**CHAPTER 1 ONCE UPON A TIME IN FAERUN**

It was two weeks since her arrival. Yet, the metropolis offered so much, she felt nearly as overwhelmed as she had on her first day. Waterdeep was a huge city-state and had so much to offer. Even a large sophisticated home city such as Selgaunt in Sembia was as a village to this megalopolis. It would take longer to become acclimatized.

She walked the streets to explore and learn; such had been demanded by her Queen’s representative. “You will not accomplish much, Dolora, unless you are familiar with the terrain” had been the Mistress’ words. “I cannot fathom why our Queen would select a stranger to the city, but I do not question Her decisions; ever. So learn the city.”

And so she walked, listened, questioned and learned. The streets were always crowded and teemed with all manner of races, not only from Faerun, but other continents and places in the world of Toril. And even from places not of Toril. The shops and markets carried goods, items, equipment and food stuffs from all over the planet. Already she had purchased an odd item; a talisman from the Far East. It was also said that many extra-planar stuffs could be had, if one knew where to look or who to ask.

And so she walked, listened, questioned and learned. But there was also another purpose. “Hundreds of displaced penniless young people arrive in Waterdeep every day seeking safety, employment, fame, or fortune or any combination”, had continued the Mistress. Most are preyed upon by the dark side of Waterdeep to end up dead, sacrifices or slaves. Be the first to recruit them for our Queen. It should not be difficult to pretend that you also are a recent arrival. Tell them you have found employment and a place of refuge. Charm them. Tell them they do can do the same. Bring them here. We will train and teach them- those who are worthy-then when converted send them out into the noble houses, the notable establishments and others, to continue the recruitment and the corruption. All for the glory of our Queen.” In this Dolora was very successful.

And so she walked, listened, questioned and learned. Learned, that as most other places, there were two sides in Waterdeep, the day and the night.

Walking in the day, both men and women would stare; with lust, envy or both, at the beautiful, firm-bodied young girl. Beautiful women were common in Waterdeep, but the mischievous amber eyes and the come hither ruby lips grabbed their attention. Merchants would stop hawking their wares to stop and stare, young swains, full of swagger would close in to flirt and make offers only to be shunted aside by guardsmen in the pretense of protecting a vulnerable young girl who would then themselves proceed to flirt and make offers. Knowing their value, she would flirt back. Noble-carrying carriages would stop as noble heads would pop out to ogle her swaying form.

At night she would walk with Taylor Swift **[Ed. Note- see Interlude Chapter 1 for more details]** and another sister or two. Walking in the night, the dark underbelly of the city became evident should it be sought out. One soon learned where to find the fences, for whom any object was fence able, the swords for hire,-no questions asked, the secret banned slave auctions, the brothels, both high and low class and the drug houses. The night brought out the thieves, the vagabonds, the slavers, the muggers, the bored seeking excitement; any excitement which unattended young lasses could provide. But she had her Queen’s favor.

The city watch found many a would-be rapist acid blinded, castrated with slit throats. Known and suspected slaver kidnappers were found floating naked in the dark waters of the harbour, their faces scorched; their flesh scourged. As the victims were low-life rabble, the law enforcement agencies were officially concerned but unofficially not. And so she and her sisters indulged their evil sides by inflicting pain and death on the “competition” and delighted in increased chaos. They vied with each other to determine who produced the more agonising torture.

And so she walked, listened, questioned and learned. Lately she had seen posters advertising the Challenge of Champions. She had heard much talk in the market squares, how the event was annual, how the victorious team was rewarded both monetarily and by reputation. That she did not care about too much, but as the Queen’s selected agent, she did want to test her mettle. She wanted to prove to her Waterdeep sisters, and especially The Mistress, as she had done with Taylor, that she was more than capable. The contest was open to whoever had the entrance fee. Dolora Amortrix had decided to participate.

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Barid watched carefully. He noted the temple guards and timed their movements. *Yes, right on schedule.* He had been spying on the temple for over several weeks, ever since he fled Unther and reached the relative safety of Waterdeep; actually, ever since he had been told that Malkin was the temple leader. It was his personal quest to assassinate Malkin. The fact that Malkin was a priest of Cyric just made it more pleasing.

The temple was well defended. Built high into Mount Waterdeep, it oversaw the entire harbor. Only approachable on three sides, it had a tall stonewall with only one massive gate. The wall was guarded and it was their comings and goings that he watched. The Cyricans thought they were virtually impregnable, but with the Black Lord’s help, he would show the error of their ways. As a priest of Bane, it was a holy duty to eradicate the worship of Cyric and the assassination the so-called Prince of Lies’ high clergy was an aim of that goal. Such a feat would enhance his power and reputation amongst his fellow followers of the Black Hand. That he would need when he returned to rule Unther in the name of his Lord of Darkness, He who held destruction in His left and civilization in His right.

If nothing else, the Cyricans were punctual. The guards changed regularly and took the same time to walk the walls. This gave him a time window if he chose to scale the walls instead of using guile to gain entry through the gate. He had careful notes of who was allowed to pass and when. He would study scenarios of both options.

Satisfied with the day’s spying he rose to leave. He was hungry for his supper*. Now with whom to* *dine tonight*? *Dame Lauren, or Lady Julia*. It amazed him how easily these homely affection-starved older widows and spinsters were to manipulate. All one had to do was pay attention to them. Of course his physical appearance, compliments of a celestial heritage, aided in that regard. His lightly tanned skin was tinged with gold. This integrated his white-blonde hair and his pupil less topaz eyes with the silver flakes. He looked exotic. He took two steps. A searing pain flamed in his head, staggering him. The view of the city below was replaced by an infinite blackness. Impossibly, even darker was the Black Fist symbol of his deity above a poster. The green rays emanating from the clenched fist illuminated the poster which advertised tomorrow’s challenge of champions. The message was obvious. *Your humble servant understands and obeys, Black Lord.*

With that thought, the vision and pain vanished. Normal sight returned. The rapture of suchclose contact with his deity had brought him to his knees *.A mission. The Black Lord has selected me for a mission .*Pride filled him*. Ladies, you all dine alone tonight.* Barid Belmedar made his way down to the temple of Bane, to spend the night in prayer and preparation. Tomorrow he would enter the challenge contest.

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The tiefling thief followed the plump merchant woman. Never leaving her out of his sight, he followed as inconspicuously as manageable, not to arouse any suspicion. At that, he was very good. It was an extremely heavy purse she was attempting to carry hidden under her robe. It would be a boon to her if he relieved her of that weight. She approached a heavily crowded crossroads. Soon he would strike.

The kalashtar followed the tiefling and the merchant. He too had seen the fat purse; he too desired the coins but his psychic ability had warned him about the tiefling. And so he followed. He would steal from whoever was left to steal from, be it tiefling or merchant. They approached a crowded crossroads.

The young wizard followed all three. Much earlier, she had first passed by the graceful and elegant human but the strange angularity to his face suggested something else. With white flowing hair and pale skin, it was the total ebony black eyes that drew her attention. Intrigued, she had turned and followed. It was then she noticed his interest in a tiefling and in turn a merchant woman. Now in need of coin and realizing something was afoot, perhaps it could be possible to turn it to her advantage, she continued to follow. Perhaps she could pick up the pieces of whatever was left. Perhaps everything would just fall to her. She anticipated the latter. In time they reached a crowded crossroads.

Oriana had almost called it an unsuccessful day. No one had attempted to steal the purse lure. She knew the guild members would leave her alone but surely there were enough free-lancers that an attempt would be made. This was Waterdeep after all. Of course, the thief would have to be very skilled; first keen-eyed to even notice the purse, second brave or desperate enough to risk the wrath of the guilds by free lancing and third, apt enough to apply a sleight of hand to free the purse. The trap was designed to entice such a thief. She recalled Lord Ruldegost’s words: *Find an independent thief with all the skills we discussed. The challenge of champions will further test the other abilities.* With these thoughts she reached a crowded crossroads.

It was busy intersection with people jostling as the crowds moved in four directions. The jostling hid the tiefling’s accelerated approach. Now in strike range, just one of many bumping about, his nimble fingers felt for the purse strap.

Watching the tiefling, Tormod chuckled. *Ah, thief- yes- steal from that merchant. Then I will take from you.* He hastened through the crowd, ensuring the tiefling was always in sight.

To Morticia, it was a stage show. The actors were playing all their parts. The merchant who was about to get robbed by the thief; the thief who was being followed by well, something passing as human, and then herself, the young wizard who had all in sight and would be the last one standing. Her cowl midnight black robe hiding her long dark hair and alabaster skin, she quickened her pace. She needed to see how all this would play out and what the finale would be.

Oriana’s magic alarm warned her even as experienced fingers reached for the semi-hidden purse. *Finally, success.* Quick as a flash, her hand gripped the offending wrist and spun it even as she moved off the street to stand in front of a cheese shop. She found herself facing a cursing tiefling’s dagger.

Shodan’s hand had just barely release the pouch clasp, when it became gripped as in a vice and he found himself spun through the air to land facing the stout merchant. *Who knew that she could be so strong?* *And how had she known*? *Explanations later.* No stranger to surprise, he reacted instinctively. Even as he landed crouched on his feet, he quick drew his dagger. *Fight or flight?*

Watching the scuffle, Tormod spotted the purse falling, to be mostly hidden by the scuffling dust. Now if he only could make his way undetected while they were busy with each other…

Morticia too watched the show. She too spotted the freed purse and the human-but not quite human- sneaking his way towards it while the merchant and the thief had their little interplay. Smiling inwardly, she moved closer and cast a minor magic.

Oriana took a step back and raised her hands in a peaceful gesture. “Hold devilspawn. No harm done. Calm yourself. We need to talk” Her actions disguised a spell, one that would, with careful words put the tiefling at ease.

Shodan’s tension diminished. Somehow he realized that there was no immediate danger. Not wanting to attract the attention of passers-by he quickly re-hid the dagger Straightening he replied, “Talk then.”

“I have been searching for one with your talents. I have a scheme that should enrich us both. *Play on their greed Lord Ruldegost had advised.* It is a…” Here she stopped. “Trust me “ she commanded. “Enter the cheese shop.” She had luckily spotted a person-one who she had noticed earlier. It could not be a coincidence. Shodan felt compelled to comply with the wishes of his new friend.

Tormod watched as the two exchanged a few words and entered the cheese shop. *What is happening?* Realizing that this had just become a perfect opportunity, he rushed to where he last saw the purse.

Morticia’s attention was now truly piqued. She witnessed the merchant‘s spell casting, -ill-disguised to one of her craft; (*so a little charm heh, interesting*) the thief’s sudden change in attitude and then the two entering the shop. She also saw the pseudo-human rushed towards the fallen purse. She closed in, just a bit unsteady in her high black heels, to see how this would all unfold, the fat purse her prize.

The odor of various cheeses filled their lungs. “You like cheese, don’t you?” suggested Oriana. Tormod found himself agreeing, even though he had never given cheese any serious consideration in the past. “Why don’t you go buy some “gorgon” zola and keep the cheese seller occupied? I will see about our little follower.”

Puzzled about the follower, but noting nothing untoward regarding his newest best friend’s suggestion, the tiefling approached the shopkeeper. Oriana placed herself in an isolated corner and gripping her broken horn, cast a personal enchantment. Anyone now spying her would see a half-giantess. She left the cheese shop.

Tormod approached the purse’s location. His peripheral vision noted a giantess exiting the cheese shop, then turning to mingle in the crowds. He bent to retrieve the purse, only to be assailed by a most putrid stench, so repulsive as to make him gag and jerk back up. It was then that a massive fist grabbed him about the neck and a deep voice spoke “Is it the purse or the tiefling you were following all this time? The hand squeezed.

Morticia regarded the unusual human bending down to retrieve the purse, only to be jolted away by the unexpected result of her prestidigitation spell. She had also noted the half-giant leaving the cheeses shop and then once out of sight, returning to grapple the unusual one. As she observed the following commotion, she detected the disguise spell illusion on the giantess. Wobbling more that slightly on her inappropriate black leather high heels, she cast a second spell, minor enough to go unwatched in the ensuing altercation; a spell that mage handed the purse to her.

Tormod reacted with a thought to the squeezing hand. Instantly a blade-shaped weapon of force appeared in his hands, even as he spun around. He recognized the giantess from the shop.

Oriana recognized a force mind blade. Taken aback, she released her hold and stepped away. *Psionic ability. Always useful.* “Peace friend. You have proved your worth.” *There. That should confuse him into hesitating.* It worked.

Tormod delayed his slash. *Proved my worth? What?*

The half-giant opened her arms and spoke quickly. “What you seek; if the tiefling, then know I will not interfere. If the purse, then it is yours and many more like it. I wish to recruit you, not fight you.” So saying, she dissolved her disguise.

Tormod’s took a step back. *The merchant? What happened to the thief?* The words further puzzled the kalashtar soulknife, but now he realized any danger had passed. He also realized that he had been caught out, and not being a fool, best to play on; besides this may prove to be advantageous. “The purse! I sought the purse.”

“And so it yours. Do we come to an agreement? I am recruiting those whom are worthy. Do we concur?”

*Humm. One who changes shape as easily as I don apparel; willing to pay me much; just to listen?* Speak then, of how these purses may be obtained, but do not think to fool me as you did with the fetid holdings in your last offering.”

“Fetid? I know not of what you speak.”

“No? Then come, pick it up and sniff.”

Both, eyeing each other cautiously, moved to the fracas area and searched. The purse was gone.

“Looking for this?” a melodious feminine voice drew their attention. A young female, whose midnight black attire, contrasted her alabaster skin while complementing her long dark hair. Her jet black ankle boots bore so high thin heels that one’s first reaction would be ‘how can she possibly walk in those?’ She was leaning against the cheese shop wall, one hand juggling the missing purse.

At this point Shodan exited the shop, well-chewed gorgonzola cheese in hand, puzzled why his newly acquired best friend was interacting with these strangers.

The black-clad female continued. “So, enter the befuddled tiefling. Now the cast is complete. I must thank you for a most entertaining piece of drama. Well worth the price of admission. As this was promised to the kalashtar (she had determined Tormod’s species), then I shall return it. Oh, fret not. I have removed my magic causing odor.” She tossed the purse.

Oriana was simultaneously cautious and intrigued. This unknown female, not only used arcane magic, but was also clever enough to outwit them all; a very useful combination to have onside.

She replied. “You did not abscond with the purse but instead return it. That action implies further discourse. Correct?”

Morticia nodded. “As you stated-why have one purse when you could have many?”

Oriana nodded back. This day had gone from a total failure to one of resounding success; a nimble-fingered rogue, a clever mage and a psionic soulknife. She whispered a prayer of thanks to the Hidden One.

“Indeed. We are all in agreement, then. Let us betake to my mentor’s villa where we can all discuss how to improve our financial assets. Whether you can agree or not, you still get meal and drink tonight with a soft bed.

“My compliments, most gracious host;” were Morticia’s words to Lord Bly Ruldegost as she sipped on her after supper port; “An excellent vintage and a delicious repast. A question if I may, before I give my decision. The Knights of the Shield, they are recruiting non-order persons because…”

Lord Bly broke-in “Forgive my interruption. As I may have poorly explained, the order is expanding its operations but we found ourselves short-staffed. As such, we are forced to look to hire outside expertise. Your task is not complicated. You need only to accompany Lady Oriana here”, he nodded towards the tall orange-haired scarred knight at his side, who had long shed her merchant disguise, “to collect our fees from those merchants who pay for our protection services and to help convince others that they should subscribe to such services. And of course, to apply your talents to those who may be, shall we say a bit …reluctant. In return, you gain a high steady income for low risk and the influence of our order, which here in Waterdeep is of no small worth”

*Outstanding. I would get the force of the knights in case those bastard Red Wizards come searching for me.* “Then as explained, I agree to those conditions.”

“Wonderful. Then we are all of similar mind?” He turned his gaze towards the remaining two.

Tormod replied first.” I also will agree to those terms…as long as it is in my interest.”

All eyes gyrated to Shodan. He smiled friendship. “But of course. The terms are more than agreeable. We will all be enriched.” He beamed at Oriana. *Oh yes bitch. You be-spelled me. You dared to be-spell me! I will be your friend- right up to the time my knife cuts your still beating heart out from your chest.*

“This bodes well. Tomorrow, as discussed, we enter the Challenge of Champions to determine how best to mesh our different abilities. I propose a toast to success. Skol….”

Finished in his supplication, Barid sat, alone in the absolute blackness of the inner temple. His prayers had been answered. The power of Bane filled him; nothing was beyond him. He felt, more than heard, the high priest move to sit beside him.

“The Dark Lord blesses you, brother Baird. You have been selected for a mission, Succeed and great will be your rewards.”

“With His blessing, I cannot fail. I will follow this path to wherever and for whenever The Dark Lord wishes.”

“Dutifully spoken. My loss. I had hoped to recruit you for another assignment. We have received word from the Dalelands regarding possible infiltration by Sharrans. We need to verify and if true, root them out and repay them in kind. But our Master has decreed otherwise for you. Still be alert.”

He felt, more than heard, the high priest move into the darkness. *Oh yes, he would be alert. Tomorrow the Challenge of Champions, as his god willed.*

Taylor Swift aided in the cleansing. She had dismissed the slaves. The brazen blonde sponged grime, blood and sweat from both herself and Dolora. Both girls stood washing, alone in the cult’s pleasure pool. The waters here were magically refreshed and warmed.

Taylor’s breath became shallower with arousal. She watched the water beads trickle over Dolora’s breasts, only to drip off the purple-tinged nipples. For Dolora, today’s color had been purple. They continued down her flat stomach towards the purpled pubes. There the streamlets converged to flow across the mark of Malcanthet’s favor; the thorn-pierced red lips embossed on Dolora’s inner thigh; the mark that only the souls belonging to the Succubus Queen could discern.

“That was fun tonight” she stated as her hands lingered over Dolora’s breasts. “I so enjoy our walks.” She was referring to the night’s killings. The Mistress had ordered Dolora to learn Waterdeep. For that she walked the streets. Most times she was accompanied by Taylor and most times, late at night, the ‘sweet, innocent’ girls would be accosted by the riff-raff; rapists, slavers and worse. But of course, they wanted to be accosted. They would fall into their routine. Dolora would awaken your outwardly countenance of beauty, a gift of the Queen. Then while the attackers were fascinated into immobility, they would strike. Taylor took extreme pleasure in torturing and castrating them, while Dolora would scourge their flesh. They jokingly referred to it as ‘taking back the night’. Besides, the city needed more chaos which they were more than happy to provide. It was the blood of their latest victims that were now washing away.

Taylor’s inciting hands were having an effect and Dolora could sense her own growing passion. Soon both were breathing hard. Of the pair Dolora was the dominant. This had been demonstrated upon her arrival in Waterdeep. **[Ed. Note-see Interlude Chapter 1 for the details].** As a weaker demon was subservient to a stronger one, so was Taylor to Dolora. It was the way of the Abyss.

As her elation increased, Dolora’s fiend-blood manifested. Her eyes changed from amber to red. Her voice became hoarse. Grapping Taylor’s hair to force her to her knees, elicited a yelp of pain from the pert blonde. Tears were forced from baby blue eyes as Dolora increased the pressure to pull back Taylor’s head. In a raspy voice, she growled in the language of demons, “Tonight will be rough. Your pain, my pleasure; please me.” With that she mashed Taylor’s face into her groin and began to gyrate her pelvis as if lap dancing. “Your pain, my pleasure; please me.” Tomorrow she would enter the Challenge of Champions to prove her worth once and for all.

The next morning found Dolora in the staging area of the completion. It was noisy and crowded. All manners of beings and species milled around while organisers attempted to direct to the correct area. The place was heavy with city guards to ensure order was maintained. She made her way to a registration booth. Passing through the thick assemblage, she ignored both the lustful stares and the groping.

“Excuse me, I wish to register for the Challenge.” The man she spoke stopped making notes and looked up. His mouth fell open as he gazed upon the sunset red-haired girl before him. He noted the corresponding red-filled lips, the amber eyes, the upright breasts held in by a loose blouse. Taking a deep, breath, he shook his head as if to clear it.

“Where’s your team?” he replied. “You have to register as a team of four.”

“Oh, I didn’t know. I don’t have a team*.*

“That will be a problem then. Registration closes in a minute. Then I have to hand in my list.”

“Oh my. What is a girl to do?” she pouted her lips and leaned forward allowing her blouse to flop exposing her scarlet-painted nipples. The registrar gulped hard as his eyes became fixated. “Is there something you can do to help me? I would be so grateful.” She picked up his hand and slowly licked the middle finger.

He had trouble clearing his throat. “I have one space left. I will just fill it in with your team name. Go to area six. That is where people can put together a team. Bring them to unit number eighteen in the team gather area. What name should I put?”

“Oh. you’re so sweet. I’ll dance for you one day. Just make it team X. Now the entry fee…”

He waved it aside. “All taken care of.”

As she left for area six, she snorted. *Males were so easy.*

Area six was nearly empty as those without teams had left; this being past the registration closing. Still she spotted a few lingers. She approached a pair; a gnome and a half-elf; both males. “Want to take part in the challenge” she inquired. Just need a team. It is already registered.”

Both gaped at her. “Why yes, of course, but how…” began the half-elf.

“I am Merkish”, interrupted the gnome, “a bard of renown. My friend here…”

“Introductions later. Time is short. We need a fourth.” It was then she spotted him; the handsome, platinum-blond-haired human, with the deep blue topaz pupil-less eyes. His gold-tinged skin and the silver-specks in the eyes indicated, to her planar knowledge, a celestial in his ancestry. He had been staring at her.

She approached him, the other two in tow. “We are seeking a …”

“Fourth to make a team” he finished for her. “I knew you would arrive.”

This puzzled her. “What? You expected me?”

“Not you specifically. Just that I am expected to compete today, and given the time available to enter, your little group here had to be my three.”

He spoke and dressed as a cleric, a lawful one at that. Her nose twitched at the thought. She looked him over. There was no holy symbol in sight; obvious or disguised. This could only mean a deity whose open worshipped in Waterdeep was outlawed; most likely a human deity. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of the black morningstar hidden in the folds of his cloak. Her religious knowledge led to one conclusion. *Bane then. The Black Lord himself.* The thought of corrupting such a cleric to her Queen excited her. Better still, she could use him to locate their temple and should affairs break apart, always report him to the proper authorities. Blackmail was always good[pardon the pun]

“Well fine then. Let us be off. All is arranged.” She led them to the team gathering area. On the way, she learned the cleric was Baird, and the half-elf Darvin was a sorcerer. Merkish did most of the talking.

Arriving at the gathering area they were met by a clerk. “And you are?” he hailed them.

“Team X for unit eighteen” she replied.

He checked his ledger. “You’re late. We had almost given up on you. In there and await further instructions.” He pointed at a building. “Go through door number eighteen.” He watched them leave, eyes centered on Dolora’s swishing rear.

Inside was a small enclosed room with benches all around the walls. A door opposite their entry was simply labelled exit. A disembodied voice spoke out of the ceiling. “Team X. please sit and listen to the instructions. For the challenge, to ensure fairness, no armor, weapons, magical items or psionics are allowed. Any use of such will lead to automatic disqualification. No animals, companions or familiars may accompany you. No spell casting of any sort is allowed. Should magic be necessary, your team will be provided. Each task has a fifteen minute time limit. Hints are available but the point total is then halved. Is all this understood?” They all indicated affirmative.

“Good. The results will be posted after the last team has competed. There is a monetary prize for the best team and an additional purse prize for the best team member. You will be called out. Leave all prohibited items here. They will be returned to you. Good luck.” Dolora looked at her team mates. *What a sorry crew. No magic-so what good is a sorcerer? An arrogant gnome bard and a weaponless, spell les cleric. No healing help there. But if I do well with this sorry lot, then it should more than prove my capability.*

Merkish was already thinking of the best style to compose a ballad to tell the tale of their tasks. Darvin just kept ogling Baird as he had been doing all this time. *What a handsome fellow. Such a shame that he appears to be straight. Still…*

Barid’s thoughts were similar to Dolora’s*. What possible reason could the Dark One have for my being here with these losers? The gnome and the sorcerer are bad enough, but the girl is completely useless. All she has is good looks, well lots of them certainly, but useless for any task. Still I go and do as ordered. In time, my Lord will reveal His purpose.*

The voice spoke again. “Team X, please use the exit door. You are being called for the Challenge of Champions.” They arose and proceeded through.

ED. Note-the actual events of the Challenge not immediately pertinent to the rest of the story.

The competition was over. The various teams milled around and checked the standings and began to disperse. The overall winner was a certain team Bly. The individual winner was a female mage named Morticia. Dolora watched them congratulate each other as they received their rewards. Morticia turned out to be a black-clad wizard with outrageous heeled boots. With her was a knight of the shield, a cropped orange-haired, burly scar-faced female. Completing the team was a roguish tiefling; Dolora scowled at the taint of Baator and finally an odd looking human, comely features, but seemingly not quite right.

The charming seductress was more than pleased. Team X had placed second. Quite an achievement, considering that team X had become a team of not four, but two. She looked over at her ex-teammates. Darvin was consoling Merkish. The sorcerer had been practically useless without his magic, whereas poor Merkish had borne the brunt of every possible mishap in every trial of the contest. Still, her team of seemingly two came in second. More proof of the Queen’s favour; an achievement she could use to abrade the smugness from her Waterdeep sisters. As if her other blessings were not enough.

Having no interest in the fate of those two, she searched for Barid. Not only was he handsome and smart but if she could debauch and subvert a priest of Bane…well then. She spied him slowly leaving, shaking his head as if he was puzzled. Hurrying, she caught up.

“Hey, don’t leave without saying good-bye. We did well together. Is something wrong?” she queried, noting his puzzlement.

Pupil less amber eyes, silver specks sparkling, narrowed as if to gage her intent. Shrugging, he responded with a half-truth. “I felt it urgent to partake in the Challenge, yet nothing seems to have come of it.” *So why did the Black Lord want me here?*

“Hey, not true. You got to meet me. That should be worth something.” Speaking these words, she linked arms with him; making it apparently accidental that her breast rubbed up and down along his forearm. Come on; buy a team mate a drink. Let’s celebrate our achievement.” She began to lead him away. *Slow and careful girl. This is a priest after all.*

“A drink sounds fine, right about now.” *What a slut! Still she is extremely comely and was very useful in the challenge, so not totally brainless. Interesting contradiction. A smart slut. Could be useful. Pimp her out? Get her drinking, see what follows.*

“So, Dolora, what is it you do?”

“Me? Oh, not much. I’m a poor working girl, recently arrived. I’m a dancer by trade. I’m also training to be a masseuse. I can demonstrate my talents in both should you wish.”

“Yes, I would like that; very much. You are a delicious morsel. And where is it you work?”

“Why at the ….”

The rest of her response was interrupted by a call behind them. The sound was a commanding feminine voice that seemed unused to requesting. “Well-met. Please hold. I have a proposition for you.”

Turning, they saw Team Bly trailing; being led by the orange-haired Shield Knight. Curious, they waited for their approach. Dolora leaned into Barid, as if to say “please protect little defenceless me.”

“Excuse my boldness, but we are Team Bly, the victors of the…”

It was Baird’s turn to interrupt “Yes. I know who you are. What do you wish?” He was gruff.

The rugged-faced she-warrior and the becoming he-priest faced off; two alphas, each taking the other’s measure. In a few seconds, both seemed satisfied.

“I am Oriana, full knight of the shield. My organization is seeking mercenary expertise and since you have proved yourself in the Challenge by missing out by the narrowest of margins to us, I come to offer you employment. In return, you get steady income, the influence and protection of my guild and first call on newly found magic. My team mates here have already accepted but I need two more; three teams of two. It is a generous offer.”

Barid thought quickly. *This must be it; the reason why I was to enter the Challenge; a foothold into the Shield Knights; the use of their resources for the Church and for my personal vengeance. Thank you Dark Lord. “*What manner ofwork will be required?”

“At first, nothing more than the collection of payments from our clients for …err…services rendered. Then, later, well that would depend on how well you and my guild are fitting together.”

“Well then, I accept your offer and will do my utmost to fit in.”

“Excellent.” Oriana actually smiled.” Now can you suggest which other of your teammates we should approach for the last position; the gnome or the half-elf.?”

*Well this should prove amusing. “*If I was recruiting, then I would pick this one.” He stepped to the side to expose Dolora. She had been standing, hiding really, behind the priest, with only her head jutting around to view the encounter. As Barid moved aside, she became the focus of the others.

Oriana snorted in derision. “This piece of fluff, are you also a jester?” Dolora stood, acting timid under their gaze, as she imagined the arrogant knight being buggered and flayed by rutterkins.

“It was because of ‘this piece of fluff’ that we almost won” retorted Barid.

“Really? Well then ‘fluff’ what do you do?”

Dolora snapped herself back to face Oriana. Since the start of the dialogue, she had been thinking of ways to enlist herself. Now Barid had presented an opening. This had to be handled carefully, without revealing too much.

She stiffened her back. If she could face this veteran knight, the others would see that she was not easily cowed. “My name is Dolora, not fluff. What do I do? I am a professional dancer and an amateur masseuse. That is what I do.” She crossed her arms, as if to say, so there!

All chuckled, except Morticia, who narrowed her eyes as if to focus better. Dolora observed this. *That’s the dangerous one*. Oriana’s glance to Baird said-you are kidding, no? She turned back to Dolora.

“So, suppose someone like me refused to hand over their payment. What would you do about it?”

“I would use my cuteness and sweet-talk them into handing it over. Like this.” She had already taken the flavor of the others. The tiefling was bored, the kalashtar was amused, and the mage was suspicious. She allowed a little of her beauty countenance to well up. Even such a small amount was enough to widen their eyes in surprise. She selected Tormod. The abyssal power converged on him. She began to sway her hips. His eyes followed, fascinated, as a mouse is fascinated motionless by a swaying snake. She began to undulate faster. His mouth opened and his eyes began to glaze over. She stopped suddenly. In a few short moments he imploded back into reality.

“What just happened?” were his first words. He stared hard at Dolora. “Whatever you did, do not ever do that to me again.” His words carried a threat.

She gave him back her best disarming ‘little girl’ smile. ”I won’t, handsome one. I promise. For what I wish to do to you, I want you to have a free mind to enjoy the experience.” she replied ambiguously, touching his cheek and rubbed his chest down to his crotch. *First sex, then the torture.*

“Well” declared Oriana, “seduction; an impressive talent; could be useful. We’ll take you on probation; see how it works out. Agreed?”

“Oh, yes, thank you, oh Knight of the Shield.”

“That’s it then. We have our full group. Barid, Dolora, time you two met my mentor. Let us be off.”

And so it all began…