**Log#21 Lumberjacks and Drow Gutting**

The battle had been vicious. The victorious Seekers surveyed the killing field. Dead Baneites, Zhents and their slave trolls lay scattered amongst the woods.

Kilzadi, black robes fluttering like tongues of dark flame; face hidden in the dark recess of his newly acquired drow piwafwi, burned his way from troll corpse to troll corpse, ensuring no regeneration. Okul, dragon scales flashing golden in the sun, moved among the dead. He collected usable weapons, items and valuables. His spear disembowelling of Laskur, the mighty half-orc barbarian, had turned the battle in favour of the outnumbered and out powered Seekers.

As a fish through water, Swan glided effortlessly and traceless through the forest. She gathered the battle scattered Zhent horses. The sensuous scout spoke in a language they understood. Her soothing words and stroking hands calmed their fears. They collected around her. In the battle, Granpar’s bow had blazoned its new power, easily striking down their mage riders; most deadly of which was Nehum, the Zhent invoker wizard.

Gideon, standing over a corpse, had been pensively collecting and examining the holy symbols of the Banite clerics. The red-yellow double flame symbol of Kossuth etched on his burnished plate mail flickered, seemingly alive. He considered and frowned at the one in his hand. Swan, now trailed by a small coterie of devoted horses, joined him.

“But that’s …“she began staring down at the body curled in death.

“Ah, yes” finished Gideon. “You recognize him now. It’s our good ‘friend’ Brechtu, the ‘Sembian cloth merchant’; he who travels to and from Ashabenford quite frequently.”

“So, an infiltrator then! A spy. A priest of Bane in disguise. No wonder they…”

“An infiltrator, yes! A priest of Bane, well… let us go and chat with the prisoners.”

Roped together, the bedraggled captives sat silent. Most were common foot-soldiers, but one stood out; Suddilis, a Black Hand rank arch priest of Bane.

Suddlis had been the leader at the Zhentarim Citadel from where the Seekers had rescued the Mistledale Councillor Zander Wolcott’s prized war stallion, his groom Walter Little and the captured townsfolk. They had also freed the Zhent slaves including the two children, Padriac and Ewert, who had adopted Swan as their mother.

Suddilis, Laskur and Nehum had been captured, and handed over to captain Jarrod Rold, and the Mistledale Riders, for imprisonment. They were to be tried for murder and enslavement. Instead they had been ransomed and set free by the High Councillor Mayor of Mistledale, one Haresk Malorn. This aroused suspicion, especially Swan’s, regarding the Mayor’s loyalties and motives.

Risca and Neon were playing ‘bon cop, bad cop’ with the few survivors. The dwarf, blood-drenched battle axe Guifoon in hand, was slowly circling around the bunch, eyes staring death at each in turn.

“Let me just gut them now” he snarled, spittle flying into their faces, “save everyone time and expense.”

Neon stood, hand on chin, expression indicating serious consideration of the request.

“Let us not be too hasty, good Risca” the half-elf responded after a moment. “Perhaps we can strike a deal; information for spared lives; who ransomed them and why. Why were they allowed to be ransomed and what can they tell us about the rogue Red Wizard Bareris. The last was stated in the hope that new knowledge regarding the death of Aleena was forthcoming. Now that Osier was safe, all he wanted was knowledge; knowledge that could aid in the determination of the head that was ultimately responsible for it, a head he could lob off in vengeance.

Bound as he was, Suddilis could only spit at them as he glared with hate. “Bastard half-breed, orc-buggered dwarf, they fear the Dark Lord more than death. You will get nothing from us.”

“See” Risca regarded Neon. “Talk is useless. I gut them now.”

Neon shrugged. “They are not going to be co-operative so you may as well. Start with the priest. The others may be more prone to talk then. If not, gut one and move on to the next one.”

At that point, Suddilis spoke up at the approach of Gideon and Swan. “Well look who comes to gloat; the weak ball-less priest of a weak ball-less god and the bitch bow-slinging slut.”

Gideon ignored the insults. “Hold on, Risca. Tell me Suddilis” he started, “as an arch priest, have you been getting orders in the recent past which to you seemed shall we say, out of place? And when carried out have weakened rather than strengthened your church’s plans? Have these type of orders been increasing lately?”

Suddilis’ eyes narrowed suspiciously as he licked at his lips. “What manner of trick is this, flaccid fool?”

Gideon nodded. Suddilis’ reaction confirmed his insight.

“Neon, remove his bonds. He will need his hands free. Risca, should he make any sudden move, do your gutting thing.”

The Seekers had learned not to question Gideon’s orders, at least not too much, even the strange ones. Neon cut the rope while the dwarf placed Guifoon’s blade across the Baneite’s throat. “With pleasure” Risca grinned evilly with anticipation. “Please, please, make a move.”

Suddlis’ stare bored into Gideon. “Priests of the glory of the Lord of Darkness do not play games.”

“Yes, I’m counting on that.” He threw a holy symbol of Bane at Suddilis’ feet.

It was a bronze disk upon which was engraved green rays squeezed forth from a black gauntleted fist; the symbol of the Dark Lord.

“This belonged to Brechtu, your spy. Pick it up. Use it to call for your god’s blessing.”

Suddilis made no move to pick it up. He just continued to focus on Gideon.

Gideon sounded exasperated. “This is no game, no trick. Just use it! Call for Bane’s blessing!”

Slowly, almost hesitantly, eyes never leaving Gideon, Suddilis did as requested. His lips moved silently in the invocation of a prayer. Then all were startled by a sudden shriek. He hurled the disk to the ground. His hands had been seared. Only Gideon seemed unsurprised as the disk began to transform. The bronze turned black with a deep purple border; the symbol of Shar!

“Yes” Gideon sounded. “You had to do it yourself. You would not have believed me otherwise. Brechtu was a spy, only not your spy. As with the Mystrans, so has your church been infiltrated; and where there is one spy there are many more. That would explain your unusual orders, no?”

Suddilis’ face was the course way through which many emotions raced. First surprise, then anger and finally rage.

“The Shadow Slut!” he cursed. “That demon sucking harlot! The Whore of Shades! How dare she! To insult the Dark Lord so. She will be crushed, her temples toppled, her followers slaughtered. Sharran blood will be our bath water. This is now Holy War.” Out of breathe, he calmed down, then continued without emotion.

“But first Zentil Keep and the major temples of Mulmaster and those in the Moonsea must be made aware without alerting the Sharrans.”

“Yes” answered Gideon. “And since the church of Bane is the only non-Kossuth worship allowed in Thay, I would also notify the Red Wizard zulkirs in case your church was also used to infiltrate them. But being a wise man, Suddilis, you now see your dilemma.”

The priest of Bane was brought up short by the last words. “Yes. I cannot do anything while I am your prisoner.” He thought a moment. “By the majesty and splendor of the Lord of Darkness, He who holds Civilization in his Right and Destruction in his Left, I swear for my church, release us and until the Sharran dogs are smitten, we will ally. Release us and we will forgo the Cormanthyr Forest, release us and your enemies will be our enemies.”

“By the glory and flame of the Firelord, he whose fires cleanse and renew, so be it” Gideon acknowledged and completed the arrangement. “Release them”.

“Awh” Risca actually sounded disappointed; “I so wanted to gut them.”

Promptly, the Zhents were cut free.

“Is this wise?” inquired Swan of the Seeker leader, as the Zhents took to their horses.

“The Baneites are lawful enough to abide by the alliance, especially if their resources will now be used to root out and war upon the Sharrans. We gain as well. A new enemy for the Sharrans and cessation of Zhent activity in the forest and the Dalelands. At least for a while.”

Suddilis approached. “As a sign of good faith, there is a cave about an hour hike that away. There you will find the remaining caravan workers, the wagons and horses. Oh and there has been increased drow activity in the forest. We have eliminated more than our usual quota recently.”

“They are not working with you?”

The arch priest spat. “The spider-lickers? We may now be allies, but please don’t insult us.” He turned to his soldiers.

“Ride! We ride to Zentil Keep!” He spurred his horse and the others followed.

“And now?” queried Neon.

“Now Swan leads us to this cave, we free the caravaners and then we journey to Teeghan’s lumber camp.

“Still think we should have just gutted them” groused Risca.

“Fret not, good friend. According to Teeghan, there will be plenty of drow for you to gut.

“Ah, the gutting of the drow.” The sound and visualization made the dwarf beam with satisfaction. Then, remembering his past vow, in a serious tone spoke, “And so will begin my scourge on that race…”

Without difficultly, Swan picked up the forest signs; the heel print, the cracked twig, the trodden grass blades, which traced back to the cave. Shortly, the Seekers found themselves at the blocked entrance. It was no hindrance to their skills. With much gratitude and rejoicing the freed caravan workers promised to take the captured Zhent horses to the stables of Kaulvaeras Greymantle and the Zhent equipment, armor and weapons to Holfast Harpenshield at the White Hart Inn; all for safe-keeping.

As the Seekers saw them ready to leave, Neon, true to his nature, had gone off exploring the cave rear. There he discovered several smaller cave tunnels leading off. In one an unusual lump of stones grabbed his attention. Digging through, he uncovered an old chest. Its deteriorated condition indicated old age. Easily opened, his eyes opened wide at the riches within; riches from some long lost caravan. He counted 16 gold bars, at least 2000 gold pieces which bore the portrait of the great-grandfather of the present king of Cormyr and several water star gems. For a moment, but only a moment, he thought of keeping his find a secret. That is what the younger Neon of the past would have done. But now he was a Seeker, and the Seekers shared all. He left to tell the others of his find.

“Old gold is still good gold” chortled Kilzadi placing the last gold bar inside his magic bag. The extra-dimensional space easily accepted the treasure. There was no change in its size or weight.

“Good find. Well done friend Neon.”

“Bah! Your greed is only surpassed by your lust” piped up Risca.

“Yes, I know. It is not truly wonderful?”

“Bah!”

Any further discourse was ended by Gideon’s call to gather outside the cave. There they joined the others. Okul and Gideon stood on either side of Swan as she pointed to an approaching speck on the horizon. “There.”

“There what?” inquired Neon.

“Teeghan’s companion” was her answer.

The speck soon presented itself as a sleek, large goshawk. As it circled overhead, Swan cried out to it. To the others it sounded like she was imitating hawk calls. To the hawk it sounded as “little brother, Teeghan lead, lead.”

The raptor cried out in response. Swan understood, “follow, follow.”

She hoisted her pack. “Let us go. The bird will guide us to the camp.”

As the group followed, Risca turned to Neon, “Might not get used to how me gurl now talks to animals. So strange.”

“No, strange is how she now talks to trees and such” rejoined the half-elf.

“Wrong” interjected Kilzadi, “any idiot can talk to animals and plants. You just stand there and talk to them. Strange is when they will respond and actually talk back to you. It can be done magically for a short time, but she does it naturally, as if a divine gift.” They fell silent at that thought and its implications…

As the sun began its decent, the scent of freshly cut wood and lumber permeated the air, giving it a fresh, seemingly invigorating odour. It grew stronger as they followed the overhead hawk into a huge clearing. There they came upon a walled-in lumber camp, measuring 120 yards long by 80 yards wide. The walls were composed of 20 feet tall rough-hewed tree trunks, each sprouting a two foot sharpened point. The north wall contained two huge doors, each ten feet wide, 18 feet high and re-enforced with bands of steel. There were no ramparts or walkways but the camp’s north-east end contained a watch tower. The various sheds had flat roofs which rose above the walls. Archers were posted on these roofs and in the watch tower. It was these archers which hailed the Seekers as they approached the gates.

“State your name and purpose” one shouted out.

Gideon answered for the group. “We are the Seekers, here at the request of Teeghan.”

“Excellent and welcome. We have been expecting you. Open the gates. Someone fetch Druid Teeghan.”

The ponderous gates were slowly pushed open and the heroes entered to be met by Teeghan and his foremen.

“Welcome friends” saluted the brown hired half-elf druid, “Our thanks.”

“No need for that” replied Gideon. “What is the present situation?”

“We are still expecting a drow attack sometime tonight, but come let us discuss these matters during the evening meal.”

The druid led them past stables, but mostly work sheds to a long house. There a meal had been prepared and they all sat to eat. By the time the meal was finished, night had fallen. The forest was wrapped in darkness. It had been determined that staying only behind the walls until the onslaught was a weak strategy. The Seekers would do a perimeter patrol around the camp, hopefully to gain time to warn of the attack. Gideon laid out the agreed plan.

“Risca, you and Swan start at the east side, moving around clockwise. Kilzadi and Okul will do the same from the west. Neon and I will take the front of the gates, the north side. Teeghan and the lumberjacks will defend the camp, with archers on the roof tops and the rest on the ground. Kilzadi has given Neon and Swan a fire arrow to use as a signal so we’ll know from which side the main attack is being launched. Any questions or comments?”

“I have one”, Neon addressed Teeghan. “These lumberjacks of yours, how much combat experience do they have?”

“They have all had some militia training.”

“Just… some militia training?”

“They are all brave and honourable people, willing to give their all.” The sharp words indicated resentment.

The rogue held up his hand in a peaceful gesture. “I was not questioning their courage or determination; just wanted some indication of their ability; as long as they do not panic if the battle goes awry.

“They will not panic” assured Teeghan.

“Well now, that’s all settled then” Risca’s rough voice eased the tension, “shall we be going? Guifoon is anxious to gut some drow.” Each left to their assigned posts…

Risca and Swan had been circling the camp in near silence; the dwarf becoming grumpier as time wore on. All had been quiet except for the sound of crickets, the scurrying of field mice and the flutter of moths. Afar, an owl hooted.

“This is our third time around” counted Risca in a whisper. “Hope something happens soon. Need something to happen soon.” His wishes were prophetic. He peered into the night covered woods. “Duck, gurl” he screamed out.

Faster than thought, battle honed reflexes asserted themselves. Swan bent backwards almost in half as a drow death arrow whistled past her nose. Two others struck at Risca; one bouncing off his raised shield, the other batted aside by Guifoon.

Tumbling to the side and straightening, Granpar,s bow already notched and pulled, her improved vision easily spotted the three drow warriors at the wood’s edge, quickly reloading their bows. At the same time a streak of a fire arrow, like a reverse shooting star, kindled the north sky. *The signal! Neon!* Keen ears now identified the shouts and growls of a bugbear horde.

“Go gurl!. The main gates. Help there. These drow are MINE, ALL MINE! The dwarf’s voice stormed with rage and holy fury even as he charged. “Crush for Crull!” He was upon them as a maelstrom…

Okul and Kilzadi were on the west side on their third walk around. Even as they kept sharp eyes on their surroundings, the fire sorcerer had been and still was discoursing on the changes their excursion into the Plane of Shadow had wrought on the Seekers. The fire mage wore his Gwenect-given ruathar gift, a mask that enabled him to look drow.

“Lastly Okul, you are more agreeable and rewarding to partner with ever since that night. I can now broach topics and say things that in the past would have led to your pouting, running off in a huff or even striking at me. Who would have thought that one long session of exquisite bountiful sex with our dear scout could change a man so much? I don’t mean just your looks, now more ah, golden scaly, but also your attitude and outlook on life. You are so much more confident, more at ease, less likely to take umbrage. By the Holy Fire, you even show a sense of humour.”

“Indeed. Swan’s consecration ritual that night changed me for the better. Her continued desire for me makes me a most fortunate being.”

“Fortunate indeed you are and an experience you had that should be shared. In that regard, I was considering this. Gwenect and I should accompany you and Swan when you finally depart to confront your father and take vengeance on Emperspeak. Together we would share the dangers and the rewards. And, well, convince the lovely ladies to…ah, share other things. We would all bond together nicely. Now, you do understand what I am talking about, do you not?”

The half-dragon grunted amusement. “But of course. You desire sexual communion with Swan. For that you are willing to trade Gwenect to me. Swan continues to resist your charms and skills. This frustrates your lecherous nature. Her brotherly affections only leave you more obsessed. She is the prey that keeps getting away. You could understand if she was virginal and hesitant. But the fact that she makes no secret of her sexual nature and her wantonly pleasures with so many others baffles you. It is an itch you desperately need to scratch. To this end you have now concocted another mad scheme, which somehow involves me. Now I am not averse to sharing pleasure with the magnificent Gwenect…”

“You’re not? Wonderful, just wonderful, good Okul. So let us plan…”

“Wait, let me finish. I determine three major obstacles to this strategy of yours. First is prevailing upon Gwenect. Despite her affections for you, she is drow. Drow females are haughty and proud. The idea that a mere inferior male, human at that, meaning you, could even suggest selecting bed mates for her may be anathema. Do you wish to risk it? I would not.

Second is persuading Swan. She is a Deepingdale girl. In such matters, Swan will do as Swan wants to do. Should she want to bed you, then she will bed you. No amount of persuasion, friendly or otherwise, will convince her differently. Should you persist, well, there is a reason she calls Gutripper, Gutripper. I will leave that persuasion to you.”

All the while, Okul’s voice had been cracking with suppressed laughter. “Now, suppose you overcome the first two obstacles, and both women agree to share. But share who, what? My friend, the third obstacle is my nature. A dragon’s innate sexual prowess eclipses yours as a whale to a minnow. Look at my size. I am half-dragon. My organ is in proportion and finely scale ribbed. I have been told it provides impeccable gratification. Now combine that with my inherited stamina , my mating pheromones and my much, much, longer, rough-skinned tongue. You realize your problem. How could you possibly offer anything comparable? It would displease me that my good friend Kilzadi, would be left alone in his bedroll on cold mountain nights, listening to Swan and Gwenect sharing, yes, but sharing me, together partaking of my, ah, let us call them specialties. Well, I suppose you can always stand watch. But again I will leave the decision to you.”

The sorcerer snorted. “Okul, having a sense of humour does not make one a wit. You are the proof of that. And so…”

Any further words were unspoken as an arrow hissed its flight. A lumberjack sentry shrieked once as he fell dead from the wall top. More arrows whistled. An army of bugbear shrieks and growls filled the night. From the north side a flaming arrow shot to the sky.

“Neon’s signal” cried Kilzadi. “Where are those archers?” he shouted as Okul’s spear swatted away an arrow aimed at him. The two found themselves caught in an arrow storm as the defenders and the unseen enemy exchanged bow shots at each other.

“There, off to the side, well-hidden” responded the dragon-son.”

“Let’s see about that” snarled Kilzadi. His draconic tattoos flared as he began his incantation…

Neon and Gideon were on the north side on their third walk around, conversing quietly even as they kept careful watch.

“I don’t know. Gideon, it seems to me that as the Seekers, we seem to be directed by powers beyond us, think of our dreams. There is scarcely time left over to achieve our own personal goals, wants and needs. I wish to seek my father, as Okul does his. I wish to pursue my vengeance on Aleena’s murderers. You and Rica have personal agendas; he to return to his clan and you to determine your origin. We wish to lead our own lives. I want to compose, go on tours with Jhaer, sail the oceans. Instead I find myself doing circuits of a lumber camp, expecting a drow attack.”

“Neon, all I can say to that is that the gods have a purpose for all this. We have been selected for a reason. I want nothing more than to be left alone in my stone cottage. But until this matter of the Queen of Darkness, the Sharrans and all the rest gets settled, no one is safe, especially if they are not stopped. No one will be able to follow their own desires. Who knows, perhaps they are all related and all will be resolved at the same time. You pushed us to rescue Osier, but we removed the shadow threat at the same time. But you are free Neon. You can leave the Seekers to find your own path whenever you wish.”

Neon sighed. “Yes but that is not what I meant. It is …wait do your hear that? Wait here.”

The rogue approached the forest edge. He had definitely heard something, something large moving through the brush. He took 5 steps. Then the forest erupted into a colophon of growls, roars, and shrieks as a line of blood lusting bugbears gushed out of the woods. Leading them was a drow wizard, a drow female and someone enwrapped in a red cloak. The monsters charged.

Neon quickly backtracked. His agility and tumble skills avoided the spears and javelins launched at him. As he went prone he shouted “Gideon, the main gates. They must hold. Go! I follow.”

Kipping up, he fired the signal arrow, lighting a line of fire in the night. Then he ran…fast.

The drow wizard raised his staff to point at the huge doors of the camp wall. “Ful’mi’ne” he shrieked more than shouted. A bolt of lightning thundered its way from staff to door. The night lit as it struck. The explosive noise was painful as chunks of wood and steel were blasted off. The door held. The screams and shouts of battle were everywhere now as the defenders fired arrows and in return were fired upon. Arrow pierced bodies fell everywhere.

“Ful’mi’ne” the wizard roared once again. Once again, a lightning bolt shattered the darkness. Once again, the doors were struck. But now, they could not hold. Wood and steel wailed as they fractured and splintered. The way into the camp was opened. The horde howled as they rushed towards the gap. The wizard raised his staff a third time, now aimed at the two solitary figures standing in the opening, Neon and Gideon…

Swan ran! Her enhanced vision made out the swarm of battle-crazed bugbears now streaming out of the woods. Most seemed to be heading for the north side doors, but a small group swept towards the east side, towards her and Risca. Amongst and towering over them, lumbering quickly was the largest troll she had ever seen. Dressed in a massive chain shirt, it easily wielded a two-handed battle axe that was twice as long as she was high. Wearing an evil anticipatory grin, it lumbered quickly towards her.

Despite the far distance, while running, she armed Granpar’s bow with flight arrows, quick-aimed and fired. In rapid succession, two arrows struck the leading bug bear, bringing instant death. Later it would be noted that one arrow was in its left ventricle, the other in its right auricle.

Shrieking and shrilling, the others kept advancing, the bugbears towards Risca; the troll, grinning, veered towards her. It was then that the night sounded thunder as a bolt lit the dark. The walls of the camp shook. *The doors! Neon! Gideon!* She changed tactics.She swerved towards the wooden wall and scurried up its height as would a spider. A second bolt struck, rocking the walls. Her spider boots kept her from being shaken off. She heard the doors being blasted away. Reaching the top she was finally able to see the entire northern side of the camp. Neon and Gideon stood together facing an oncoming host of bugbears. Another group had just vanished on the west side. *Okul! Kilzadi!* Inside the camp was chaos as Teeghan and others strove to move a heavy wagon to the blasted doors to act as a barrier to the oncoming monsters.

A drow stood at the edge of the clearing. He raised a staff to point at the two Seekers. Granpar’s bow shivered in her hand. *Mage* she thought even as she instinctively loaded the bow and released two arrows. The first caught the magic user in the throat, stifling any command word. The second penetrated through his forehead. The staff dropped from a lifeless hand. Hearing a growl, she whirled to see the troll, as tall as the wall, giant axe swinging down towards her head…

Risca raged. The drow archers were unprepared for the speed he reached them. There was no time to spread out. Guifoon slicing up through the first one’s leather armor and belly opened out his intestines. He exhaled a death rattle as the battle axe gutted him. Without pause, the dwarf slammed his axe into the second. The super sharp edge sliced its way through the drow’s waist, bisecting him, as blood and guts spewed out. The third had barely managed to draw his short sword when the axe cleaved into his skull belching out brain matter.

“Crull” he thundered, as he turned to face the oncoming bugbears…

Kilzadi’s spell displayed itself. The magic produced a cloud of fine golden dust, which glittered even in the darkness. Settling over a large area, it outlined all within the woods. And so, the three invisible drow archers became evident. He then turned to face an oncoming rush of screaming bugbears. Again draconic tattoos flared as the sorcerer reached into his arcane ability. A bead of flame formed in his hand; grew into a ball. It launched itself, trailing fire, into the midst of the goblinoids. There it exploded into a fire ball. Battle cries became shrieks of anguish as flesh and bone were charcoaled. By then, the remaining survivors, led by the female drow warrior were on him. “Die, race traitor, die inferior male” she crowed as her long sword rounded down to behead him…

Even before the gold dust settled, Okul charged. His battle-cry of “Tempus” was barely finished when his spear skewered the first archer. His powerful muscles propelled it through the archer’s chest and out the back. Without pause, he swung the impaled corpse in an arc, flinging it away, trailing blood and guts. The continued motion forced the razor-edged spear blade to slice through the second archer’s neck, in effect decapitating him. All this happened in the blink of an eye. There was no denying the bravery of the drow. Standing his ground, the third archer drew his short sword and hacked at the rampaging dragon-son. Okul blocked the sword slash with his dastana, then grabbed onto the drow’s sword arm. His other hand, wearing a spiked gauntlet, punched into the drow’s face. The drow’s jaw, teeth, nose, eyes, brain and forehead were driven against the back of his skull. That was when Okul was staggered by a black ray. His body was deluged by pain and weakness. He looked up to see standing, well beyond his reach, someone in a red cloak…incanting.

The blast wave of the exploding doors knocked over the rogue and cleric. Wood and steel shrapnel flew over their heads; miraculously not striking them. Neon was the first up. He bent over to help steady Gideon. Both men knew that the attacking horde had to be kept outside the walls.

Coughing out wood dust, Gideon managed to speak. “Help Teeghan fortify the breech. I’ll be fine in a sec…oh, oh”

The last words were uttered as they both saw the drow wizard raise his staff for the third time; aimed directly at them. Neon could have evaded, but it would have meant sacrificing the still reeling Gideon. Instead, he picked up a large piece of the shattered door, hoping that the insulating properties of the wood could offer to both of them, a small amount of protection against the electrical bolt. As he brought up the makeshift shield, he heard Gideon whoop in triumph “Swannie girl!”

Looking again at the drow wizard, he could now see an arrow lodged in his throat; just as a second arrow whizzed into his forehead, spewing out the drow’s brain matter. ***Ah Cygni, recorda’me amo’rta te fini morte.*** His elfish thoughts were interrupted by Gideon. “Go, help Teeghan. I will be fine. I am in the hands of Kossuth.” He gave Neon a push to emphasize his meaning. The rogue did not hesitate. Racing to the now breeched opening, long dormant battlefield commander instincts awoke.

“You, all”, he pointed at a bunch of lumberjacks, “stand with me. We cannot let them through.” He called out at the men stationed on the shed roofs and the watchtower. “Archers, don’t aim. Just shoot into the mob. Shoot continuously.” He looked over to where Teeghan and several jacks labored to push the heavy wagon towards the opening. They needed more time. “All right boys, those aren’t bugbears coming, think of them as big trees, big, stupid trees. Aim for their legs and chop ’em down. We’re all good at that, right? They haven’t got a chance. We’re lumberjacks and we’re O.K. We chop ’em down every day. Whose tougher, a tree or a jack? Let’s strip their BARK! Let me hear you!” The last was shouted as he drew out his rapier and dagger, and crouched to meet the onslaught.

“Let’s strip their BARK” a dozen voices rang out determinedly as the jacks gripped their axes saws, and drawknives. Their morale having been boosted, they too braced themselves.

Gideon drew upon his blessing. “Kossuth, it is your sanctuary I seek.” Having uttered the prayer, he could sense a divine force surrounding him. He stood there motionless, strong in his faith as the screaming oncoming bugbears reached his position. They then ran around him, as if he was not present and continued past to engage Neon and the lumberjacks. He could hear fireballs exploding from the west side and could only hope that Kilzadi and Okul were holding their own. He could hear Risca’s battle cries from the east side and could only trust that the dwarf and Swan were managing well. But for now, they were outnumbered at the front and he had to help keep them out. He drew upon his gift to summon forth extra planar creatures.

Swan tumbled away from the giant axe, her boots allowing her to act on the wall as if she were standing on the ground. Her black dragon bone arrow struck the troll in the neck. It screeched as the acid sizzled into its flesh. But she misjudged the speed of the monster. Even as her second arrow hit, she barely managed to twist, so that the axe sliced down her side, instead of driving into her chest. The pain and trauma were intense, slowing her reflexes. She fired a third arrow just as the axe bit deep into her shoulder. Crippled and in shock, she knew she was now useless in the fight. Purely on intuition, ignoring the agony, she rolled to the other side of the wall, safe from the reach of the troll. The giant monstrosity shrilled out its dismay at the loss of its prey. Then it gaffed in pleasure as it spotted Risca and strode towards the dwarf.

Swan quickly swallowed a serious cure, quickly followed by another. Even as the magic potions began their healing of her wrecked body, she was still too injured to re-join the battle. From her new vantage point, looking into the camp, she could make out Neon, Teeghan and the jacks holding their own. The horde had gained entry but that was all. The fighting was fierce. Shouts, screams, death cries and the boom of fireballs assailed her ears. The scent of blood and entrails filled her nose. Looking back over the wall, she was filled with dread. She watched as Risca was being battered by the giant troll. “Risca, Risca needs help” she shouted. “Help him” she shrieked out, drowned out by the battle’s din. She was still too weak. Tears of helplessness formed as she painfully loaded her bow, knowing that she would be too late and of little help. Risca needed her and so she had to make the attempt. The deadly consequences to herself did not matter. Over the wall she went, to live or die with her good friend. But unbeknownst to her, Gideon had managed to hear her cries…

The bugbears only saw an easy victim; one quick kill and then back to join the others in the destruction and looting of the camp. One lone dwarf; easy, they thought; not knowing that Risca had been weaned on battle tactics against his racial enemies.

A rage state did not lessen Risca’s combat talents. He had fought bugbears and their ilk for so long that his body did not need a conscious guide. There was no rage-fueled blind hack and slash. If anything, the increased strength and grit of the rage just increased his battle competence. Even before they reached him, he reacted, by charging at them instead of waiting.

He used his shortness as an advantage to their height, knowing they would have to lunge down to strike him. And so reaching the lead goblinoid, he veered and ducked, allowing the bugbear to miss and allowing him to slam Guifoon into the bugbear’s kneecap. Crippled, it screamed, collapsed, and writhed, out of the combat. Without pause, he ducked and rolled, shield slamming against the nearest ones shins, effectively tripping him. Then rising and swing simultaneously, Guifoon chopped into its skull. Two gone in an eye blink. Two left.

It was then that he heard the swish of a large weapon behind him. Spinning quickly, be shield blocked but the force striking the shield was extreme and strong enough to send him reeling. Dazed by the strike, he barely blocked the second strike, which numbed his arm and sent him to the ground. Defenceless, the third strike cut across his chest, slicing through ribs, sending up a fountain of red blood. Only his rage kept him alive. He snarled his fearless hate as he was finally able to see a giant of a troll raise up a huge battle axe for the death blow.

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Kilzadi ducked and twisted away. His long hours of practising calisthenics with Neon and Swan bore fruit as the drow’s sword whished through the air barely missing his head. Of course the main reason he practised was to watch Swan’s breasts and firm well-shaped rear, bob, jiggle and undulate but being able to dodge sword blows was not an unwelcome result either.

The female drow cursed as her second swing also missed. The bugbears were arriving and soon he would be surrounded. His continual attempt to dodge her sword was preventing him from spell casting. He needed to concentrate but that would mean taking a hit. Still he had to act or be sliced up. As he tumbled up, he managed to see a red cloaked figure at a distance, spelling darken bolts at Okul. It occurred to him then that they were engaged with the wrong combatants. A plan formed.

He incanted his spell knowing he would be struck. The drow’s sword slashed down his side causing pain but he managed to cast the spell. The drowess shouted in victory as her sword flashed down again. But he was gone. She could only blink in surprise as a tall muscular draconic creature popped into existence to replace the helpless male drow she was about to slice in two.

Okul felt an instant of discontinuity. Regaining his senses, all he could notice was a sword slashing down towards him. Combat reflexes determined his next actions. Without thinking, his spear moved latterly to block the slicing maneuver, pushing it off to the side and returned for a quick thrust. Spurred on by the huge strength of the half-dragon, it skewered its way through her breast plate, through her heart and out her back. Her eyes still held a look of astonishment as she died. *Kilzadi. Transposition spell Good one desert fox*, he thought as he removed his spear He called out the gold dragon’s battle challenge to the rushing bugbears. *Now this is my kind of combat.* Gripping his spear, he met their charge. They died quickly.

Kilzadi materialization in Okul’s spot so startled the red robed mage that his incantation was interrupted. The spell was lost. Kilzadi smirked. *Mage duel. My kind of combat.* Both magic users began new incantations. Kilzadi knew that in a mage duel it was not the most powerful spell that brought victory but the fastest. His spell went off first. A loud thunderclap detonated beside the red mage; the concussion hurling him to the ground. Even as the red mage was staggering up, Kilzadi finished his next spell. *Now, let me show you why I am a sorcerer of fire.* A pea sized marble of flame exploded out of his hand. Trailing a flame tail, it speedily entered the red mage’s gaping mouth. There it transformed into a nova heated inferno. There was nought left of the strange magic user except for individual atoms, blowing in the wind.

The mage duel had taken no more than two instances. Kilzadi turned to only see Okul gut the last bugbear. *Ah, no one saw my mage duel finesse*. *What a shame. Next time must do one in front of the watching Seekers.*

Okul turned to Kilzadi. The sounds and roars, screams and shrieks of dying men and monsters could be heard coming from the main gate. “Follow” he called out. “We must help!” They both ran around the corner; their eyes taking in the carnage happening at the gates As well, a huge wave of bugbears, were all trying to squeeze through the blasted out main gates.

“Hold on, Okul” shouted Kilzadi. *This is too much fun to pass up.* “Let me soften them up first”*.* Even as he spoke he uttered the words and motions for fireball spells. Three balls of fire sped out to arrive where the ensuing fire explosions would overlap. And so they did. Except for bugbears already inside the camp, the horde, shrieking their death cries was wiped out. Without hesitation, once the balls of fire had died out and ignoring the now pervasive stench of broiled flesh, Okul charged into the camp. Stopping only to take a deep breath, *I love the smell of overcooked meat in the evening,* Kilzadi followed in; a sudden urge came over him, an urge not seemly of his own volition. *I will use Crimdrac’s Claw. I just love the orgasmic feeling it gives me when it makes a kill.*

Gideon could sense the divine will force reaching out like fingers of a hand, plucking planar creatures as a child would pluck marbles. To others it would seem as if creatures instantaneously materialized out of thin air. And so it was. There at the blasted camp opening appeared three monstrous centipedes. Their size and sulphurous stench indicated a fiendish nature. It mattered not. Upper, lower or elemental plane, Kossuth’s Holy Fire burned equally well. Gideon’s will was their will and so the three huge insects immediately scampered to attack the bug bears. The priest drew his mace and was about to follow suit, when he happened to see Swan. The Seeker archer had rolled to the inner wall. Her bleeding and wounds made it evident that she was in desperate need of healing. *Oh no, Swan girl. Just hang on!* About to rush to her aid, he just made out her cry over the din of the battle raging all around him. “Risca…help” was all he could interpret. Seeing her quaff a cure potion, he arrived at a quick decision. He sped around the front of the camp.

Neon was everywhere. Never tarrying long enough to fully engage a bugbear, he flitted from jack to jack. Here he would block a bugbear thrust, allowing the combatant jack to strike freely, then jump his way to the next to rapier stab; the distraction allowing the jack to chop away Following this would be a tumble to trip one up and then on to the next where the whole pattern would be repeated. But it was a time consuming stop-gap measure as the jacks were totally outnumbered and were succumbing. Soon the horde would overrun them all. But time was bought; time enough for Teeghan to fortify the opening with the large log-carrying cart. That slowed down the enemy influx but could not prevent the camp’s inevitable defeat.

 A jack lay injured. A bugbear straddled him, heavy club raised for the killing strike. Neon leaped in to help, knowing he would be too late. Abruptly, the large humanoid gave out a shriek. There attached to its leg, a giant centipede had sunk its pincers, pumping out demonic acidic poison. The bugbear changed targets, attempting to simultaneously shake off and step on the fiendish insect. The delay granted Neon enough time to arrive and without slowing, insert his rapier, piercing the monster’s ear, to follow through its head and out the other ear. The bug, still obedient to Gideon’s will, sensed its death and scurried off to join its two fellows in attacking live ones.

 Helping the jack up, the rogue could see that the large wagon had slowed down the tide but not prevented it from entering. Even as he watched Teeghan cut down a bugbear, he knew they would need a miracle to survive. He found himself growing angry; angry because Aleena’s death had not yet been fully avenged. It was at this point that three fireballs exploded. The amassing horde at the opening was simply wiped out; totally ‘bug-bear’-bee cued. While he was still attempting to make sense of what just happened, Okul came charging; leaping over the wagon, shouting his battle cry. He skewered two bugbears even as he landed. Neon smiled death at the goblinoids. *Okul, battle-brother, about time you arrived*. His grin grew more villainous as Kilzadi ran into view. *Ask for a miracle; get a miracle.* The tide had now turned.

Racing round the corner, Gideon could see that Risca was in serious trouble. A giant-sized troll was about to chop down with an oversized axe. The dwarf lay on the ground, obviously hurt. Around him, were two bugbears; hooting in anticipation of the dwarf being sliced in twain. As fast as thought, faster than even calling upon Kossuth’s blessings, he used his mental powers. Powers that had only recently began to reveal themselves; powers that the others were as yet unaware.

 Even as the sound of three ignited fireballs was loud in his ears, a psionic energy ray streamed invisibly from his forehead to strike the troll. The mental energy burrowed its way into the monster’s flesh, dissolving and disintegrating. An instant later, Kossuth answered his divine spell. An agonizing scorching ray burst forth from his palm. Unerringly striking the troll, it seared and seared. Green troll blood boiled out. As he ran, Gideon willed his deity’s favor upon his crystal mace. The holy flames of Kossuth began to burn inside the crystal, turning it a deeper and deeper red. He charged the monster.

From Risca’s viewpoint, *tick*, he was about to be sliced, *tock*, the troll monster was screeching in pain as its flesh boiled and dissolved. *Tick*, without thought, he was up on his feet, Guifoon striking down a still, surprised bugbear. *Tock*, and the second bugbear joined its companion in death. Whirling quickly, despite his wounds, he turned to engage the troll, only to see Gideon vault at the creature, red mace a brilliant torch in the night.

Gideon regarded Risca as the dwarf raised himself to strike down the bugbears. The tenacity, fortitude and spirit of his dwarf friend amazed him. He leaped at the troll. “Kossuth, smite! He shouted as he brought down the mace with both hands. There was an intense flash of blinding red. When eyes were cleared, there was nought left of the troll except a pile of dust and a large axe. Without pause, he caught the now falling Risca. Somehow, after the flash, the dwarf knew that there were no immediate enemies. His rage ended, causing great weakness. Exhausted, terribly injured, he had collapsed.

Gideon laid him down gently. “Rest old friend” he whispered as he lay Kossuth’s healing upon him. Little tongues of flame danced all around Risca’s body, halting the bleeding, mending the wounds.

“Ah, the hot red pepper healing, the Seekers, the camp... the dwarf managed to croak.

“Listen”, replied Gideon. From inside the camp, came the sounds of cheering. “I think we won.” Risca smiled. The priest continued his healing. “You will be up and about in a short time. Just rest now.”

It was at this point that Swan limped up to them. “Oh, Risca”, she bemoaned, kneeling beside him to cradle his head. “It’s my fault. Please, please forgive.” Tears formed in her eyes.

The dwarf smiled up at her. “Hey gurl. We did well. Gutted us some drow. Ah, what is your fault?”

“The troll! That damned troll. I couldn’t keep it occupied, she sobbed out. “I couldn’t use my bow and avoid its attacks. It forced me to retreat. That’s when it came after you. Oh, Risca, I’m so sorry. If it wasn’t for my ineptitude, you…’ Here her shoulders shook as she fresh tears formed.

“Buckle up, Swan Morgana Battlestar” interjected Gideon; the use of her full name both commanding and demanding. ”Stop your whimpering and act like the warrior we all know you are. There is no fault here. Had you not retreated, you would have died and then no one would have warned about Risca’s danger and he too would have died. By retreating, you saved both of you. You have a problem with avoiding attacks after using your bow? Well stop bemoaning after the fact and do something about it for next time. Now finish healing yourself. You’re no good to anyone the way you are. That’s an order.”

Risca’s smile became a grin. “Better do it gurl. Wise leader made it an ‘order’. And I wouldn’t mind some of your green healing either.”

Swan laughed out her last sob. Her voice now determined, she responded. “You’re right. You’re both right. I am going to do something about it. I’m overreacting. It’s just I care for you so much, for all of you.” She pulled out her healing wand.

“Hey gurl, can’t speak for the others, but I have no problem with you caring so much, especially about me.”

“Oh Risca”. She bent down to put a kiss after kiss on his cheek He grinned even wider. She reached over to embrace Gideon in a tight hug. “Thank you. Thank you oh so much, my very good friend and leader. He hugged her back. “And now…” She laid the wand between and them and spoke the holy command word. The air filled with the fresh, invigorating aroma of forest pine and mint. In quick time their bodies were completely mended.

“Well look who finally showed up”, commented the dwarf as he was rising to his feet. All turned to see Okul gaiting towards them. With a glad cry, Swan leaped up and raced to embrace him.

“She’ll be fine, my gurl, no?” inquired the dwarf as both Seekers watched the two lovers together.

“Without a doubt” spoke Gideon with certainty. “You know how she is. She hates it when we battle in separate groups, where she can’t keep us all in sight. Like a mother, she worries about us getting hurt and that she’s not there to aid us just adds to her guilt feelings. She knows the problem she had with that troll and, you heard her, she is determined to rectify that. And who knows better than us that when our Swan determinedly makes up her mind to do something, it will get done. Now shall we go and unstick those two and checkup what’s happening in the camp?”

“A wise suggestion, oh wise leader.”

“Are you being sarcastic with this ‘wise leader stuff?”

“I? I’m just an uncouth, illiterate, ignorant barbarian, remember. I do not even understand what you just said.”

“Right. And I’m just a simple village pastor.”

Neon looked around. The battle for the camp was done. The jacks had surrounded and slaughtered the last bugbear. All seemed normal except for the cackle of burning wood, the stench of burnt death and the pile of corpses, human, drow and goblinoid; and one surviving monstrous centipede which dissipated even as he watched it. “The others…” he began.

“I will go” uttered Okul, his voice inviting no denial. Off he raced to circle the camp, his concern for the other Seekers obvious, but for Swan, truly evident.

Kilzadi, gory Claw in hand, breathing deeply, looking drained and euphoric as one completely sated during sexual acts, moved beside the rogue. “Well that was invigorating. This scimitar is spectacular.” He was recalling the almost overwhelming feeling of rapture it gave when used to make a kill. He felt a great reluctance to sheathe it.

“That weapon will be the death of you yet. It is making you addicted. Soon you will not be able to rid yourself of it. Stay with your magic. And now Teeghan?” he addressed the druid who had come to stand by them.

The druid looked both haggard and relieved. “Now? Now we gather and honor our dead, assemble all that is useful from our enemies and begin to rebuild into something bigger and better. The drow have taken a beating tonight, thanks to the Seekers. It will be awhile before they bother us here again.”

“Not just the Seekers. Your jacks fought well; staunchly and bravely. And the enemy bodies?”

“And so you should tell them. It will mean more coming from you. We all saw how you aided and stiffen their spines; the corpses? Those we’ll collect and dispatch into the forest. There at least there they will do some good as they feed the soil and the wildlife. As well as a warning to all who would do us harm. It will be dawn shortly; as we are still all too energized to rest, I suggest we start now by doing a body search for useful items.”

“Excellent suggestion” replied Kilzadi. “From our dead drow friends, there is mage equipment that I would like a closer examination.”

It was then that the other Seekers made their appearance. With a glad cry, Swan bounded joyfully towards them. “Neon, Teeghan” she called embracing each.

Neon hugged her close, relieved to see Gideon and Risca were also unscathed but as her body moulded into his, he surprised himself at the greater relief he felt at Swan’s non-injured appearance. He could sense hers as well.

Kilzadi cleared his throat. “Ah, Swannie I helped too.”

“Oh, Kilzadi, you are incorrigible” she whispered in his ear as she hugged him in turn and then gently removed his hand that had somehow found its way to stroke her rear. “But I am truly pleased you are safe.”

“We have much to do”, spoke up Gideon; wounded to tend and dead friends to honor. I suggest we start.”

And so they did. Weapons, items and other valuables were collected. Enemy bodies were dragged out and dumped; the fallen jacks were organized for burial rituals.

It was during this time that Okul approached Swan with a note in his hand.

“Dear one, this was found on the female drow. I cannot read the script. It may be important.”

“Well let’s take a look then.” The script was drow, but close enough to elfish that she could discern it. Her face grew serious as she read. “Yes this is important. Call the Seekers and Teeghan too.

Shortly they were all gathered and each had perused the note which read:

*Captain Vrinrae of House Morcane,*

*The Darkness is Rising! My emissary is in negotiations with Quamara Keleidsa, the Dragon Lady, at the old Keleidsa estate. Quamara has been willing to work with Drow in the past and hates the humans so much that she is blind to all else. Having been rejected by the elvish gods, the Eldreth Veluuthra are ripe for the darkness, and would make formidable allies and spies to our cause. Take to my emissary the head of Teeghan and his forest destroying lumberjacks. It will make a nice gift for the Dragon Lady, once my emissary secures her loyalty.*

*The Queen of Shadows*

*PS I am concerned that your house wizard, Elac, is hesitant about our goals.  Dispatch him to our Dark Deity once his loyalty is no longer useful.*

“Well that explains the why of the drow attack, but not the who or what. All must be made aware of this proposed alliance between surface elves and the drow. It must not be allowed to happen. Teeghan can you enlighten us?”

The half-elf druid seemed deep in thought. He answered slowly.

“The house Morcane…I seem to remember there is something unusual about that particular house, but I cannot recall exactly what. The Eldreth Vehuuthra is a secret cult of extremists. They are like-minded in elfin superiority of the races and promote any act which will restore ancient elfin glory and subjugate the “inferior races” to slave status. They consider elfin blood to be sacred and any non-elf with elfin blood to be a blasphemy. I assume that this Dragon Lady is their present leader. I have no idea of this Keleidsa estate. But Gideon is correct. The Vehuuthra and the drow cannot be allowed to ally.”

The priest replied, “True. And so we must find this estate and soon. But now we have more questions than answers. I doubt that this ‘Queen of Shadows’ refers to Sharr. I am hard-pressed to imagine a goddess such as Sharr writing a hand note to a drow captain. And the identity of this ‘emissary’; more mysteries.”

“Upon your return go to the Oakengrove Abbey. Seek out Gannon Durei, our Oakfather and of the Mistledale Council. He may the information that we need. I will notify him to expect you and to what has occurred here.”

Looking smug, Kilzadi spoke up “I know someone who may have all the answers we may need. Our good captain Vinrae. Yes, she’s dead, but I’m sure our good friends in the Tyr temple will have no qualms about questioning her. Not for something this important.”

All the Seekers knew what he proposed and by now, none were squeamish.

“An excellent idea. I think you are correct about the Tyrians. Fine. We will prepare the body to take with us; put a preservation spell on it. Now let us finish up here and get a good start in the morning.”

The return of the Seekers to Ashabedford was uneventful except for one puzzling moment for Swan. Kilzadi had ridden up to her to state that when she and Okul went in search of the dragon Yenamros, there was an excellent chance the he and Gwenect would accompany them. *Wink,* *wink*. More puzzling were Okul’s snorts of supressed laughter. She wondered what kind of joke the two of them were concocting. A short distance before the city, Gideon veered away towards his cottage with the agreement they all reconvene at the White Hart Inn after a late brunch.

Entering the city, Neon bade his adieu as he trotted off to the boarding room he shared with Jhaer. The remaining Seekers arrived at the inn, much to the relief and joy of Swan’s ‘Uncle Holfast’.

Late that night, Gideon lay curled up against his dryad. The moon shadows of the large oak by the bedroom window swayed along the walls as the night breeze ruffled the leaves. He breathed in the forest calming scent of her fey green hair; her summer shade. Finally at peace, drifting into sleep, his last wakeful thoughts were of what the morrow would bring and how he would guide the Seekers in the quest for the Keleidsa estate.

Late that night, Neon lay naked on his back. Jhaer slept contented, slick with sweat; exhausted from the many vigorous bouts of their lovemaking. As the beautiful moon elf bard slept; head on his chest, he could feel her pert breasts slowly rise and fall. He did not yet sleep. His thoughts kept racing: Aleena, Red Wizards, drow factions, Shaar, the Compact, Darkness Rising, god-sent dreams; there had to be a connection to all of it; some commonality. As yet he could not find it. And so he kept on, his mind racing, attempting to join the pieces until finally Jhaer’s gentle rhythm lulled him into slumber.

Late that night, Swan lay engulfed by Okul. They had, as the half-dragon would say, ‘mated’ many times that evening. He stirred in his sleep, causing her ranger sharp senses to open her eyes as she felt him slipping out of her. Repositioning herself allowed his scale-ribbed manhood to enter her fully and stay in place. As a wave of pleasure moved through her, she gave a sigh of satisfaction and cuddling against him returned to sleep.

Late that night, Kilzadi, Risca and Holfast stayed sharing flagon after flagon. “On the house for my Ugly Duckling’s companions” insisted the old warrior. “Tell me about the battle at the logging camp; spare no detail.” And so the tales lasted long into the night. For his part, Kilzadi tried to match the dwarf and the grizzled veteran, flagon for flagon, but soon enough the spirits came to dominate and he slumped over face first onto the oak table. The other two ignored him and continued with their drinking and story-telling only to be interrupted once as the Desert Fox jerked up and stated emphatically, “One day, I will own an inn such as this” and promptly slumped over again. When they retired, they left him as he lay bent, only to be awakened pre-sunrise by the morning staff as they prepared for the inn’s breakfast business. So with a sore neck and stiff back, all roaring a deafening chorus with his pounding headache, he stumbled up to his room.

Gideon arrived at the White Hart Inn post brunch. All the Seekers, as well as Jhaer, were present. She and Swan were in a corner, tete-a teting much to the discomfort of Neon and to a lesser degree, Okul as the two ladies would at times glance at them, giggle and snort and then continue their quiet conversation. Despite being adults and worldly, there was still young girls in them.

All had dined well on the generous portions except for Kilzadi who still looked a bit green, despite having the honeyed green tea to soothe his stomach and a cantrip to free his head from its pounding. Risca had taken great delight in seeing the mage shudder as he ensured that Kilzadi watched him consume great slaps of greasy ham and buttered eggs, mouth open, washed down with morning ale.

With Gideon’s arrival, they got down to business.

“Swan, you and Risca seek out the Church of Chauntea. Obtain what information you can from the Sisters, especially Watchful Sister Alena and your friend Nelyssa Shendean. Okul, you and Kilzadi take the drow body to the temple of Tyr. Talk to Kurud. See if can persuade the war priests to cast divinations to answer some of the many questions we have. Neon and I will…what, oh, sorry; Neon Jhaer and I will travel to the Oakengrove Abbey to confer with Gannon Durei and the druids. Then we will all reassemble back here to exchange information; to plot our next course of action.” He ended with his personal call to action. “Let’s do it Seekers!”

Risca was still chortling as he and Swan rode to the Abbey of the Golden Sheaf.

“Did you watch Kilzadi at breakfast, me gurl? I made sure he saw me savouring all that rich, greasy food. Almost did him in”, he chuckled. “Show no mercy”, he chuckled again.

Swan laughed. “Oh Risca, there is such an evil side to you.”

“Yes”, he snickered back, “especially when it comes to bedeviling our self-proclaimed ‘Mighty Mage of Magic’. Gods, but annoying him is much fun. Surprisingly, one would think that sorcerers’ apprentices would learn small magics to be able to hold their spirits without ill effects. It is one of the first things that dwarf younglins learn and that with no magic help.”

Swan’s laughter continued. “Yes, one would think so, but then your teasing would be diminished, no? Besides he may get his revenge by ensorcelling you into a teetotaler or worse, a teetotal ling master brewer.”

“That me gurl is beyond even divine abilities, let alone our magic friend. Now what were you and Jhaer all on about? You two were practically by yourselves and besides yourselves all morning.”

“Oh, since our return to Ashabenford has been much interrupted, I never really got a chance to visit my friends; so you know, doing some catches up, girl to girl talk, stuff like that.”

“What does all that mean? I don’t understand.”

Swan burst into a fit of giggling causing Nivea to turn her head to look at her reproachfully. Swan knew her response would embarrass the dwarfness out of her dear Risca. “You know, girl talk…gossip, recipe exchanges, latest attires, who is sleeping with who, who wants to sleep with who, .comparing our lovers in terms of favourite positions, various techniques, staying power counts, satisfaction ratios.

Risca turned sunset red as comprehension dawned. He knew his gurl had a wanton nature but amongst dwarfs, unlike elves and their kin, such matters were kept private and confidential. No wonder Neon and Okul had been on edge. Even the bravest of male warriors feared discussion of their manliness by the womenfolk. Luckily, by now they had arrived.

The abbey was an L-shaped two story brick building with all manner of flowering vines crawling up the sides to the roof. The grounds were filled with fountained gardens, rows of flower beds; tended to by the daughters of Chauntea. Songbirds filled the branches of sweet peach, plum and cherry trees with harmonic music. The perfume of the various blossoms sweetened and invigorated the air. Between the sides of the L was a special red rose garden; special because the roses were always in bloom, no matter the season; special because Sister Aleena lay interned here.

“Hail the abbey” shouted Risca, happy to discontinue the conversation. The Seekers were always welcomed at any church of the All-Mother; especially Swan who had spent much time at the Golden Sheathe with the novices. Greeted by warm welcomes, they were quickly ushered to Alena’s office once Swan had made their urgency known.

The four sat; the two Seekers, Alena and Nelyssa. Swan had requested that the paladina of the Red Rose also attend the meeting. Besides being the leader of the Mistledale Riders, Nelyssa was also a holy warrior of the church of the All-Mother and a good friend. Swan and Risca explained the situation and what they had had learned and what they needed to know.

“Your words bode ill, dear daughter. But I know nought of this Eldreth Vehruthra except what is generally known Nelyssa? Alena deferred to the paladina.

Nelyssa had been deep in thought as Swan had described the latest developments.

“Your words speak true, Mother. House Morcane is a defeated house of some drow Underdark city, whose survivors fled and finally reached the surface. Instead of returning to the Underdark, they now wish to establish a drow stronghold on the surface; here in the Dales. In this they are wooing a common goal with the Vehruthra; the removal of all non-elves, especially humans, apparently spurred on by the Sharrans. This alliance of drow, Sharrans and the racist fanatical cult would be a danger to all. The other Dales must be warned as we would be their first target, but also should Cormyr and even Sembia. I will see to it. Also we will increase our Rider patrols and increase vigilance for drow signs. But it would be best if this soon-to-be alliance was dismantled in its infancy. For that we would need to know the location of this Keleidsa estate. I will make inquiries. Hopefully we will not be late.”

Alena addressed Swan. “Daughter, in two days there is to be a full meeting of the Council of Six of Mistledale. It would be beneficial if you and the Seekers be present to explain the situation, answer questions and help make recommendations. Yes? Excellent. Now then, let us retire to Aleena’s Rose Garden and take tea.”

“Thank you Holy Mother; but only for a short time. I wish to visit the estate of Zander Wolcott to see how my boys are faring. It has been awhile and I do not want them to imagine that they have been forgotten. Besides, Zander is also a council member and he can put his resources to tracking down this Keleidsa person.”

“Good and wise.”

Risca’s momentary fallen face at the mention of tea had not gone unnoticed by Nelyssa’s sage eyes. As Alena and Swan began their departure, she beamed at the dwarf.

“The fields of The Rose Matron contain both grain and grape, valiant warrior. Our hospitality would be amiss if we could not manage to find refreshment more suited than tea for a dwarf’s palate In fact, I will join in such. As two champions we will toast both the bounty of the All-Mother and the watchfulness of the gods of your fathers”

Risca’s next words forced heart-felt laughter from Nelyssa. “Finally, a paladin that understands the more important matters. Lady, it would honour me and my spirit to share your toasts…as long as the spirit was strong.”

More laughter. “Now I truly understand why Swan finds you so endearing. Come then, let us go and test the strength of my goddess. Methinks you will be surprised. Then she got all serious again. “Now tell me, did all the drow bear the house Morcane badge?” she asked as she led him off.

Okul and Kilzadi had borrowed a cart from Uncle Holfast’s inn to bear the drow captain’s corpse to the temple of Tyr. The fighter drove while the mage rode, head in hands. They were silent most of the way until Okul, feeling sympathy for his fellow Seeker and battle brother spoke up.

“You must learn to moderate your spirit intake”, advised the half-dragon, “especially if your magic is limited to the effects. Otherwise you will be useless the next day and more susceptible to Risca’s teasing. We all noted his effect on you at breakfast.”

Kilzadi lifted his head from his hands and stared red-filled eyes at Okul. “One of these days I will flambé that dwarf.”

Okul gave a snort. “Perhaps, but until that day comes, heed my words or be prepared to endure more dwarven antics. We have arrived.”

The temple of Tyr was a mini-fortress on the outskirts of Ashabedford. A great stone wall surrounded its lands; containing stables, armoury, storage sheds, granaries, living quarters and the temple itself. A wide moat ran along the outside the walls allowing access only by a wide drawbridge to a portcullis and heavy harden wood doors. Regularly spaced along the walls were heavy ballistae, arbalests and trebuchets. The clergy of Tyr were composed of three martial orders; one which specialized in extra-planar threats, one for worldly threats and one for rival organizations. Each order took their deity’s doctrine of Constant Vigilance quite seriously.

The guards at the gate readily recognized Okul and waved the wagon through. As a sparring partner for Kurud, the half-dragon had been a constant visitor at the temple. As usual, the grounds and buildings were a din of action. The priests seconded as professional blacksmiths, wheelwrights, coopers, tanners, hostlers armor and weapon smiths. For those not on duties, there was always other work. And, of course, there was always the constant weapon practice.

The two Seekers were directed to the paladin Kurud’s location which, not surprisingly, happened to be at one of the practice areas where he was taking several new recruits through their paces. Spying Okul and the wagon, he smiled and handed over control.

“Okul, brother warrior, so glad to see you fit. Ready to show these young pups how to spar?

The two large fighters embraced warmly. “No my paladin friend. No time today. Important business and we need you to intermediate with the Previ Marshal for us.”

Kurud stepped back and appraised the golden scaled battler. “You seemed changed since last time we met; taller, bigger stronger, more, ah, draconic. But I also sense great calmness, a peace, in you, not present before. Now what business would involve the head of the temple?”

“Just test out his changed sense of humor” retorted the dismounting Kilzadi. All these changes have one source; continuous daily gratuitous sex. Well-met to you too Kurud.”

The paladin nodded to the mage. “I detect jealously in you, Kilzadi.” He addressed Okul. “And this is true? You have forsaken the potent fury of Tempus for the fleshly pleasures of Aphrodite?” There was humor in his voice.

Okul waved him off. “A story for later. Now, come and see.” He led the paladin to the back of the cart. He unwrapped the drow captain’s death shroud. The well-preserved dead eyes stared up at the paladin. Kurud frowned and shrugged. “And so, what am I supposed to be looking for?”

“We need to question her spirit. There is an alliance of drow in the making with the Eldreth Vehruthra.”

The paladin’s face grew pale hearing the last two words. With no hesitation he summoned an acolyte.

“Run to the main temple. Ask for the Previ Marshal and the other high ranking clerics. Tell them they are to urgently make preparations to speak to the dead. Go quickly.” He turned to the two Seekers. “Come. Let us take the body to the temple.”

Shortly, arriving at the main temple, they found the elder priests and senior paladins awaiting them on the steps. The Previ Marshal, Nerval Watchwill glanced at the two Seekers and stepped up to the paladin. “Because the summons came from you, Kurud, I interrupted my schedule. Now, what is this about? Why speak with the dead?”

“Come” Kurud indicated to his superior; the battle-hardened warrior-priest. “Look” He exposed the drow captain’s corpse. “As you trust me, we require answers regarding Eldreth Vehruthra. We require them immediately. Explanations later.”

The high priest did not hesitate. He ordered several acolytes. “Take the body; prepare it and the inner sanctum for the ritual.” He addressed Okul, “This ritual is not to be taken lightly. While they prepare, explain to me this necessity and what answers you seek.”

Okul recited the events of the last several days; the drow attack at the lumber camp, the discovered note and the possible triple alliance between drow, the church of Shar, and the Eldreth Vehruthra.

“Dire news indeed. Constant vigilance demands knowledge about our enemies. Now let us go and question this drow’s spirit.”

The gathering made their way into the temple. As Kilzadi made to follow a steel strength hand forcibly gripped his arm, preventing him from moving.

“And where do think you are going?” Kurud whispered in his ear.

Having failed to shrug off the arm, the sorcerer answered with anger in his voice, “with Okul of course.”

“You cannot bring that vile… thing into the sacred temple” the paladin indicated Crimdrac’s Claw. That weapon will be the death of you yet. I warned you about it.”

A sudden urge came unbidden over the mage; the urge to draw the weapon and use it on Kurud. This was followed by the greatest reluctance to leave the weapon behind.

*What, what? Where are these feelings from?* He shook his head as if to clear it“I need to be there at the questioning.”

“Then leave that thing behind. Better yet, destroy it. The longer you keep it, the easier it will come to dominate you.” Kurud’s tone broke no compromise.

“Bah. I am the Desert Fox. Nought can dominate me.”

“Then prove it. Leave the weapon behind…since you will not be allowed in with it. Prove that your will to enter is stronger than your reluctance to leave it behind.”

“So be it.” Kilzadi’s hands went to unclasp his weapon belt. As he did so, his fingers tensed as if averse to continuing. *What? What is this? I do as I will!* With a snarl, he moved his hands to unlock the clasp and hurled the belt and sheathed weapon into the back of the cart. “There! satisfied?!”

Kurud just stared. “For the present, yes. But remember my words. Come now.”

Finally entering the inner sanctum, they found the ritual almost complete. All stood around the marble slab, upon which lay the drow corpse. The high priest conducting the ritual finished the litany. The corpse opened its mouth and without motion of tongue or lips, its voice moaned out :Asss…kkk”

The priest looked to Okul and Kilzadi. “Tell me the questions and I will command an answer.” They did.

In a few moments it was done, the silence broken by the First Sword.” This is indeed grave. We will warn our fellow temples, increase our vigilance. There is to be a meeting of the Mistledale council in two days. Kurud, you will be our liaison; express our concerns and our desire that action must be taken. Thank you Seekers for bringing this to our attention. We are done for now.”……

Returning to the White Hart Inn, Kilzadi seemed pensive. Okul finally broke the silence. “Well we learned a little but nothing of immediate help.” The mage glanced at the half-dragon as Okul continued.

“We now know that the lady of loss in the note refers to Shar and that her emissary is still at the Keleidsa estate and that this estate lies in the Cormanthar forest. What we do not know is how to find this estate, the kind and size of the forces arrayed against us and the next point of attack. Hopefully the others will have had better luck.” Kilzadi grunted his assent.

“So what were you and Kurud discussing before you entered. Anything I can help with?”

“What? Oh, nothing. Nothing important. Nothing I can’t handle on my own” replied the mage as his fingers played over Crimdrac’s hilt, deep in thought.

It was a 20 mile ride to the Oakengrove Abbey. The sun was pleasant as Gideon, Jhaer and Neon made their way there.

“So Gideon, do you know where we are going, none of us never having been to this abbey before?” inquired the half-elf.

“Holfast described it to me” responded the Chosen of Kossuth. “Apparently, a priest-druid of Silvanus was a member of his adventuring group, along with Swan’s parents. It lies inside the edge of the Forest. It is a walled stronghold that protects an ancient oak grove sacred to the Oak Father. The abbey is almost hidden by trees, but its outer shape is defined by a large fortress ring studded with small towers. The ring is almost a mile across and encloses woodland alive with a wild variety of trees and crisscrossed by small chuckling streams and meandering paths. At the heart of the ring is a hill crowned with old, massive oak trees: the sacred grove itself. So we head along this road until we come to the forest and spot small wooden towers. Should not be too difficult.”

“Fine then. I leave it in your capable hands.” He reined back to converse with Jhaer.

“So this morning, what were you and Swan carrying on about; all that giggling and such?

The beautiful bard smiled a ‘gotcha’ grin at her lover. “Got to you did it? I was wondering when you would ask. Cygni and I were just talking catch-up girl stuff, you know, gossip, attire, recipes, and relevant items like bedroom secrets, lover’s ability to satisfy, favourite positions, that sort of thing.”

Neon’s reaction was opposite to Risca’s: he laughed heartily. “And here I was worried that it involved matters of import. So tell me my Jhaer of the Sweet Voice”, he teased, “How did I compare?”

“Well, Ninnach my luscious lisserling”, she teased back, in terms of physique, a far distant second. But no surprise there. You are hardly expected to match a half-dragon; but yes, in terms of expertise and style, somewhat in front. But only somewhat as Swan is diligently teaching him certain refined ah, arts and with that extra-long pointy rough tongue of his, well…, but yes, overall you come ahead”

“So you are content then, even with my inferior physique?” he chortled.

“Oh, very. You have my heart, Ninnach. But still, as explained by Swan, there is something to be said for a simple good, protracted pounding with a hard ribbed member”, she ended as her face took on a dreamy look; a look not unnoticed by the half-elf.

He grinned at her. “Apparently something you are tempted to experience, no?”

“I would not be adverse, especially with the nightly training Okul has been receiving. And you my love; have you lost your ardor for our carnal Cygni?”

Neon became serious. “I have tried to explain to you….”

Jhaer too became serious. She stroked his cheek. “Yes love, I know …Aleena. You want to avoid such pain again by not committing with her. But still, unlike her, you welcome me into your bed. You have no fear for me then? Am I also, just… what is Swan’s expression…oh yes, just another pet-fem for you?”

“Never!” he emphasised. “Every day, I pray to find you safe. Each day I ache to return to you. But with Cygni, those times she died…”

“But returned to us by the will of the gods…”

“Yes, and the agony, even so. Imagine if I committed, imagine if the gods do not so will next time. I am only mortal. Committed I could not bear it to happen again.”

“Ah, and of course, as a Seeker, she risks death continuously. And so you steel your heart, avoid intimacy.”

“Yes, and as her mother said, she is not one to wait and so will turn her affection elsewhere.”

“As she has done. But you forget one thing. She is elf-heart. She can love more than one equally. Ninnach, barring accident or battle, I will outlive you as you will outlive Swan. I ache to see you unhappy. I do not want to see you growing old with regret.”

Her eyes glistened with beginning tears. “Is a brief love worth a life of pain? A life though filled with pain but has no regrets? That is for you to decide, my dear one. Think on it. That is all I ask.”

She wiped at her eyes. “Methinks Gideon needs some conversation.” She spurred her horse ahead to reach the priest, leaving Neon alone with his thoughts. ……………………

In time they entered into the forest. After a bit of floundering, they finally spotted a small wooden tower. As they approached, a large crow atop it gave forth a loud caw. As it flew off, it was echoed by another, then another and another, fainter and fainter as the birds were farther and farther.

“I think the sentries just warned them of our presence” deduced the bard.

No sooner as she spoke than from in front, unnoticed till now, crept out two large dire wolves. They stood, their low growls daring the Seekers to approach closer. An instant later, another pair emerged from behind. Then another pair and another. Quickly the companions were surrounded by a large pack of dire wolves.

Then they heard a command. The wolves stopped their aggressive actions.

“That was a command in druidic” informed Jhaer.

Sure enough, from the bushes stepped out a young pretty female wood elf. On her left was a dire black bear, on her right a dire cougar. Her leafy attire and the oaken symbol on her chest left no doubt that she was a druid of Silvanus.

“Ah, finally, the Seekers of Faerun. You are expected. Please forgive the grove guardians but we always arrive immediately at the first crow call. Please, follow the path before you and you will arrive at the Sacred Grove. Oakfather Gannon is waiting. When you return to Ashabedford, give Holfast greetings from Nera Aquilae.” With a small half-bow, she quickly disappeared back into the woods. As did all the animals.

“Path, what path…” began Neon. “That one” replied Gideon pointing. Where once had been thick underbrush, now stood revealed a forest trail. “Let’s do it Seekers.”

And so the trio set off. Proceeding down the single file trail, the trees became more diverse, the plants more lush and the insects, birds and smaller animals more numerous. Even more interesting, the trail behind them vanished, changing once more into thick unpassable underbrush.

Eventually the trail slanted upwards and led to a hill, upon which sat massive, tall oaks. Interspersed amongst them were log cabins and a much larger wooden long house. Figures could be seen moving through the grove. As they approached, a cloud of sparkling motes veered towards them. As it neared, the cloud resolved itself into a flock of colourful fairies. The palm-sized creatures, dragonfly wings fluttering as a hummingbird’s and scintillating rainbow colors, carried needle sized rapiers and tiny bows along with sleep-inducing arrows. They could hear high pitch sounds as the fairies communicated with each. The flock circled them once and then veered away into the woods, soon lost to sight.

Neon, understanding sylvan, translated. “They said we were under the protection of the Oakfather and not to be harmed.”

“Yes, replied Gideon, “They are commonly called ‘Tinkerbelles’. The grove is sacred even to the fey races of the forest. They protect it as do the druids.”

By now they reached the grove itself. Waiting for them were a group of forest priests, elf, half-elf and human; as well as a quartet of satyr rangers. The humanoid half-men, half-goat gave more than appreciative looks to Jhaer as the bard dismounted, their goat-horned heads bobbing welcome.

An older druid stepped forward. “Seekers, welcome. Come. The Oakfather awaits.” He led them to the longhouse. Entering, he guided them to the main area. There to greet them was a splendid figure. Standing straight and tall, shoulder length marble white hair covered his forehead. Though his sun-bronzed face and hands bore age wrinkles, his green eyes shone youthfully and bright. Dressed in buckskin, a feathered cloak draped his back. One hand held an oak staff, etched with runes. They could feel the magical auras surrounding the man. The other hand made a cordial gesture.

“Please, seat. Enjoy our refreshments, Gideon Fireforged, Seeker leader, Ninniach Wilde, son of the lady Dawnhorn and you elf lady, Jhaer Brightsong is it not, of Shadowdale?”

Gideon replied. “You are well-informed, good sir, Gannon Durei, is it not?”

The old man chuckled. “Touché. I meant no rudeness. But in these unsettled times, it is wise to be well-informed. And you are correct; Gannon Durei am I. Now please join me at the table.”

“Be at ease. Teeghan contacted us regarding the information you are seeking and you shall have it. I wish to inform you that the abbey and all those related to it are more than grateful for the Seekers help in that matter. Unknowingly you have made many allies; which is why we are having this little meeting. I must also tell you first that here at the abbey we let the Eldreth Vehruthra be. Not because we agreed with their gaols and policies, but because they were friends of the forest and so shared that ideal with us. As for the rest, our neutrality kept us aloof. But now…” Here his face darkened. “…cross-breeding monstrous humanoids, to ally themselves with the Underdark drow, no lovers of the woods and even worse, the Sharrans, who would cast a shadow over the life-giving sun to bring eternal night, no! They would upset the balance. By all this, they have crossed the line. They must be stopped! And so I tell you this now. The Keleidra estate lies at the south-east edge of the Archwood. It is marked by a small lake by a large cliff wall upon which sits a huge weirdwood tree. The manor home is a tree house amongst its top branches. This is the home of the so-called Dragon-Lady. The reason she is called the Dragon-Lady is due to the legend that so resentful was Quamara Keleidsa of the elven retreat and so hateful of non-elves, especially humans, that she gathered similarly minded minions and underwent a vile ritual in which she fused her body and soul with that of a green dragon, in effect becoming a half-dragon. West of the lake are three ancient cairns, burial crypts the elves of old used for nobility and heroes. Find them first and they will direct you to the cliff. Our final position and our plans on this matter will be furthered at the Mistledale Council meeting. You will attend of course.”

“We plan to be there. We thank you for that important information.” answered Gideon.

“Excellent. The combined response of the Council will become deed at that time. Now try the excellent fresh baked trout and the wild honey and the strawberry wine. Let us talk pleasantries before your departure.

“Well” began Jhaer, using what she termed her ‘musical’ voice, “this is delicious. On the way here we met one Nera, who bade us give regards to Holfast Harpenshield…”

“Ah”, interrupted Gannon. “Yes, our Nera. Of the Eagle tribe she is. She rarely leaves the forest now. Once, when they were all younger, she and Holfast and that Battlestar couple, Lilia and Armando made a formidable adventuring party. Nera and Holfast became rather close. But since they disbanded as such groups are wrought to do, she did not want to face him as he grew old and she did not age. A mistake I told her, but, she has her own mind.” He shrugged. “My hope is that she does not come to regret her decision.”

Here, Jhaer gave a knowing look at Neon.

The archdruid continued. “I was hoping that the youngest Battlestar would be part of your retinue.”

 “Swan? No, she went to make the same inquiries at the Abbey of the Golden Sheathe. Do you know her?”

“Her personally, no; only by reputation of the Seekers. I just look forward to meeting her. Her grandmother and I are friends and allies. Actually, for a time I was apprenticed to the Tree-Talker of the Fox tribe. From her I learned elfin ways and how to be a leader that cares for his duty, his god’s expectations and care of the people he serves. But most importantly, from her I learned acceptance of fate’s will and the overpowering power of true love.”

“His eyes glistened as they took on a faraway look. Swan’s grandfather, her last husband, and I fought the invading drow together. We were all fighting the drow then. I was part of his scouting party, and the fights and skirmishes bonded us as beloved teacher and favourite student. He died saving an overconfident young and foolish druid apprentice. As he lay bleeding to death in my arms, and I helpless to save him, he whispered to me to take his bow and return it to Harma; that she would know what to do with it. I hear Swan has it now. Yet for my previous hubris, I am forgiven. That weighs heavy upon me. My only consolation is in knowing that he now rests in Arvandor. But never will I forget nor will I ever forgive House Morcane. She is reputed to have her grandfather’s eyes. I just wanted to see the truth of that.” He shook his head as if to clear it of old memories.

“Forgive an old man’s musings. I’ll see for myself at the Council meeting. Now come, let us finish our meal. Tell me about the battle at the lumber camp…”

….*to be continued*