**CHAPTER 22 Cursed Cairns and Flying Trolls**

The Mistledale Council of Six was adjourning. Present were the Seekers. Gideon had reported the events leading up to and including the lumber camp battle. Also present were the paladin of Tyr, Kurud who had put forth his church’s stand on the situation. Nelyssa Shendean and Jarrold Rold stood in for the Riders of Mistledale.

The Councillors had retired to discuss the matter and arrive at a plan of action. During the meeting, Swan saw a chance to determine something about the High Councillor, Harlesk Malorn, the mayor of Ashabedford. She still felt distrustful of him, after all the decisions he had made in the past. During the meeting, she had used her magical scout headband. She wore this item disguised as a Deepingdale militia bandana. It enabled her to true sight people, creatures and objects.

She was disappointed to observe that all the councillors and people in attendance were as they seemed; including Harlesk Malorn. But her headband did allow her to discern a secret, magically hidden entryway in the wall directly behind Malorn’s chair. **[Lord No’s Note-Much, much later, in the saga,, she would be full of remorse and guilt that she never explored and used this information as future events became such that this apparently insignificant bit of knowledge was shuffled to the very back of her memory.]**

Her thoughts were brought back to the present as the High Councillor began to speak.

“People and friends of Mistledale, the council has weighed heavily upon this most urgent and grievous matter. We have concluded and agreed with some of the speakers…”

“Talks nicely, don’t he?” Swan whispered sarcastically to her bench mate Okul, only to receive a tender but still painful elbow jab.

“…that yes, immediate action must be taken to offset the danger posed by this nefarious triple alliance…”

Swan yawned loudly. “Wake me when he has something new to say, if ever.” Another elbow jab.

“…and so to that end we have come to a plan. We have agreed that we cannot send a large force, be it the warriors of Tyr, or our own Riders, or even a band from the Oakengrove Abbey. Such a force would alert our enemies, who would then have time to make good their escape. No, my fellow councillors and I have resolved that our best course of action would be to send in a tactical hit squad, one that could deliver a surprising swift surgical strike. To this end, and knowing of their past history and accomplishments, this council requests of Gideon Fireforged, if he would partake and lead the Seekers of Faerun on such a mission.”

“Ah now we finally get to it” murmured Swan while grapping her lover’s elbow to prevent any further jabs. The Seekers had already discussed this possibility. Once they had all reassembled and shared their knowledge, especially the location knowledge of the Dragon Lady’s estate, they had discussed acting as the agents of Mistledale. All had agreed for different reasons:

Risca- more drow gutting

Swan- the Dalelands are in danger

Okul- I go where Swan goes

Gideon-the darkness must not arise

Neon-perhaps more clues related to Aleena’s death

Kilzadi-treasure, fame and fortune

Gideon rose to reply. “Councillors, The Seekers and I have discussed this possibility and yes, we will undertake such a mission.”

“Excellent. The Council is most appreciative. Please see captain Rold for supply details. Now unless there is further business I will adjourn this meeting. None? Then Adjourn!”

With that people rose began to mingle. Swan began to make her way towards Nelyssa and Jarrold. A voice stopped her.

“Swan Battlestar, a word, would you be so kind”

Turning to the speaker, she recognized Councillor Gannon Durei. Puzzled as to why, such an esteemed and respected figure would address her; she bowed her head in respect. “Councillor, Oakfather, of course.”

“No child, there is no need for that. No formalities between us. I just wish to extend my personal invitation to you to visit our abbey; whenever you have the time and inclination, of course. Also should you ever feel the need to stay awhile in a natural setting, the abbey is yours to use as a base of operations.”

All the while he spoke; he had been focussing on her face, especially her eyes. Finished speaking, he nodded as if in confirmation.

“You reflect much of your grandfather. I look forward to enjoying your company and conversation. Will you accept my blessing?”

Still astonished by the open-ended invitation, she could only nod. Palm on her forehead, he recited: “In time of need, the Green renew your faith and strength. As you love the ‘Green’, so it protects you. As you love the ‘Green’, so it supports you. As you love the ‘Green’, so it renews you. Now, take care child.” He turned to leave and just as suddenly turned back. “Oh, and the invitation is also extended to Holfast Harpenshield. Be sure to inform him.” His last words left her open-jawed and perplexed.

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Mayor Malorn approached Neon.

“Good sir, a word, if you please in private.” He led Neon to a corner where they good not be overheard.

“It is a private matter. Family. When Gideon made his report, he mentioned that Brechtu, the Sembian cloth merchant was actually spying for the Sharrans and responsible for attacking our caravans. My anxiety is that my youngest daughter, Mandalane went on a picnic with him just the day before you encountered him. But she has not been seen or heard from since. Unless, she is dead, gods forbid, in that short time, he must have left her with the emissary at the Keleidsa estate. I know she is fond of you, so please I implore you, as a distraught father, please search for signs of her.” His voice began to crack. “If dead please return her body for a proper funeral, but if alive, gods willing, rescue and return her.”

“Mandi was with Brechtu?” Neon felt a rage in his heart. Another one taken from him? True, he was not in love with her, just a pet-fem, but she was sweet and eager to please. He was fond of her. She was delightful to be with; that someone could intently hurt her…”Rest assured we will do all in our power to return her to you. And, on your behalf, take vengeance on her abductors.”

“A tortured father’s gratefulness to you. I just pray and pray that she is still alive.” Now his eyes began to tear. “Also another matter. Her older sister, Synthya, took a carriage to Sembia as part of a caravan, the same day as the picnic. But there has been no word from either her or the caravan. I need to know her whereabouts and…”

Neon was taken aback. Sindi as well? Two daughters going missing at the same time? It could not be a coincidence. Sindi was the oldest of the three daughters, the one Kilzadi lusted after. Well, actually he lusted after all of them, including the mother. But she was the only one who seemed to return his ardor. Were they being taken as hostages to force the father into doing something he would not normally do? Something harmful to Mistledale? “Rest assured, the Seekers will attend to both.”

“Oh, again, thank you. Thank you.”

He described it all to Jhaer over their evening meal. “So I don’t think it is just a coincidence. I think the Malorns are being targeted for some reason by someone.”

“And so this is your business because…?”

“If Brechtu kidnapped Mandi and was delivered to the Dragon Queen, then it is all connected. Taking down this Dragon Queen also means rescuing the young lass if she is still alive. Regardless we will get more information.”

The lovely moon elf peered intently. “Loti cog nsco, Ninniach, I know you. Your inside is seething with anger. This is more than just the possible abductions. What else is involved?”

“That young girl! She does not deserve to be involved in all this. She is like a kitten; trusting, soft, gentle. That someone would use her, likely abuse her…well it makes my blood boil.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Oh, I understand now.” She rose, and moved to sit on his lap. Embracing him, she commenced to kissing him. “By all means my lisserlig. Go; rescue your pet-fem. It will do so much good for your spirit.”

“Wait. How do you know that Mandi…”

“Loti cognsco, Ninniach. After Aleena, you need to do this. When do you depart? How long will you be away?”

“The Seekers leave in the morning. We have the druid’s map; so one day to arrive, one day to take care of matter, one day returning so at least three days, but…”

“No buts. I will not be here when you return. I have some gigs in Shadowdale and some affairs to attend to with Dameon. So, as this will be our last night together for a while, we’re off to bed. You need some relaxation, and I need some as well.

The journey around the eastern edge of the Cormanthar forest was unremarkable. Following the map the druids had given to Gideon; Swan soon spotted the three cairns. They appeared to be mounds of rocks, each 10’ wide and 40’ high, set parallel to each other. A 10’ wide gap separated them. She recognized them for what they were; burial tombs of heroic elves.

Signally the others to prepare themselves and remain vigilant, she advanced searching for tracks and alert for danger. Sets of tracks became discernible to her woodland abilities. They seemed to around and in-between the cairns, but much to her annoyance she could not decipher their type; large clawed-foot, bipedal creatures yes and several days old, but that was all. There was nothing else of note that she could spot. Gesturing the others forward, she continued slowly, giving them time to catch up. She moved forward in between two cairns. She had gotten halfway, when Risca shouted out his warning.

Rising out of each cairn were two translucent vaguely humanoid shaped black shadows. Their in-corporealness belied their speed as they caught the group by surprise. All except Risca. With a shout of ‘Crull” he charged forward.

Swan reacted as soon as Risca shouted, but as quick as she was, the shadow was quicker. It flowed over her. The scout felt an intense cold and weakness, but even so, she tumbled away, putting arrow to bow; a maneuver she had practised and mastered. Kneeling, in rapid succession, two serren wood arrows struck at the shadow. A mental scream of anguish reverberated in her mind as the shadow faded and dissipated away. She felt increasingly colder and weaker; shivering and teeth chattering as she slumped. As her life energy ebbed away, her skin began to slowly darken.

Risca slammed Guifoon into a shadow. Full of rage and holy fury, there was no missing. Blow after blow landed on the creature. There seemed to be some effect, but it was as if the battle axe could only inflict slight damage. It could not stop the monster from flowing over the dwarf. One more swing of the axe to strike and Risca too slumped.

At Risca’s bellow, Gideon recognized the undead shadows for what they were. He began to call upon the cleansing divine flame of Kossuth, but then could only watch in frustration and outrage as the two Seekers, his good friends, slumped. He knew that soon they would become as the shadows unless their life force was restored. He was the only one able to do that. Risca was closer. With a silent prayer that he arrive in time, he raced to the unconscious dwarf.

Kilzadi knew his role. The Seekers depended on him for magic; whether devastating blasts or subtle enhancements. The instant Risca shouted, he noted the shadows, two of which were approaching from the farthest cairn. His dragon tattoos flared as he spoke a quick incantation. A comet-shaped orange-red flame streaked out of his pointing fingers. Reaching the area behind the shadows, it exploded into a ball of fire and light, engulfing the shadows. One was quickly erased as the second appeared to halt. Yet another incantation. This time several missiles of magical energy shaped as marble-sized red dragon heads, jaws agape, catapulted from his fingers to unerringly strike the second shadow. It dissipated as an ice cube in a lava flow. Then he scanned the battle; Okul and Neon, busy with shadows, Gideon tending Risca and Swan, alone, slumped and motionless. Swannie girl! He hastened to the scout.

Okul slammed his great spear into the shadow. The shadow rippled as a mental shriek filled his mind. Again the spear dug in, empowered by massive muscles. With a final mental shriek echoing, the shadow dissipated. He noted his beloved Swan falling, but before he could react another shadow flowed towards him.

Neon laughed mirthlessly as he danced. Shadows? They expected shadows to stop him? The shadows neared; he blinked away stabbing with the rapier as he dislocated. It repeated as he danced around the shadow. Thrust, blink, thrust, blink…At every thrust, the shadow rippled in agony. He noted the battlefield; Okul engaged with a second shadow, Gideon supplicating over a fallen Risca, Kilzadi laying hands upon… *laying on hands*? *what*? … motionless Swan; whose collapse had put a familiar ache in his chest. He had to help! One last thrust and the shadow dissipated. With trepidation he raced to the prone scout.

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Risca was cold, colder than the wind swept glacial tundra of the Icewind Dales. He could perceive his life force ebbing, replaced by a darkening shadowing essence over which he would have no control. *Marthammor Duin, I fail you, I fail my clan, I fail dwarven kind, send a better hero.* Words formed in his mind- “In War, Victory. In Peace, Vigilance, In Death, Sacrifice. Are you willing to sacrifice?” *Yes! All for my clan, all for dwarven kind!* “Then your final death should have meaning. This has no meaning. The test of all the Chosen is yet to come” Risca felt heat and with the heat, his soul re-entering.

Gideon kneeled and prayed over the prostrated dwarf; hands afire. “Kossuth, restore this valiant warrior’s life force, I, servant to your will, beseech you.” As he prayed, he placed his flaming hands upon Risca’s chest. The flames turned from red to blue hot, engulfing the dwarf’s body in a blue haze; the Renewing Fire of Kossuth. He sagged as the divine energy passed through him into his friend. It felt as if two divine personages were working in collusion. As the renewing fires burned, he saw Risca’s colour lighting, back to normal. He felt heat and life returning to his friend. He smiled as Risca’s eyes opened. *Your servant thanks you Fire Lord.* “Don’t speak”, he ordered. “Lie still. Finish the renewing. I must see to Swan!” He noted Okul destroying the last shadow; noted Kilzadi attending Swan, Neon arriving at the pair. He hoped that he had not saved one Seeker only to lose another. Time was of the essence. He sprinted to the fallen scout, reciting the renewal prayer as he went.

When Kilzadi had first reached Swan, she was dangerously close to succumbing to the shadow undeath. She was dark and cold, so cold. Not being able to renew her, he could only think to delay the transformation. He called upon his draconic endowment, tattoos flaring. His body heat increased to red dragon fever temperatures. If he could slow down the cold, perhaps he could at least halt the change. Quickly he loosened Swan’s chain shirt so he could slide hands and arms beneath her cotton half tunic and silken chemise. Heat that would have normally seared her just began to warm her. He could feel the heat flowing from him into the scout’s body; enough heat that the cold could not get colder. As long as he could generate such heat, the cold could not advance. A stalemate! But he could feel something else as well.

As part of the mage’s mind was concentrating on maintaining heat, another suddenly realized that his hands were resting on her breasts. *Oh, my*! Even as the cold was held at bay, his fingers began exploring. It was his flaw. The temptation was too much to resist- gods knew whenever he would get such another opportunity. He traced out the size, shape and angle of her nipples; the cold having giving them extra erection; flicking them as he confined to memory their texture and elasticity. His thumbs heeded the spread and contours of her areolae; how their consistency differed from the breast base; his palms sketched the perfection of her breasts’ firmness, size, suppleness and malleability. He gave out a sob of regret laced with envy that such luxury was made easily available to Okul and past others, whiles he who had such appreciation for …

“What by Mystra’s mysteries are you doing?” Neon’s sharp question brought him up short. His hands slid off her breasts. The rogue was staring down at him. With certainty the rogue had seen his hands moving as to leave no doubt to what they had been doing.

“Saving her, the best way I can” was his curt response.

The rogue knew Kilzadi’s lustful nature. The mage could not forgo any occasion in which he could touch, feel, stroke, fondle or caress fine female flesh. It was an urge he had that he seemingly could not or would not control. It had got him in trouble in the past and most definitely would again in the future. It was a weakness that could leave him susceptible to manipulation by schemers. Neon also knew that Swan was, if not an obsession for the mage, then at least a constant pre-occupation.

Even so, Kilzadi had always done right by the Seekers and if the ‘fee’ for saving Swan was to allow him access to her bosom, then so be it. It was a small price. The heat radiating from Kilzadi was easily felt and must be doing good as Swan’s pallor had ceased to darken.

“Fine then. Continue to do as you were. Just be certain to save her or you will answer to us all.”

“Thank you for your understanding brother. She is as dear to me as to you. It is just I cannot resist. The process is halted best through her breasts…*well, why not*.” Kilzadi’s hands repositioned themselves on her breasts. As Neon stood over them watching, wondering if he was doing the right thing, thinking what he would really do should it turn out that Kilzadi’s fondling did not delay Swan’s change, the fire mage did manage to hold the cold at bay, while his hands recommenced their exploration. This continued for a few minutes until Neon announced, “Gideon approaches and Okul is not far behind.”

Kilzadi moved his hands off the breasts. It would be difficult …and more than awkward to explain. Even he could feel the fire of Kossuth as Gideon neared. He arose, out of the way, as the priest kneeled to put renewing flames on Swan. As the blue-hot haze enveloped the scout, he looked up to Kilzadi. “Well done. We would have lost her otherwise.” Neon felt his tension fading. *Yes, a small price indeed.*

Okul arrived. “Swan…”

“…will be sound, Gideon finished for him, by Kossuth’s blessing and Kilzadi’s timely intervention.”

The powerful, half-dragon warrior nodded acknowledgement. All could see the strain leave his body.

“Then I praise Kossuth.” He stepped to Kilzadi. “And I thank you.” The mage actually looked abashed. “It is nothing. Just one Seeker aiding another as best they know” was his response.

“Still, we are in your debt.”

“Hey, I’m recovered too, should anyone care. Why is no one fawning over me?” All turned at the sound of the gruff voice to behold Risca, now fully recovered, approaching. “How is she, my gurl?” he voiced concern.

“Kossuth favours her” answered Gideon. “The fire, as it did for you, renews, instead of incinerating. By the way, I passed on your thanks to the Fire Lord.” The last was said sarcastically.

Risca relieved at Swan’s recovery, snorted. “He knows what is in my heart. Look, she is awakening.”

All Swan had felt was the extraordinarily frigid abyss-black glacier moving over her, crushing her into shadow thickness as it froze her. Nothing she could do could halt its advance; not that she ever stop trying. Half of her was normal, while the other half was a cold wafer-thin black wasteland, upon which the glacier was sitting. She knew, if that glacier kept advancing, she was doomed.

 Then a miracle; she felt heat; heat that was able to halt the advance of the glacier. The heat and the cold were stalemated. Then a short time later, the heat increased. The glacier retreated and eventually sublimed to nothingness. Her body returned to normal.

Swan opened her eyes just as the renewing flames extinguished. Her head lay on a familiar lap. She found herself staring up into Okul’s concerned and relieved face. Aurous dragon-shaped eyes, rimmed with golden scales, full of love looked down at her. She smiled up at him as her hand found his. “Hello love. I’m back” were her first words.

Turing her head, she easily spied the remaining Seekers gathered around; all looking reassured. No stranger to divine magic, she first addressed Gideon. “When I regain my strength, I will convey my gratitude and humility to the Fire Lord. In the meantime, please convey it for me.”

The priest nodded. “Welcome back Swan. So I shall. But also gratefulness to Kilzadi, without whose draconic magic, it would have been too late.”

“It is true” confirmed Okul, as he helped her sit up. “The mage’s magic delayed the transformation so Gideon could arrive in time.”

She looked to the mage. “Then I thank you with all my heart, my friend, my brother

Kilzadi cleared his throat. “No need. As you stated many times, the Seekers look after each other. But should you wish to thank me above and beyond the call of duty, then perhaps some accommodation may be arrived at.” His hands clenched and unclenched in remembrance of their explorations.

Swan gave a half-laugh “Your incorrigibleness is a constant and a sign of normality.” At these words Neon looked away as if embarrassed by a secret. “Now since I promise that I am recovered, should we not continue on?”

“What were those things and what are these things” grumbled Risca indicating the cairns?

Swan replied. “These are ancient elf burial burrows, reserved for heroes and leaders. Those things were…”

“Greater Shadows” Gideon finished for her. “Creatures of undeath and desecration. I detected the aura of desecration earlier but had no time to call a warning. The aura is now gone, implying that it needs to be re-set. So the question now becomes what is our next step; stay or continue?”

“We continue of course” emphatically emphasized Neon. “The longer we delay, the more time there is for this Dragon Queen to forward her plans and the less time there is to rescue Mandi.”

“No” countermanded Swan, just as emphatically. ”These sacred burial cairns are being desecrated. Revered elven bodies being transformed into shadows! This outrage must be ended. The Dragon Queen can wait. Your ‘Mandi’ can wait. This is more important. Besides, that tart is playing you for a fool and you are too lisserlig blind to see it.”

Any retort by Neon was blocked by Kilzadi’s outburst. “Let’s continue this later. Right now we have company. Look up.” The Seekers as one all looked to where the mage was pointing.

High in the sky, three figures were rapidly descending. At first they appeared to be trolls with wings but as they approached, more distinguishing features became discernible. That they were trolls was evident but what trolls! Sprouting from their backs, enabling them to fly well, were wings, shaped and structured like green dragon wings. Their bodies were covered in green scales, small green dragon spiked crest protruded from their foreheads to run down their backs. Their long, narrow troll nose jutted out above a draconic, incisor-filled muzzle. There was now no mistaking them for what they were; half-green dragon trolls.

Even as the Seekers scattered to present separate targets, the trolls attacked while still descending. Three maws opened to unleash three cones of a greenish acidic gas. Okul and Risca were caught in the gas cloud. Coughing, vomiting, eyes and lungs burning, they were all too quickly incapacitated in the short term. Neon managed to dodge and tumble out of range of the cone meant for him and arose, weapons in hand to face the troll as it landed.

The other Seekers were not idle. Gideon bestowed Kossuth’s blessing on them, to enhance their combat skills. Then he readied his psonic powers. Kilzadi cast a fireball. The missile streaked up even as the screeching troll streaked down. It exploded, engulfing the troll in a sphere of incandescent flame, changing its war screeches into pain screams. This he followed with two fiery bursts. The troll ceased its screams as it’s burned out corpse fell, shattering on impact. Then he became aware of the troll landing by Neon.

Swan’s deftness with Granpar’s bow allowed her to release arrow after arrow in quick succession. By moving along the ground to use the correct angles and directions of firing, the scout was able to inflict massive precision damage with her arrows. *Thunk, thunk.* Two arrows into the troll’s left wing. Move. *Thunk. Thunk.* Two arrows into the right wing. With damaged wings, it began to spin as it descended. Move. Then four rapid arrows pierced into the troll’s brain; one through each eye and two through the forehead. The troll was dead even before it crashed into the ground, breaking and shattering limbs. Even its regeneration abilities were overwhelmed by the amount of damage it had sustained. Then she noticed Neon engaged with the third troll.

Even as the troll landed, its dragon-honed claws swiped at the rogue, snarling its hate. Nimbly, Neon arched back, and ducking beneath the swipes, counterattacked; his dagger slashing and rapier piercing through the thick-scaled hide of the troll. Then he somersaulted away from any returning strike. Straightening up, now behind the beast, his weapons once again scored hurt and pain. Now he tumbled away, putting distance between himself and the monster. Fearless and methodical, he was prepared to kill this troll, using ten thousand cuts if he had to. But he was no longer alone.

Now bellowing in battle lust, bleeding from its wounds, the creature turned towards Neon, ready to rip and rend. But before it could act, a clap of thunder resonated from beside it. The shock waves blasted the troll, knocking it back and crushing it to the ground. Kilzadi had unleased his spell. The troll rose slowly, still snarling. The concussion‘s damage had enraged it more. But before it could recover its balance, two arrows struck and penetrated deeply into its throat. It gasped as blood gushed and its breathing began to shut down. As Swan reloaded, Gideon unleased his physic power. Two energy beams, one after the other, struck unerringly. Both burned large holes into the thick scaly hide, cauterizing as they incinerated.

Unable to scream as its throat and lungs were filling with blood, the monster convulsed wildly. Powerful wings flapped and it began to lift off. Two more arrows smacked into it as a fiery blast burned into a wing. Staggering, the troll continued to fly into safety until Gideon discharged a final energy ray. Catching the retreating brute in the back, it literally exploded.

Swan ran to Okul and Risca. Unmolested, both had by now lurched out of the gas cloud. Both showed the effects of the acidic gas; reddened and blistered skin, burned eyes and throats, coughing and hacking as they tied to draw, sweet cool air into their damaged lungs. Wasting no time, she used her wand to place the Great Archer’s soothing cures upon them. Blisters disappeared, skin restored and lungs were soothed.

“Enough Swan. Enough. We are fine now” Okul’s words stopped her prayer.

“Fine, what do you mean fine?” spat Risca in disgust. “Two combats now and I miss both. I really need to stick Guifoon into something.” He slammed the said axe into the ground in disgust.

Swan put an arm around each and hugged both. “I have a feeling; this is a long way from over. You will get more than your share, dear Risca.”

“I could have handled that troll myself, you know” Neon was explaining to Kilzadi as the others joined them.

“Yes, my brother, but it would have taken too long. Are we not in a hurry to rescue Mandi? We saved time; not a slur on your fighting abilities.”

Gideon had been poking the remains of the trolls. He addressed the group. “Definitely green dragon cross” he reported. “Around here then, that would imply Quamara Keleidsa herself and so the Eldreth Veluuthra elves.”

“And hopefully, some drow to top things up as well” added Risca; “Can’t wait to meet up with them. Need to earn my keep.”

Swan nodded and looked to Neon. “It seems we have no argument. The cairn despoilers and Mandi’s abductors seem to be one and the same.”

Neon nodded back. “Then let us seek them out and end this.”

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Following the old tracks away from the cairns led the Seekers to the bottom of a 100-foot cliff that seemed to run extensively in both directions from where they were standing. They searched around the base but could not find trails or footpaths or even an animal aisle. Going around would take too much time. They would have to climb. Numerous vines and shrubs covered the rock face, allowing those with good climbing abilities to reach the cliff top forest with little difficulty; as was the case for Neon. “Meet you all at the top” were his words as he quickly swung up and began the climb.

This was not the case for Risca. He eyed the cliff face with dubious eyes, shrugged, and stated” I’ll go around and catch up to you all later.”

“Do not be foolish. I can easily carry you piggy back once I drink this” retorted Okul, as he quaffed a potion. “It will allow me to climb the cliff as a spider can climb a wall.” Gideon was drinking an identical potion while Kilzadi cast a spell to the same effect.

“Truly? You want me to get on your back while you climb the cliff? Do you realize how foolish that will look? Why not just give me one of those potions.”

“We have none left and Kilzadi only has one spell.”

“Do it” ordered Gideon. “Okul is the only one here strong enough to carry you, his equipment and yours. The rest of us lack the strength. It ensures we all stay together.”

“This I must see with my own eyes” commented Kilzadi with laughter. A dwarf mounting a dragon.”

Risca glared daggers at the mage.

Even Swan had to giggle at the final sight, never mind the process of watching the much shorter dwarf attempting to climb onto Okul’s back. “I’ll scout out the top; make sure all is safe. See you all there.” So saying, she set off. Swan’s boots were enchanted to allow her to move along surfaces as a spider would, only faster than either potion or spell. She hurried along the cliff face and soon caught up to Neon who, by now, was close to the top. The rogue waved her on. She reached the top and peered over the cliff top, and even knowing from Oakfather Gannon Durei what to expect, she still gasped at what she saw.

About 250 feet from the cliff edge, a weirwood tree towered over the forest canopy. Weirwoods were giants and so moon elves used them to hold their abodes; homes, meeting buildings, festive halls, shops, all manner of public buildings. Each tree connected to others by walkways amongst the branches, upper, and lower, and so forming treetop towns. Tangled Trees, where she had spent time with Inialos, Nylian and the twins was one such type of town; a small city actually.

But this weirwood was a loner. There were no others nearby to rival it and so she knew that what they were seeking had to be where the tree was. Elves were drawn to weirwoods as bears to honey.

By now, Neon had reached the top. She leaned over to give him a hand up, signally silence. His eyes opened wide as he spotted the tree. Despite being human city raised, his elven heritage and knowledge made him understand the significance of such trees. She signaled she do a quick reconnoiter before the others arrived. He signaled back that he could reconnoiter as well. She signaled - =we are not breaking into a bank= I’m the scout= someone has to be here when the others arrive= let me do my job=

Neon just looked at her for a while, concern evident. = be careful=.

Swan blended silently into the woods. Moving quickly, she spiraled a path towards the great tree. Nothing out of the ordinary was spotted. The base of the tree was a good twenty-five feet in diameter. Stealthily, she circled around and easily sighted the fragment of an old wooden staircase dangling .like a broken branch. Strangely enough, the landing, 50 feet above the ground, to which the staircase ended appeared newer and sturdy. A short series of sturdy steps led from the landing led to an equal sturdy-looking balcony. The balcony with a waist high railing ran all around a two story manor house; except that the manor house seemed run-down, most of its windows broken and the locks on the doors, rusted and ripped.

The scout sensed a sadness emanating from the tree. She pressed herself against the trunk as if to embrace it and sought to commune with it. Swan had inherited some ability from her Tree-Talker grandmother and also had been granted some power from her times in Arvandor. She pushed to combine her essence with that of the tree. Through the thick bark, and then through the cambium, followed by the sapwood and finally into the heartwood. Her essence and that of the tree blended .She knew what the tree knew. The knowledge made her gasp.

The tree was sad because it was dying. Where once, laughing children and contented adults had lived, worked and played amongst its branches and boughs and those of its brothers, now only parasites crawled inside it. Now its brothers were all long gone, taken away by the ravages of war, greed, and time. It was lonely and the parasites inside it had taken out the heartwood to build spaces and structures. It was rotting away from the inside out. Soon its conciseness would end and it would just become a dead hollowed-out wooden tube.

Swan broke contact, feeling both mournful and angry; mournful that such a gentle giant , which could have lived for many more lifetimes of men would soon be dead and hot anger at what would so coldly and wantonly carve out the inside of such a magnificent specimen, knowing that it would die from such treatment. Whoever they were, elf or not, they would face her wrath! Her hot ire morphed into a frigid resolve. As Granmar said many times, she may look human, but her heart was elven. As an elf cleric she was bound by the laws of Solonar Thelandria and the Sheldarine, she would act as the *punitor*, the avenger. She would be judge and executor. Her chaotic nature made her the law unto herself. She made the vow; “*voi es daman ti morte. You have been sentenced to death.”* As she did so, she felt divine energy filling her, pushing out any remorse for her forthcoming executions; making her ruthless and unremitting. The Sheldarine had accepted her as their earthly punitor. She sneaked back to the others.

The Seekers had finished climbing the cliff by the time Swan returned. All were relieved to see her emerging out of the forest.

“Prepare for battle”, she casually informed them. There was something in her voice that made them uneasy, as they watched her check the tension on her bow string, re-adjust the location of her quivers and scrutinize the sharpness of Coldkiss and Gutripper; all in a cold calculated manner.

“Ah, Swan” inquired Neon, “what happened to let’s be quiet in our approach?”

“No need. They know we are coming. They have readied themselves. So we ready ourselves.” She said this as while applying war paint stripes around her eyes and across her cheeks. The others looked at each other nervously. The stripes indicated a wood elf in merciless total war.

“And you know this all how?” continued the rogue.

“The tree told me.” This simple statement caused a small silence and more staring at each other.

Okul faced her, worry in his voice. “Swan what is amiss?” He knew, as did the others, that, in the past, when Swan had acted this way, she had become an implacable killing machine.

The scout looked from her examination of Lil Biter’ her glance to the gold dragon’s son was neutral.

“They purposely killed the tree. Even knowing what it is, they still did it purposely.” It was as though no further explanation was needed.

“Well that explains it then” spoke up Kilzadi; the manner of his words indicating he was clueless.

“We need a strategy some kind of plan“, this from Gideon.

“The strategy is simple” retorted the scout. “We go to the tree in our battle order, we climb the tree in our battle order, and we confront the Eldreth Veluuthra and their allies. Then we just kill them all.”

Then a pause.

“Oh, I suppose, if, along the way, Neon’s pet fem is still rescuable, then we rescue her.” All this was said in a calm matter-of-fact way, especially the ‘we kill them all’ part, as if she was describing a walk in a park. The others were momentarily stunned; all except the dwarf.

Risca broke out into a huge grin. “Now that is my kind of plan, short, simple and to the point, especially the kill ‘em all part. Right Guifoon?”

“We may need prisoners” protested Gideon.

Swan resettled her haversack and responded. “You need prisoners, not I. Tribal law, tribal justice. The tree confirmed their crime. I declared them guilty. Any tree-killer that crosses paths with me, I will execute. Now, as you always say, ‘let’s do it Seekers’ ”Not waiting, she headed back towards the tree.

Neon realized what was occurring. Swan, proud of her wood elf heritage and all that implied, saw herself as a caretaker of the woods, forests and trees. They had gotten a glimpse of this back in Ashabedford with the runaway wagon and the trolls. His own elven heritage at least gave him an appreciation. Swan had become one with the tree. She had felt its slow dying. She was going to do what the tree could not. She was going to take vengeance. She was not acting as Swan Battlestar, Deepingdale militia and fellow Seeker, but as Cygni Vulpae of the Fox tribe, granddaughter of the Tree-Talker and wood elf war cleric. She was to be the punitor, sanctioned by the Sheladrine. She was going to dispense justice to the despoilers; punitor justice. He had to ensure that Mandi was not mistaken as a despoiler or in any way interfered with Swan.

With a fleeting look at the others, Okul followed. A gold dragon always fought by its mate’s side.

Quickly jogging behind, with a look of delight, Risca followed. Neon, in battle field commander condition addressed the other two:” Kilzadi, you next and then you Gideon to help boost us and then me to guard both your backs. There is no stopping her now. All we can do is aid her and ensure no innocents are harmed.”

The other two nodded. Kilzadi made a point before moving on. “As I have said in the past and have been proven correct, she is the most bloodthirsty of us all and she is, right now, definitely in her bloodthirsty mode. I pity those poor bastards.”

Gideon eyed Neon; his question obvious. The rogue nodded. “This is more intense than the lumber camp. Gods have sanctioned her. She will revert once all this is over.” *I hope.*

Gideon sighed. “I pray you are correct.” The two moved on.

Reaching the tree, Swan climbed easily to the landing, as did Okul and Risca. The dwarf had an easier time with the large branches being so close to each other. The remaining three Seekers reached the landing just as Swan and Okul reached the first balcony. With a signal to Okul to take the door, Swan pressed forward, bow ready to an open window. Okul kicked down the door and at that point, as the saying goes, all the hells broke loose.

………..*to be continued*