**Chapter 26 Shattered Heart, Ice Blood, I Am Punitor**

She stood alone on the rampart, as she had done for the past while since the temple battle. Behind her, the Ulbrinter estate grounds were quiet. Above her, the Sembian dusk was a dark grey-blue with the first stars peeking. The pink west was dominated by Coliar, the brilliant green star, now setting. In the east, its rival rose, blazing blue-white Karpri

**Lord No’s Note-**For all my readersunfamiliar with the solar system, Toril is the third planet, Coliar is the 2nd planet; a small gas giant. Karpari is the 4th planet; a large water-ice world. This explains their extreme brightness in the Toril sky.

Gideon had persuaded her to join the other Seekers in Sembia.

“We’ll gather information” he had said. “Find out more about the Selkirk House relationship with the Eldreth Veluuthra*.* “Determine more about the Sharrans and their plans.” She could not deny him the opportunity and so she consented. It did not go as planned. They had learned nothing new. No, correction! They learned that Neon had a younger human half-brother. Mirabeta Selkirk and Rasco Wilde had an affair whose product was Kevan Selkirk; now heir to the House. Their family resemblance was undeniable. Then, by all the good gods, Mirabeta and Neon themselves had a dalliance! She was certain that it hadn’t taken much persuasion on Mirabeta’s part. This whole situation gave her very mixed feelings.

Gods, but she was tired; tired of Sembia, tired of babysitting another haughty Malorn, tired of living in a magic dead zone. Her time here was a waste. They had learned nothing that would allow them to be proactive instead of reactive.

It was now five days since the temple ambush. Five days since she agreed to be a punitor of Waukeen. A poisoned blade had been stabbed into her. Regardless that now physically all was well, her spirit felt sapped. Someone or something had taken much trouble and expense to eliminate the Seekers. Whoever had put the mad gnome Jebalek in command, who had also hired an elite assassination group, had wanted all the Seekers together, confined, in a killing space. It was just yet another reason to leave.

Also they were now on the Silver Ravens’ ‘to be watched list’ as well as being scrutinized by that drow, Jezz the Lame. Yes, more time here was just wasted time.

The only positive was her purchases at the Magic Shoppe. Now that had been a strange experience. “Call me Brenys” the gnome proprietor had declared. She had been friendly and welcoming; smiling like she hid a secret. “Noristuor informed me you would be arriving. Your items are already prepared.” Lazying, on the counter, a pseudodragon named Rossal hinted a familiarity. It watched her wistfully. Strangest were Brenys’ parting words, seemly talking to herself: “I have now served both the Star Birds of the Battle; first the Raven, now the Swan; alike, yet so very different.” She should have expected it though. Any matter that the tiefling mage was involved in was bound to be strange.

She sighed. Still what she would give to be with him now, drinking strange teas, eating even more exotic cupcakes, all the while listening to his, fanciful tales concerning places called Krynn, Barsoom, Greyhawk, and other locales. Her favorites were the stories of the heroines; Lessa Ruathan, gold queen Dragonrider of Pern, Nuria Darkfire , ultimate magus and grand archwizard of Greyhawk and Goldmoon, Matriarch Ecclesical of Krynn when all three were still young maidens, ‘yet-to-be-world-famous’ just about your age’ he would say. The accounts were definitely entertaining despite her inability to determine if they were products of his fanciful imagination or if he was relating personal experiences.

But not only Noristuor was missed; but the rest of them as well. She missed riding Nivea to visit Nelyssa and Jhanira in Aleena’s Rose Garden. She missed visiting her ‘cygnets’; Walter, Ewart and Padriac. She missed listening to, and at times joining in, to Jhaer’s after-hour bawdy songs; missed their ‘tete-a tetes ‘at times laughing so hard that their sides would ache and their eyes would tear.

She especially missed sharing smooth amber malt liquor with Uncle Holfast, just the two of them, in the quiet night. He would relate adventuring accounts with mother and father and the elf druid Nera. She had noticed that his voice would crack whenever he talked about Nera.

**Lord No’s Note-**The elf druid Nera Aquilae was first noted in Chapter 21 when she accosted Jhaer, Gideon and Neon on their travel to Oakengrove Abbey to gather information concerning the Eldreth Veluuthra. Her relationship with Holfast Harpenshield was described by the Oakfather Gannon Durei.

Gods, but she missed all that, just as much as she was tired of all this; tired of the Ulbrinters**;** both Nomus and Karya and their gushing hospitality. It made her queasy. She was especially tired of Sindi Malorn; of how the floozy fawned over Kilzadi At times she caught Sindi looking at her brother-in-arms as a she-spider set to devour its mate. She felt useless. She felt discomforted. It felt like the charged air before the thunderstorm broke.

Then there was the lack of intimate privacy. The Seekers shared a bunk-house styled room in the manor itself. Refusing to be a source of embarrassment, she would not share a bed with Okul. And so she would seek out bits of time and locations to be alone with her ‘amorata’. This vexed her. At home, they would be sleeping together, snuggling comfortably; coupling whenever, however and with as much time as they wanted. She missed that. Yes, this was another reason to leave.

She made her decision then.

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She sensed before she heard her lover’s approach. She did not turn to face him. A cloak was wrapped around her shoulders. Strong arms enveloped her, pressing her against his chest. A final sigh released much of her tension. He always made her feel this way; cocooned, snug and safe.

In gold dragon manner, he rough-tongued the nape of her neck, eliciting a contented murmur.

She broke the silence. “I am done here. Tomorrow I leave for home.”

It was as if he had been expecting this for some time. He replied with scarcely a pause: “Then we should go tell the others and pack our belongings.”

It was just another example of his devotion.

 In the Shadow Plane, after their sexual ritual of consecration, he had promised, “my spear will always stand for you.” She had chuckled then, at the double-entendre. In a short time, she had come to realize he was, in all seriousness, proclaiming his deference. Her decisions were never questioned. He never required explanations, asked no questions, did not partake in discussions. He merely accepted her judgement. He would never doubt her. It was just one of the many reasons he had won her heart.

She turned to face him. Okul had experienced changes since that ritual. Still a towering, imposing, and dominating physical presence, his demeanour had mellowed. He was more self-assured and self-confident. There was no more need to prove his competence in his masculinity or as a warrior. He became satisfied rather than embarrassed as more dragon features externalized. His pupils were shiny liquid gold inside slender eyes of solid gold. To her carnal delight, his pointed tongue had roughened, lengthened, and narrowed. His teeth had sharpened; the cause of many gleeful nips. Up along his body, front and back, strips of tiny, shiny gold scales proliferated. She loved their feel against her naked skin, simultaneously hard and soft, smooth and rough, but always warm. As for his loins…

Delicately, her hand traced his face; ran down his muscled chest. “Fili draco, you are my golden soul, este spirti aurum mi,” were the elvish words.

Looking down at her upturned face, he pressed her against his breast and in draconic whispered ‘ret sek froneel sia’ “you are my total all”

As they stood embraced, she thought of the men now in her life. Her father, naturally; for him her love was forever and unconditional. ‘Uncle’ Holfast, who, since babyhood, showed his endearment by teasing and rough-housing; their attachment was deep and unshakable; Inilaos, the elf ranger, her first lover, who so patiently awoke her to sensual pleasures, waited for her to mature in her own sexual confidence. For him, there would always be a bond.

Then there were the men of the Seekers.

Risca, her surrogate father, who treated an inexperienced country girl as an adopted daughter, was another unconditional love. Gideon, whose leadership and friendship she trusted without fault. Her brother-in-arms; Kilzadi, was still incorrigible but improving. Over time, their shared dangers eased the tension between them. She had come to accept his overtures as part of his character and at times would even tease him. Still, she wanted a brother, not just a battle-brother.

And finally, there was Ninniach. He was lisserlig. Since the beginning, her feelings for him seem to oscillate between extremes of anger and ardor, resentment and delight, jealousy and desire; all swirling around inside her; all at the same time. It was a turbulent flux.

For counterbalance, there was the last of the Seekers; her solid anchor…her golden one. With him, there were no complications. For him her feelings were straight forward; warmth and passion, fervor and adherence.

“Come”, let us go tell the others.”

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As expected, only Risca and Gideon and Neon were present. The Seekers bunked together in a large room. Well almost all. The Desert Fox had his own bedroom on the upper floor where apparently he had to ‘endure’ nightly sojourns of Sindi Malorn.

The priest seemed to be in a deep thought while the dwarf was whet-stoning Guifoon. As he had done frequently, Neon was in the middle of grooming himself for a visit to his ‘friends’. She just rolled her eyes at the sight, wondering which friend had won tonight. His ‘friends’ being the female staff of the manor. He would leave for his ‘visit’ and not reappear until mid-morning.

Submerging such thoughts, she loudly announced, “Tomorrow, I leave”. Their attention was caught.

Quick to the implications, the priest responded first. “I am waiting for the Firelord’s sign. Wait with me till then.”

“No, Gideon. I am sick and tired of this place. I’ve had enough. We have learned all we can. I feel on edge. I am going home.”

He knew her well enough to realize her decision was final. No type of argument would alter it. Naturally this meant Okul was also leaving. There was no need to ask. He shifted focus; first to the dwarf. “Risca?”

The dwarf shrugged and recommenced the sharpening. “Me gurl can take care of herself and besides the dragon-son will be there. I’ll stay and leave when you do.”

“And you, Neon?”

The rogue, grinning, cocked his head at Swan. He loved to see her flounder in such instances. “Well let’s see. This job is easy, the pay is excellent, and the perks are…*his grin widened …*well the perks are absolutely delicious. So I’ll wait and leave with Gideon”. He winked at Swan. “Tell Jhaer I’ll be home soon though. Well I’m off.” Swan discovered that her hands had been clenching and unclenching as he spoke.

Gideon spoke up as Neon exited, “That ends it then. We will say our good-byes in the morning.”

“Yes. I suppose it does. I am going to pack, wash up and get some sleep.”

“It is getting late. We should do the same.”

Hours later, the entire household was awakened by Kilzadi’s resounding shouts; “The Claw! The Claw! No, no, not Crimdrac’s Claw!”

Swan ranger-woke, instantly ready. She was the first to leap out of her bunk, snatch Gutripper and race up to Kilzadi’s room. The other three were a few steps behind. As speedy as she was, Neon had already arrived.

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Neon was drowsy. Cooling perspiration sheen covered his naked body. Curled up against him, in an exhausted sleep, the cheek of an equally naked and pretty house maid rested upon his chest. His sleepy thoughts were on Cygni. He just could not resist teasing her. Wise in the ways of the female, he knew she was pulled to him, as much as he was pulled to her. But as long as they were Seekers together, that was all it should be. Sense dictated otherwise, but emotionally, he would not, could not, endure another Aleena. Teasing was the only way to indicate his feelings. Besides, it was so much fun to watch her squirm. It was then he heard Kilzadi’s shouts.

“The Claw! The Claw! No, no, not Crimdrac’s Claw!”

All sleep fled. Well-experienced in escaping from bed chambers, he was out the door at quickling speed. “Remain here until it is safe”, he ordered the now awakening and puzzled servant.”

The Desert Fox was a happy man. The days were filled with escorting and guarding Sindi. This just meant shopping, sight-seeing, day parties, and evening dinners. Simple! For this he was going to be paid lots and lots of money. It was almost stealing. The only mar was the temple fight but even that had its upside. Risking his life, indicated to Sindi, how brave and noble he was. Since then, as a reward for her’ hero’, her nightly visit coition had become more frenzied, frantic and madcap. Naturally he welcomed it. Just as he now welcomed her re-crawling on top of him.

“It’s now my pleasure to surprise you.” She pressed down upon him; body part to body part. He gave a frown as her weight seemed to increase. She clamped her lips to his as her weight held him immobile. His eyes widened as a twin Sindi moved out of the candle-lit shadows. This one was dressed for travelling and held the sheathed scimitar blade in her hand.

Bending over the bed, she snorted in derision. “Are you enjoying the shadow-stuff- me, mighty mage? Savor it then, your last act. You and your friends were to die in the temple. I had placed you all so carefully. It nearly succeeded. But this is just as good; after all, we get our prize.” She held up Crimdrac’s Claw.

“Baby sister thought the Eldreth Veluuthra would do it. She enticed that red-head into a …what was the term…oh, yes…a pet-fem relationship. She knew her plan for a pretend kidnapping would bring him to a rescue and the rest of the Seekers along with him. That almost worked as well. But from our very first meeting, I was luring you, using your star-crossed weakness, finally getting you to Ordulin. And so here we are at the end. We also wanted to rip the secret of the Draconic Ritual from you, but we can do that later, from your corpse. Aunt and uncle know what to do. The Claw is ours. Die well now mage. Mother will be so pleased.

With those words, the weight of the false Sindi increased, pinning him to the mattress. Vapour-like shadow-stuff flowed from its mouth, into his, down his throat, up into his nose, filling air passages. He began to asphyxiate. He watched as the real Sindi incanted a spell. A shadowy portal formed. She blew a kiss as she stepped through. The portal, shrinking to a point, vanished.

**Lord No’s Note—**it is agreed by all sages and historians that of the three Malorn daughters, the eldest, Synthya, was most like her mother. Not solely because she, of the sisters, most resembled Imbrautha physically, having the same features; full bosom, shapely body, midnight tresses and eyes so blue-dark they appeared black, but also because her schemes rivaled her mother’s. Unlike her siblings, her plans unfolded in detailed small steps, each innocuous on their own but together over a long period of time achieved her goals. Unlike the younger Mandalane, who had attached herself to Neon Wilde, she had attached herself to the one person who most mattered, namely, Kilzadi Litecaster. Her long-in-time plot to bring him to Sembia, destroy the Seekers, and take Crimdrac’s Claw had followed its course. And of course she was a most intelligent and consummative actress and suffered only a touch of Evil Genius Syndrome

Kilzadi was a hardened combatant. There was no panic as he choked. And it was not for nought that he had rigorously practised hand to hand combat. Breaking pins, escaping grapples, without magic, were part of the extensive training Neon as his teacher had insisted upon. Using tricks learned, he broke the pin; enough so that he was able to heave and hack out the shadow stuff. This enabled him to scream out, loud enough to be heard throughout the manor: “The Claw! The Claw! No, no, not Crimdrac’s Claw!” He then attempted to escape.

Shortly, Neon swept in and hesitated. Kilzadi was wrestling with Sindi.

It was when he saw grey-black vapors issuing from her mouth and heard Kilzadi yelling “Kill it! Kill it!” that he plunged the Fleeting Rapier into the creature’s forehead.

It looked up at him and smiled. The hole in its head filled in. There was no bleeding. A second thrust produced the same result. He felt he was skewering jelly. Still smiling, shadow haze dripping; it released the mage and rose to engage the rogue. Freed, Kilzadi wasted no time in loading his crossbow.

At this point Swan rushed into the room. Both Seekers , in unison, shouted, “Kill it!”

She instantly recognized the threat. There was no hesitation. Battle-hardened, she was oblivious to their nakedness. Gutripper sliced down; demonstrating its name. Its serrated edge shredded flesh and scattered mucus as it tore; practically bisecting the creature. Shadow stuff from the massive wound diffused, chilling the room.

The remaining Seekers arrived. Guifoon chopped and Okul’s Greatspear hewed. Despite all the damage, the thing continued to reform. It was only when Gideon used a psionic energy blast to sear it, did it cease to repair itself. All this occurred in brief moments.

**Lord No’s Note-** up to this pointof time, Gideon had not announced his physic abilities to anyone, although the Seekers were aware of them, as he had used them several times. They did not pursue the matter, as they, confident in his leadership, assumed he had valid reasons not to.

The slicing, stabbing, hewing and chopping now had permanent effects. The room became crowded with Seekers and quite chilled as the shadow stuff dissipated.

“Are you hurt?” Swan asked Kilzadi with concern.

“The Claw. She stole Crimdrac’s Claw” he mumbled.

“Who did and just what was that?” queried Neon.

Then a voice from the doorway called out.

“To answer your questions; my niece did, and that was one of her creations” the familiar voice of Nomis Ulbrinter answered. He stood in the doorway along with his wife Karya. Both wore smirks as they brandish shadow wands. Behind them, grinning wickedly was Captain Fairweather, along with two household guards with crossbows. Other guards crowed the hallway on both sides.

He continued. “Finally, all the Seekers; gathered together, confined to a small space in a magic free zone. “Mores the pity”, he snickered. “I get to slough off the ‘kind and timid rich merchant persona. Our magic still works as it based on the Shadow-weave, praise to Shar, as Synthyna, so aptly demonstrated. Now, I am not without mercy.” Karya and the others chuckled at this comment.

“I will make all your deaths painless; ah no, sorry, not quite all. Two of you are to be kept alive by Mandalane’s desires; the rogue to enslave and the scout to be exquisitely tortured. Now…”

**Lord No’s Note-**it is agreed; by they who study such matters, that Nomis Ulbrinter, suffered immensely from Evil Genius Syndrome. Should he have destroyed the Seekers when they were entrapped and unaware, the entire future history of Faerun would have been dramatically different. But as all Syndrome sufferers, he had an unstoppable, relentless urge to gloat and explain his actions to his supposedly helpless victims.

As he was talking, the Seekers had been rearranging. Risca, grim, about to rage, prepared to charge. Sharrans now ranked first on his list of ‘those who must be killed’

Okul, growling, took a position behind him to the right. She who had accepted him as’ vramec’3, the Seekers, who had become his weyr4, all were in danger. He stood, spear-ready; the gold dragon battle-cry imminent to be released; the sound to carry fear onto his enemies.

**Lord No’s Note**- For my dear readers who are unfamiliar with the draconic language; vramec3- mate, partner weyr4- family group of dragons, dragon siblings

Swan took the rear, to aid the three warriors. Kilzadi beside her, crossbow cocked.

Neon took the left position. His combat judgement indicated their dire predicament. They were confined and without magic, effectively neutralizing Kilzadi and Gideon. Cygni was without her bow. Still, to buy some time he could leap over the charging Risca to get at the Ulbrinters….

**Lord No’s Note-**The journals of thebard Jhaer Brightsong recount that when she had decided to compose an epic ballad of the Seekers of Faerun, she had Swan relate to her the particulars of that encounter. One response of the scout had been, so intent was she on the oncoming fight, she was still oblivious to the fact that both Neon and Kilzadi were naked. Jhaer had then apparently retorted that even if noted, the size of their nakedness would still have been oblivious. This remark then had caused Swan to guffaw, leading her to choke, as a significant amount of ale snorted out her nose.

It was at this point that Nomis’ monologue was interrupted by Gideon’s hearty laughter. The priest walked to the front to face the Sharran wizard.

“It’s too late Nomis. As you arrived at the door, I summoned help. It should arrive in a few moments.”

Now Nomis laughed back. “You’re bluffing priest. Only shadow weave magic functions here, and you have none of that.”

“True’ I have none of that. I have something else.”

“Bah! Enough prattle. You die first.” He raised his wand. But thought is faster. Gideon unleased a psionic force blast; which was the reason he had moved to the forward position.

The force wave hurled the Sharrans across the hallway, back against the wall. They landed in a heap, momentarily dazed. The energy required weakened Gideon. He would be helpless for a time. But the others were not! The Seekers were well battle-experienced. They immediately took the advantage now offered. Their weapons, though now not magical, were still sharp and master-crafted and they were experts in their use. Innate abilities do not depend on magic. Supporting each other’s talents does not require magic.

Shouting his battle-cry, Risca was the first out into the hallway. Two swipes by Guiffon dispatched two of the now recovering guards. Okul’s giant strides propelled him, roaring, on Risca’s wake. Great Spear impaled a too slow guard. In contrast, soundlessly, Neon was a step behind as he leaped over the raging Risca. At the apex of the leap, he twisted sideways to bring Fleeting Rapier to bear. The last sight a guard had on this plane of existence was that of a naked bottom seemly appearing above him.

By the time Swan exited the bedroom with a call to Kilzadi of ‘follow and keep me covered’, the Sharrans were beginning to regain the initiative. They had the advantage of both numbers and magic. Being her father’s daughter, her objective was to engage the magic users …*the spell casters always first, daughter mine, always them first…* so she located the Ulbrinters as they were regaining their feet. She spun towards them, braced to engage. Her charge was interrupted by the interposition of Captain Fairweather.

He spoke. “Oh, I have so much fun planned with you. Mandi promised when she was done breaking you, I could have the left-overs.” It was then he gasped in pain as a crossbow bolt bit deep into his shoulder.

Kilzadi did ‘have her back’. Following her, he was aware of her intent. The bolt was meant to clear her path.

These people were party to the assault of Waukeen’s temple. As such they were under Her death sentence. Swan was now Her punitor. Its essence filled her. There was no mercy for them.

Kilzadi’s bolt gave her some extra time. No magic and no bow, but she was still a Deepingdale scout, and in her hands, Gutripper was still a formidable weapon.

Tumbling through him, she spring-attacked. Gutripper’s serrated edge sawed deep into his Achilles’ tendon. He collapsed. She stabbed the sword into his kidney, wanting him to bleed out painfully. Without pity and never with remorse, she wanted him to feel agony and to know why.

“Waukeen sends her regards” were her cold words. Somersaulting away, she turned to punish the Ulbrinters. Too late! They had recovered and were raising their wands.

The Seekers operated as a team. As Risca engaged up close, Okul’s spear aided from behind. Neon’s rapier would stab into the openings provided. More guards fell to these three. But it would not be enough. Either in sleep clothes or naked, they had no armor and no magical protection.

It was at this point that ‘popping’ sounds filled the hallway all around the battle scene. The last thing anyone saw were Sembian Silver Raven soldiers materializing, firing dozens upon dozens of drow sleep darts at all the combatants.

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She awoke to Okul’s concerned face. She felt it was starting to become a habit. “What…” she began.

“Hush”, he interrupted; relief in his voice. Gently sitting her up, he handed her a cup “All is well. Drink. It will clear your head faster. I will explain.”

She glanced around, sipping the sweet concoction. House guards were being tied and marched out by the Silver Ravens. Nomis and Karya, both mage-cuffed, blind-folded, and gagged, were being guarded. She recognized, Miklos Selkirk in conversation with both Gideon and a still-agitated Kilzadi, now wearing pyjamas. She identified the drow, Jezz the Lame, chatting with, wait, what, chatting with Risca, the drow hater? Neon, now in bed-shorts, was reassuring the frightened house servants

Okul described how after the battle inside the temple of Waukeen, Miklos and Gideon, on the advice of Jezz the Lame, agreed to keep in contact using psionic telepathy. Apparently the Silver Ravens had been suspicious of the Ulbrinters for some time. And so if ever proof was found that implicated them as dangerous to Sembia, then Gideon would contact them and they would psionically teleport in to deal with the Ulbrinters; which is exactly what occurred.

The potion had removed her lethargy. She felt awake and alert. ”Let’s find out what is going on.”

Miklos nodded his head at her as she approached. “Ah, Swan Battlestar, please let me apologize for your extended sleep. My soldiers had orders to overcome everyone. I hope you are well recovered.”

“Yes, fine “, she responded somewhat curtly. And so what happens now?”

“Now? Now we take in all the guards and servants for questioning. Now we interrogate the Ulbrinters. Now we start to determine who else is part of this conspiracy.”

“No. I mean what more do you need from us.”

“From the Seekers? As Gideon and I were discussing, just that you remain here until for a while, in case there are new developments.”

“Alright. But without me. I am leaving tomorrow, no matter what.” *No noble is going to tell me what to do.*

“So Gideon informed me. That will not be a problem. We do not need all the Seekers present.”

“I too am leaving” interjected Kilzadi, panting out the words, indicating his anxiety. “I need to recover the Claw, as soon as possible.”

Swan put her hands on his shoulders to help calm him. “Do you know where she took it”?

“No” he hammered back in his turmoil. “But back in Ashabedford, I have items and materials that will help me locate it. I just need to get some sleep and in the morning I will teleport out. Since you are leaving anyway, come with me?”

“Yes, of course. And we will search for it together.”

Hearing those words, and being in an agitated state, something twisted inside Kilzadi. By experience, he knew that when the scout decided to do something, it would be done. Looking across at Swan, he suddenly saw her in a new light; not as an object worthy of his star-crossed libido, but as someone who had his interest in mind; someone who treated him like family, like she would a brother. She, without encouragement, was going to forgo her own agenda to help him. This realization shifted his perspective concerning her from ‘a beautiful woman that stirs my lustful ways’ to ‘a beautiful woman who is a close friend and treats me as family’.

 Any lingering passionate longings for her, simply evaporated. In its place was a sense of sibling.

“Thank you for that … sister?”

Swan’s eyes showed surprise at that word and the emotion that filled his voice .It was the first time he had ever used it She was sufficiently astute to note the change in Kilzadi. She gave him a big smile. “You are most welcome… brother.”

**Lord No’s Note**-This was the turning point of Swan and Kilzadi’s relationship. No longer was she a figure of his lust, an itch that had to be scratched, but instead he treated her as family. She, not having to gently fend off his advances, in turn did the same. They still teased and bantered at each other as would siblings, but without the licentious tension, they drew closer to each other as a brother and a sister.

Then she heard, “Ah, the Lady scout is now awake.” Her eyes narrowed as she beheld Jezz the Lame limping towards them. An extraordinary handsome male drow, to Swan he appeared arrogant; to carry himself with a superior air like a hoity-toity noble. There were also rumors that he had commanded the Vhaeraun drow in the last war to retake the lost elf lands. The same drow-war that Grampar had fought and died in! She could not avoid him.

A special arrow had crippled his leg instead of out righting killing him. It could not be healed. The rumors also stated that now he controlled if, when and the where of their occasional raids in the Cormanthar Forest and their now infrequent hit and run incursions into the Dales.

He stopped as he beheld her expression. He put his hand to his mouth, as if he had committed a faux-pas. “Oh, please… please forgive me for calling you ‘Lady’. I forgot your dislike of the so-named nobility. So allow me begin anew. “Ah, the scout is now awake…” then he switched into elven.

“…Cygni Vulpae, exploratora milizia d’Daleprofonda, filia d’ capa militiare legioni Lilia Vulpae e furbo Armando Battlestar, nepotia d’parla arbori e sylvae controlla Har’ma Vulpae”… Then back into Chondathan. “I am relieved that you were not too discomforted by the sleep darts. And I do truly wish you well, Swan Battlestar. I am not your enemy.”

She sensed no sham at his last words, but still….*how does he know so much about me and my family? More important, why does he know so much about me and my family?* He turned away began to converse with the others before she could respond.

Puzzling over his remarks, she left to join Risca. “Are you all healed? Good. What were you and that drow talking about?”

“He asked me if I was my cousin” was the short answer.

“What? Why? That makes no sense.”

Risca shrugged. “During the fight, when those Silveries were popping, I saw a drow with em. So naturally, I turned to engage and gut him. But all em damn darts sleep me. When I woke, he was bending over me, to give me drink to hurry my recovery. That’s when he asked ‘you are a Foraker. Are you Rossco?’

“Again wait. He knows your cousin’s name is Rossco? How would he know that?”

“I donna know. He knows too, I am banished. Anyway, I says no, I am Risca.

He says, ‘if I think all Forakers were the same, and Rossco did me harm, then what I would do to Rossco, I would do to you, and I would be wrong, no? Just like you despise all drow for the harm and grief certain drow did to you and to your daughter.”

“Again wait…wait. You have a daughter?”

Risca cleared his throat. “Methinks he meant you, gurl.”

“Oh!” Swan blushed embarrassed. “Please continue then.”

He said “As you are different from your cousin, so drow are different from each other. Would you hurt Gwenect? Both Anuth and Shidon attended her, yet are they the same? One became a follower of Eilistraee, one welcomed Sharr’s darkness. You would treat them the same? I am not your enemy Risca Foraker. I am Rossco’s enemy.’ I understood his point and told him so. But between ya and me, gurl, I donna fully trust em.”

Risca’s recited words startled Swan. “…*he knows about Gwenect, Anuth and Shidon as well? He seems to know a lot about us. Why? For what purpose?* “Oh, I quite agree, dear Risca. He may declare himself not our enemy, but he will have to prove it, as I feel he is hiding something.”

**Lord No’s Note**-Historians argue whether or not Jezz somehow had pre-knowledge of the demise of Ashabedford and so wanted to ensure the Seekers of the truth of his peaceful intentions. The debate, whether it was at this time that the drow expansion in the Cormanthar Forest halted for good, or to use the Seekers as insurers to the War Convocation when the Vhaeraun drow arrived to present themselves as allies to the gathering. They all agree, however, of his desire to legalize their present settlements in the Cormanthar Forest thereby ending the forest strife and make common cause against the Darkness.

At this point they were joined by the others. Only Miklos and Jezz remained of the Silver Ravens. The Ulbrinters and their household had all been taken away.

Miklos addressed them. “I will post several guards around the manor-house, to ensure that nothing and none can enter. You Seekers are free to remain. We will resume in the morning, those who are remaining. Let us depart.” The last words were spoken to Jezz.

The drow gave a little bow. “Well done Seekers.” Then eyeing Swan, “no te nemico sunt. Verita est.” Then he and Milkos popped out, leaving the Seekers alone in the house.

“What em say?” questioned Risca.

“I am not your enemy. That is the truth.” Neon translated, looking questionably at the scout.

Swan shook her head to indicate, ‘not now, not now.’

The Seekers soon found themselves alone in the vacated manor.

“You saved us, Gideon” remarked Neon.

“I just called for help. The rest of you held them off long enough for the help to arrive” replied the priest. “Job well done Seekers, together we evaded another deathtrap plot.”

“She took the Claw” interjected a still agitated Kilzadi. “She was always after the Claw. We were positioned to die in the temple. That was her plan. That lying harlot played me for a fool and took my Claw. Can your psionics determine where? No, well then, I am retiring to prepare myself for tomorrow. I need to retrieve it. Swan, Okul and I are leaving. Anyone else? Not yet? Still going to play along with the Sembians, are we? Fine. See you all in the morning.” With that, he huffed hurriedly for his chamber.

Gideon sighed. “He is upset, not that I blame him. I think it best if we all retire and get some sleep. We will have clearer heads in the morning.”

With that, the Seekers began to disperse. Surprisingly, despite their close brush with death, they all soon fell into a deep sleep. Near dawn, and for the sixth time, each was visited by a Dream of Darkness.

**Lord No’s Note-** The Dreams can be read in their entirety in the appendix below.

[*Dreams of Darkness VI*](http://www.ddarling.ca/dd/dr/logs/dream06.docx)

For my dear lazy fans, here is a very brief synopsis:

Gideon’s Dream-ordered by Kossuth to go to dormant volcano (Pillar of Fire) in the Galena Mountains. Pass the test of the Elemental Princes and claim their prizes in order to receive their aid. This must be done before the forces of Darkness claim the prizes first.

 Szass Tamm has put Meliai’s essence into an acorn to use it to demand Gideon’s obedience. Yaphyll, the Zukir of Divination, does not think this is a good plan, as she knows for the Darkness to be defeated; Gideon needs his loved one with him.

Kilzadi’s Dream-told by Eilistraee through Gwenect to free the enthralled drow by travelling to the drow city of Maerimydra and there expose the false Mother for what she really is.

 Fang Dragon, Nartheling, is outraged at his betrayal and promises to avenge himself. He orders a ‘package’ be delivered to Kilzadi with instructions to help him in his vengeance and to show no mercy to his betrayers.

Neon’s Dream-Ashabedford is destroyed by an earthquake. The miller’s sons, Heldo and Pavos, are ordered by Mandi Malorn to kill Holfast and Jhaer. They apparently do so, and then are sent by Mandi through a portal to the Galena Mountains to collect the Elemental Princes’ prizes before the Seekers can do so. She joins up with the Regal Female Drow from the previous dreams as they descend to the Underdark through a fissure.

Okul’s Dream-Kurud, being attacked by Sandi and Sindi Malorn, is revealed to be a gold dragon wyrmling by name of Kurudravos and Okul’s half-brother, as the gold dragon, Yenamros, is father to both. Being captured, he is told that Okul is now most likely dead, and that he is to be used as a sacrifice to restore the dracolich Crimdrac. He is then dragged down into the Underdark.

Risca’s Dream- Fang Dragon, Nartheling, is outraged at his betrayal and promises to revenge himself. He orders the dwarf egg farmer, Barundar, in Glen to deliver the ‘package’ to Kilzadi with instructions to help him in his vengeance and to show no mercy to his betrayers. Barundar barely escapes from Glen, as Roscco opens the passage to the Underdark, letting in drow warriors led by Anuth the Slayer. Glen is quickly overwhelmed and its surviving inhabitants led into slavery into the Underdark.

Swan’s Dream-Mayor Haresk Malorn is working at his office desk when his wife Imbrutha enters and walks behind him to massage his shoulders. While massaging, her figures rip his soul apart, killing him. Setting the building on fire, she steals the true Rod of Peldan. Leaving, she causes an earthquake to topple buildings and open fissures. Ignoring the havoc, pain and deaths, she has caused, her features shift to reveal the Regal Female Drow of the previous dreams. Joined by daughter, Mandi, they descend to the Underdark through a fissure.

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Kilzadi snapped awake. *The Claw! My Claw! I know where it has been taken. I will not be stopped by either drow or Malorns. I must get to Ashabedford now!*

Gideon snapped awake. *The Pillar of Fire! I must take the Seekers there. Oh, my Meliai, duty first. I must get to Ashabedford now!*

Risca snapped awake. *Rossco! I will kill you filthy! I must help the Dwarfs of Glen and close the Underdark passage. I must get to Ashabedford now!*

Okul snapped awake. *I have a living family- a brother! Kurud must be rescued! I must get to Ashabedford now!*

Neon snapped awake. *Jhaer! No, not again! Not another Aleena! I must get to Ashabedford now!*

Swan snapped awake. *Earthquake!* *My friends! Murder, treachery! I must get to Ashabedford now!*

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Dawn was about to break as the Seekers snapped awake practically simultaneously. As they looked at each other, no words were needed to indicate that each had had another Dream. As each hurried to prepare to leave, discussion would only slow them down and so, each kept their dream to themselves to share later. Breakfast was quick iron rations washed down with water.

“All ready?” inquired Kilzadi, looking at the others.

All nodded. “I’m sure each of us has a duty to perform when we arrive. Let us do so. I gave mental notice to Jezz”, Gideon informed them. “Let’s go!”

**Lord No’s Note**-Gideon was unaware that during what has become known as the Night of Dark Tremors there was no true need to contact the Sembians. Jezz and Miklos knew something was amiss. So intense was the earthquake spell that the magical energy wave released caused both the Weave and Shadow Weave to oscillate throughout all the lands bordering the Sea of Fallen Stars. Already powerful personages, potent creatures, mighty spell casters and governments of all types had performed or were performing divinations, communing with the supernatural, and far-scrying to determine the cause; all leading into what was once the city of Ashabedford.

Kilzadi cast his teleportation spell. There was an instant of discontinuity and the Seekers found themselves in a new hell, a scene of total devastation. The ruination was a shock for those who were expecting it, and doubly so for those who weren’t.

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The air was full of thick smoke, dust and the screams of the injured and dying; children crying and parents mourning. Only a few buildings were standing and even those were damaged or burning. The rest had been reduced to rubble. The ground was crisscrossed with deep and wide cracks, fissures and crevices. Clerics and priests were healing or giving last rites. Animals, both companions and familiars were sniffing through the rubble for survivors. Magic was being used to both free the survivors and injured or to bring out the bodies of the dead. The Riders were organizing the work, trying to bring a command of order to all the chaos.

Kilzadi had brought them to what was the courtyard of the White Hart Inn except now it was strewn with debris. The inn, sheds, and barns had collapsed. Standing by itself in the area was Nivea. Spying Swan, it sighed through its nostrils, and then trotted to her, neighing and nickering.

“The Seekers! I should have known!” The familiar voice caused them to turn. Jarrod Rold had ridden up with some Riders. They looked exhausted.

“You fools decide to teleport in. All of Mistledale is now on a war footing which means all in-teleports are to be investigated. So, no surprise, Neon and his friends waste my time while there are many important matters that need my concern. Make yourselves useful. Use your magics and your talents to help out. Go to the town square. People there will show you where you can be the most helpful.”

They turned their horses away before the Seekers could respond but not before Risca blurted out: “What news of Glen? How fare the dwarfs and other townsfolk?”

“Decimated “was the reply. “Most slaughtered; the rest taken as slaves. The temples of Tyr and Tempus have sent units of clerics, fighters and paladins to ensure the closing of the gate and to eliminate any remaining drow. That is all I know at this time.” With that they rode off.

Meanwhile, Swan and Nivea, after showering affection on each other, had conversed using Swan’s ability to talk with animals. From the horse, she had learned that no one had been trapped in the inn; all the hired help, the guests had gotten out at the first tremors. Uncle Holfast and Jhaer had left to help to aid the townspeople. The other inn animals, those that escaped from the barn had all been collected by the stable keepers and taken away to be tended by the ‘colts’, as Nivea referred to Walter, Padriac and Ewart. From this she knew that the Zander Wolcott ranch estate had survived and that her cygnets were safe. She also learned that Nivea had refused to leave knowing that Swan would return sooner or later. Her horse had waited for her. Such allegiance filled Swan’s heart.

“Alright then, we go to the town square. We find out the latest news, make inquiries” spoke out Neon. He was more than anxious to find Jhaer and not anxious at all to relate to Swan his dream of Holfast. Better if she found out on her own or from others.

“Not I” spat out Risca. “I needs to go to Glen. See for meself what is going on there. I needs a horse.”

“Take Nivea” offered Swan. “She will take you there quickly, wait for you and bring you back. She is here now and so you do not have to waste time looking for your own or another horse. I will tell her.” Swan proceeded to do so. All the others heard was a series of various horse sounds from her and the animal. The Seekers were long accustomed to Swan’s animal language ability. She continued with Risca. “She is ready now. Get on and be on your way.”

“Thank ye, gurl. See you all later today. Come on horsie. Take us to Glen.” And they set off.

Gideon now spoke up. “I also need to check on something first. I will meet up with you later.”

“As must I” said Okul. Looking at Swan, he added “I can do this alone. Go where you are more needed.” She nodded. Okul and Gideon departed in different directions.

The remaining Seekers headed for the town square where they hoped to find more information regarding their dreams.

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Nivea galloped, leaping over rubble and fissures. Racing, she soon passed the Abbey of the Golden Sheaf. Risca could see that the main temple building had half collapsed. The smaller buildings including the orphanage had totally crumbled. He could hear the cries of the injured, frightened children and see clerics attempting to soothe and heal. He was too far to distinguish who they were.

Passed the Abbey, in a short time Noristuor’s Tower came into view. It too had collapsed and its broken parts strewed about the grounds. All was quiet in the area.

They arrived at the outskirts of Glen. Nivea slowed to a canter. Risca could see that here, the buildings had not collapsed but rather had been set ablaze. He could see bodies of dwarfs and other inhabitants lying in the streets. He could see shapes gathering the corpses. The smoke and dust made it difficult to identify the shapes. “Let’s get closer, horsie.”

After some dozen steps, they were surrounded by a group of solders and clerics, emerging through the dust.

The dwarf found himself looking down at First Sword Jareth Burlisk Champion of Tempus.

“Well, well,…well,…look who it is. State your business Risca Foraker or are you here to’ tear the temple down about our ears’ as you last threatened to do?”

**Lord No’s Note**- as all my faithful readers will recall, this occurred when Swan had been killed in the drow ambush. Risca had carried her body to the Abbey of the Sword demanding that they revive her immediately.

“Eyes want to close the gate, help the dwarfs and kill me cousin.”

“He speaks truth” a cleric spoke out.

“Well then, get off that fine horse and come with me.”

Jareth led Risca to where the dead and injured were being tended. Nivea followed.

“There are more last rites than healing being given. The slaughter was overwhelming. There is not much for you to do. The portal to the Underdark has been closed and is being continuously guarded. The last lingering drow have been eliminated. Our priests prepare to question the enemy dead. As for your cousin, the few survivors tell us he left with the drow. You are lucky we spotted you first and not the Tyrrans. They are a bit touchy now. Their Highpriest, Nerval Watchwill, was killed in the earthquake. Their paladin Kurud has gone missing. The worst has been assumed. Mistledale has gone to war and so the other Dales will follow. You want to help? Then join the war effort. It will have need of fierce, experienced warriors.”

Risca knew Jareth spoke true. The Dales at war meant that Deepingdale would go to war. That meant the commander of the Deepingdale military would be at war and that commander was Swan’s mother. But Lilia and Armando had declared he was forever a family member, a father stand-in. Since the banishment they were his only family. His cousin was out of reach, at least for the moment. His family was going to war, and so he would go with them. Rossco was with the drow. Finding the drow would find him and Guifoon would deliver his due.

“Eyes do it.”

“Then return to Ashabedford. Tell the Council we have secured Glen. We remain here to control the portal. None shall pass without permission; the soldiers of Tempus and Tyr have so-vowed.”

He grinned at the dwarf. “And Risca, should you ever find yourself in a temple of the enemy, make sure you ‘tear the temple down about their ears’.

Risca returned the grin and climbed back on Nivea. “Eyes do it. Come on horsie. Back to me gurl.”

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Gideon reached his stone cottage. It was nothing but ruins. In the surrounding woods the insects, small animals and birds were just beginning to recover their normal activities. With trepidation he walked around to the other side where her tree should stand. His dream was confirmed. Where the magnificent tree of oak once stood, there was now just a hole in the ground; no root parts, no ashes, no residues, just a hole.

Tears streamed down. He knew her essence still persisted; he still felt their connection. Thus he knew her spirit was still enjoined with her tree. The Dream had told him she was a prisoner of the Red Wizards.

“Why, Lord of the Flame, why me? Is there no one else; no one better suited?” His prayer was not answered. As a Chosen, he realized that Kossuth’s had reasons to select him to go to the Pillar of Fire and that superseded his desire to go to Thay to rescue Meliai. He wanted to know why the Thayans were so interested in him. Feeling helpless but not hopeless, he turned his attention to the cottage. He entered and began a cautious search.

Casting a spell, he prayed. “Please Kossuth, at least grant me, your obedient servant, this blessing.”

His plea was answered as from the released magic; he was able to detect and locate the object covered by debris. Retrieving the small wooden oak box, he cleared it of dust and ashes. Opening and seeing the contents greatly relieved him. Inside was what he had hoped to retrieve; a perfect fresh green oak leaf. She had given it to him as a deceleration of her fidelity, with the words “as long as the leaf stays green, know that my spirit and passion for you still survive.” Pouching the box and with a heavy heart, he made his way back to Ashabedford.

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Okul had barely arrived at the outskirt of the tattered town when he heard a commotion and a thrashing nearby. A somewhat familiar voice was addressing itself.

“I have to find it. It is nearby. They will need it. He needs to eat it. Where or where can it be? Casper! No, Casper is gone now. Find it on my own.”

Pushing through some bushes, the dragon-son beheld an amazing sight. There, on his hands and knees, crawling around, dragging a basket of a variety of cupcakes was the tiefling mage, Noristuor.

Okul knew,as did everyone else, that Noristuor had a reputation for being a little unstable; even so, these antics still surprised him. Knowing Swan had become fond of the eccentric mage, he decided to intervene.

“What are you doing? Do you need help?”

The tiefling looked up. “Oh, it’s you. Too early! Too early! No, no, I dropped it. I’ll find it! I’ll find it! It’s around here. I dropped it! I’ll find it! You’ll need it! Don’t forget to eat it! Not too soon. Not too late. You’ll need it. Don’t forget to eat it.”

Okul had no inkling of what the mage was going on about. “I can help…” before he could finish, Noristuor interrupted and the change in the mage’s demeanour and rationality took him by surprise.

“No help now needed, son of Yenamros. You will receive it upon your return from proving your worth to the Elemental Princes.” He grinned. “Just remember to eat it at the proper time. Go now to the standing stone. Look for, Kurudravos, your brother. Go now!”

Still puzzled, Okul felt a compulsion to do so. “Alright then. Take care Noristuor.”

“And to you as well, Okul Tarmikos.”

It wasn’t till many months later, that Okul would question how Noristuor knew who his father and brother were and that he was on his way to the standing stone.

Okul reached the ancient elven standing stone. It stood as the symbol of unity between the elves of Cormanthyr and the humans of the Dales. Staring up at the twenty foot tall, glossy, gray monolith, he could track the elf runes which celebrated the treaty of the ‘Dales Compact’; the alliance between the elves and the humans and the communality between them.

But he was not here to ponder age-old history. He wanted to find clues as to the whereabouts of Kurud. He began searching for clues. To his trained eye, the signs of a struggle were evident as were the signs of tracks, but they came to a sudden end. He could find no trace of the fissure from his dream. A glint caught his eye. Reaching down, he picked up a gold dragon scale. He knew it to be Kurud’s. He spoke to it.

“My brother, you are the only family I have now. For that I will find you and side by side, we will destroy our enemies. Then you will tell me all you know about our father before I set out to find him. Pouching the scale and with the fierce resolution of a dragon, he made his way back to Ashabedford.

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Kilzadi, Neon and Swan reached the town square. Neon was anxious and desperate. He had to find out about Jhaer. The square had been filled with huge tents where the injured had been had been laid on cots, sleeping bags, blankets and even straw. The moans and sounds of pain were plainly audible. Clerics, healers and priests were in attendance, mending and soothing as much as they were able.

The rogue addressed the other two. “It will be faster if we each search the tents separately.” They nodded in agreement and each headed for a different tent. As the fates ordained, each entered the tent which would end their search.

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Kilzadi entered the tent to his right. Inside lay the injured waiting their turn to be attended as the healers were too few. After achieving the Draconic Ritual, he had sensitivity to all things draconic and so his normally invisible tattoos flared indicating the presence of a potent draconic magic.

Where the trail of magic ended, a wounded, battered, exhausted dwarf lay on a straw cot. Clenched tightly between his arms was an elaborately finely carved wooden box. It was from the box that the magic emanated. The mage recognized the dwarf.

“Barunder” he softly called out.

The dwarf’s eyes opened. “Kil-za-di” he managed to croak from a dry throat. “The…”

“Wait! Here, drink this first. Then talk.” The sorcerer raised the dwarf’s head as he placed a cure potion between his lips. Barunder drank it down.

“Oh, that’s good. Thank ye. Thank ye.” The Master of the Mountains sends you this.” He held up the box. “He has been cheated. This is to be used to extract his revenge. No mercy to be given.”

Kilzadi took the box. The magic tingled. The Master of the Mountains was the fang dragon of his Darkness Dreams; the ancient gargantuan, Nartheling. The ones who cheated the great dragon were the same ones who had stolen the Claw; amongst them that whore who played him for a fool. Mercy would be a joke.

“Assure the Master his vengeance will be to his stipulation. Thank him from me for this gift. Now rest. The healers will be taking care of you.”

Leaving the tent, he wandered till he found a secluded spot. Wondering what kind of potent item Natherling would have sent him, he gasped as he opened the box. The gift was greater than he expected. There, upon a layer of black silk, lay a mottled gray-brown dragon egg. His spellcraft indicated that the magic of the egg was an ‘age reversal’. Only a dragon or one who had passed the Draconic Ritual could remove the magic. This would return the dragon to its original age. Removing the egg, he set it on the ground. His draconic tattoos flared as he incanted the dismissal spell.

“Meager sek wux gavir vet waph oontanx. Ret seken weyr.”

**Lord No’s Note**- for those unfamiliar with draconic, it best translates as ‘By my order, I command you. Live and grow. We are now family.’

The egg vibrated, and then shattered to reveal a newly hatched dragon. Then, in a spasm of light, there stood a medium sized juvenile. It let out a grunt as it unfurled its well-muscled wings.

Weighing in at about 350 pounds, it had an overall length of 16 feet. Standing 4 feet at its shoulder, its mottled gray-brown body had a length of 5 feet and a width of 3 feet. Its head, adorned with two back-sweeping horns, was atop of a 4 foot long thick flexible neck. Projecting in-between the horns, across and under its chin, were toughened spikes. Besides scales, most of its body was covered in bony plates, which, at the joints, ended in spurs. A trail of spikes ran down its neck, covering most of its back, finishing along its tail. The tail tip forked into two keen-edged, scythe-like bone blades. Its four feet each ended in four serrated razor-edged claws. It was a magnificent specimen of a fang dragon.

It glared at the mage through intelligent brilliant orange eyes. Its killer tail switched back and forth. It opened its mouth to reveal long fangs, sharp incisors and rows of pointed teeth.

“Stop that” ordered Kilzadi. ”You cannot intimidate the leader of your weyr. Save that for our enemies. Now you need a name.” He looked the dragon over.

“Well since there is no disguising what you are, I name you Fang. Yes, Fang. It suits you. Now follow me. I will find you food. Later, you will meet the others of our weyr.” He walked on with Fang following at his heels like a loyal hound.

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Neon entered the tent to his left. Inside lay the injured waiting their turn to be attended as the healers were too few. He spotted one; a young acolyte; one that he recognized always attended Jhaer’s gigs at the White Hart Inn and made calf eyes at her; the one he used to tease Jhaer as a despoiler of innocence.

Walking up to the exhausted young man, “Jhaer Brightsong”? He inquired.

“Twelve cots down to your right” was the response.

Arriving, a great sense of relief overcame him. She lived! He could final breathe easy again. She was sleeping peacefully

. His kiss on her cheek woke her up.

“Ninniach, veniste. I knew you would arrive; it kept me alive,” she muttered weakly.

“Vivate, vivate! You live! You live! I was so afraid. My dream…”

“Lie beside me. I need to feel you; taste your lips, watch you breathe, hear your heartbeat, sense that I can experience life. Tell me your dream” He did so, holding her close in the small space they shared.

“All in your dream is true except that I survived the Miller’s sons backstabbing. It looked like I was dead, but I was only near death. Three things kept me alive: I appeared dead to them, so there was no further stabbings; knowing you would return for me; and the fact that Holfast managed to interpose himself just a bit. Oh, Ninniach; that is what most likely killed him”, she sobbed. “Heldo stabbed him first and as he burned, he purposely managed to fall my way to take some of the electric shock as Pervos stabbed me. He died hoping to save me.” She heaved sobs into his chest; her tears soaking his shirt.

He stroked her hair. “Hush, hush. It is over. I am here now. Rest and regain your strength.”…*both the miller’s sons are now dead men walking.*

“This will devastate Cygni. Does she know?” she murmured.

“I am not sure. If not, she will find out soon.”…*and yes, she will be devastated. Then she will seek retribution. Heldo and Pervos will have the gods’ own luck should I find them before she does.*

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Swan entered the tent straight ahead. She wanted to enquire the whereabouts of Jhaer but especially Uncle Holfast to help them with whatever they were doing. Stepping in, she was blocked by a desk. A harried, tired-looking scribe sat opposite. A ledge, ink and pen rested on the desk.

“Name of deceased you wish to claim?” he wearily inquired.

This puzzled her. “What. No, sorry. I just want to find Holfast Harpenshield or Jhaer Brightsong. Do you…”

Leaving through the ledger, he interrupted her. “No Brightsong, but, yes, Harpenshield. Cot 43. Oh, he has already been claimed; just a few minutes ago.

For an instant, Swan was confused, not understanding what he meant. Then she recalled his words, ‘deceased’ and ‘claim’. Glacial dread slithered. “Uncle Holfast”, she sobbed. She rushed passed him into the tent.

**Lord No’s Note**-for the few unaware readers, Swan had entered the ‘black tent’ where the remains of the quake victims were brought and in-spelled with gentle repose until family/relatives/friends came to claim them for the appropriate funeral rite.

Hurrying through the tent; numbered cots on each side holding the bodies, she arrived at cot 43. There he lay, looking at peace. “*NO! OH NO!* Uncle Holfast!” she wailed. It did not register that already grieving over him was a weeping female moon elf.

Throwing herself over him, she streamed tears as her chest heaved with her sobs. “Oh, Uncle Holfast, not you, please. Not you. Uncle Holfast, it’s me, ugly duckling. Please Uncle Holfast, please. Not you…..”

Her keening continued and in a little while she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She looked up into a red-eyed elf face swollen with weeping.

“Voi essere Cygni Vulpae.”

Swan was startled. It took her seconds to realize that this person had been here all the while. But who…? Then she saw the oak leaf and acorn holy symbol of Silvanus on the shoulder. It then all fell into place.

“Et te necesse est Nera Aquilae” she replied hotly. The elf nodded agreement.

So this was her; the one Uncle Holfast always talked about with such longing; Nera the druid; adventuring companion of Uncle Holfast and both her parents.

It is said that when one is in deep grief, rage and anger are but a breath away. This was her; the one her parents reluctantly discussed; the one who spurned Uncle Holfast’s amour; who left him forlorn and yearning, unable to romance another. She who, without reason, refused her good Uncle Holfast! Now she was here, attempting to claim him!

**Lord No’s Note**-the true reason for Nera’s spurning was explained by Oakfather Gannon Durei in chapter 21 to Neon, Jhaer and Gideon. None of them had related that conversation to Swan.

Swan’s sorrowful redden eyes took on a darker hue as ire filled her.

“How dare you! You have no claim! You have no right here! Get out! Get out!”

Nera moaned in pain. Her sobbing intensified.

“Pax Cygni, pax per favore! Don’t throw me out’ I’m begging! I must talk to him. My regret is endless agony. I want his forgiveness. I need to tell him why I spurred him; how much that hurt me. I need to explain my cowardice. I need to say a proper good-bye to him. Please, I’m begging! I can make it so that all who loved and cherished him can say a proper good-bye.”

Despite her fierce anger, Nera’s much distraught state and the last statement caught her attention.

“Proper good-bye? How? Explain!”

The elf reached into her pouch and showed what she had pulled out. “Know you this?”

Swan gave a choke of surprise. She had only seen one once before when Grammar was teaching the youngster Swan about the various trees of the forest. She remembered Grammar’s words:

“Piccolina Cygni, pay attention. This treasure belongs to our Fox Tribe and is entrusted to me for safe keeping. There are so few of them left anywhere. Now when this is properly planted…”

Swan could only whisper, “Yes, I know it. It is a Soul Tree seed.” It finally made sense; Nera’s presence here now, her claiming of Uncle Holfast’s body and what she intended to do with it.

“You are willing to do this, For Uncle Holfast?” Her tears once again flowed.

“Anything for my lost love. Anything. Please allow this, Cygni. You too will have time with him, as will your parents when they arrive for the War Convocation; as will any other who wishes to pay respects to Holfast Harpenshield.”

“I cannot refuse this treasure. Where will you plant?”

“Gratia Cygni, gratia. In the grounds of the Oakengrove Abbey. I have the Oakfather’s permission. Nunc lui nos simul lacrima lamenentos.”

**Lord No’s Note-** to save my readers’ time researching, the Soul Tree has a special ability. Whenever its seed is planted with a dead body, the seed begins to absorb the soul or spirit of the deceased as well as its memories. As it grows it absorbs more and more, until at maturity it has absorbed all. The tree, in effect, has become the person. Anyone with the ability to tree-talk, then, in essence, can converse with the departed. This effect lasts for about a week. Then the tree seeds and dies. Of the many, many seeds, only one or two are viable. This accounts for the rarity of both the seeds and the trees. This process is quickened by magic that allows the seed to grow and mature in the span of a day.

Near midnight Swan was an arid desert. There was no moisture of any kind left in her. All her mourning for her people that had died had completely drained her. Not just Uncle Holfast, but her surrogate mother, the paladina Nelyssa Shendean and her good instructor and friend, watchful Sister Jhanira Barasstan, both were rescuing the children orphans buried under rubble, when the last wall had collapsed on them, even as they removed the last child.

A group of drow that had attacked village Hap, entered in to the forest with the intent of burning and causing havoc. They were met, repulsed and annihilated by a force of the forest elves. But in that battle her good friend, Simimar, of the Evioro twins perished.

Her heart was in little pieces, strewed about inside her. It could not beat, but that was fine. Glacial ice had replaced her blood. There was nothing to pump.

The time for mourning had ended. Now was the time of the punitor. She demanded justice and punishment. She would be punitor for herself and as fate would have it, the ones she would punish were the same ones that Waukeen and the Seldarine wanted punished. Even better, the ones she dearly wanted to encounter, the miller brothers, had gone to the same place where Gideon had convinced the Seekers to go; the Pillar of Fire in the Galena Mountains.

“Nothing else will matter”, he had explained. You described your personal quests; Risca wants to find his cousin, Okul to rescue his brother, and Kilzadi to recover the Claw. Should the Sharrans recover the tiles, none of that will matter. The Elemental Lords will side with the Darkness and we will have lost. The tiles are the priority. They must be recovered by us. Then we can do the others, as they are all in the same drow city”

So they had agreed. Tomorrow, at first light, they departed for the Galena Mountains. She needed some rest. She would lie with Okul and let him comfort her grief. Then she would prepare as punitor.

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Fang yawned, exposing his fangs and spike teeth. The morning was dewy. His was a strange weyr. Gold thought it was his weyr. Stupid Gold! But as long as Gold helped defend the weyr, it could think what it wanted. Besides, Master’s sister, She of the Weyr, had selected Gold as mate. What puzzled him was why she did not also select Red-Cap as mate. She had the urge to do so. Any She of the Weyr could have as many mates as desired, so what was holding Her back?

When Master had brought him to the weyr for the first time and introduced him to Rage, Gold, Red-Cap and Healer, he had sensed their deference and respect to She of the Weyr. Not surprising since she was Master’s sister. But more than that, he had sensed her cold merciless; so like a fang dragon.

When Healer related to where they would be going, why, and whom they may encounter, She of the Weyr had grinned. He had recognized that grin. It was a dragon’s grin in anticipation of a satisfying hunt followed by a delicious kill. He so wanted to prove himself to She of the Weyr.

Swan was the last to arrive. She did so in full wood elf war paint. The others stared at each other and then at Okul, who shrugged a message of …*she does as she wants.* They had seen this before and knew what it meant. Swan was in total war mode, punitor mode. There would be no mercy. There would be no prisoners. She would totally eliminate anything or anyone that prevented her from reaching her hunted targets. Risca was the only one of two Seekers content with this.

Fang discerned the ruthlessness and determination of She of the Weyr. So fang dragon-like. The weyr was going on a hunt and he would prove his worth to them, especially to She of the Weyr. He too would be ruthless and determined. No mercy! He began to bounce side-by-side on his four feet as its scythe tail swished back and forth. His weyr watched amazed.

Neon turned to Kilzadi. “What, by all that is holy, is your dragon doing?

The mage stared at Fang. Believe me when I say, its doing the equivalent of a dance of joy. It’s happy.”

“Happy? About what?”

“I can’t determine. Something.”

Gideon interrupted. “Time is wasting. We’re all here and prepared. Do it, Kilzadi.”

The sorcerer invoked a teleportation spell.

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