her further.

She pushed through the discomfort and pain to attack with an upward arc at the Abrikandilus' center of mass. Her blade left a shallow cut in its chest, dealing superficial damage. Shayliss tried to go in for another attack, but was pushed back

by two quick claw attacks that threatened to sever her neck. She managed to get her longsword up in time to deflect both attacks, but she was pushed back a couple of steps in the process.

“Hold your ground!” Irabeth called to her, “We just need to hold for a few more moments!”

“Easy for you to say!” Shayliss growled, her body tensing under the force of another claw attack.

Using the momentum of the last attack, she bent at the knees and surged forward, thrusting her longsword out to stab into the demon’s thigh. It struck home. However, the demon reached down to the blade, grabbed it, and pulled it out. While Shayliss was not forced back by this, it did cause her to hesitate. She had never seen a creature anywhere decide to just grab a naked blade and pull at it.

The demon did not waste any time. With blood splattering against the stone of the Garrison, it raised its clawed hand and prepared to slice Shayliss into pieces.

An arrow sailed over Shayliss’s head and slammed halfway into the demon’s hand. Trailing right behind the arrow was a white furred blur that then crashed head-first into its chest. Shayliss, recovering from her surprise, slid to the side of the doorway, allowing Snaga to enter the space she had occupied.

“Stay.” He whispered in his hardly heard gravelly voice.

Nodding, Shayliss leaned against the bloodstained wall and fought to catch her breath. The foyer was littered with tiefling corpses all with wounds that would have killed any normal person three times over. She was not sure if it was just that tieflings can withstand more pain or if the demons were enhancing their troops, but it was something to consider in the future.

“Let me heal you.”

Shayliss looked up to find Irabeth standing before her with injuries of her own slowly closing up. She nodded and Irabeth started praying to Iomedae under her breath. It was hard to understand the words themselves, but not to understand the meaning and passion behind them. Holy energy coursed through Shayliss’s body and she could feel some of the gashes in her skin close up. However, the shriveled skin remained.

“We can take care of that when this is over with.” Irabeth explained, “Those can only be healed with higher level spells and we cannot afford to use them so soon.”

“Fair enough.”



“The room’s clear now!”

Shayliss and Irabeth entered the shrine. Both Abrikandilus were dead on the ground in pieces. On the wall, above a small altar was a metal bracket that would have held a longsword. Behind where the longsword hilt and handle would have been was the etching of a sunburst. On either side of the sunburst were strange runes carved into the stone. Covering all of that was dried bloodstains and something of dark brown color that Shayliss did not want to think about, but knew of by its awful smell. The only other exit besides the one she just crossed was a closed, reinforced door that led to a hallway.

“They dare desecrate a shrine of Iomedae?” Strune snarled under her breath.

“Whatever they can do to reduce the power of her followers.” Kaira answered.

With a short snort of anger, Strune walked for the shrine and pulled out a cloth that she doused with water. Irabeth followed suit, mirroring her counterpart. Both of them muttered prayers as they started rubbing off the dried stains. As they did, holy energy glowed from their hands, casting shadows behind them and onto Shayliss.

“Do we have time for this?” Shayliss asked, “We do have demons to take care of.”

Both holy warriors ignored her, continuing their consecration.

Shayliss muttered something dark and turned to the others, “Defend this room. We cannot let th-”

The reinforced door buckled under the force of an attack. From beyond it, Shayliss could hear the battlecries of even more demons.

“Damn it. Snaga, hold that door!”

Without a word, Snaga rushed up to the door and pressed his hands against it, reducing the impacts against it and preventing it from flying open. Each blow against the door threatened to send him sliding, yet he managed to keep ahold of his position, digging his toes as deep as he could into the stone floor. Of course, it was practically useless since the stone was smoothed flat from constant movement, but with the added strength of Nephelim, it was enough.

Kaira started moving behind Snaga so she could shoot, but Shayliss stopped her, “Stand back, Kaira.” Shayliss then turned to Mordria, “Get ready to rush in behind Snaga.”

The tiefling gave Shayliss a raised eyebrow but complied. At Kaira’s inquisitive grunt, Shayliss explained, “That door is not going to hold on much longer.” As if to agree with her, wood splintered when a tiefling’s hand burst right through it to grab at Snaga. Mordria raked her claws at it, forcing it back. “So, we are going to make a sustained assault, pushing them back and holding the door.”

Kaira’s eyes widened. Then, she nodded agreement and took a couple of steps backward, ready to start firing. Thankfully, all of their experiences under Kenabres helped train her to avoid hitting allies in such close quarters, or else this would be a horrible idea. Blueeye joined her, body down low and ready to pounce should something break through the line the group was about to create.

Another fist burst through the door and raked claws across Snaga’s side, leaking more magical blood. He let out an angry grunt and turned to look back at Shayliss. Making sure that the others not cleaning the shrine were ready, she nodded, “Do it!”

Snaga moved away from the door, letting it open under the force of one last attack. As soon as it did, he charged forward. On the other side of the door, Shayliss could hear demons letting out shouts of surprise. Those quickly turned to battlecries mixed in with the impacts of metal to flesh.

Mordria followed a second later, not waiting for the splintered wood to settle. Shayliss could now start seeing what was happening. Mordria had raked her claws across the belly of an Abrikandilus and grabbed the front of its robes. She then shoved it backward, making it topple into whatever was behind it. Without skipping a beat, she ignored a blade that left a cut on her forearm to grab a tiefling to hold it as a shield. Her plan worked. Blade and arrow alike that was on its way toward the woman sank into the meat-shield's back. Those attacks did not kill the tiefling and it struggled to swipe its shortsword into Mordria.

Snaga came to Mordria's rescue, grabbing the tiefling's wrist and slamming his other fist into their side. The tiefling's body fell limp, but Snaga was already targeting another tiefling with a right hook to the jaw. He then followed it up with two jabs to the belly before finishing it with a kick to the knee. Bones could be heard shattering and the tiefling let out a cry of pain. The half-orc did not have any time to worry about it, though, as he was recovering from a blade to his side. He blocked another swing with his gauntlet and tried to return fire, but the demon backpedaled to avoid it.

However, that let him enter Kaira's line of sight. Not leaving anything to chance, she took a half a second to aim before letting loose the arrow she had been holding. The metal tipped shaft shot forward like a dart, arching upward, barely missing the door frame, to slam hard into the demon's chest. She pulled out another arrow from her rapidly diminishing quiver and aimed at her next target, an Abrikandilus who was about to send a claw into Snaga's exposed back. Her arrow missed, but it was able to distract the demon long enough for Snaga to recover his stance.

The frontline pair were managing to push the demons back step by step. It was a slow process, but with each kill Snaga and Mordria made, they stepped in preventing the remaining demons from advancing. Not only that, but they were successfully putting pressure on the demons, causing them to take steps back on their own. Shayliss's plan was working wonderfully. They had managed to keep the demons from entering the shrine and even pushed the line of combat past the stairs upward.

Her eyes widened. The stairs!

A sudden flare of fear exploded in her belly as she drew her longsword and ran forward. There was no time to warn them. As soon as her foot planted against the ground preparing to launch her forward, two tieflings appeared from the stairs to flank Mordria and Snaga. Neither of them saw the attack coming. Shayliss could

only watch as both tieflings raised their swords up in what would most likely be fatal blows.

A bright light flashed in front of the pair of tieflings, not only stunning them but also Shayliss, who was halfway toward them. Pain seared her eyes and she knew that it would take a few seconds to recover her sight. Blackness started dissipating back into normal color. Another few seconds later and she was able to see blurry shapes. When she was finally able to see clear again, she noticed that all of her allies were alive.

Irabeth and Strune had joined the fight.

Both holy warriors of Iomedae had charged forward when one of their Daze spells successfully stunned anyone looking right at it, which was everyone except Snaga and Mordria, since they were turned away at the time. Irabeth took the left tiefling, slamming it against the wall with her shield then stabbing with her longsword. The blade went deep into the tiefling and stopped at the stone of the wall. She then swiped the blade out to turn her attention to the stairs where more tieflings were trying to descend.

Strune, who was taking care of the other flanker, would not be able to help Irabeth at the stairs, so Shayliss filled the spot for her and yelled, "Keep pushing! Make your way to the end of the hall!" Taking her voice down, she said to Irabeth, "Looks like we're together again."

The half-orc flashed a tusked-grin, "Looks like." She raised her shield against a blade, "Are we holding them here?"

"No." Shayliss answered as Kaira and Blueeye both moved behind her to keep the assault going, "We are going to start backing up with the others once we give them some room to work."

Shayliss deflected a set of claws with the flat of her blade and threw them back. With a quick flick of her wrist, she sent her weapon into the arm of her attacker. There was the slight resistance of a successful hit, but she did not stop her motion. Pulling back, she swiped up in an uppercut that missed her target. However, it left her whole body open to the attack that left shallow lines across her chest.

Irabeth shoved her shield in front of Shayliss to block another attack that was coming her way. She then raised her blade to deflect a shortsword that was coming

for her side. This left her in an awkward position that left her back wide open. However, she did not seem to mind. Once her shield was available, she used it to bash in the face of the tiefling she was deflecting. That sent them backward which let Irabeth to skewer them.

Shayliss took a quick look back to find that the fight behind them was moving further and further down the hall. Seeing that they had given the others enough room, she thrust her blade at whatever was in front of her. No matter what actually happened, she trusted that she gave herself the chance she needed to take a step back. Irabeth read her actions well and mirrored her. Now they stood in the hallway inching backward toward the group.

“We have to work in tandem here.” Shayliss whispered, “Since we cannot see where we are going, we must stick together.”

Irabeth nodded, “You take the lead.”

Shayliss deflected a blow on her weapon’s hilt, sending it toward the ground with a shove. Irabeth followed that action with a slash upward at the tiefling behind the weapon. Without hesitation, Shayliss finished him with a thrust and yelled, “Step!” The pair took a step backward in near perfect sync. As they did, Shayliss parried a tiefling’s claws back with her wrist against his and arced her blade at him. With a quick step, the tiefling dodged the attack allowing another to slip in and attack. Irabeth knocked the attack aside with her shield then used the edge of it to gash the tiefling’s face. “Step!”

This time the demons went for Irabeth first, a pair of them swinging downward at her head. Shayliss thrust her blade upward to parry both attacks away which allowed Irabeth to swipe at their bellies. Neither of them could dodge in time and both received deep gashes. Shayliss used their reaction to the attack to throw them away. “Step!”

Somehow, those two tieflings were still standing and were now furious. Seeing that they were being unsuccessful, they each chose one of the pair to target. Shayliss ducked under one blow and took a second to the shoulder. The third attack was to her head, which she halted with a pommel strike to the tiefling’s chest. He let out a puff of stunned breath and staggered backward. Irabeth thrust the flat of her shield forward, deflecting an attack with force before thrusting her longsword into her tiefling’s leg.

“You’re clear!” Strune called from behind them, “Run!”

“Go!” Irabeth yelled, stepping in front of Shayliss.

Shayliss spun around and rushed down the hall, its exit only ten steps away. The hallway was littered with corpses that she had to avoid. She threw herself into the room, being careful to not decapitate herself with her blade, “Kaira!”

The huntress was already on it. She raised her bow toward the hall and prepared to pull back a nocked arrow.

“Irabeth, duck!”

Like a trained soldier, Irabeth immediately ducked down as far as she could. Seconds later, arrows started flying down the hallway, slamming into whatever objects they felt like. There was no aiming to it. Kaira was just providing covering fire for Irabeth to disengage and it succeeded. When she saw that the tieflings were pulling back, Irabeth spun and ran. She did not throw herself into the room, but she made sure not to get into Kaira’s way.

As soon as she was through, Snaga slammed the door closed and Mordria pulled various nearby objects to barricade it. For the moment, they were safe.

That moment, however, died half a minute later when the other door in this room opened and a tiefling with curled horns, wearing leather armor, and carrying two vials of liquid, stepped into the room, “By the locust, what in the Abyss is going on out there?”

He halted in place and everyone stared at each other for a second. A sharktoothed grin formed on his face, “Maybe Jeslyn will listen to me if I bring her your heads.”

The tiefling was fast. Before Snaga and Mordria had made it halfway across the room, he had downed two of his vials and was preparing a third to throw. When he drank his potions, his body started to change. His body seemed to shrink in on itself, showing the lean muscle underneath and making him seem lighter. Then after the second potion, his body started to blur, as if he was rapidly moving back and forth within a span of an inch.

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the vial over the heads of both front line fighters. It crashed and shattered against the stone floor. When it did, the gel inside exploded, sending fire, glass and stone outward in a deadly blast.

Shayliss could feel the explosion as a punch as wide as a giant slamming into her front, sending her flying back to hit the wall behind. Trying to recover from the attack, she shook her head and got back to her feet. She had a hard time keeping her focus as her brain struggled to right itself again. Shaking her head, she pulled herself together and rushed forward, hoping to flank the tiefling.

Irabeth and Strune both had beaten her to the punch.

The holy warriors recovered from the bomb faster than she had and ran up to meet the enemy, positioning behind him and taking advantage of the situation. Like two dancers that had trained together for years, they moved in sync, swiping high when the other swiped low, thrusting forward together, parting aside when the tiefling tried to attack them with his longsword, and otherwise working together to give the tiefling as little advantage as possible.

However, with four of them surrounding him, that left Shayliss, Blueeye and Kaira unable to assist. For Kaira, it was that the movements of the five combatants were too fast and chaotic for her to safely fire an arrow into the mass. Of course, Blueeye did not have any room to work either, so he was forced to sit by his master's side. Shayliss would normally try to get in there, but even she could see that she would be more of a hindrance than anything. There had to be something she could do. She was getting antsy not being able to fight. In the corner of her eye, she could see Kaira and Blueeye trying to control their own battlelust.

“Do you have any ideas?” Shayliss asked her.

Before Kaira could answer, Shayliss saw a glint above her. Looking up, she had enough time to see a vial fly over her head to crash into the barricade. She was able to stay standing from the explosion, but it sent her sliding away from the door. Thankfully, the leather of her coat helped prevent any shards of wood from piercing her completely. However, that was the least of her concerns as she saw what the explosion did: destroyed the door into the hallway. With no door to hinder them, the demons on the other side started stepping into the room.

Her stomach fell. She wanted to do something during the fight, and her wish was just granted, but she did not want the fight to be against demons that outnumbered her at least five to one including both Kaira and Blueeye. She did have one advantage, though, if she could move fast enough, she could contain the fight to a one-on-one fight since only one demon could get through the door at a time.

With that thought guiding her, she moved forward to place herself in the way of the doorway. As she did, she called, "Kill any that get past me!"

The response went unheard from the clash of metal against metal. Sparks rained down on her as she parried her opponent's blade aside. She had to duck under the demon's retaliation which let her bounce up slashing. Her blade left a shallow cut up the demon's center. The demon launched forward from his backstep and his blade slid under her armpit, nearly hitting her heart. That also let him get close enough to slam a fist into her face.

Shayliss fell onto her back, the blow stunning her for a few seconds. Her vision blurred, but she could see arrows sailing over her head to pierce into demons. Following them, Blueeye launched himself at the demon trying to move through the doorway. Darkened blood sprayed from the demon's arm as the wolf's teeth sank into it. Using his weight, he sent the demon to the ground, effectively blocking the doorway for a second or two.

Shayliss used that time to push herself back to her feet, making sure not to get in the way of an arrow.

"Get back!" Kaira said, "We can hold the door!"

"Are you sure?"

Kaira's mouth curled into a predatory smile that made Shayliss take a step back, "We've been together for a long time. Besides, Blueeye hasn't gotten to fight much and you are too tired."

Shayliss knew that Kaira was right. While she would not admit it, she was not quite an endurance fighter yet. Being self-taught, she had not quite learned how to move around the battlefield efficiently. Not only that, but fighting in the foyer and holding back a tide of demons in the hallway had exhausted her to no end.

In silent agreement, Shayliss took a few steps backward until she was certainly out of immediate danger. Her body was still ready to fight, but this time she fought to control that urge while watching how her team was doing.

The alchemist had managed to hold out against the four fighters. Shayliss could see that his shifting body was making it very difficult for them to lay a strong hit against him. Attacks that Shayliss thought should have hit did not leave any wounds. If only they could dispel whatever he had on him. She was sure that if Snaga could, he would have tried already. She would have asked, but by how chaotic the fight was, she did not want to distract him with a question she most likely knew the answer to.

Snaga ducked under the swift swing of the alchemist's blade, the metal only centimeters from his skin. In a near mirror of her move, he bounced up from his duck to uppercut the tiefling's chin. If the tiefling was not blurred, it would have been a complete hit. Instead, his gauntlet passed right through. That did not stop the half-orc from twisting around to slam his elbow into the tiefling's belly, this time managing to land a hit.

As he did, Mordira tried to use that attack as a reference to know where to grab. She succeeded, her claws digging into the alchemist's armor. However, this did not halt the blurring spell, nor did it allow for the others to land guaranteed hits. Somehow, the spell still made it hard to hit despite the fact that he was essentially frozen in place. Seeing that, she dropped the alchemist and scratched at him. Her claws managed to leave gashes in him, sending him reeling backward toward Irabeth.

She waited for a split second before slashing horizontally. Her blade missed. In response, the alchemist spun around and aimed his weapon for her neck. Despite the man's enhanced speed, she managed to interpose her shield, the impact letting out a massive ring and sending her back for a step.

The tiefling pressed his attack, aiming blow after blow at her. He did not seem to care if she still held her shield up which allowed her to block every one. Next to her, Strune tried to slide in between them so that Irabeth could get a break, but the alchemist was too close to her. He barely left enough room for accurate attacks.

Shayliss figured out what he was trying to do. If he could keep up his assault, he would effectively take Irabeth out of the fight. Do it long enough, and he can gain the assistance from his allies. Kaira and Blueeye cannot hold the door forever. Shayliss was surprised that they were holding so strong anyway.

“Strune!” She yelled, “Get under his blade!”

Shayliss had no idea what happened. Something had left her body, that was the best way she would be able to describe it, and raced toward Strune. In the instant after she called out the order, Strune’s blade arm, which was positioned at her side away from the alchemist, suddenly lunged forward and caught the alchemist’s blade mid-swing. She should not have been able to move so fast, but there was the sound of metal against metal. The alchemist was forced back from Irabeth, who was able to catch her breath.

What the hell was that? Shayliss was no sorcerer or wizard. She did not have the patience to study nor any innate gift that she was aware of. So, how had she practically controlled Strune’s arm for her?

She shook her head. There was no time to worry about it. Maybe after she made sure the group survived this fight.

With the surprise move from Strune, the group was able to put more of an offensive against the alchemist. He was not able to keep up with the constant barrage of attacks, his only saving grace the fact that his blur spell was still active. However, even that was failing. More and more of his actual body was poking out of the blurring images. The spell’s duration must be at its end.

“Focus on defense!” Shayliss called, “Wait out his blur spell!”

There was no reaction from them, but she could see their stances subtly change to ones that had a lower center of gravity. That would allow them to stand their ground against hard attacks while sacrificing the ability to attack well. Which, at this point, is what was needed.

It only took another few seconds for the spell to finally fade completely. When it did, the others did not need Shayliss to tell them to attack. They charged forward, attacking him from four different sides. Now that there was nothing to protect him, there was no way he would survive their onslaught of attacks.

As the tiefling fell, everyone turned toward the door, preparing to charge it and deal with the demons trying to get through. However, all they saw was Kaira and Blueeye leaning against the wall to the right of the door. A pile of corpses lay in front of the doorway, making a very effective if crude and disgusting barrier.

No one spoke for a few moments. Then Shayliss coughed and said, "Well, since we have a moment to rest, let us do so. We keep on in an hour."

The garrison had become eerily quiet. The only sounds that could be heard were the various booms and cries from outside the garrison, the building's great stone walls blocking most of them out. This time, though, Shayliss found it comforting. After half an hour of fighting with little rest, she was ready to crash.

Apparently the rest of the group agreed with her. Kaira and Blueeye were across from the broken in doorway, sitting against the wall and ready to attack if a sudden attack occurred. A quick look at her quiver revealed that she was literally at two arrows left and the fact that she was not making more meant that she did not have the materials to do it. Mordria, one of the two members of the group who had been constantly on the front lines immediately collapsed to the floor, letting out heavy breaths and closing her eyes. Strune and Snaga retreated further into the room, investigating it.

Now that they had time to breath, Shayliss found that they were in a desecrated temple to Iomedae. Blood and filth smeared the floor of the elongated room. Six white stone statues of famous heroes lined the fall. Each statue bore deep gashes from claws, bloodstains all over and a few had limbs or weapons that were smashed apart. At the far end of the hall, a raised dais held an upturned alabaster altar. Sitting atop the altar was a hideous mass of severed limbs that have been stitched together into a monstrous insectoid shape. Surrounding the dias were seven ratty bedrolls.

Strune immediately moved to the altar, working with a grimace to clear and clean it. Because of her near obsessive need to keep the group's armor and weapons clean, she had cleaning supplies with her. She pulled them out and went to work, muttering a prayer while she did. Holy light glowed from her hands and infused into the stone of the altar. Snaga instead walked around the room, looking around and muttering to himself. After a minute of that, he sat down in front of one of the statues which depicted a woman with a floating spirit, and pressed his forehead against its base.

Shayliss left the group to their rest and turned to find Irabeth stepping into the adjacent room where the tiefling alchemist came out of. Curious, she followed the half-orc.

The room was once a priest's chamber. A long table and six chairs were pushed against the western wall. On the opposite wall, a tapestry depicting a map of Mendev hung from a silver rod. Long slashes and splatters of filth left it in ruins. A bedroll sat on the floor, and on the nearby table were an array of alchemical devices and a long wooden sword case wrapped with cords, as if it was ready for travel.

Irabeth looked around and let out a growl. Instead of saying anything, she continued her observations, moving toward the bedroll and map of Mendev. Shayliss stepped toward the alchemist table, interested in its contents. She pulled out drawers to find various toms and parchment on magic. Quickly glancing through each of them, she found one that, while not exactly what she was looking for, sounded like it would put her on the right path. The rest she set aside to give to the Crusaders to deal with as they pleased.

That done, she turned her attention to the sword case. It was a simple wooden case with rusted silver hinges and lock. Taking a few seconds to try, she could not open it on her own, so she grabbed one of the alchemist tools on the table and slammed its butt against the lock. It took two solid hits and five glancing blows to finally destroy it. At this point, Irabeth was looking over her shoulder as she set the tool down and pulled the case open.

Inside was a beautifully crafted sword in pristine condition. The handle was a simple cylindrical shape wrapped with strips of cloth on top of leather. Its pommel was a rounded nub that protruded only an inch or so from the handle. Attached to the handle was a thin hilt that curved upward slightly toward the blade. A triangular piece rose up from the hilt to help keep the blade fastened firmly to the rest of the sword. The blade itself was simple but beautiful. It was wide at its base, rising up to a point. Four feet in length, the blade had an edge that looked sharp enough to cut a feather falling on top of it. A groove was set into either side of its flat, lessening the weight and providing a means to etch in the enhancements which helped keep its sheen. A blade made simply to kill demons.

The reaction from Irabeth was immediate.

She let out a surprised gasp and Shayliss could feel the woman's shaking. Shayliss stepped aside to let her pick up the blade by its handle. There was a light in the half-orc's eyes that she had not seen before and the beginning of tears swirled in her eyes, "I thought I'd never see you again."

Shayliss tilted her head, “You have seen it before?”

Irabeth failed to blink the tears away, “It used to be mine.” She turned her wrist, examining the blade from all angles, “I sold it with to get Anevia a gift. Essentially it was her engagement ring. I believed that my father led me to the joy of my life, so I no longer needed his blade and the support it gave. I was wrong, and I did not think it would be so great to see it again.” She looked around her, “But how did it end up here?”

In the corner of Shayliss’s eye, she noticed the sword case again. Looking, she found the sheath of the blade laying in the case, under where the blade would be set out for display. Attached to the sheath was a note. From her position, she could clearly read what it said.

“Lord Staunton,

I believe you will find the enclosed weapon to be a singular and familiar delight, for it once belonged to your old ‘friend’ Irabeth. She sold it to Kandro Nyserian, of all people - I’ve no idea why Kandro’s been sitting on it for years - still would be, except his home got smashed by an ulkreth. Shame. He managed to save the sword and same here, begging for an escort north to Drezen, doubtless so he could give you the sword and weasel some cash to help him set up a new home. I hope you don’t begrudge the creativity I took - our friend Nyserian serves now as a warm suit for a verMLEK as punishment for only revealing the sword now instead of when he first acquired it. I suspect the blade will take to your brother’s touch nicely!

Your loyal servant,
Othirubo”

Irabeth apparently read it too and let out a growl, “Another one I thought I had dealt with.”

“Staunton?” Shayliss asked, “The name sounds familiar.”

The half-orc nodded, “He is a fallen paladin and the reason Drezen is no longer occupied by the Crusaders.”

Shayliss’ mind raced, trying to remember what she had heard about him, “He let the demons in, right? They could not break through the barrier around Drezen but he let them in.”

“Yes, and because of him, a great artifact of the Crusaders was lost to the demons.”

“I see.” She said, “This’ll be good for later. Right now, we have a task to do.”

After an hour of rest, the group continued their assault on the Grey Garrison. Despite being prepared for more opposition, when they reached the stairs up to the second floor there was nothing ready to do battle.

“Did we kill all of them, then?” Strune asked. Like the rest of them, she was doing her best to stand up straight, but exhaustion was clear on her face. Her longsword was held lower than normal and she was not even trying to hold her shield up to a guard.

“Maybe all of the weaker prey.” Kaira answered, “But the commander still stands.”

Shayliss started up the stairs, keeping her blade across her body in a casual guard, “There is no doubt about that. They will have strong demons protecting the Wardstone fragment.”

Strune followed, a dubious look on her face, “Are demons really that smart? All of their attacks from the initial assault on Kenabres to now have been aggression and little else.”

“Don’t underestimate our prey.” Kaira said, one hand on her quiver, ready to pull out one of her few remaining arrows, “They are smart enough to try and turn the barrier against the Crusaders. Do you think that they would not try to defend the fragment as much as possible?”

There was a moment of silence, “Fair.”

Shayliss had reached the top of the stairs. They led to a long hallway with six doors, three of them open. Immediately to her right was a closed door that was hastily reinforced with metal fittings. Next to that was an open door that led to a barracks. While it remained mostly in order, blood stains on the beds and floor gave Shayliss the impression that the guards who used them before the demonic attack were killed in their sleep or were pushed back to that room.

Across from the barracks was a war room. A circular table with eight chairs pushed into it had piles upon piles of papers scattered on top. Just with a quick glance, Shayliss could see that they were written with demonic handwriting. If the group

survived this encounter, then they could point the Crusaders to it. That would provide much needed information to the hurting fighting force.

At the other side of the hallway, a door led to a library. The bookshelves were in tatters, the books that were once held there ripped to shreds, burned, and otherwise defaced. Small smoke trails still rose from some of the ash piles. The last door remained shut.

Irabeth stood next to Shayliss when she was done with her cursory glance and nodded to the closed door next to her, “According to the map, that room is a scrying chamber. It has the stairs to go up to the last floor.”

Shayliss nodded and reached out to open the door. As she expected, it was locked shut. She took a step back and tried to kick it down, but the metal fittings held fast.

“We don’t have time to try and find a key.” She growled and turned toward Mordria, “You think you can break it down?”

The blind tiefling’s eyebrows rose in surprise, then in a slight mocking expression. But, she still stepped up to the door and braced herself. Again, Shayliss felt a strange force, this time emanating from Mordria. It was obvious that she felt it too, as her mouth opened in shock. As it did, she raised a shoulder into a tackle and rushed the door. The ground vibrated with each step and she blurred into motion. Her shoulder did not crash through the door so much as ripped it apart as if the door was made of paper. Wood splinters rocketed into the room and bounced around a bit from the energy before falling to the ground in hundreds of clatters.

The tiefling looked back at the group. Shayliss could see the scars under Mordria’s blindfolds pulse with a dark red light before return to their normal, non-illuminating state.

No one spoke for a moment. Then Shayliss moved to her side, “Do you feel alright?”

She nodded, surprise and confusion evident on her face, “What was that?”

“It happened to me as well,” Shayliss responded, “During the fight with the Alchemist. I have no idea what it is.”

Irabeth and Strune were both giving them a narrowed eyed look, calculation running in the backs of their heads.

Shayliss sighed, “No. We were not given power by any kind of god or goddess.”

Strune snorted but did not say anything. Irabeth shook her head and moved toward the center of the room. There, a pool of water was set into the floor. Body parts, organs and other matter were dumped into it, leaking blood and worse. The water was a dark red-brown color and was no longer translucent but almost opaque with spots of transparency left. Both warpriest and paladin stepped into the water, their bodies glowing with holy light.

Immediately, the water seemed to clean itself, the red-brown color evaporating into the air. Opaque cleared into translucent and the limbs were clearly visible. The holy warriors bent into the water, the liquid reaching their chests in those poses, and began tossing out the body parts. Watching, Shayliss could see that the aura around Strune was twice as bright as the one around Irabeth, making it difficult to look directly at her. Were they all given extra strength? Was it only within the confines of this building? There was a part of her that told her it was nothing but an illusion created out of fear for the future. As it whispered those words, the brand on her chest seared. Used to it, though, she simply gritted her teeth against the pain.

Minutes later, the scrying pool was clear. Before the pair could climb out, it started glowing. The light seemed to be drawn into their heads and they stood rigid with mouths open wide in confusion. And a second later, the light blinked out and the pair staggered slightly, fighting to keep their feet.

“Are you two alright?” Shayliss asked.

Both of them nodded and climbed out of the pool. “It gave us a vision.” Strune said, letting out slow calming breaths, “Of the Wardstone fragment.”

Shayliss blinked, “Since you are not panicking, I assume that it is still alright.”

“It is.” Irabeth answered, “There are two demons guarding it. They were talking to an illusion of a third. We could not hear what they were saying, but it is clear that they are not ready yet.”

“Well, that’s good.” Shayliss said, “Anything else?”

Both shook their heads.

“That’s helpful.” Shayliss sighed, “Alright. That does not change our task. Let’s get it done.”

Shayliss pushed open the large stone double doors at the top of the stairs. The sheer weight was almost too much for her body but she managed to do it without help from the others who were ready for any sudden attack.

None came, and the group stepped into a large circular room. There was no furnishings in it. The walls were made of the same grey stone as the rest of the building and torch scones lined them, torches lit. However, most of the light that illuminated the room was from its center, where a large pedestal rose from the floor. On top of the pedestal was a rounded cage made of black steel with no door or lock. Within that cage was, without a doubt in Golarion, the Wardstone Fragment.

When Shayliss had been imagining the fragment, her sense of scale for it was something that was palm size. Maybe large enough to be carried in two hands. However, looking at it now, she could not believe what she was seeing. The fragment was not something that could be carried by normal means. It was as large as her whole body and wider than her even if she was lying down.

A surprised gasp turned her attention to the three forms standing in front of the pedestal.

All three were demons. One was, at least at one point in life, a minotaur. It had the basic characteristics one might think of when they imagine a minotaur: massive horns that curled forward, a bull's head, body and legs but a human's arms, hands and ability to stand on two feet or hooves in their case. But that is where the resemblance to the mythical beast ended. Its fur, instead of being a flat brown, was a mismatch of reds and its eyes were a reptilian yellow. The horns had veins of power flowing through them and Shayliss was not sure if they moved or if it was just her imagination.

The second form, in between the minotaur and form number three, was a woman whose long, rounded ears told Shayliss that she was a half-elf. And a pretty one too, before the Abyssal energy crippled her. Plate armor with a skull motif covered most of her body. Her left foot was not fully planted on the ground and it took Shayliss a second to see that it was bent at an unnatural angle, as if her ankle had broken and she was never able to put it in place before it healed. Her right arm was

replaced by an insectoid limb that ended in three long, thin claws. Those claws were long enough to wrap around Shayliss's neck twice over, which is something she did not want to think about. In the woman's normal hand was a scythe that had seen battle by its blade's wear and tear.

The third form was nearly transparent, making Shayliss think that it was a sending rather than a physical form. She was the textbook image of a succubus: dark hair, blood red skin, curvy feminine form and demonic wings that stretched for miles. Despite floating, she was in a sitting position with legs crossed and hand under her chin.

All three of them were looking at the group now within the chamber. The minotaur was ready to charge forward, his nostrils flaring with every heavy breath. Succubus was giving all of them an appraising look, as if she was about to buy one of them from an auction. The middle demon, however, gave them all a look of pure terror. Was she really afraid of them? Or was it something else?

"Well, Jeslyn." The succubus said, "It looks like you finally have visitors. Please do be a dear and get rid of them. You know what will happen to you if you fail, don't you?"

The middle demon, Jeslyn, turned her head to face the succubus and gave her a shaky nod. She then turned to face the group and bared her scythe diagonally across her body, blade toward the ground.

There was going to be no dramatic dialogue. No hesitation. No way to tell of any weakness besides what they already found. The fight was about to start and it was going to be bloody.

Shayliss pulled out the Rod of Cancellation from her bag and gave it to Strune. "You are the most likely to get to the stone." She whispered at the strix's confused expression, "You have wings. Your main task is to find an opening and get the rod to the stone. Everyone else's tasks," she put emphasis on 'everyone else' to pull the others into the conversation, "is to get you that opening. Do not concentrate on killing. Concentrate on pulling them away from the stone. I will stay back and protect you."

There was no time for her to see if they understood. Before she had finished her orders, the minotaur let out a snarl deep enough to shake the whole room and charged right for them.

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Mordria saw that and slid herself in front of the minotaur. Again, there was an energy that emanated from her body as she grabbed onto the bull-man's horns. Her strength was able to stop his charge, sliding a couple of inches and leaving gouges into the stone. Once their momentum halted, Mordria let out a yell and started pushing forward, overpowering the bull and moving him toward the side of the room.

Snaga, on the other hand, had moved on Jeslyn, who had tried to sneak around the minotaur/tiefling pair. He leaped forward, low to the ground, and lashed out with a swift right hook. The scythe's shaft creaked under that force, somehow staying intact. Jeslyn let out a yell and shoved the half-orc back. As he stumbled, Jeslyn turned toward Strune and slid her foot backward to launch herself forward.

Snaga's body let out a pulse of pure force and seemed to blur. His hands stretched out, grabbed the woman's armor, and pulled her back toward him. She recovered quickly, though, and swept her scythe out. The pair were too close for the attack to be a great one, but the wood of the weapon crashed into Snaga's temple, nearly sending him to the ground.

Again, Jeslyn tried to launch for Strune and this time Snaga was too stunned to try and stop her. Shayliss's stomach fell hard as the woman managed to cross the distance between her and the strix in a second. She wondered how they were supposed to combat such speed, and how the woman could move so well despite her ankle. It was near god-like.

Irabeth, however, disagreed.

Shayliss was not sure how she did it, but the loyal half-orc paladin of Iomedae interposed herself between Jeslyn and her target. Scythe met shield in a shower of sparks that flared like a firework. Irabeth did not stumble backward or slide from the blow. Instead, she held her ground and thrust her shield forward, bashing Jeslyn in the torso. Jeslyn, unable to do anything about it, arced backward from the group remaining at the door and landed with one foot and massive claw digging hard into the stone.

Irabeth rushed forward, her line of motion as straight as an arrow, and slid the last bit of distance to swing her longsword in a diagonal slash downward. Jeslyn thrust

her claw arm forward, effectively blocking the blade with the limb's exoskeleton. She then swung her scythe in an awkward one-handed swing. The blade left a long shallow line in Irabeth's arm between two armor plates, sundering chain-links and leaving a bleeding gash.

As if he could smell her blood, the minotaur flung Mordira, who had taken him at the complete opposite end of the room, against the wall. The tiefling crashed hard against the stone, sending cracks webbing for feet, and fell limply to the ground. The bull prepared to bull-rush right for Irabeth, digging into the stone with his back hoof. However, before he could, a white blur followed quickly by an arrow made of pure holy energy tackled him.

Blueeye did not wait for his momentum to stop him. As soon as he had his paws back on the ground, he flung himself at the minotaur again, making a narrow angle with his line of attack. Fangs bit deep into the minotaur's side and the bull let out a howl of pain. Yet, the injuries from wolf and arrow did not seem to affect him as he spun to swing his horns at the smaller beast. There was a yelp from Blueeye and while he did not hit the wall like Mordira, he was stunned for a second.

As the minotaur was turning to finish off Blueeye, more arrows of light started raining down upon it. While most of them missed, most likely due to hasty firing, there were two that sunk deep into the minotaur's fur before disappearing in a burst of light.

The minotaur looked behind it to find Kaira, her quiver glowing with divine power, aiming two more arrows at it. It let out another earth-shaking roar and ran in an arc, his body mass preventing a sharp turn, to aim himself at the woman.

Kaira waited for him to straighten out and charge right for her before letting loose with the arrows of light. They sailed through the air, acting like normal arrows, and slammed hard into the bull-man's head. The impact caused a stutter step in the bull's motion and he had to slide for a bit, shaking his head as if to throw out the arrows, before course correcting himself and running again.

During that brief moment of hesitation, Mordria advanced on him. When she reached his side, she dug her claws into him, used that as a means to flip herself over him, and slashed his other side on her way back down.

Shayliss was just staring at the two fights, her longsword and grappling hook at the ready. What was happening? Granted, all of her allies were excellent fighters, even

during the mess in Varisia. But they had never gone all out like this before. They should have been exhausted to the point of collapsing like she was. Yet, they pushed on past that to finish the fight. Was it just that they never took off the cuffs before?

Or was Irabeth right? Was Iomedae really watching over them?

Either way, they had given Strune the chance she needed.

Shayliss traded a look with Strune and prepared to run forward with Strune. As soon as she took that first step, though, a burst of wind slammed her back and Strune flung herself forward, bolting like lightning toward the Wardstone Fragment.

Jeslyn saw that and shoved the two half-orcs aside with two scythe swings. The pair had no chance to do anything other than defend themselves with gauntlet and shield. Using their brief moment of hesitation, the half-elf-demon launched herself forward, her speed still amazing.

“Strune, evade!”

The now somewhat familiar burst of power flew from her and into the airborne woman. Strune apparently did not even need to look. She just tilted her body to the left, sending her flight curving to the left and around the Wardstone. Jeslyn’s scythe snapped chain links but did not deal any more damage. Strune let out a grunt of effort as she gave herself enough room to charge right for the Wardstone. And there was no one able to stop her. She thrust the Rod of Cancellation toward the Wardstone.

Suddenly, Strune let out a cry of pain, black energy suffusing her entire being, and veered off course. Her body slammed hard into the ground, the stone cracking with the impact. She slid at an angle away from the Wardstone, leaving a trail behind her in the floor, and finally slowed to a stop about twenty feet away. The Rod of Cancellation bounced multiple times, eventually spinning to a stop near Jeslyn's feet. The half-elf-demon lowered her outstretched hand, and bent down toward the Rod.

Before she could grab it, though, Shayliss charged in with a shout. Her longsword swept upward and met the shaft of Jeslyn's scythe. As she was not close enough to simply kick the Rod away, Shayliss flicked her grappling hook at it, sending it skittering a few feet away out of easy reach. Jeslyn let out a growl and shoved Shayliss away.

Shayliss was not having it, though, and swung her grappling hook at the retreating demon. The metal claws cracked against Jeslyn's head, staggering her toward the diagonal and Shayliss followed it up with another swing that crashed against the demon's temple. She stumbled at that blow and it took her a bit to start recovering. Shayliss used that window of time to rush for the Rod, hoping to at least guard it if not actually pick it up.

"Deradnu!" Jeslyn yelled.

A sudden roar turned Shayliss's attention toward the other side of the room. The minotaur, who was dealing with Mordria, Blueeye and Kaira, slammed his horns into the two close quarters fighters, sending them into the ground, and spun to face Shayliss directly. With a readying paw against the stone, he bent down, ignoring Kaira's arrows, and charged right for Shayliss. His hands and hooves dug grooves into the stone, sending the remains up into the air, and Shayliss had a sudden image of that happening with her blood.

When the minotaur was a second away from skewering her with his horns, a green form slid in his way and grabbed hold of his horns in two gauntleted fists. Snaga slid to a stop only inches from Shayliss and she could see his arms straining against the pure mass and strength of the minotaur.



The strange energy that has come to everyone else covered him as well and seemed to infuse his arms, giving him enough strength to hold the minotaur in place. Shayliss could see the minotaur try to throw Snaga away, twisting his head this way and that. But Snaga was not affected by it at all, his feet fully planted to the ground.

However, the attack from the minotaur did its job. Jeslyn rushed at Shayliss, slamming her body into Shayliss's and sent them both away from the Rod. Shayliss managed to hold her longsword up so that the descending scythe did not decapitate her, but the force of the sudden attack sent her to the ground and Jeslyn bore down upon her.

The impact shifted Shayliss's shirt slightly, revealing the brand on her chest. Seeing that, Jeslyn's mouth curled up in a small smile, "You are the failed experiment, then. Supposed to be one of the greatest products they ever created. Yet, you escaped." Her scythe rose, "I'll be glad to kill you so they can try again."

Despite imminent death coming down upon her, Shayliss blinked at the half-elf-demon. Failed experiment? What on Golarion did she mean by that? What was the brand supposed to do?

Focus, moron! A voice yelled in her, Get out of the way!

Before the scythe could descend, Jeslyn was slammed from behind and flew off of the prone Shayliss. A second later, Irabeth stood above Shayliss, holding out a hand. It took a second for Shayliss to switch gears from Jeslyn's statement to Irabeth's hand, but she reached up to grip it. Without hesitation, despite the sweat pouring from her forehead, Irabeth practically threw Shayliss to her feet and said, "Get the Rod!"

Dazed, Shayliss looked around to find the Rod laying down on the ground, a foot away from the still struggling Snaga and minotaur. She ran up to grab it, but a surprised grunt next to her halted her movement. She looked up just in time to see the half-orc arcing over her to slam hard against the curved wall behind her, the magic film surrounding him completely dissipating. The minotaur, now not held back by the summoner, pawed at the ground ready to charge at Shayliss.

Apparently it had become used to the arrows still firing at it because it was completely ignoring them, and Mordira and Blueeye were too far away to do anything. They were trying to reach her, but the distance was too great. Strune was

struggling to rise, but whatever spell was used against her was too great and Irabeth was too busy keeping Keslyn busy.

Shayliss was on her own.

Realizing that, she braced herself. The minotaur did not seem to notice her center of gravity shift as it pawed once more before letting out a roar and charging forward.

There was no time for hesitation. She dove to her right as soon as roar was let loose and felt the tip of one horn rip the leather out of her shoe on its destructive path. She rolled to a slide and immediately tossed herself to the side again, feeling the wind of the minotaur's passing against her chest. The third pass sent a horn digging into her torso, leaving a long line of blood where her armored coat failed to protect her, and the fourth nearly skewered her completely.

As the minotaur came in for his fifth pass, Shayliss whipped her grappling hook around twice before sending it low to the ground at the beast. Metal claws latched into flesh and meat. A roar rose from the minotaur again, this one a pained roar. Shayliss let out a cry of her own as she pulled the hook hard.

She had not really expected to do much, but the minotaur must have been losing steam like she was as her pull managed to send the beast crashing to the ground. She tried to pull the hook back to her so she could use it again, but the claws were too deep into the minotaur's limb. All she could do was strain the magically enhanced rope and barely move the beast.

However, the minotaur did not attempt to rise to his feet. It took Shayliss a second to realize that the beast was dead, but was then promptly confused. Did her hook really kill him? How?

A flash of light brought her attention to one of Kaira's arrows of light fading from his side, under his armpit. Her addled brain could not process that for a second.

It was not given much of a chance to as Kaira, Blueeye and Mordria approached. Mordria and Blueeye continued running past her to stand over the still down Snaga while Kaira halted at Shayliss's side.

“Are you alright?” Kaira asked.

Shayliss shook her head, trying to clear her mind, “Yeah. I’ll be fine.” She looked down and found the Rod still laying there, miraculously. Picking it up, she sighed, “This is too hectic. We have the minotaur down, but Jeslyn is not going to let us get anywhere close to the Wardstone now.”

As she said the half-elf-demon’s name, she turned to look at the battle that was still raging between Jeslyn and Irabeth. Jeslyn had an aura of purple energy around her which seemed to strengthen her as she pounded against Irabeth’s shield with her scythe. Irabeth was kneeling, holding her shield up toward Jeslyn, and was managing to hold on. However, with each attack, Irabeth was sliding backward and more force was getting through. Irabeth was tiring, just like everyone else.

“We have to end this now.” Shayliss growled.

Kaira nodded, “Can I see the Rod?”

Passing the Rod over, Shayliss watched as Kaira examined it. The hunter bounced it on her palm, twisted her wrist while holding it, and measured its length. She then nodded, “I can do it.”

Shayliss blinked, “I’m sorry?”

“I can shoot the Rod into the Wardstone.”

Shayliss blinked again, “Um. I was not expecting that, but okay.” Her mind was chugging along, coming up with the pieces of a plan, “We can do this. I’ll distract Jeslyn, acting as if I am about to touch the Wardstone. When I get her distracted enough, fire.”

Kaira nodded and prepared her bow. Shayliss, her stomach churning with nerves, gripped her longsword harder and looped her grappling hook back on its clip. With one last heavy breath, she charged the Wardstone, letting out a loud yell.

Shayliss had expected to gain Jeslyn’s attention. She, however, did not expect that the woman’s response would be as quick and explosive as it was. One moment, she was charging for the Wardstone, only about five feet away from it. The next, the blade of a scythe pierced her chest, going completely through her body, and sending a spray of red blood outward.

She could not feel the pain of the attack. All she felt was an icy chill that spread throughout her body. There was a push against her body, and then she was flung backward, crashing hard into the ground, though she could not feel it. That chill continued to spread, touching the tips of her fingers and pelvis. After a while, her chest went numb. That numbness followed in the chills wake, shutting down her body bit by bit. The only thing she could feel was the brand, still searing her as if it was doing its best to keep her heart beating.

Shayliss saw Jeslyn stand over her. The woman's mouth was moving, but Shayliss could not hear anything coming out of it. The ceiling far above her started blurring out of focus. Jeslyn was doing the same as she raised that scythe up to finish the job that apparently was too slow for her.

There was a thin white line that flew above Shayliss's sight. Jeslyn saw it flying and turned to watch its progress. There was a burst of white light.

Then nothing.

The first thing that came back to Shayliss was the sensation of rolling back and forth. It was something she had never felt before. Her body was standing still, her feet planted onto some kind of surface. Yet, some kind of force was pushing against her, as if someone was telling her to move to the left. That force then shifted as if someone on her left was telling her to move to the right. Shayliss had a hard time placing what was happening, but then something Valtyra told her resonated in her mind.

Was she on a ship?

She could not see yet. All around her was blackness. It was not like night, as during night she would still be able to see general shapes. This was as if her sight was replaced by the color black. Nothing else was visible. However, she was starting to hear sounds.

Waves. Water crashing against a surface. Men and women calling out orders and confirmations. The creaking of wood from age as well as the pounding of feet both armored and not against said wood. Pattering of rain against cloth and wood, though she was not able to feel the rain.

Slowly but surely, her sight started returning, confirming what she pretty much figured out: she was on a ship. A pirate ship to be precise. While all ships looked alike to her, there were some differences between the ship she stood on versus any other that she learned from Val.

This ship's wooden deck, and possibly hull though she could not see the hull right then, was worn down. The planks were warped, the rings barely visible from the wear and tear caused from so many feet. Sailors, who were passing back and forth by her, were the definition of ruffians. Muscles bulged from holed clothes or armor and scars were clear on whatever skin was exposed. Some walked the deck, checking for damage. Some climbed up and down the rigging hanging off of the masts and one stood at the crow's nest attached to the center, and longest, mast. The sails attached to those masts were arcing toward the front of the ship, being pushed by the wind. The only color the sails had were black. They held no nation's colors nor crest.

None of that really answered why she stood on the deck of a ship, though. The last thing she remembered was getting a scythe to the gut. Inside of the Grey Garrison. That does not match anything close to a ship currently in a light rainstorm. Not only that, but looking down at her belly and chest, she could see that she no longer had any gaping wound where the scythe slammed into her.

Then, there was a voice that sent pangs of longing shooting through her body, “Shayliss.”

Those pangs turned into hooks that latched onto Shayliss’s muscles, locking her body in place. She could not move. If she turned and the voice was not real, then she feared her mind would break down. It would shatter like glass. Yet, she wanted to turn. She wanted to see the half-elf again. She wanted to tackle the woman she had been looking for two years down to the ground. What happened after that would be something she mostly dreamed about. Those warring emotions and urges prevented her from moving.

“You are not going to turn around?”

Shayliss could imagine the cocky smile on the half-elf’s face, daring her to do something. She focused on that, using the image to make herself turn around. To face that smile and see it for the first time in years.

Valtyra stood there. She was there. It did not look like the woman aged a day since they last saw each other. Long blonde hair pulled back in a tail. Blue eyes that washed over Shayliss like the water below them. Dual rapiers strapped to her sides, the etchings on them pulsing slightly. Armored coat, which Shayliss modeled her own after, swaying slightly in the wind. Her white button down shirt was soaked from the rain and her black leather pants pressed against her legs.

Shayliss did not wait anymore. She could not restrain herself. She ran right for Valtira, arms wide. Shayliss was going to bear hug the woman. However, she could not touch Valtira. She just passed right through her, nearly falling from the side of the ship as her momentum carried her too far. Her mind reeled in confusion at the result of her perceived tackle.

“I am sorry.” Valtira said.

Shayliss turned again to find Valtira, or what looked like Valtira, giving her a sorrowful expression.

“I am not Valtyra. I am merely an image of her. I needed something to use to talk to you, and I saw her.” Her head turned toward the center of the ship, “And the desire to be on a ship was great. I have never been on one myself, but I know what it is like.”

Shayliss narrowed her eyes, a mix of anger and sorrow roiling around her body, “What are you?”

‘Valtyra’ let out a slow breath, “I am, in the simplest of terms, the Wardstone. The will and power that it held within it. When you used the Rod of Cancellation, it broke the bonds of the stone, sending the power bursting out like water from a dam. I do not have much time.” As she spoke, Shayliss could see her hands, once solid seeming, start dissolving into white light. It was slow, but Shayliss figured that it would speed up as this conversation went on.

“Why?” Shayliss asked, “Why did you need to do all of this?”

“I wanted to talk to you. To show you what was at stake, what you prevented from happening, and my history. From this, I hope you will understand your destiny.”

Shayliss stood there, blinking for a second before her mouth curled up in a smirk, “My destiny? You sound like every story ever.”

The Wardstone returned the smirk with one of its own, “True. But where do you think those concepts came from? There are heroes born every day and you are no different.”

It swept a hand out into the vast ocean the ship sailed on, and the world shook. At least, everything in the world except the pair of them shook. Miles away from the ship, the water bubbled and rose. Objects were being pulled up from the ocean as if they had been underwater for years and were only now allowed to rise back up to the surface. Shayliss could see residential homes, the outer walls of the city visible behind those homes, and a towering building. In front of the tower stood about a dozen people, all of them armored. They stood around a large stone. One of those people was clad in brilliant golden armor and stood taller than any other person. He had an angelic longsword strapped to his side and a golden halo made entirely of blades was held over his head.

“This is my first memory.” The Wardstone said, stepping forward to stand next to Shayliss, “In a ritual led by the Hand of the Inheritor himself, I was born, infused with the Wardstone. Over the next few days, the other Wardstones are born in the same way. The Hand of the Inheritor gave me my task of defending the border with my brethren which I had done for centuries. This happened a decade before the Second Crusade began.”

Before Shayliss could respond, the Wardstone waved its hand again and the scene changed slightly. The buildings and tower remained, but the stone was gone and the figures shifted. Now there was a stage and on top rose three stakes that Shayliss recognized immediately: pyres. A familiar looking man in silver armor spoke to a crowd of people as soldiers tied a form to each of the pyres. With a prayer, the man set the pyres on fire, burning the victims alive.

Shayliss turned her gaze sharply away, not wanting to see the very realistic burning of men and women. As she did, the Wardstone gave her a sympathetic expression, “Lord Hulrun burns suspected witches in front of my tower, in front of me. Even I do not know if they were true witches or not. This event marks the start of the Second Crusade.”

Shayliss looks up in time to see that the scene has changed completely. Now she looked from what must have been on top of the tower down upon the city of Kenabres. There, a war was being waged between demons and mortals. Smoke rose from burning buildings, screams could be heard in the distance, and flying forms descended upon those running around on the ground. A shadow blinks into visibility above the tower, and Shayliss watched as a very familiar demon, the same one that killed the Silver Dragon Terrendalev, dove right for the Wardstone like a bird of prey.

With blade and whip in hand, the demon charged right for the stone and swung down with the power of a demi-god. The blade connected with the Wardstone and Shayliss was, for some irrational reason, expecting the Wardstone to shatter under that massive power

The opposite happened, however. The blade in the demon’s hand cracked and shattered in a loud sound of metal tearing magnified by the weapons sheer size.

The demon was about to circle around to attack the stone again with his whip, but then Terrendalev crashed into the demon, sinking talons into its chest, nearly killing it. Both forms raced away and out of sight.



“The start of the Fourth Crusade.” The Wardstone said, “An attack on Kenabres. It was the first time the demons made a serious attempt at destroying the Wardstone Barrier. It failed, but left a crack in me that leaked out power. The Wardstone Barrier became less effective, though no one noticed it. That is the main reason the demons were able to successfully invade Kenabres this time.”

The image of Kenabres below changed and evolved to something that looked like what the city was before the latest demonic attack. Footsteps sounded from a set of stairs leading down from the Wardstone chamber.

An armored dwarf appeared, huffing out heavy breaths and staggering. Only a few steps behind him was a few years younger Irabeth. The half-orc had swiped her longsword at the dwarf, but he dodged it with much effort. However, that dodge sent him into the Wardstone and the sound of searing skin and cracking armor came from the point of contact.

The dwarf let out a scream but managed to dodge a second attack from the paladin. On his way up, he bashed his one handed hammer into Irabeth’s knee, bone audibly cracking under the blow. He was going to make a final blow on Irabeth’s head, but the sound of more footsteps from the stairs made him change his mind. He ran to the edge of the tower and leapt off. Moments later, he could be seen on a massive summoned wasp racing from the city.

“A traitor within the Crusaders kills many as he tries to sabotage me. Irabeth got on his trail fast enough, though, and prevents him from doing anything. But he got away.”

Now Shayliss was looking upon the Wardstone Chamber where, she assumed, her body lay still. This was before the fight as two forms stood in front of an uncaged Wardstone fragment. The larger form, a humanoid demon with a long thin tail, clawed hands, and curling horns where her eyes should have been, raised both hands up and seemingly summoned a large black cage down upon the Wardstone, trapping it in the state the infiltrator group found it in. It then turned to the form of Jeslyn and gave her the order to defend the fragment until a crystal of appropriate size could be found.

“Minhago uses a Wish spell to request her patron god to create the cage. It is, of course, successful and traps me within it, unable to do anything. And the last memory.”

The scene changed one final time, and this time it was a moving image. Shayliss was whisked around the city of Kenabres, helpless to do anything but watch as a surge of demonic and abyssal energy blasted across the city. Those citizens who did not immediately die suffered the worse fate of being infected by the abyssal energy, similar to the Mongrelmen. Crusaders, lay people, everyone was affected.

Shayliss knew that event would never happen now, since they succeeded in their mission, but it was still sickening to see. The whole city would have been weakened or utterly destroyed. A major fraction of the Crusaders would have been killed or turned into demons. That would have practically determined the demon's victory against the Crusaders.

“What would have happened, in five hours time.” The Wardstone stated, “Of course, I cannot know for certain, but based on conversations with Jeslyn and Areelu Vorlesh, I figured that Areelu would find the stone within three hours and finish the ritual needed in two more. If you had hesitated further with your attack, there is no guarantee that you would have made it in time.”

Shayliss blinked, “What do you mean?” It was still hard for her to separate the Wardstone from the image of Valtyra and it became even harder when she saw the frown form on that achingly familiar face.

“Within minutes of her finding the crystal, the Grey Garrison would have held their defenses, no matter what distractions you threw at them. Not only that, but Areelu would have arrived and in your current state, nothing you did would affect her.” The Wardstone turned toward Shayliss, letting the still running image of Kenabres's destruction fall slowly back into the ocean. “That is what I hope to amend today. Destiny has led you here, though you do not see it. I hope to give you the power you need to face that destiny and come out on top.”

Shayliss shook her head, “I still don't understand.” She pointed at the space where those scenes played out in the ocean, “What was all of that about? Why show me that?”

The Wardstone stepped closer to her, “Four Mendevian Crusades have started and failed. In my lifetime I have seen and felt the suffering of Mendev from my tower. Suffering caused not only by the demons but by the same Crusaders that were supposed to be fighting against it.”

Shayliss flinched backward. There were a couple of times she saw Valtira show passion for something. Usually it was about her 'son' Bubnug the goblin. However, she never saw such emotion from the real Valtira. It honestly scared her a bit. She expected the Valtira in front of her to draw her blades to enhance her words.

Instead, the Wardstone only stepped again, "And if the demons succeed here, there is no stopping them from taking the fight to the rest of Golarion. No one will be able to stand against them. However, destiny has placed you here, now, where you have a chance. All of you, to fight and end the demonic threat once and for all."

Shayliss could not move. It was not like she was frozen in place. More like her brain could not process what the Wardstone had just said so its response to not think at all. After a moment of silence, she finally let out a stuttering, "I can't." Using those two words as a crutch, she swallowed and followed up with, "I cannot do this. I did not want to join the grand fight against the demons. I only wanted to find Valtira. I'm sorry, but destiny can wait."

The Wardstone tilted its head, which sent chills of memory down Shayliss's spine, "You would sacrifice the world for one woman?"

Hesitation. Shayliss was ashamed to admit it to herself, but she actually hesitated at the Wardstone's question. She wanted to scream that of course she would. That Valtira was more than the world to her. But something held her back.

The Wardstone nodded, "I see. Well, you always have the choice to run away. But I do not think you will." It moved within an inch of Shayliss and said, "I trust you will make the best choice."

It leaned forward and Shayliss felt her lips on her forehead. With that, the world around her darkened and darkened until all of her sensations faded away.

"I am alive. Help me." Came that familiar voice.

Shayliss awoke.

She could feel the cold uneven stone under her cheek. Her body was pounding. Not with pain. It was hard for her to grasp the feeling that pulsed throughout her system. The best thing she could come up with was that something within her was trying to burst out as it no longer had room within her. In time with her heartbeat, her skin felt as if it was stretching and while it was not painful, it was uncomfortable. She needed to release whatever was within her as soon as she could. That desire burned within her like the brand on her chest.

With a groan, she pushed herself to her knees. It was a slow process and as she did, she could see Snaga and Mordria to her right doing the same, letting out similar groans.

“Everyone alright?” Shaylis asked, her voice sounding deeper than normal.

“I think so?” Mordria answered, “Not sure what is going on anymore.”

Shayliss looked around her. Along with Mordria and Snaga, the rest of their group except for Irabeth were struggling to rise. Irabeth, kneeling next to Strune, held her longsword out toward a vague form floating in the air. What surprised Shayliss, though, was that the half-orc was caked with a dark powder. It was a familiar color and it took her a few seconds to realize what it came from. As if to confirm, she moved her gaze to the altar where the Wardstone Fragment had stood.

The Wardstone was gone. The only signs that it had been on the altar in the first place being fine powder of stone covering the altar’s top and some bits and pieces of its remains sticking up.

She then realized why the floor was so uneven. Chunks of the Wardstone littered the ground, radiating from the altar. Most of the pieces were stuck into the floor and wall, leaving a webwork of cracks running along them. Hanging against one wall, pierced by dozens of shards, is the corpse of Jeslyn, the half-elf demon. About twenty feet to Jeslyn’s left hung the corpse of the minotaur, already dead by the time the Wardstone exploded but still pierced by many shards.

Yet, she and the rest of her group were untouched save for stone powder covering their bodies.

Before she had a chance to really think more about that, the floating form Irabeth's sword was pointed at started slowly descending back toward the ground as if the succubus was going to land. Instead, she made it to about five feet from the ground and stared at the group as a whole.

“You insects can be trying.” The succubus growled, “But you only delay the inevitable. Now that I cannot turn the Crusaders, I must go-“

Irabeth let out a roar and charged at the demon, sword ready to piece the form's midsection. Even if she hit the form, she would not be able to do much other than maybe disperse the Sending. Speaking about turning the Crusaders must have sparked something in her instincts.

The succubus, as if expecting the charge, waved a hand in front of her. Shayliss could see some kind of power radiate from the hand, only visible by the way it deformed and distorted the area around it. She was not sure that Irabeth could see it as it wrapped itself around the half-orc's neck.

By her reaction, the spell had tightened itself around her neck. She fell to the ground, dropping her blade and shield to rake at her neck. Her fingers could clasp nothing, the spell intangible but effective at shutting off her airway.

The remaining power raced by the half-orc, aimed at the rest of the group. A tidal wave coming to descend upon them. Shayliss did not have time to do anything but watch the surge race toward her, prepared to do to her what it was doing to Irabeth. She braced for the physical force of the spell as it tightened around her own neck.

But it never came.

She felt the spell roll around her like water around a stone. There were tingles of energy brushing against her skin, leaving lines circling her neck, but there were no invisible fingers clamping down. Looking around, Shayliss could see that no one else was affected by the spell and were forcing their way to their feet. She did the same, trying to ignore the strain against her whole system.

The succubus gives the group a look of annoyance that holds a hint of surprise within it.

“You will not just fall over and die, will you?” She whispered, barely audible, “No matter.” She raised her voice, “No matter if the Wardstone is protecting you. You will fall soon enough to my slaves.”

While holding the spell upon Irabeth, the succubus held out her second hand toward the side of the altar. At the spot she chose, a long red and black line ripped through the air, distorting reality around it. A second later, the line widened into a tall imperfect ellipse as if it was a door opening up. Through it, ten skeletal humanoid demons stepped into the chamber.

While it had been a while, Shayliss recognized the grey skinned Babau demons from the initial invasion of Kenabres. She and the group had been able to kill them, but it was a six against one fight and it could have killed them easily. The only reason it did not was most likely because it was playing with them. These babaus do not look like they are wanting to play, though.

Behind the babaus, more demons prepared to enter. There were demons that looked like a crude and ugly mix between vultures and men, four armed towers of flesh, muscle and cruel intelligence, and demons that were a cross between woman and snake with six arms and claws that seemed a mile long. All of them emitted auras of power, confidence and bloodlust. Even without Strune’s gasp of surprise and despair, Shayliss could tell that if they were to get out the hope of survival in the next few seconds would dissipate.

They had to figure out a way to close that portal and fast. The problem was that she could still feel the power within her bursting to get out. It was straining her system and preventing her from being able to move more than twitches.

“I don’t think so.” The voice of the Wardstone whispered in Shayliss’s ear.

Valtyra’s blurry and translucent form appeared in front of Shayliss. In front of the others, more forms appeared: A cloaked and hooded woman stood in front of Kaira, the un-fused form of Nephalim was next to Snaga who had the real Nephalim fused to him, an angel with armor bearing the Sword of Valor floated on wings of white by Strune and a priest bearing a crest in the form of a woman standing in front of a sunburst stood by Mordria.

All five of the translucent forms pointed hands or weapons toward the portal. As soon as all of them were raised, a surge of power that rocked the Grey Garrison to

its core lanced out, converging together halfway between the group and the portal. From that convergence point, a single massive column of holy energy roared across the remaining space, leaving a gash as wide as three Shaylisses heightwise.

The babaus managed to leap out of the way of the energy surge. However, Shayliss instinctively knew that the demons were not the true target of the Wardstone. Not only that, but she was sure that it would not have mattered if they stayed in the way. The column would have just gone right through them undeterred before colliding with the portal.

Shayliss could hear the death screams of dozens of demons from behind the portal, unable to stop the power that spelled their doom. Then, there was a deafening screech like metal ripping under force as the portal disintegrated, leaving only strands of magic flying into the air to dissolve.

Finally, she heard a terrified cry from the floating succubus. She looked up to see that, just like the portal, the succubus' Sending was dispersing. Before the Sending failed entirely, Shayliss watched as the succubus' gear was blasted apart, her skin ripping open in multiple spots, and one of her horns pulling out of her head painfully.

Then the image was gone. The portal was gone. The only things remaining within the chamber were Shayliss, her group and the ten babaus who managed to survive the colossal power surge. Irabeth was no longer struggling against the spell that was suffocating her, but she was having trouble rising to her feet. In contrast, Shayliss no longer felt like the power within her was struggling to get out. It was still there, but it was as if it and her body finally reached an agreement to behave. By the expressions and postures of the others, it looked like they were in the same boat.

The babaus let out loud roars that did not shake the Garrison like the power did, but loud enough to discomfort Shayliss. They then raised their arms and something told Shayliss that they were attempting to summon more of their kind. However, the spells failed. The remains of the Wardstone's power must have cancelled out their spells and within a second they realized it. Seeing that apparently spells have no effect for them in this room, the babaus charged forward, letting out their roars again.

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Snaga and Mordria literally leapt into action. The half-orc summoner landed in front of the charging horde and braced himself as if he was ready to hold back a tidal wave. When the first of the babaus approached him and tried to slide around him, the summoner objected heavily. With one gauntleted fist, he clotheslined the demon, sending it crashing down to the ground. Shayliss thought she could physically feel the impact from where she stood.

Another babau attempted to get past Snaga and failed. However, two moved around him at once and he was not able to catch both of them before they were already past him.

Mordria caught both of them before they could move too close to Shayliss. Her claws lashed out, leaving deep gouges in its torso. When the injured demon turned to face her, she dug her claws into its body, gripped something within it, and twisted her body. The demon went flying so fast that Shayliss did not even notice its trajectory before its body crashed hard against the rounded ceiling.

While it peeled itself from the indent it made, Mordria moved to babau number two. She dipped into its defenses like a brawler and gave the demon two slashes in its belly. It gave Mordria a right hook that bashed into her cheek, but the only reaction she gave was a grimace of annoyance before returning the favor with interest. Her right hook sent the demon crashing and flipping over the center altar, its body limp after landing head first.

The babau Mordria tossed into the air finally pushed itself out of its indent to freefall on top of Mordira. Its progress was interrupted by a pair of holy arrows that pierced a shoulder and leg. It spun in the air to find that Blueeye followed the arrows' path and made the twenty foot leap to crash hard into it. They both sailed through the air in a curve that took them beyond where the portal was opened.

Blueeye was sent rolling after landing but quickly got back to his paws and leapt at the demon again. He ripped out a huge chunk of flesh from the demon and then took it to the ground. Another demon, pulling away from the mess around Snaga, charged for the wolf and prepared to bash his spine into the ground. Before it could, though, another pair of arrows slammed home in its head, sending it flying backward and into the ground.

Kaira let another series of arrows into the brawl around Snaga, injuring another demon and pushing it away from the crowd. That demon growled and leapt over

the whole group and landed a dozen feet away from Kaira before rushing toward her.

Strune came out of nowhere. Like a cannonball made out of holy energy, she collided into the demon, searing its flesh and sending it across the chamber to crash into the stone wall. The impact shook the whole room yet the demon managed to survive long enough to try to lash out at Strune. Its claws only left scratches in her armor as she pulled back her shield to bash its head in.

Seeing that this was a one-way fight, the other babaus worked to disengage from Snaga. However the half-orc was not having it. He was able to hold two of them back, but the other four managed to get away and as soon as they did, they blinked out of existence.

The two that remained struggled against Snaga, but could not avoid having five people just descend upon them. With quick claws and blade, the remaining two demons were killed easily.

The Siege of Grey Garrison was successful.

~ E ~

30 Arodus, 4692 AR; Defender's Heart, Kenabres

Defender's Heart was a cramped place even before the fight of the Grey Garrison. Now, however, with both the remaining Crusader force and the mongrelmen trying to all fit in the place, there is barely any moving room. And that does not shine true anywhere more than in the tavern portion of the inn, where dozens upon dozens of men and women all crowd together around the tavern tables. They are all either playing Argus or observing those who do, letting out loud cheers for impressive moves or playful jeers at the losers. It was as if the men and women were all one big family having a family night.

Shayliss was leaning against the railing that overlooked the tavern, watching the post-battle festivities. While she did not know the specific numbers, she knew that the 'Siege of Grey Garrison,' as the fight for the Wardstone Fragment was named, had the lowest casualty rate as any mission or skirmish since the invasion of Kenabres. The Crusaders and Mongrelmen were both celebrating the successful offensive by taking a few days of rest.

Beside her was a large book open to a chapter break. Set into the binding of the book as a bookmark is one of her many sketches of Valtyra. It was among her belongings that she took back from those robbers. She still did not understand all of the book's topic but she could feel that something had changed since coming back from the Grey Garrison.

She took a second to look down at her hands, dirty and calloused but otherwise whole. The power that she felt in the Wardstone Chamber was still within her, even if it was not trying to break out of its fleshy cage. From talking with the others, it seemed like everyone had a very similar experience as her in the Chamber after the Wardstone shattered. Similar visions, similar power, everything. Yet, when she talked with Irabeth, who was right there beside them during the whole skirmish, the half-orc paladin did not have the experience nor the power.

Shayliss did not understand what had happened to them, but it was pretty obvious that they had been given power by the Wardstone. She was afraid of what that meant, though.

'Help me' 'Help me' 'Help me'

“May I join you?”

Shayliss jumped at the sudden voice from behind her. She felt her arm hit the book on the railing next to her and worked to catch it before it fell on the unsuspecting men and women below. Once she was sure everything was secure again, she turned to find Anevia standing in the doorway right behind her.

The scout was standing on both feet without any issue. She must of had one of the healers patch her up while everyone else was at the Grey Garrison. The change in her posture was subtle one now that she did not have to worry about putting pressure on her leg, but it was a powerful one that gave her an air of confidence that finally matched the rest of her.

She gave Shayliss a small smile, “Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you.”

Shayliss snorted, “You’re just good at your job.” She waved a hand, motioning the other woman toward her, “Please.”

Anevia nodded and walked to the railing, standing to Shayliss’ right, “Where’s your hook?”

It took Shayliss a second to realize what she meant, “Oh, Snaga has it. He said he wanted to study it. I asked what he was doing, but he only said that it was a secret.”

“He’s actually talking to you?”

Shayliss shrugged, “Only one word sentences. But I think he is finally starting to trust us.”

“That’s good to hear.” Anevia watched the events below them before asking, “Why don’t you join them?”

Shayliss let out a bark of laughter, “Even if I could fit down there, I have never been good at Argus.”

Anevia’s eyebrow rose, “Really? I have seen a couple games of yours with the other Crusaders. While you did not win, I think you had some great strategies.”

“Like you said, I didn’t win any of them. I only won once against Kaira when we were learning the game in Neatholm and that was by luck more than anything.”

“How many games have you played since?”

Shayliss took a second to remember, “Maybe four? All of them losses.”

Anevia nodded, “How many has Mordria played?”

“At least fifty. She spends a lot of free time in here playing with the soldiers. I think the only people she has lost against is you, Irabeth and one of the Crusaders. I think her name is Elie.”

Anevia nodded again, as if Shayliss was giving her the answers she was expecting, “One last question.” She points a finger toward one of the tables, “Tell me what’s going on in that game.”

Shayliss blinked but turned her head toward the table in question. Two Crusaders were sitting down in front of the makeshift board a Crusader who used to be a woodcarver made for the game. Surrounding them were mongrelmen and Crusaders alike and it seemed to be a particularly intense game as the faces of the onlookers were all focused on the game with concentration only seen on the battlefield.

The game itself had been going on for about half an hour. One side had no Control Gems flipped over so he had not lost a round yet while the other side had two gems flipped. If she lost this round, she would lose the game. Yet, something drew Shayliss’ attention to the board itself. It was fairly covered with cards and with her height she was able to make out that the winning side was using the Varisian deck while the other was using the Worldwound deck, a very unpopular choice among the Crusaders for many reasons. But what made the board interesting was that the Worldwound forces were slowly overrunning the Varisian forces. Something that should have been easy to do with the Worldwound before that round. So, why was it only now working?

That’s when she got it.

“The Worldwound player sacrificed her first two rounds, probably a lot of forces as well, to get exactly what she needed to start getting the upper hand. She had been letting her opponent beat down the units she did not need so she could get more cards in her hand later in the game.”

“Didn’t she wait too long, though?” Anevia asked, seemingly pleased to hear Shayliss’ answer.

Shayliss studied the board harder. Her instincts were telling her that the Worldwound player did wait too long. Even if she won this fight, she would still have two more rounds to win unless the Varisian player gave up which is not something that the Crusaders tended to do even when playing Argus. One lesson Shayliss learned quickly when playing against the Crusaders is that you cannot force them into surrender. They would rather die fighting than give up. Which is probably a reason the game was still going.

Yet, something was tugging at her brain. Something that made her ignore her instinct and really study the game. She looked at the cards on the table, the position of the terrain and other cards that would remain on the board even after a round ended. All of those still pointed to it being too late. It was not until she went through the cards she knew were in both decks that she realized what the Worldwound player was doing.

“Her waiting game is still not over yet.” Shayliss said with a gasp of surprise.

Anevia arched an eyebrow, “Oh?”

“She’s waiting for a series of cards that will help her win the last two rounds of the game. Sure, she is using what she has now to win this round, but she is mainly using this to keep the game going. She’s waiting for the Glabrezu demon card and the Vrolikai demon card. Getting those will pretty much guarantee her the win assuming she can keep them on the board long enough. The problem with summoning those units is that they are large and become a major target for big spells and all enemy units. If they are not used fast enough or protected, they can die before they are used effectively.”

Anevia gives Shayliss a look of surprise before nodding, “Yes. That is true.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, they watch Shayliss’ observations come true. The Worldwound player does manage to summon the Glabrezu demon on round four and the Vrolikai demon on round five. The player protected her powerful demons through support from the other units she summoned to the board first and the terrain that both she and the Varisian player summoned, effectively trapping the Varisian player while providing a nice buffer for the Worldwound player. When the Varisian player flips over his third Control Gem with a sigh, the onlookers,

who only grew since Shayliss started observing, let out a massively loud cheer that shook the whole building.

“You were right.” Anevia commented, adding a hint of ‘I told you so’ into her tone.

Shayliss snorted in mild surprise, “I was.”

“I think that table is about to clear. Maybe I can show you some more of the intricacies of the game since you seem to have more of an idea of the strategy.”

Shayliss nodded and let Anevia guide her down the stairs. As she did, Shayliss could not help but notice the sudden and intense attention of the Worldwound player on her. Even when Shayliss returned the attention, she did not back down, even giving Shayliss a small smile.

Shayliss did not remember to take the book or the sketch of Valtyra with her.

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The room filled with cheers as Mordira flipped over her last Control Gem. It had been a hard fought game but she was not able to keep up with the very devious mind Irabeth had when it comes to Argus. All of their matches have ended as two points against three and only about half of them were victories for her.

Both of them stood up as the onlookers continued to cheer and jeer.

“That was a wonderful match as always, Mordria.” Irabeth said with a smile.

“Same here.” Mordria answered, suddenly very tired. It was surprising just how much mental energy it took to play a match. Especially against someone like Irabeth, who most certainly used her military experience to great advantage.

Irabeth held out her hand for a customary handshake and Mordria reached out to grasp it, “It is always a pleasure to face you.” The last word shifted in tone and intensity very slightly and Mordria immediately knew why.

She pulled her hand away quickly but she could still see where the plated gauntlet bent where her fingers closed. A quick look showed that Irabeth was doing her best to hide the pain but Mordria knew where to look and sure enough, she found it.

Without another word, she vacated her seat so whoever wanted to play next could sit down and moved out of the backdoor as quickly as she could without being obvious about it. As she did, her gaze moved across the table where Anevia and Shayliss sat. It looked like the game was moving slower than a normal game did. Anevia was most likely teaching Shayliss.

Once outside, she could feel the cool autumn air gliding against her skin. It was hard to tell what time it was since her sight was not based in her eyes, which were gone, but the strange energy she received from the injury that took her eyes let her see the moon overhead. It seemed to be around two in the morning.

Behind Defender's Heart was a sparring and training area where the troops could get some training in while having to stay in the general vicinity of the inn. It was not a great place with only two straw dummies and a small ring, but it was usually busy during the day. Mordria was honestly surprised that Kaira was not back here. The hunter could almost always be found here, practicing her bow.

Mordria shifted her body to aim right for one the training dummies, a simple thing in the shape of a tiefling wielding a shortsword and shield. Without bracing herself, she raced forward, at least twice as fast as she had ever been able to move, toward the dummy. She could feel the power surging through her, enfusing her muscles and guiding her magical sight. When she reached the dummy, her arm swept upward from her side, claws gripping the underside of its metal armor, and threw it upward.

She could hear the air rushing past the dummy as it soared into the air. Within half a minute it went beyond the clouds above and out of sight, straw falling back down. Mordria waited, watching the sky for any sign of the dummy. She found it about a minute later, when the barely perceptible form of the dummy reappeared as it descended onto a building about a block away. She could not hear the crash from its landing above a sudden cheer from within the inn.

“You have gotten stronger, haven't you?”

Mordria turned around to see Irabeth walking out of Defender's Heart. She had her arms crossed and a look that mixed curiosity and worry.

“I guess so.” Mordria answered, “I mean, there was no one descending from the heavens to tell me that I became a godling.”

Irabeth chuckled at the soft joke, "It's never that simple, is it?" The half-orc points to one of the observation benches along the fence and Mordria sits down next to her.

"None of you asked what happened."

Mordira snorted, "You mean when we were passed out for two days?"

"You all were pretty lucid." Irabeth said with a mischievous smile, "But you did have some interesting things to tell me."

Mordria blinked, "I don't remember any of that."

"Don't worry." Irabeth said with a laugh, "Your secrets are safe with me." Her expression turns down into seriousness again, "Do you want to know?"

When Mordria simply nods Irabeth starts, "Shayliss took Jeslyn's scythe right to the guts. I thought that she was dead when she hit the floor, but she seemed like she was trying to keep fighting. That's when Kaira hit the Wardstone with the rod." Irabeth paused, "There was a sudden flash of golden light and I thought that it had blinded me for a moment. When my vision returned, Jeslyn was dead from the Wardstone shattering and you guys were knocked out. Thankfully, you were only down for a minute before you got up. After your fight with the babaus, you suddenly collapsed, as if whatever power you had disappeared. And you know the rest. At least the rest after your two day nap."

Mordria snorted but did not have anything else to say. After a few minutes of pure silence, Irabeth stood up, stretched and started walking for the inn.

"Irabeth?" Mordria asked. When Irabeth stopped, Mordria stood up, "What is happening to us?"

"I think you have been Chosen."

"Chosen for what?"

Irabeth turned halfway to look back to Mordria, "To lead the Fifth and Final Mendevian Crusade."



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When the five-hundredth cheer shook the building under Snaga's feet, he flinched hard enough to nearly send his inkwell flying. He managed to catch the glass vial in time but he noticed that a few droplets of ink fell onto the floor leaving a barely perceptible black stain under the moonlight. None of the ink hit his notes or the grappling hook he was studying, but that did not stop the surge of annoyance rising in his body.

With a sulfurous curse, he shot up from his seat and aimed for the door. Those soldiers needed to calm down and he was going to request they do. If he had to do it by bashing in a few skulls, so be it. He needed to get his work done and their constant yelling is not helping him at all.

Before he took two steps, he could feel a hand press against his chest. With that hand came an arm which wrapped itself around his waist. Both felt bare and as solid as anything else in the room. Its subtle but powerful restraint pulled Snaga away from the door and he tried to fight it for a few seconds.

"It's alright," Nephalim's voice whispered in his ear, "It's alright."

Along with those words, Snaga could feel the hand gently sliding back and forth across his chest sending a sudden but not unwelcome sensation down his spine. It was a shocking sensation that seemed to lock his body in place but it eventually shifted into something smoother and gentle. Something that glided through his body and loosened the tense muscles that had built up the past day.

They stood like that for at least five minutes, Snaga taking in the soft touches and letting his mind focus on the sensation. When he finally felt his anger calm down, he laid a hand on Nephalim's and started to pull it away. Yet Nephalim did not let go. Which he was sure he did not mind much.

"The impulses," she said after another two minutes, "they are getting stronger, aren't they?"

Snaga could feel the anger pushing its way back up into his head, but he let out a snarl and forced it back down, "Yes. Ever since the Wardstone Chamber."

Nephalim walked around him until they were facing each other, her arm still wrapped around him. She was completely unarmored, which is something Snaga

was still surprised she was able to do. Eidolons are not supposed to be able to change their appearance without guidance from their Summoner. She looked so much smaller without her mixed armor and it gave her an appearance of confident grace rather than one of hulking strength.

“The power you got from it is really strong. I can feel it through you.”

“Not only that, but it has the capacity for growth.” He said, placing his head on her shoulder. It felt warm and inviting, “I do not know how, but this is only the beginning of what I can do.”

She let out a soft sigh, “And you think it is driving your rage?”

“Not directly. The mere idea that I have power stronger than any of those Crusaders down there is what’s driving it.”

“A God Complex?”

Snaga let out a small smile, “Something like that.”

“You know what could help?” Nephelim asked, pushing Snaga so he faced her again, “Go down there a mingle with them.”

“Not when I am so close to the answer.” He said, a sudden panic hitting his system. He had to make sure he had an excuse not to go down there, “If I could just figure out how to control the Law of Kinetic Friction, then maybe I can bypass the-”

He did not see it when Nephelim placed a hand over his mouth, shutting down the rest of his sentence. “This is exactly what I mean.” She said with a barely concealed hint of laughter, “If you moved away from your work for a day, you may be able to figure it out. And enjoying time with those who fought alongside you would do wonders for your anger.”

Snaga sighed and moved her hand, “You are not going to let this go, are you?”

“I will drag you out there myself if I have to.” She responded with a huge smile.

He raised his hands in defeat, “Fine. Fine. I’ll go. Let me just organize my notes.”

Grumbling half-heartedly, he moved back to his desk and rearranged all of his piles of notes in a system that he was sure only he would understand. When he was done, he let out another sigh and turned to find Nephalim patiently waiting at the door for him, that smile still plastered on her face.

He could not help but snort and smile himself as he left the room, the noise of the tavern below almost blasting him back. Fighting through the sudden increase in noise, he made his way down the stairs, Nephalim close behind, her gaze moving around the room as if looking for something.

A call of his name brought Snaga's attention to one of the tables toward the back of the tavern room where Shayliss and Anevia sat. They had the card game in front of them and two drinks half drunk.

A hand suddenly pushed him from behind and he let out a small grumble toward Nephalim before moving toward the table.

"It's good to see you, Snaga!" Shayliss said as he sat down. He had the sudden impression that the drink in front of her was not her first, "Want to play?"

He gently shook his head.

"I think you would do good." Anevia said, placing a card on the board. Snaga had no idea what was going on, but the similarly colored cards told him that Shayliss had more cards on the board. Also that she seemed to have the upperhand positional wise.

"She has been getting a lot better since the Siege. She's won all three of our games so far."

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The early morning air glided across Kaira's skin as she lay down on the inn's roof. She was not paranoid about being so exposed as the demons who had been flying around Kenabres for the past week were mostly gone. Those that remained avoided Defender's Heart like the plague. Two brave souls decided to do a flyby but neither noticed her. Whatever power she now held was actively hiding her from their sights.

Blueeye lay next to her, his breathing soft and slow from sleep. Yet, Kaira could see his ears twitch with each noise. Ever since she rescued the white furred pup from the Worldwound with that mysterious woman, they had been close enough to be able to practically read each other's mind. After the Siege, though, that connection has become so deep that they were one being. Kaira could feel the power coursing through him and she was sure it was the same for him.

That mysterious woman. The one who rescued Kaira when she had managed to get past the Wardstone Barrier. The huntress had not seen her since she walked back through the Wardstone Barrier with Blueeye in tow. When she had her vision, though, she clearly saw that woman. Not only did Kaira see her, but she felt the woman.

She felt the shackles that held the woman to the stone wall. Could see the iron bars that blocked her way to freedom. The pangs of hunger that had not been sated in days or even weeks. Limp muscles that did not have the energy to move. The defiance of those who kept her in captivity. Seething, boiling anger. And a longing for one soul.

Ever since she received that vision, she had wanted to pack up and head out of Kenabres. The drive to rescue her rescuer. Seeing her in that state angered Kaira more than anything else had in her life. Even now she could feel the rage rising. Kaira knew she could do nothing. Even though she saw the cell that her rescuer was in, she had no idea where that prison was or what was guarding it. If she went out to try and find the woman, even with her skills, she would get nowhere. Something in her told her that it did not matter. That she would find a way. Her legs were trying to follow along with her anger. Her muscles tensed up trying to rise and move.

Blueeye must have sensed her confusion as he raised his head and gave Kaira a worried look.

She gave the wolf a smile and pet his head, "Yeah. I don't know either."

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At four in the morning, Strune finally gave in and decided to sleep. She was somehow the first one of their group to give in to her exhaustion yet she imagined that she would not be alone for long. Shayliss and Mordria were both about to

collapse, only staying up because they are in the middle of games. No one had seen Kaira for hours, but Strune was not worried.

After saying good night to the others, Strune headed up the stairs and into her room. She barely remembered to take off her armor before diving onto her bed. The blankets under her felt as comfortable as if they were on top of her and the pillow was just perfect. She was out within seconds.

When she next became aware, she was standing in a field of pure white. Under her feet, she could feel the uneven texture of grass, though with all of the white around her she could not see the grass at all. There was no sense of depth as there were no shadows. Yet, she still had a sense that she was standing in a completely flat plain.

Strune was about to wonder why she was standing there when a form appeared in a great aura of light. It descended gradually with a chorus of angels behind it. It took no time for Strune to realize who, or Who, was coming down upon her, and she knelt down as fast as she could.

There was no mistaking the black hair cut in a short bob, the thin, angular face and near black eyes that give the descending form the look of a warrior. Her body is covered in full plate mail common among paladins with the crest of the Sword of Valor in the breastplate. Hanging down her back was a red cape with the crest sewn into it and golden clasps attaching it to the breastplate. Inside of the cape was a longsword in a beautiful sheathe and in her left hand was a heater shield with the Sword of Valor set into it.

Strune looked down toward the white grass when she knelt, so she could only hear when the form of Iomedae, the goddess of Valor and Justice, landed in front of her. However, seconds later, she could feel something pulling her back up. It was as if her whole body was telling her to rise.

“There is no need at the moment.” The rather normal but commanding voice of Iomedae said with a hint of humor.

Strune stood back up, no longer fighting the urge to rise on her own. Yet, she did not look right at the goddess. She knew that if she gave Iomedae the slightest excuse, the goddess could do horrible things to her.

“Do not worry, Warpriest.” Iomedae said with that same humor, as if she had read Strune’s thoughts, “I am not here to exact any punishments. In fact, it is quite the opposite.”

Strune blinked in surprise. What did she mean by that?

“Your fight against the demons, the strength and determination of not only you but your allies were those I have not seen bettered. Your will to save the Crusaders and the citizens still within Kenabres moved me to act.” Iomedae stepped closer and gently pulled Strune’s face up to look at her, “I cannot do much, but on the morrow, you will find yourselves strengthened even more than what you have already been given. I wish I could do more, but even gods and goddesses have their limitations. Good luck, and I will be watching you all closely.”

With a smile, Iomedae bent down and gave Strune a kiss on the forehead. That contact sent emotion and energy rolling throughout the strix’s body. Then, the world around her darkened around her until she no longer felt anything except for the point of contact on her forehead.