**Chapter 27-The Pillar of Fire Part 1—Punitor Justice Served**

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Kilzadi had teleported them near the midpoint on the side of the Pillar of Fire. The dormant volcano’s mouth towered above them. The way down was steep with frozen lava flows. To one side was an outcrop hiding what was around it. Surrounding them lay the rest of the Galena Mountain range; mountains as far as the eye could see; bare rock shorter ones and snow-peaked taller ones. A beautiful vista if one had time to enjoy it.

“Best I could do without familiarity of the destination” he explained.

“This is fine” answered Gideon. You got us to the right place.”

Fang shaking his head, hissed. The young dragon was as yet unused to the disorienting effect of a teleport.

“Shield dwarves could make a good holding in these mountains “remarked Risca, as he viewed the sights.

“Okul, where is Swan?” inquired Neon.

The question made the others pause and realize that the scout was not with them.

At that point, she appeared from behind the outcrop. “Come. I found a way in.”

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The punitor state had allowed her to shrug off the disorienting effects long before the rest of the Seekers. She was on a hunt and time was essential. Waiting was impractical. Even as the others were recovering, she had spotted a track by the rock-face. Examining, ranger-sense indicated human, about a day old. She slipped around and now there were two sets of human tracks. The tracks led up to an opening in the mountain side.

A heinous grin displayed. Two human tracks, about a day old, leading into the Pillar of Fire…*oh yes, please let it be.*

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The Seekers stood in front of the opening. Neon had found the entrance to be trap-free.

Gideon addressed the others. “Right. We must do all we can to recover those tiles. Otherwise we sacrifice in vain. I cannot emphasize this enough. So, are we ready? Yes, good. Let’s do it Seekers!

Swan led, scouting with a sense of savory anticipation. *Yes, the tiles and punitor justice…*

The opening was the end of a rocky tunnel, descending steady, with twists and turns, but not too steeply. After some time, the tunnel leveled ended at the opening of a somewhat diamond shaped area, about 40’x40’.

“Risca, how far into the volcano are we? And what direction are we facing? All those twists and turns confused me.” inquired Gideon, relying on the dwarf’s sense of underground depth and direction.

“About a mile and a half from where we first entered. This opening faces a northward direction.”

“Swan, details” the priest queried.

Their torchlight behind her was enough for her enhanced low-light vision to scan the area as if it was bright daylight. “The room appears empty, with natural rock walls and ceiling: A very tall ceiling. The floor seems to be composed of fine beach sand. “I can hear nothing. There are three openings; eastern wall, northern wall and westward wall.” She made no mention of the tracks that seemingly ended here.

“Kilzadi, magic?”

“None that I can detect, Gideon” was the response.

“Okul?” The half-dragon had been attempting to locate hidden or secret openings.

“The walls in this area are solid rock. Unless we missed a secret opening further back, this is the only opening.”

“Then we have to go forward. “Neon, any traps?”

“Nothing I could discover” was the rogue’s response.

Swan spoke up. “Gideon. me enter first and scout…*and hopefully meet up with the track’s owners before the others.*”

The priest nodded. “Be careful gurl” retorted Risca.

Swan used her spider boots to enter, climbing up the western wall. Even her scout senses could neither spot nor hear anything. Her hope was to reach the northern wall to uncover a clue as to which passageway the owners of the tracks had taken. Her going was slow: too slow for Risca.

“Gurl is only half-way there. Nothing’s happening. Let’s go.” So saying, he jogged across the sandy floor. “Hey, gurl, meet you at opposite side.”

The dwarf managed to reach half-way when it all changed.

A sand geyser exploded as a huge earth elemental, a brown-black loamy colour, vaguely humanoid shape, erupted from the floor. A large stony fist smashed into Risca’s shield, pushing it against his arm into his chest, breaking ribs as it knocked him back.

The rest of the Seekers reacted. Okul called out a gold dragon battle cry and charged at the earth elemental.

Kilzadi ordered Fang to ‘go help the fools!’ The he stepped into the room to caste haste on the group.

Fang was eager to show the weyr that he belonged. Casting a shield spell on himself, he flew faster than ever. He circled to land on the elemental’s back. Stone is hard, but so are a fang dragon’s natural weapons. Bits of stone and chunks of rock flew off as Fang’s teeth, claws, body spikes and especially his scythed- tail wreaked havoc on the elemental.

Neon veered towards the eastern wall. He knew Cygni had the west side covered. Following two steps behind, Gideon recited a prayer spell. “Lord of the Fire, I pray you strengthen our allies and demean our enemies.” Kossuth answered and each Seeker felt empowered.

Swan knew that time was of the essence. The *Lore of the Scout-Ranger* tome instructed her in the manner of the elementals. She was aware of their weaknesses and their strengths. The earth elemental would sink back into the ground, attack them at its leisure and sink back again. This process would repeat endlessly until they left the chamber or were all killed. Either way, they could not claim the tile. Besides, it was interfering with her hunt! So it had to be destroyed quickly. Luckily, she knew how to do that.

**Lord No’s Note-**my faithful readers will recall that Swan was given the tome to read by Granpar in Arvandor, as detailed in Chapter 9, Chapter 9 Interlude and Campaign Note 2 and Campaign Note for Chapter 13.

Running down the wall, she released two arrows. Each struck the creature’s head, but were angled towards each other, forming a small crack between them. Her next shots had to count.

The elemental lashed out at the charging Okul. Tumbling past, Great Spear struck and tore out a chunk of rock. The elemental reared back as two orbs of fire hurled by Kilzadi smacked into it.

Fang kept gouging and tearing.

Risca lost sensation of pain as rage and holy fury filled him. Getting up, he roared a challenge as he charged the elemental. Guifoon commenced to chip away at its legs.

Neon saw an opening. Rushing in, he flanked sneak attacked and then quickly sprung-back as it flailed at him.

Gideon once again beseeched the Firelord. “Bless these Seekers who do your will.” Again Kossuth answered and the Seekers felt their strikes become more accurate. The priest drew his mace.

Swan realized that all the damage the Seekers were inflicting would be meaningless should the elemental merge with the floor. This was the deciding moment; time to remove this obstacle to her hunt. “Keen-Eyed, guide my aim.”

Her first arrow pierced the head crack near the top, enlarging and deepening it. Her second arrow did the same for the bottom. The third one she gave an extra pull and released it into the crack center.

There was a slight pause in the actions of the elemental. Then its head literally broke apart into rock chunks. Then the rest of its body quickly followed suit. Fang gave a squawk of surprise as it flapped wings to stay afloat.

As Gideon tended to Risca, Neon searched through the rubble. He came up with a brown 6” square, 1” thick piece of granite. “Is this the tile, Gideon?”

Finished repairing the dwarf, the priest examined the object. “It must be. It has the symbol of Grumbar, Lord of the Earth etched into it. Congratulations Seekers, we have our first tile.”

*We have a tile- Very good,* thought Swan. *The Ubler brothers must come to us to recover all the tiles. I shall be most welcoming to them.* Her thoughts were interrupted by Gideon’s question.

“Which way, Swan?”

To the scout, the path chosen did not matter, as sooner or later the miller’s sons would have to make an appearance or she would find them first. Since she was standing by the west opening, she replied “this way”. Leading the way, the others followed.

After about 20’ the passage way veered in a north west direction. After about 80’ it opened into a cavern.

“Swan?” inquired Gideon.

“It’s similar in size and shape to the one we just left, with a very high ceiling but I do not see any pathways on the other side. It seems to be solid rock.” replied the scout.

“Alright then. We enter carefully. But before we go, I will beseech Kossuth.” The god responded with prayer and bless.

“I will hasten all of us again” Kilzadi spoke out. “And Risca, something special for you. So saying, he cast burning rage on the dwarf.

A nimbus of blue flame surrounded the hellreaver. “Stupid mage, it burns. Are you trying to roast me?”

“Oh hush up. It is just a small pain. It will make you hit better, deal out more damage every strike and even heal you a bit. You should be thanking me. Besides, you look pretty in blue.”

“Bah!” So saying Risca began to walk into the cavern. He was joined by Okul. Neon moved in along the left wall, whereas Gideon took to the right.

Swan looked to Kilzadi and then to Fang and spoke in draconic: “You two follow while I race ahead to the far side and look for some kind of openings.”

The mage nodded and Fang did a little hop of happiness. “Master and his sister, She of the Weyr, agreed. Also She of the Weyr acknowledged him and She spoke in the language of the dragons. *Of course She would- She is so dragon-like. And I can tell She is anticipating catching her prey. So dragon-like.*

Kilzadi and Fang made their way in. Swan reached the far wall at about the same time Risca and Okul reached the middle of the room. That is the time that three large air elementals revealed as twisting columns of air, immediately attack with fly-bys.

The first one (A) slammed into Okul. It then turned to head to the opposite wall towards Swan. Okul felt like he had been hit with a giant hammer. It hurt. The scout saw it coming and tumbled out of the way. Her arrow pierced its weak spot. What she did not count on was it suddenly halting its motion. Sounding like a steam leak, it converted into a whirlwind and picked her up to swirl her around rapidly and chaotically. She was trapped.

The second (B) attacked Neon who managed to dodge. As it flew by, he leaped up and stabbed with his rapier. The elemental made a sound like compressed air leaking from a small opening. It then headed for Okul.

The third one (C) collided with Gideon, knocking him back and breaking a rib. It then veered towards Risca. Despite the pain, the priest surveyed the situation and formulated a battle plan.

It was at this point that Kilzadi’s fireball erupted. The mage had been incanting as soon as the air elementals assaulted the Seekers. Only (B) and (C) were affected. They steam-screeched as the flames burned. Fang landed on (C) and began to rip and tear. To the dragon, the air felt like a solid. The elemental steam-whistled louder.

Okul saw (B) heading towards him. With a cry of ‘Tempus’ he translocated up beside it and struck several times with Great Spear. Each strike severely damaged the elemental. He landed feet first, and repeated the translocation. Again, his spear struck deep into the elemental and the air mass dissipated.

Fang could not be dislodged from the elemental. The dragon continued to rip and tear. Then finally, with a powerful swipe of its double scythe tail, it ripped open the elemental from top to bottom. With a final screech sound of rushing air, it dissipated.

Swan was in trouble. The whirlwind swirled her around so much there was no time or opportunity to draw arrows or unsheathe weapons. Also the constant violent pummelling felt like her body was undergoing a continuous battering. She could not last much longer like this.

Gideon’s voice rang out. “Risca, prepare to hack that elemental from the inside.” He had chosen Risca because the dwarf’s body and bones were tough and more easily to resist a pummelling. “Kilzadi, prepare a benign transposition.” Even as he was speaking, he psionically levitated the dwarf to match heights with Swan.

The mage did as requested. Swan found herself falling. Being lithe and limber, she managed to land feet –crouched. Still, her body was so battered that she still felt pain upon landing. Okul ran to her.

“Swan, what help do you need?” he asked with concern?

“I’ll be fine. Go see if someone else needs help.”

Her reply concerned him.. He knew it was the punitor, not his beloved that spoke; still the punitor had never before been so curt; not to him. It hurt. Something was off. He would be watching her closely.

Risca found himself inside a small, strong cyclone. But he was ready to lash out. Additionally to his rage and holy fury, aided by the blue nimbus flame, he power attacked. Guifoon struck hard at every swing. The dwarf could hear and feel the air escaping as the whirlwind kept shrinking and quieting with every chop of the axe. One final slice and the elemental spent itself out.

Risca began to fall, but was lowered gently by Gideon’s psionic ability.

Gideon healed himself and Okul while Swan did the same for herself.

“Good thing you had that blue flame, hey Risca?” teased Kilzadi.

The dwarf just grunted back.

“Found it” declared Neon as he handed a clear, faint blue-tinted glass tile to Gideon.

The priest examined it. “Yes, this must be the air tile. It has the symbol of Akadi, the Lady of the Wind on it. This gives us two, with only two more to go. Well done Seekers. Swan, as our scout, where to next?”

“This chamber is dead-ended. There are no passages forward. We will have to backtrack.”

And so they did. Once back in the earth elemental room, they had a choice of two passages; north and east. Swan, for reasons of her own, led them to the east passage. “This way” was her only statement. Her tone brooked no argument.

After about a hundred feet of twisting tunnel, it forked; one branch headed north-east, the other south-east. The consensus was to take the southern branch, because it was behind the way they first entered. The passage led to a huge room, similar to the others. It appeared empty with no other passages leading out.

Neon and Swan found no traps at the entrance. Kilzadi offered a caution. “I am detecting some moderate magic in the room but cannot determine its type. The aura seems to be near the high ceiling.”

“Elemental?” inquired Gideon.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. As I said, I cannot determine.”

“All right Seekers, move in with caution. Be prepared to strike.”

“Let me haste everyone first”

The group moved into the room, combat ready, some along the left wall, some to the right wall and the rest in the middle. They had had crossed about a quarter of the way, when the room magic dissipated.

Circling the ceiling above them was a pride of five chimeras. The large creatures each had the hindquarters of a goat with rear hoofed feet, the forequarters of a lion with front clawed feet and three heads; a black-haired red-eyed goat with long horns, a black-maned lion and a dragon head. Interestingly, each chimera’s dragon head was a different chromatic colour; a red, black, green, white and blue. Equally colored dragon wings rose from their backs while the scaly snake-like tail bore the same color. Each one immediately swooped down to attack, only to be confronted by the battle-ready Seekers.

The red plunged towards Swan. The punitor’s arrow caught the goat head through its mouth and out the neck. The other two heads screeched in pain. The dragon mouth opened to breathe fire but was interrupted as Fang landed on its back. This gave the scout time to tumble away and stand beside Risca.

Fang was incensed. That abomination was daring to attack the She of the Weyr? It could not be allowed. Before the red could spew its flame, Fang was on it, claws and teeth piercing and slashing. The chimera could only scream and roar in agony. Its natural armor offered little resistance to the body spikes and scythe-tail of the smaller dragon. It was over quickly. Fang trumpeted his victory cry as the red plummeted lifeless to the floor.

The blue swept towards Okul, unleashing a bolt of lightning. It had ever been a fatal mistake to assume that the half-dragon, due to his stature and muscular physique, would be slow and cumbrous in movement. The opposite was the truth. The gold dragon’s son was dexterous and agile. Okul was both strength and speed. Deftly, he side-stepped the lightning. As the blue flew just over his head, by crouching and leaping, he slammed Great Spear deep into the monster’s heart. Bracing himself and pushing the spear with his great strength towards the ground, he managed to bring the beast crashing down. Before the chimera could recover, he was on it and two more deep hard thrusts of the spear ended it.

The green plunged towards Swan and Risca, releasing a cone of corrosive, acidic gas at them. At that instant, Gideon, who had been watching the green’s actions, released the spell intended to protect the two Seekers. So instead of engulfing them, the gas was blown back and dispersed by the priest’s wind wall spell. The green flew over and then commence to turn to make another attack. But it had no way to know about the range and accuracy of the scout and her long bow.

Swan’s first arrow passed through the eye of the lion head, through the brain and out. In quick succession, the second arrow did the same for the dragon head while the third finished the goat head. Now brainless, the green just arced to crack up on the floor.

Even before they could begin their attacks, the black and the white were caught in Kilzadi’s prepared, immediately cast fireball. With wings burned, ablaze and now unable to fly, they both fell screaming and screeching. The white crashed at Neon’s feet while the black toppled near Risca.

Risca could hear the near simultaneous one, two, three, twangy releases of Swan’s arrows behind his back. He watched the black fall. He did not bother to turn to see what the green was doing. He did not consider it a threat any longer. Even in his raging, holy fury state, so great was his confidence in his ‘gurl’ to take care of the enemy at his back that he had no reason to check. Just as the black crash landed in burning agony, he rushed it, calling out his battle cry. With three strokes of Guifoon, three head skulls were split, finishing the black.

Whereas the scout was partial to ‘through the eye head-shots’, the rogue favored, ‘into the ear through the brain and out the other, using rapid rapier thrusts.” And so it was that as the white burned, Neon used a hastened full attack. Three quick rapier plunges, one per head put an end to the white’s suffering and its life.

The Seekers stood prepared, on alert, weapons ready, Gideon and Kilzadi poised to cast new spells. The room was now quiet, filled with the odor of roasted chimera flesh, blood and offal. After a reasonable time with no new opponents appearing, they began to relax.

“That’s it?” inquired Neon. “No elementals?”

“It seems so” responded Kilzadi. “Gideon, was this some kind of test?”

“I don’t know” the priest answered truthfully. *After all, who knows how an Elemental Lord thinks?* “Let us search for a tile just in case.”

Swan approached Fang. Placing her hand on his lip, still stained with chimera blood, she wiped some off and rubbed it on her own lips. Staring into his eyes, she spoke in draconic. “Algbo authot… Vinxa Weyr!………well done Warrior of the Weyr!”

The young dragon was elated. By sharing the blood of his kill, She of the Weyr, Master’s Sister had acknowledged his status named him vinxa. He had proven himself to Her. Now he could be regarded as a full weyr member, not just the junior constituent.

Kilzadi’s draconic tattoos flared at this exchange. He watched, surprised and amazed. *When did she learn that particular tradition?*

**Lord No’s Note-**This is, still to this day, quite, an enigma**.** For a long time now sages, historians and self-proclaimed ‘Swan experts’ haveresearched attempting to answer Kilzadi’s question. Many theses have been written about it. There are countless hypotheses, postulates and theories concerning how she knew. Even now; so many decades later, divinations, auguries and communing with deities have not revealed an answer. If the gods know, they are not sharing the information. Should the gods not know, then a force more powerful than they must be involved. Such an idea is daunting. And so there are countless hypotheses, postulates and theories concerning the silence of the gods on this matter. Even Kilzadi Litecaster himself was unable to resolve the mystery. As he wrote in his memoir “My Time as a Seeker of Faerun”…

*So whenever I asked her [Swan] how she knew the fang dragon way of initiating to become a whole-fledged member of the weyr, then and whenever asked over the course of many years, her response was always the same. “I really don’t know” she would reply, “but I felt compelled to say and do what I did. At the time it felt right. I don’t know how I knew what to do.”*

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Searching produced nothing; no tiles, no secret compartments, no hidden passageways.

“There is nothing else here” conclude Gideon. “Back to that fork.”

Reaching the fork, the group took the unexplored northeast tunnel. In a short time they came upon a cavern; at first glance, as empty and barren as the one in which they fought the chimeras, with one glaring exception.

“The gods are comedians!” were Neon’s words upon the sight. There, in the center of the space, sat a large gold-gilded chest. “It is an obvious trap”

“Most likely so” was Gideon’s comment, “but we cannot forgo the chance that there might be a tile inside that chest or somewhere in that room. Kilzadi, what does your magic detect?”

“There is magic in the room and from the chest. But again, I cannot determine what kind.”

“Nothing for it then, but to check it out. And since it will be most likely trapped, our best trap-dismantler should check it out. Correct Neon?”

“Yes”, agreed the half-elf. “I should be the one to do it.”

“I should help with the trap” added the scout. Her reason was to speed things up; to sooner deliver her justice.

“No, Swan” interrupted Gideon. “Not this time. I have a feeling that he alone should suffice. We will be ready to help him from here.”

She remained silent in her disappointment.

Neon entered the space, moving stealthy and prudently. There was no change as he reached the chest. Squatting to closer examine it, there was a crack sound as a 20’square of mountain rock ceiling fell towards the chest below. It all happened so quickly that the others did not have time to warn him. Not that it was necessary.

Athletic and prepared for any kind of trap, he speedily reversed somersaulted out of the way. The huge, heavy rock slab landed loudly on the chest. Then it gently rose and levitated to its position on the ceiling. The chest, instead of being crushed, appeared untouched.

“Well there’s your trap” asserted the rogue, rejoining the others. An illusionary or out of phase treasure chest, magically linked to a literal drop ceiling; one that resets itself. Oh, thanks for the warning; it helped a lot.”

“Are ye injured?” inquired Risca.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Then ye didn’t need a warning. So no complaining.”

“Alright then” interjected Gideon. This area is just a trap for the greedy. There will be no tile here. Swan, what does our scout say?”

“There is only one passageway left; that of the northward one back in the room we first entered. We have travelled all the others.”

Then that is where we go. We still need two tiles. Let’s do it Seekers.”

They backtracked to the room where they battled the earth elemental and headed down the north tunnel. This passage was much longer and twisted east before turning north again. It opened into, a by-now familiar type, space with sandy floor and rock-hewed walls and high ceiling.

Swan, leading and about twenty feet from the space opening, had spotted the two barely noticeable sets of human footprints, each on opposite sides of the passageway. She recognized them as identical to the ones detected earlier but much more recent; only a few hours old. They disappeared at the opening. She did not mention this to the others and outwardly betrayed no reqstion. Inwardly, the punitor in her was satisfied. Soon justice would be served.

“So what do we have here Swannie?” Gideon asked the question as he and the others caught up to her waiting at the entrance.

“The same kind of space terrain and about the same size as the first space we entered. There is a similar passage way in the west wall.

“We should be moving faster. Kilzadi, can you speed us up again?”

“Am doing so now” the mage replied, magically hastening the party.

“Good. Alright Seekers, we enter, search around and then head for the passage way. Let’s do it!”

The punitor did not argue as this was her choice as well.

As they fanned out into the space, Gideon entreated a prayer; “Kossuth, Firelord, as these Seekers are doing your work, I beseech you; fill them with elation.” His prayer was granted as he and the others felt energized, stronger and dextrous.

Kilzadi, and Neon moved along the right wall as Fang flew above them.

Swan and Okul went left. The half-dragon continued alone as the scout spider-climbed the wall and across to the middle of the ceiling; upside down to the others’ perspective.

Risca and Gideon took to the center of the room; below the inverted Swan.

They advanced several steps. Then, without warning, no less than a dozen large fire elementals actualized, immediately attacking. They were composed of pure orangey-red flame, and humanoid in appearance. The temperature in the space became singe-skin hot.

But by now, travelling the passageways beneath the Pillar of Fire; the Seekers were ever vigilant.

Without hesitation, Fang landed on one, determined to rip and tear; only to feel intense pain as the flames burned into his body.

“Foolish” screamed out Kilzadi. “Retreat and wait for healing.”

**Lord No’s Note-**for those of my faithful readers who are unfamiliar with fire elementals: of the four main common elementals, fire is the only ‘energy’ and thus the easiest to defend against on the material plane. All one needs is to be immune or resistant to fire and the heat cannot affect you. Being able to avoid their slam attacks, means they cannot hurt you. So, if one has weapons that affect them, then, in time one can destroy them as they have no concept of combat logistics and will keep attacking until they destroy you or themselves are destroyed.

Gideon reacted first as one elemental veered towards Okul, one towards Neon and two veered to Kilzadi, while the rest, in the middle of the room, advanced in pairs, towards himself and Risca. He quickly incanted fire protection prayers; one for Neon and one for Risca.

Neon felt the debilitating scorching heat as the fire elemental approached. Abruptly, a cooling sensation washed over him …*thank you, Gideon*… Expertly, he evaded two bludgeoning arms of fire and commenced a hasted full attack. Four quick piercing stabs of his enchanted rapier quenched the flames and snuffed out the elemental. Then, looking for a new opponent he watched amazed but not surprised as……

Kilzadi quickly cast two spells. Thin and wispy greenish flames engulfed him. The temperature around him fell as the chill fire shield took effect. Whereupon stood the Seeker mage now stood a large red dragon. The polymorph was complete. Immune to fire, he assailed the two elementals with claws, teeth, wing buffets and tail slaps. The chill shield ensured that any of their fire slams would inflict cold damage on them as well. Shortly, both elementals were doused. Then, looking for a new opponent he watched amazed but not surprised as……

Okul was disquieted. His concern regarding Swan’s recent behaviour induced him to team up with her. Then without any word or warning, she abruptly left his side to proceed along the ceiling. This was so unlike her. Even as a punitor, she would communicate. Something was terribly wrong. Such were his thoughts when the elementals materialized. Then battle instincts took over. The intense heat did not bother him greatly, after all, the blood of gold dragons, creatures of the Fire, coursed through his body. Being highly dextrous, he easily evaded the flaying fire arms of the attacking elemental. In return, Great Spear pierced and slashed its way through the body of fire several times; enough times to extinguish it. Then, looking for a new opponent he watched amazed but not surprised as……

Risca felt the overwhelming heat. Abruptly, a cooling sensation washed over him …*thank ye, Gideon*… He saw 8 fire elementals in a double row heading towards him and Gideon. In an instant he was full of rage and holy fury. The fire-slam attack hurt but did not deter him. Taking a 5 foot step, Guifoon hacked and sliced. The elemental was snuffed out. A cleave did the same for another one. This continued with the dwarf absorbing the slams and then retaliating and destroying two more elementals. There were no more advancing. . Then, looking for a new opponent he saw………that there were none left.

The punitor was exasperated. These battles were delaying her when she was so close to justice. The sooner the fight was over, the better. She knew the weakness of these elementals. In her state the heat did not bother her. On the ceiling, the elementals ignored her but she did not ignore them. Critically injuring arrows removed an elemental. She then proceeded to walk along the ceiling, using Granpar’s bow while moving. More arrows, one less elemental. Move. Repeat. Move. Repeat. Finally the last elemental was destroyed.

The others, amazed but not surprised, had watched Risca and Swan, between them, methodically eliminate the remaining fire elementals. The room temperature lowered to normal. All was now quiet. Presently the silence and tension was broken by Neon’s bantering.

**Lord No’s Note-**as is well-known to all my readers, the Seekers always bantered after a major confrontation in order to ease the battle emotions and strengthen their bonds to each other.

“Well, see how easy a combat can be when Risca and Cygni finally decide to do their fair share and not leave it all to the rest of us”

“Watch yer tongue elfie. Someone has to make up for yer lack of effort. At least mage-boy can turn himself into a dragon. You can just turn around. Wees all remember the Neon Maneuver” ribbed back Risca.

“Mage-boy? Who you calling mage-boy” enjoined Kilzadi in the badinage. “Be careful about names, dwarfie or you will find out how well dragon talons fit inside hairy holes. Now will one of you healer types look after my dragon?”

They fell silent as the scent of pine and mint, Swan’s signature healing, filled their noses. On her own initiative, Swan had been attending to Fang. Finished with her ministering, in a firm tone, she addressed the group.

“Shouldn’t you all have been looking for a tile? Time is passing.”

“She is right” replied Gideon. “Search around, Seekers.”

All the while, Okul had been paying attention to Swan. He had observed her destruction of the elementals. He had seen her emotionless determination. He watched as she wordlessly, without any notification to himself or the others, take care of Fang. Her actions caused him consternation. A normal Swan would partake in the repartee; perhaps even instigate it. A punitor might not, but even Swan in previous punitor modes would inquire about the health of others after a confrontation. Even a punitor Swan would not be so curt and firm to the others. This confirmed his fear that something was not right. This perturbed him. It would have to be addressed soon. He would notify Gideon and Neon. Perhaps they could explain and help.

It took only a few short minutes to uncover the fire tile .Gideon examined it. The same size and shape as the others, it was a dark red-orange slate with the symbol of Ymeri, the primordial Queen of the Inferno.

“Good work Seekers. That makes three with only the water tile left. There is nothing else here so lead us out Swan.”

They entered the west wall opening. The passage was short. Again she noticed the same two faint fresh sets of booted tracks. Again she kept quiet about them. Soon the tunnel opened into another large space, by now familiar in setting. And again the tracks ended. Three passages led out; one north, one south-west and one west. The space appeared empty. The Seekers detected neither traps nor magic. Swan decided to lead them clockwise from the south.

The south-west passage was another short one which once again led to a large space except this one was full of stone and rock rubble. It appeared that the ceiling had collapsed in places.

“No one enter” commanded Risca. That ceiling can fall at any time now. Wees dwarfs can tell these things.”

They turned back to take the west passage. Here the scout picked out the very faint tracks. To a non-ranger without a good tracking skill, they would be undetectable. They appeared to be recently fresh. She kept this knowledge to herself. This passage was long and opened up into an incredibly large area, larger than the others put together and appeared empty. Swan could see that the tracks entered into the room for a ten foot distance and then just vanished.

“Well this is different” remarked Neon, a gigantic volume of empty space under the volcano. The ceiling here must be three times what we already noticed, as well as the area. Oh, the opening is not trapped.”

“There is some conjuration magic inside” added Kilzadi,” It fills the cavern but begins about ten feet inside. It feels like space has been twisted or folded. Some kind of magical gate perhaps.”

*Just about where the tracks disappear* was Swan’s thought.

“Alright Seekers” was Gideon’s request. “Let’s avoid that area while we search around. Be on guard.”

And so they did. As the others wandered the huge cavern, Swan and Kilzadi, each for their own reason; she to investigate the tracks and he to investigate the gate, stayed in close proximity to that area.

“So Kilzadi , what would happen if one were to step through a gate?”

“That depends on the type of gate. Gates usually lead to a different plane; some are one-way only, some two-way. That is if you could step through. Most need a key to be used; a word, phrase or item. The worst ones need spilled fresh blood. At times they can be selective to race, class or some combination. Some are keyed to the creator only; others are universal.”

“Which type is this one?”

“That, my sister, I cannot determine. Not yet anyways. Why this sudden interest in magical gates, Swannie?”

She told the truth but not the whole truth. “Gates might be used by the guilty to attempt to escape the justice of a punitor. So knowing their nature would be useful.”

The mage stared hard a bit before replying. He knew she was in some sort of punitor mode. She had made that fairly obvious at the start of this excursion. He could sense that she was holding something back but she was his ‘sister’ now and siblings helped each other out. Many times she had trusted him; no questions asked. He could do no less.

“True. I will teach and explain to you whatever I am able to. Just ask. And Swannie, know that I am on your side. Your brother will always have your back.”

Swan, normally, through words or action, would have expressed her delight at his statement. The punitor just nodded her thanks. This odd behaviour made Kilzadi frown as she stepped away.

In a part of the cavern, away from the others, Okul approached the rogue. “Neon, I must talk to you about Swan.”

That caught his full attention. He knew the half-dragon trusted and respected his opinion on many matters but never asked for them concerning his relationship with Swan unless he deemed it serious. By now Okul knew her better than anyone else. If he thought there was something amiss then of course he would listen.

“Yes, please, speak. What is on your mind? How may I help?”

“I am worried. Lately she is acting and speaking not as herself, even as punitor. You know her. Have you noticed?”

He hadn’t. But then he had not much had that much interaction with her since their arrival which, thinking about it now, was unusual, since she reveled in teasing and cajoling him, more than she did with the rest of the Seekers.

“Well, now that you make me aware…..however she is in her punitor state.” *something which I personally do not care for. It deprives her of her essence which is something I do care for…very much.*

“Yes. Still, we both have known her in that state. Never before has she been so curt, so aloof, so …unconcerned about Seeker safety. Something is off. Something has changed.”

“Uhmmm….so what do you wish me to do?”

“Just to stay close to her and observe, as will I. Be ready to help should it be needed.”

Neon nodded his acquiescence. “I will do so.”

Their searching revealed nothing- the room was empty and vacant. Gideon assembled them.

“We have been everywhere except through the north passage in the last room. We still need the water tile. So that is where we go next. All ready? Good. Lead us out, Swan”

They retreated back along the long passageway. Close to the entrance to the previous space, Swan spotted the same two sets of prints now heading in the same direction; still faint and difficult to discern but very, very, fresh. She stopped at the entrance because the tracks also stopped. She could hear nothing and all that could be seen were the tracks the Seekers had made previously in the room. Without a word to the others and not waiting for them, she entered along the west wall, as silent as she could be and hiding as much as possible.

Neon had kept close to the scout; a short distance behind. Swan entering without waiting or explanation was atypical. Okul was correct. Her punitor behaviour was deviant. Signally to the others who were lagging, he followed her inside.

Entering, he could see the scout about 30’ in front. He took five more steps when he was attacked. His thief-acrobatics skills and uncanny dodge abilities saved him as the rapier thrust of the assassin death attack, meant to kill him, missed as he bent backwards. Moving away from the wall, where he had been nicely camouflaged was the miller’s son, Pervos Ubler. His rapier crackled with electricity as little lightning bolts moved up and down its length. He stabbed again at the rogue but Neon used fleeting rapier to blink away and to face Pervos.

“I always wanted to kill you” snarled the assassin. “You thought you were so much better than me. So hoity-toity. As I killed your bitch, now I will do the same to you. You cannot escape the assassin death attack. All I need to do is cut you.”

Pervos did not know that, thanks to Holfast, Jhaer still lived.

Neon’s response was short and cold. “For what you did to Jhaer, you die here and now.”

As Pervos lunged, the rogue blinked behind him and critically stabbed into the spine. Paralyzed, the assassin fell, hearing Neon’s words:

“As you stabbed her in the back, so I stab you.” Another thrust through the back and into the heart put an end to the miller’s son. Then he looked up to see Heldo Ubler confronting Swan.

Swan was halfway to the north passage, still looking for the tracks, when she felt a sharp pain, like a long needle puncturing into the nape of her neck. Whirling around she faced Heldo, the miller’s son; the one she sought. He was holding a needle from which black drops dripped. He too had been well camouflaged.

He gloated. “It’s Black Mark poison-very rare and very expensive. I got it especially for you, you little whore. In about 5 seconds, the negative energy will kill you, but don’t worry. You will rise from the dead, but as a zombie under my control. Can’t wait.”

He looked totally surprised as more than five seconds passed and she still stood there, glaring at him with merciless eyes. “Don’t kill him” was the first and last he heard her speak before the flat of Okul’s great spear knocked him unconscious.

The others saw Neon’s signal and hurried their pace, but none more so than Okul. At full speed and with his long strides, he soon outpaced the others. Entering the space, he saw Neon engaged with a miller brother while the second one was confronting Swan. He charged at Heldo’s back and was soon to impale him when he heard her say’ “Don’t kill him.” Shortening his grip, he smacked the flat of the blade against the back of the assassin’s head.

When Heldo regained consciousness, he found himself sitting up against the wall, tightly rope bound and gagged. His armor, weapons and equipment had been taken away. Similarly stripped, the corpse of his brother lay beside him. He could hear snatches of conversations.

“What else did you find in the backpacks?” the hated Neon was asking the swarthy mage.

“Interestingly” was the response, “each pack had a piece of non-magical blue dragon scale. Now why would they be carrying a worthless piece of a dragon’s scale? I wonder…”

The priest was berating the whore. “You should have mentioned the tracks, Swan, right from the beginning.”

“There was no point. They had been sent here to retrieve the tiles, but instead decided to let us confront the dangers as they stayed close-by. Then they planned to take the tiles from us somehow.”

“Just the two of them? I find that hard to believe.”

She shrugged. “They are expert assassins. Perhaps they have a powerful ally or perhaps they are awaiting reinforcements. But I knew as soon as we found a tile they would have to accost us. You did not need any distractions from searching for the tiles.”

As he was listening, Heldo was testing the bonds using his escape artist techniques.

“Ye shouldn’t move” a voice to his side spoke out. “She ordered me friend here to eat you should ye should move even a little.”

Turing to the source of the words, he recognized Risca, but what widened his eyes was the fang dragon beside the dwarf. It was crouched to leap at him; as if waiting to carry out orders should a certain condition be met. He immediately ceased his struggles and listened. The whore scout and the priest were still conversing.

“I suspect they were to wait until we had collected all four tiles but they acted too soon. Most likely, seeing Neon and myself alone and exposed, they could not resist the attempt to kill us. Now here we are. Pervos is beyond punitor justice but Heldo will be executed accordingly.”

“Yes, about that, Swan…”

She waved him away. “We have gone through this before. I am a punitor, not a torturer. His death will be suitable and quick. Then I will cease to be punitor. That last tile needs to be found quickly. Take the others through the north passage. I will finish here and join you. Your trail will be easy to follow. Go now, the sooner, the better.”

Gideon sighed.” You know I trust you. Be strong. Make the right choice. Seekers, we are moving out.”

Okul objected. ”We cannot split up and leave her alone. Should something happen, she will be alone. I will stay with her.”

Her reply shocked them, especially Okul. “No!” she shouted emphatically. This was too personal. This was Uncle Holfast’s murderer. She did not want anyone else to view what she had planned. Looking at their shocked faces, she realized she had to accommodate.

“All right then. If one has to stay, I select Fang. Will that be enough?”

“Me gurl knows what’s best. Let’s go” replied Risca.

“As you wish beloved” was Okul’s sad response.

Neon sympathized with her. “Don’t be too long. We will need you to find the last tile.”

“I trust my sister” acknowledged Kilzadi. “Fang, guard her well.”

Fang was overjoyed. She of the Weyr had selected him; selected him over Rage, Red-Cap and Gold even. Guard her well? Of course he would. Had She not made him a full member of the Weyr? At times, Master could be so silly. He also sensed that this was the object of She’s hunt. He wanted to see how She would dispose of Her victim.

Swan waited until the Seekers disappeared into the northern passage way. Then she crouched in front of her prisoner; Fang beside her. She reached out to pull down his gag and removed the assassin’s short sword from its master designed leather sheathe and began to examine it.

Heldo couldn’t help the first words out of his mouth. “The poison. It should have worked. You should be dead and now a zombie.”

“Oh that.” She shrugged as if it was of little consequence. “I have a contract with the goddess of trade and commerce.” She continued as if no further explanation was needed. “So this is the sword that slew my uncle. A finely crafted weapon; it has the dwarf rune of fire etched into it as well as the mark of good master smith Thorik. But I do not plan on keeping it. Gutripper and Coldkiss are enough short swords for me. Now I do not think that you could afford such a potent weapon or even that smith Thorik would forge such a weapon for the likes of you. I must presume you stole it. That makes you a thief as well as a murderer.”

“And what will you be as you kill me in cold blood, you whore” he shouted spittle.

Fang had been enjoying watching She playing with her food- again so dragon-like. But at this outburst insult to She he started to lunge at the prisoner only to be halted by Her raised hand.

She maintained to converse in her punitor monotonic unemotional voice.

“You keep calling me ‘whore’. Could that be because in my early days in Ashabedford, I kept rejecting your advances, yet I accepted those of others? Did that make me a whore in your eyes; the fact that I slept with others but not with you? Did my refusals change your jealousy to hatred? Well not that it matters now. We have reached the end. Yes, you are going to die now but it will not be murder. I am your executioner. You are going to be put to death for your past crimes. I was considering the manner of your execution. I could just let the dragon eat you, but I have something else in mind; something more karmic. I was told that you bragged how my uncle squealed as he burned. I decided that I will return the favour. Let us see how much squealing you do as you burn, shall we?”

Then she uttered the dwarf word for fire. With that word the sword flames burst intensely all around the blade to sheathe it. She raised the sword to strike.

At this sight Heldo began to struggle mightily to free himself. “You crazy bitch-whore! I’ll kill you! “I’ll rape your corpse! Then I’ll….” he screamed.

Swan hesitated, not because of his screamed words, but because it did not feel right. A punitor delivered justice swiftly and to the point. She wanted vengeance for her uncle but did she really want him to burn alive, to feel intense pain? Would that lead her down a darker path? She had told Gideon that she did not torture. She recalled his words: “I trust you. Be strong. Make the right choice.” Did she really want to burn him alive? She spoke the word to quench the sword’s flames.

“Heldo calmed down. “Ha! I knew you could not do it. Your good ethos, would not allow you to kill an unarmed, bound man. That is your weakness, whore. As your priso…ach!” that was his last sound as she stabbed him directly through the heart.

“Ah Heldo. Your mistake was in not understanding the role of a punitor. You received your quick and painless execution. Now may your soul enjoy whatever inferno Shar has for those who fail her. Come Fang, we join the others.”

As they headed for the north passage way, Swan was acutely aware that she still could feel no emotion; no elation, no satisfaction, no relief.. In the past, once justice was served, the punitor state vanished and she could be herself once more. Now it was not happening. But, being emotionless, she could not worry about it. She could just be aware of it; issue to be resolved later.

The passage was short, the Seekers’ tracks easily followed. It opened onto a twenty foot wide sandy beach which ran the length of the immense cavern of the volcano itself. The beach fronted an underground lake which occupied the entire bottom of the Pillar of Fire. In the center of the lake, there arose an extensive rock pillar formation, rising at least 500’ up towards the mouth of the volcano. Halfway up the pillar was encased in a swirling display of fire illuminating the entire vast cavern. A steep spiraling staircase wrapped itself around the pillar, disappearing into the swirling fire.

When Swan and Fang rejoined the Seekers, they were standing at the lake’s edge, staring at the rock pillar.

“Welcome back Swan. We waited for you. Prepare for teleportation” were Gideon’s remarks.

……………………………………………………to be continued