**CHAPTER 23 Voi Es Daman Ti Morte**

**PART 1—Nazi Elves and Spiders with Swords**

Okul kicked down the door! If one had the time, one could observe that the door led into what was once a 30’ by 30’ guard post. One could notice the odour of leaf mould and damp, rotting wood and that once exquisite furniture had been long removed to be replaced by a rickety table, crude wooden chairs and some crates holding dried foodstuffs and drink. One could if one were not too busy trying to stay ALIVE!!

The immense force of the kick did not just take the thick wooden door off the hinges, but was strong enough to cause the door to fly into the room like a battering ram. It smashed into the Eldreth Veluuthra moon elf across from the doorway just as he released his bow. The arrow went astray, as the elf was knocked back, screaming from a broken chest. The other elves released arrows at the same time. The golden warrior easily batted away those aimed at him and in an eye’s blink rammed the dragon spear through an elf’s mouth out the back of the neck. A quick kick to the ribs freed the weapon followed by a swing where the scalpel sharpness of the blade edge sliced through the neck of a second elf like Death’s scythe itself. That was when the flying troll leaped upon him.

The room seemed to be full of moon elves. By now, all the elves had reloaded their bows or drew great swords. All had entered into a raging state; all screaming ‘matta ii refutte’. *Kill the garbage shitbags*. The archer nearest Okul drew a sure hit bead on the dragon-son; now that he was engaged with the troll. The Eldreth Veluuthra elves had been prepared to confront the Seekers but were unprepared for the group’s ferocity and how well they meshed in battle. The Seekers had a rager of their own. Practically hidden by Okul’s massive frame, Risca had followed in close behind. Full of holy fury, he turned on the archer who was a tad too slow to change targets. ‘Crull’; his battle cry rang out as Guifoon severed the elf’s leg at the thigh. As the elf collapsed, the dwarf showed him mercy by using his axe to swiftly cleave the skull. Then he swivelled to face the charging elves.

With Okul and Risca inside the room, The Seekers had gained the entranceway. So when Kilzadi arrived, he easily recognized the situation. A quick incantation and the floor became greased. The elven charge was broken as they slipped, slid and fell. The greased floor was no hindrance to Neon. He and Kilzadi had practised this many times. The nimble rogue stepped along the slippery surface with ease, shifting his weight as he step-slid along to maintain balance and speed. A raging elf, screaming obscenities, attempting to rise from the glassy floor was promptly silenced by a rapier thrust through his mouth. Spinning around, he dealt the same fate to a second elf and faced the remainder from the rear.

Swan had placed herself by a broken window. As Okul broke down the door, affecting the elves to charge, she released Granpar’s bow. In a twinkling, two arrows struck deep into an elf’s cranium, fulfilling her role as executor and instantly sending his spirit to be judged in Arvandor. She always did favor the head shots as being more merciful. But she had been watched and timed. Even as she was halfway to reloading, with a cry of ‘matta ii refutte’ a roguish-type elf, unnoticed and well hidden in the thick branch foliage above the walkway, leaped down, elven thin sword ready to skewer the scout. As quick as the scout turned, there was no time to properly defend herself. But as fast as the elf rogue was, thought was faster.

A psychokinetic blast pummelled the elf as he leaped. The physic force was enough to shatter all he held, as well as shred his clothing.as it pushed the elf screaming off the walkway to crash to his death on the forest floor below. Gideon gave the thumbs up to Swan. He turned to pass through the doorway and suddenly grabbed at his eyes. “Blinded’, he shouted. “A blind spell!”

Swan swiveled back to the window, Granpar’s bow vibrating to indicate a mage intending harm. Emerging from the hidden shadows at the rear of the guard post was a female moon elf, in elaborate wizard robes. Her eyes radiated hatred and satisfaction as her mouth was about to utter the final words of a spell. She should have remained hidden. Before the last syllables could be uttered, an arrow humming with magic pierced her breast. Even before the shock could be felt, a second arrow pierced her other breast. Spell lost, the elf female collapsed to her knees; mouth beginning to fill with blood.

Swan somersaulted through the window, tumbled across the greased floor, avoiding the combatants to reach her. The tree’s memory had made this elf recognizable. Her magic had aided in the hollowing out of the weirwood. The elf looked up at Swan looming above her, hatred still strong in her eyes.

“Voi es daman ti morte” the scout spoke elven in a level emotionless voice. *You have been sentenced to death.* Then with one swing, she used Gutripper to behead the elf; its serrated edges easily cutting through the flesh. No one witnessed this incident, as Gideon was just now dismissing the blindness and the others were too engaged. As the headless corpse collapsed, she surveyed the combat around her. At that point two more elves emerged from the shadows and a flying troll smashed through the wall to get at her.

Gideon finished dispelling his blindness to once again look into the room to see:

Risca removing Guifoon from where it had spliced an elf from crotch to chin

Neon ending a killing back stab of the last warrior elf

Okul locked in combat with a winged troll; both bleeding blood, one red, one green and watched as Okul’s great spear, skewered and sliced through the troll, in effect, bisecting it

Swan using her tumbling ability to distance herself from the remaining two elves and troll so that when Kilzadi’s fireball erupted, she was able to evade the blast while they were incinerated.

As the odour of burned flesh filled the room as little fires sizzled out, the priest felt a pride in his companions. *Kossuth, I pray, bless these fine warriors, these fine people, these fine friends.*

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The Seekers took stock. A door indicated where the elf wizard and the last warriors had emerged from. It opened into a barracks. On the wall opposite the door was another door which led out into the walkway. A bank of double bunks lined this wall. A table, some chairs were the only furniture. One wall was covered by a huge banner portraying a human skull with an elven thin blade transfixing it from back through the mouth. An ash-full brazier marked the room’s center, along with a stack of weirwood cut from the tree; the sight of which shrivelled any of Swan’s last silver of mercy for the Eldreth Veluuthra.

Opening the door onto the walkway revealed the south side of the manor house, with 5 more doors as the walkway proceeded 75’ west before turning north and the windows of the barracks as the walkway headed east 30’ and then turned north. All the windows were broken and shuttered all along the walls of the manor house.

“So we go west one door at a time” suggested Neon.

“No”, ordered Swan, her voice broking no dissent. There is still an upper part. We will ensure there is nothing or no one above us as we descend, and so exterminate the Eldreth Veluuthra level by level. Before we cleanse this level, we will ensure there is nothing above.

Without waiting for an answer and disregarding the looks the Seekers gave each other regarding this new behaviour, she used her spider shoes she strode up the sides of the building to the second floor. She peered through a shattered window. The upper level was easily the size of the entire guardhouse and barracks combined. Broken windows lined all four walls. Directly across on the opposite wall a staircase spiraled down. Heaped all around the stairs were dozens upon dozens of forest animal skeletons, as well as bones and skulls of humans, some small enough to be children.at this sight, her ire burned so hot that she knew she would exterminate any Eldreth Veluuthra, treat them as vermin, anytime, anywhere. Splintered timber lay in heaps all over the floor, making good hiding places. Mould patches grew on the ceiling, wood and walls. The scout entered through the window for closer inspection.

Well camouflaged, even beyond the scout’s sensitive spotting ability, two huge shapes rose up from under the ruined lumber debris. To Swan’s low-light vision, the shapes unfolded to expose huge spiders; their bodies sleek, black and thick-haired, with dark brown fur stripes encircling their abdomens. Large chitinous spikes ran along their backs from head to rear. Down each leg ran large plates of chitin, with raised, razor-sharp edges the size of short swords. Venom dripped from their mouth pincers. Even as the scout instinctively vaulted backwards, the spider was faster. Four legs reached out, their cutting edges shredding and severing, covering her in deep gashes and lacerations. Before impacting the walkway, she managed to bark a warning of ‘spiders!’

The first spider followed the scout out the window, its bulk smashing through the wall. So large was it that the head almost reached the walkway while the rear legs were still on the floor. The group sprang into action.

Okul was torn between rushing to the sprawled Swan and tackling the spider. He had watched his love almost die against the Shadows. He had been too slow to reach her then and had no desire to do so now. But the danger to all was immediate. To help her, he had to help the group. Besides, Gideon had already begun to administer to her. All this took less than an instant.

With a draconic roar of anger and furor, the gold half-dragon warrior of Tempus leaped into the sky, slamming his ponderous great spear down into the spider’s head. Foul-smelling ichor erupted. The gigantic vermin responded by lashing out with his forelegs, barely slicing through his shoulder’s golden scales. Then it reeled back as Neon sprung in to jam his rapier through an eye. By then, Okul had once again rammed his spear into the spider’s head. The spider quaked’ mandibles clanking on empty air, as Neon’s rapier blinded another eye. A third thrust of the dragon spear through the spider’s mouth, up into its and out its head was enough to kill it.

While Okul and Neon were occupied with the first spider, its companion had appeared and began its attack charge down the wall.

“Bugs!” screamed Risca, “always bugs. Why do we always get bugs?” Eyes aflame with rage and fury, he lashed out at the second spider. Guifoon smacked into the monster, spewing foul, acidic fluids everywhere. The dwarf was oblivious to Kilzadi, launching flame bursts over his head. These two always attempted to belittle each other, but when the combat was serious, always worked efficiently together as a duo; as did all the Seekers. The spider was simply out classed.

“I, *smack, burst,* HATE, *smack, burst, BUGGGSs! Smack, smack burst.* The giant vermindied, guts dripping and burned.

They all re-grouped around Swan and Gideon, who had by now cured her injuries. Her leather leggings were slashed in places, but her flesh was all whole. Okul had raced over to inspect for himself that she had fully recovered. “Swan… ” he began, holding her at arm’s length to better inspect her injuries.

She looked up at him. “Fine, love. I’m fine. No wounds, no poison.”

“So what are these things?” Neon’s question was on more than one mind.

“Sword spiders” answered Kilzadi, remembering all the discussions he and Gweneth used to have. The drow use them to keep the slave populations in check, to execute prisoners and act as guards.”

“So” replied Risca with an evil grin, “where there are sword spiders, there usually are drow. Hear that Guifoon, we most likely will be meeting drow; most welcome news of the day.”

Swan retreated from Okul’s embrace. “The monster’s lair is up there. This tells me there is nothing up there of value. So we check out the remaining floor, ensure no one remains and then head down. Prepare yourselves.”

The first door opened to a hallway which ended in a spiral staircase going up. A quick reconnoitre showed they led to the spider lair. The stairs were strewn with bones. Nothing of value was found.

The second door led to a set of bedrooms and closets. It was apparent from the clothing and items scattered around that the Eldreth Veluuthra warriors used these rooms. Nothing of value was found.

The third door led into a kitchen, food preparation area. The space was filled with the scent of burnt grease and wood smoke. Several half-dressed animal carcasses hung from the ceiling. There was a large fireplace and a brick oven. Nothing of value was found. The next door led to more bedrooms, similar to the first set.

Even as the Seekers approached the last door, they could hear muffled noises coming from inside; noises that seemed to indicate someone or something struggling. All set for another combat, they went into action. Neon quietly tested the door. His brows curled up in surprise to find it unlocked. *Why? According to Swan, they knew we were coming.* Nodding to the others, he flung it open. The large room revealed itself to be a guest bedroom. In contrast to all the other areas, this room was well-kept, tidy and luxurious. Its wooden walls were freshly varnished. A thick expensive-looking rug covered the floor. A hard wood desk, a comfortable chair and a large armoire took up half the space. The other half was taken by two objects; a large side table upon which rested crystal wine glasses along with a collection of very costly Sembian wines. The odor of sweet incense struck the nostrils. But what quickly drew the eye was the fancy 4-poster bed with a decorative canopy covered by immaculate white linen.

On the linen, arms and legs bound one to each poster, naked, gagged and spread-eagle, was a writhing, young female human. The Seekers had found Mandi.

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Neon reacted first. He rushed to Mandi’s side to begin untying her, even as Swan was yelling at him to stop. He had finished untying her and was removing her gag as the other Seekers made their way in. Kilzadi stared at the naked Mandi, eyes full of lust, while Swan’s eyes held fury. Okul, ever the gentleman, searched around for clothing for the young lass. Neon had wrapped her in his cloak as he held the sobbing girl to him.

“Oh Neon, it was horrible, just horrible” Mandi managed to blubber.

“Shh, Mandi. You are safe now” was the reply.

“Yes, Mandi” interjected Kilzadi who had come to stand by her side and pat her shoulder, “you are now safe. We will not let anything happen to you.”

“I just want to go home” She continued to sob.

At that point, Swan’s open palm drove hard into Neon’s chest; hard enough to knock him back two steps.

“Idiot! Fool! Think with your brain, not your gonads. The door was not locked. She could have been the bait for a death trap. But did you bother to wait and check? No! You go rushing in blindly. Must save the little ‘noble’ bitch, correct? I… I mean… we could have lost you. We could have lost you” Each word was punctuated by a hit on his chest. Each word was accented by deep passion and jealousy.

“And for what? For this?” She glared at Mandi.

 The young lass, safe in Neon’s embrace and shielded by Kilzadi, glared hatred at the scout. But there was fear there as well. Swan was at the moment, imposing. Mandi knew that the scout was not just a rival for Neon but also an adversary that could undo all the best laid plans. She had to keep away from the scout slut lest all come undone. And so-in her ‘kitten’-voice “Neon, Kilzadi, please keep her away. She doesn’t like me. She wants to hurt me.”

A firm hand gripped her arm. “Swan, Swan, me gurl. Enough now.”Risca tugged her away from Mandi and Neon.

Neon caught Gideon’s eye. The priest’s look seemed to say ’let it be.’

This the rogue acknowledged with a nod. Being a cold-blooded executor was not part of the scout’s normal nature. Being thrust into the role of puintor, self-imposed or god designed, without any preparation or experience was taking its toll on her stress levels. Besides she was right. He did rush in without first ascertaining the situation. It could have been a trap. He was reckless, guilty about Aleena; not wanting another death on his conscience. But there was more than that. Swan was telling him, indirectly, about her deep ardour for him, how his loss would numb her, that if he so-desired she would accommodate him. The depth of her feelings surprised him. But no, he had to strengthen his resolve. He could not bear another Aleena but neither could she be a pet-fem. This was a quandary to be solved at a much later time. Best he distance himself now.

By now Okul re-joined them. Throwing some suitable clothing for Mandi on the bed, He took Swan into his arms and held her close to him. Being pressed up close to her lover’s chest, smelling his familiarity as he stroked her back, with no words being said, had a becalming effect. She began to gain control of herself.

Gideon broke the new silence. “Mandi, dress yourself. Then you can answer our questions. The rest of you, make yourselves useful. Check around.” He himself began to rummage through the desk as Risca began to examine and pack the wines. Okul continued to hold Swan as she forgo emotion to once again become punitor while Neon warded off Kilzadi’s attempts to lay hands on Mandi who was using aiding in her dressing as an excuse. All were ready in a few moments. Gideon led the debriefing; Neon and Kilzadi surrounding the young girl in an unconscious effort to protect her from Swan’s cold-eyed glare.

“It was just terrible” sobbed the youngest Malorn girl. “Brechtu tricked me. I thought he was a family friend. I had no reason to suspect him.” At this point Kilzadi placed an arm around her. “There, there. It’s all over now” he spoke. “Brechtu will never bother you or anyone else ever again. You have me to thank for that. *Hint, hint.”* Mandi continued as if she did not hear the mage.

“We were off on a picnic, as we have done often before when instead of going to our regular area, he overpowered me and brought me here; bragging that as his prisoner, he could lever mommy and daddy into doing as he wished.” Here she shuddered and pressed in closer to Neon. Blubbering, she continued.

“While I was helpless, he would paw and finger me. He said if I didn’t behave worse things would happen. Then we arrived here; this monster place. The dragon lady inspected me, said I would make an excellent sex slave if daddy didn’t cooperate. They kept me tied up as you saw; only releasing me for short periods. I have been so frightened.” She nestled up against Neon. “But now you saved me. But I fear for Sandi because Brechtu bragged, before he left, that he would be taking her to Sembia. I suspect that he plans on capturing her as well. Oh Neon, help us...please. We...I would be ever so grateful.”

Kilzadi interjected before the rogue” Of course we will, of course we will.”

Neon passed the mage an exasperated look. “You’re safe now Mandi.”

“Why were you kidnapped?” asked Gideon? “What did Brechtu want your father to do?

“I don’t know. I really don’t know” was the whimpered reply.

“All right. But we do know you and your family are very familiar with Sembia’s merchant houses and nobility. What can you tell us about Mirabeta Selkirk?” He produced a note found in the desk to pass around. It read:

*Lady Keleidsa,*

*Please accept this token as a peace offering. How may we entreat you to stop the attacks
on our caravans?*

*Countess Mirabeta Selkirk*

“Mirabeta Selkirk? She heads a powerful trading house based in Ordulin. Their caravans travel throughout Faerun. The house is strongly connected to the High Lord Governor. She does some commerce with my uncle in Sembia. That is all I know; except that she has an eligible marriageable son.”

The cleric nodded as he looked around at the others. “So what do we do with her now?”

There was a second of silence. Then Swan spoke up before the others had a chance. “You don’t really believe this bunch of bull crap, do you? The tart is lying through her tramp teeth. Kidnapped? By Brechtu? Really? Either she tells us the truth or we leave her to her own devices.”

Mandi huddled even closer to against Neon. “No, no” she addressed him. “I am being truthful. Don’t leave me. More monsters may arrive. Take me with you. I beg you. Please, please” she pleaded, eyes red with tears.”

Neon stared determinedly over the crying lass’ shoulders at the scout as he responded. “Worry not. No one is leaving you. Part of our mission was to rescue you. We will be taking you home.”

Swan seethed. “Fine then. You take her home. And since she is your ‘pet’…” The scout then ripped Mandi’s hands from Neon. Before any of the others could interfere in any of this, using her proficiency with ropes, she quickly tied Mandi’s hands together, leaving a length of guide rope. “Here” she handed the length to Neon, “here is the leash for your pet. Lead her well. And you…’ she poked a finger deep into the young girl’s chest causing her to wince, “should you ever betray us, in any manner, then know that I will personally gut you. Immediately! No questions asked, no quarter given.” She shouldered her pack as she addressed the rest. “The upper levels are clear. Now we descend and kill the rest. Follow me.”

They all missed the bore of unadulterated contempt and malignance that Mandi gave the scout.

Knowing her state of mind the others offered no resistance. Gideon posed the question his mind: “So, Swan girl, you know where to go?”

The scout blinked her eyes as if puzzled *why ask me that?* “I know what the tree knows” was her cryptic answer. She led them out back towards the landing.

“Neon, please, I just want to go home now” pleaded Mandi, tearfully, holding up her bound hands. “That archer peasant scares me.”

“Don’t worry Mandi. You will get home. I will make sure of that. But for now, we will go with the others” the rogue replied, gently wiping away the rolling tears.

“Yes” added Kilzadi, who had also lingered. “My magic will protect you. Let us finish here and I will see you safely home.”

Having no choice, trusting in their protection and hoping in their demise, she went quietly

Back at the landing, Swan pointed at the wall, “, There, a secret doorway. There is a spiral staircase carved through the center of the tree. It is what has condemned the tree to its slow death. It leads to the level of chambers below the tree’s roots. That is where we go next.”

“But Swan” inquired Gideon, “if you knew about this all along, then why did we not go here earlier?”

“As I said before”, dead-panned the scout, “we kill them all; starting at the top and working our way down. Besides, did we not also have to rescue the bimbo?” Opening the now not-so-secret door, there was revealed the staircase exactly as described by Swan. She led the Seekers down.

**PART 2- Drow and Demons**

Down and down the Seekers went. “Gurl” Risca called out, “we are now past the tree roots.” His dwarf sense of depth had informed him they had descended about 200 feet..

“Yes” Swan replied. And here we are.” Even as she spoke, the stairs ended at a 5’ square platform opening into blackness. The air was now damp and cool. The scout’s sharp ears picked out a shuffle.

“Something here!” she called out pulling back on Granpar’s bow. We need some light!” From beside the scout, Risca growled as he flung a light pellet. The Seekers averted their eyes as the chamber filled with sunlight, exposing all within. Events now happened quickly.

The darkness evaporated to uncover a large 30’ by 25’ chamber. Opposite the platform at the other end of the chamber was a small rectangular pool of clear water. On both the left and right sides of the Seekers, were two doors, equally spaced along the walls. Beside the pool was a female drow, her attire denoting a cleric, but oddly enough with nothing to indicate Loth as her patron. The bright light had evidently caused her pain as she was clutching her eyes while screaming ‘matta ii refutte’. Then she disappeared even as Swan’s arrow whistled through the space she once occupied.

“Dimension door” blared Kilzadi, noting the spell the drow used. Risca cursed the fact that the drow had escaped him. It was then that the other occupants of the chamber became evident. There were 4 of them, screaming as they rushed the Seekers; two from each side of the pool fountain. At first glance they appeared to be large eight-foot tall drow, until one noticed certain peculiarities. Each inky –black skin was layered with demonic scales beneath thick grey fur. The powerfully muscled body had a bestial canine face and their necks were covered in a yellow-white mane. But the most noticeable feature were the 4 arms; two of which were long, large and ending in razor-sharp serrated crab-like claws. Below these were two normal appearing drow arms with fingers. These hands held long spears as these creatures raced screaming towards the group, claws clacking.

Having fought many strange entities in the past, the Seekers were inured to bizarreness and so wasted no time in gawking but sprang into action.

Neon passed Mandi’s lease to Kilzadi as the maid gasped in feign terror at the sight of the charging monsters. “Keep her safe” he ordered as he sped into the room. Kilzadi pulled the apparent frightened lass against him. “Now you have my magic to protect you. Watch a hero in action’ the mage informed her, as he quickly incanted a spell. As quick as he was, Gideon had already cast as the Seekers counter-charged.

Being in the front, Swan and Risca were first into the area, Okul and Neon close behind; four Seekers, four monstrosities. The spells took effect; Gideon’s bless spell fortifying them against fear and at the same time increasing their strike capability. An instant later Kilzadi’s magic hastened the speed of the Seekers.

Swan raced up a wall, releasing arrows as she went. She knew not what these creatures were but the cleric in her she sensed the Abyss in them. Foreknow ledged, her arrows used were cold iron tipped. Sticky spider slippers allowed her to stride the walls, out of reach, as she pumped arrow after arrow into the nearest creature. The drow-thing could only screech in pain and frustration as a storm of arrows ripped into its heart, head, lungs and throat sending it into death.

Risca became a rolling cannonball as near the end of his counter charge he tucked and rolled Screaming ‘Crull!’, his shield blocked the claws and spear, he collided hard against the creature’s knees, so that it fell over; its face striking the stone floor hard. Bellowing in rage, it attempted to rise, to strike at its much shorter opponent. But by then the dwarf was up, trampling along the creature’s back and, in one stroke, used Guifoon to cleave its skull. A victory cry of ‘Crull!’ rang out.

Okul’s method was more direct. He charged directly at his adversary, out-screaming it. They collided in a clash of titans. Taking damage from the claws, he skewered the creature. Pulling out the blade of the great spear, he used the shaft to block the second claw attack and re-rammed the heavy blade through the monster’s face. A quick boot to its chest, crushing its ribs, sent it reeling back, silenced in death.

Neon used just the opposite tactics; those of nimbleness and quickness. As neared the charging beast, he tumbled through its legs, avoiding its attacks. Kipping up behind it, his rapier transfixed a claw arm through a nerve, rendering it limp and useless. Bellowing in rage, the beast turned to face his tormentor, only to see the agile half-elf duck, dance, and prance his way to keep to the rear. Each step was preceded by the rogue’s rapier running through evil flesh .Finally a deep thrust finished it.

“See, it’s all over and you’re safe” Kilzadi addressed Mandi. *Wait! Is that a look of disappointment on her face?* Before he could ponder longer, the lass ran into the chamber, throwing herself into the rogue’s arms. “Oh Neon, you are so brave; a true valiant hero, my hero.” She exhorted, throwing a vindictive gaze towards the war cleric.

“Keep her leashed!” was Swan’s spiteful remark.

“Anyone know what these things are?” asked a perplexed Okul as the scout tended to his wounds.

“Does it matter?” broke in Risca. “They’re killable.”

“Gideon searched through his knowledge. “They are called draegloth. They are half-fiends. Whenever a drow female is accepted by Loth as a priestess, the ceremony involves that she lie with a summoned demonic glabrezu. The result of such a union is a draegloth. The priestesses use them as body guards and as enforcers. Their willingness to lie with the demon shows their dedication and loyalty to Loth and her principles.”

“That they willingly allow themselves to become impregnated by a demon; to produce such abominations is just another reason to eliminate them” retorted the dwarf.

“Not all the drow, Risca, not all” replied Kilzadi thinking that Gweneth would sooner die than copulate, even unwillingly, with a demon.

“Save it all for later” added Gideon. “We still have to find the Dragon Lady, if they haven’t already fled. Let’s start the searching by checking out the pool.”

“No need” enjoined Swan. “The pool is just the clean water supply for the tree’s inhabitants. The Eldreth Veluuthra are not foolish. They would not disrupt it as they depend on it. We will go through that door.” She pointed to the north-east door.

“Why that one?”

“It will take us to where I have a duty to fulfill to the Tree. Then we will return and destroy the Eldreth Veluuthra. They will not leave as they want to eliminate us. They will lie in wait for us. ” Again the scout spoke in the cold merciless voice of a punitor.

“And you know this because…”

“Because I know what the Tree knows.”

Gideon stared at Swan. There were so many questions he wanted answered but he sensed her urgency to move on. The scout had shown her loyalty many times over. Now was not the time for discussion. That could be done later. He made his decision. “We follow Swan’s lead. Let’s do it Seekers!”

The group moved on. Swan instructed that both north doors be opened. They revealed sleeping rooms. Both were dark and reeked of half-eaten flesh and unwashed bodies. The stink indicated the draegloth used these chambers. A jumble of crates and barrels filled with decaying meat, chewed bones and fur lined the walls. The west room contain 2 cots, while the east one contained 4. This meant that at least two, if not more, of the half-fiends were unaccounted for.

Without hesitation, the scout pushed aside a barrel using her skills to open a secret door that lay behind. It opened to a 15-foot long east corridor which opened on the north side into a small room and continued on the south side. Reach the junction, the Seekers could now tell the room was once a chapel. Two everburning torches illuminated the area. Elven designed contoured stone benches were built into the walls. The walls themselves were covered in mosaics depicting moonlit woodland scenes. Most of these had been defaced with claw marks and smatterings of dung. A once clear water pool of thoughtful meditation was polluted with chunks of stone, marble moldy cloth, bones and skulls, lending the room a sickly smell. It had been obviously desecrated. This just increased Swan’s glacial ire.

She led them south passed the symbol of House Keleidsa. “The catacombs are this way.”

The corridor branched like a trident to three sets of catacombs; each set lined with shallow niches. The first two branches had niches that had been completely broken into and looted. Swan shook her head in disbelief. *She dishonoured her own ancestors.* Now she realized why the Sheldarine had chosen her to act as punitor. For the murders and desecrations of the Keleidsa Eldreth Veluuthra, she had no guilt for their executions.

The last branch still had some unopened niches. She told the others “open them up. But be careful, some will be trapped.” The first two revealed nothing, but the third one was occupied by an elven corpse, ancient, withered and wizened, in regal robes, drabbed in jewellery. “Jackpot” gloated Kilzadi.

“Not yet” ordered the scout. “Do not touch anything. We will need permission first.”

The others looked to her. “Permission from whom?” Kilzadi asked.

“From the House Keleidsa Tomb Guardian. Who else? Continue opening watch for traps.”

The others again regarded each other. “Who else indeed?” Neon was heard to mumble.

The other niches were bare. The last one held a golden amulet. It was then that the guardian manifested as a whirlwind, the blast of air sending out chipped rock, marble and metal pieces at gale speeds to strike the Seekers, hurling them back. A voice screamed out, the sonic cry bleeding ears, each hearing it in their native tongue, “Defilers, desecrators, die for your sacrilege.”

Pelted by debris, eyes half shut by the dust and wind, the Seekers prepared to fight, until Swan raised her arms and commanded, “No, do nothing now! No matter what, do not interfere!” She stepped into the gale, shouting to be heard, “Punitor del Sheldarine sunt.”

At the sound of the elfish words, the whirlwind died down. As it dissipated, there appeared to be a short, stocky, grey-skinned male elf in the eye of the storm. Bright, silver-white hair moving as if wind-blown cascaded down its back; its eyes constantly changing color in rainbow order. Grey ring mail armor covered its upper body while its lower body was hidden beneath a grey loose rippling long skirt. One muscular arm carried a red glowing short spear, the other a blue glowing scimitar. The being seemed to flow across the floor as it moved to confront the scout.

In striking range, it lashed out with the spear at Swan’s forehead. It was only because the Seekers had been together with the scout for so long that none of them reacted strongly. They trusted that Swan knew what she was doing. Even so, they jerked as the spear was thrust. Mandi let out a shriek, whether in shock or in glee was not clear. Despite the force of the trust, the spear stopped when its incisive point touched Swan’s forehead, gentle as a baby’s kiss.

Eerie rainbow eyes were riveted into blue ones. It suggested some sort of communication. The creature lowered its spear; butt on the floor and bowed. “The spear verifies your words, punitor.”

Swan lowered her arms. “Eladrin, the Sheldarine release you from your vow. The Tree will die shortly. There is nothing left to guard. The catacombs are all laid waste. The House Keleidsa has been struck from elf-kind. The defilers are of the same family you were to guard. I will execute them from whom your vow restrained you. You are freed. Return to the Arborea plane.” The message was delivered in a cold dispassionate tone.

Again, the being bowed “My gratitude, punitor. Justice be done. ”With those words, the eladrin faded away. The Seekers were left alone in the Keleidsa catacombs.

Gideon was the first to recover. “Swan, that was a…”

Swan seemed to sag as if a huge weight had been lifted. Facing the priest, she replied “yes, yes. All will be explained later. Any treasure is now free for the taking; but first we must finish this.”

Okul had moved up, supporting her in his hefty arms, leaning her against his solid chest. “What is next, loved one?”

“We will deliver justice. We will execute Quamara Keleidsa and her remaining allies and minions.”

Risca chortled at his battle axe. “Hear that Guifoon? We will be gutting more drow.” Only Mandi looked unhappy.

 *To be continued*