**CHAPTER 2-PART 1-EXTORTION-A WELL-PAYING JOB**

Shodan strolled along the docks. He enjoyed the sea air. Life was good; the best since arriving in Waterdeep. Working for the Shield Knights had turned out to be a wise decision. Steady income and all he had to do was collect extortion fees from frightened merchants. Easy! And today he was duty-free. Dolora, Barid and Oriana were handling the payments. He whistled as he strolled.

The true reason for his whistling was to lure the two wharf rats trailing him into believing he had not noticed them. In fact, he had detected the two leather armoured cutthroats much earlier. He had slowed down to give them a chance to catch up. As they neared, he ducked between two warehouses and doubled back behind them. He prepared his attack and defences.

“Looking for me, uglies?”

Startled, the two curs whipped around, short swords drawn. Seeing their prey confronting them, they glanced at each other and broke into grins.

“Gonna hurt ya, devil boy” promised the crossed-eyed ugly one. “Gonna shew ya wa happens to freelancers. Then, my friend here is gonna play with yur smooth drum arse, using his ‘drumstick.” He gave a laugh. At those words, the scar-faced uglier one’s grin became wider, exposing brown and black crooked teeth.

“Well then, shall we…” Shodan’s words were cut short by excruciating pain; pain which blackened his vision, doubled him over and brought up dry retching. He had been kicked hard in the scrotum. As he lay gasping, he could just make out two more wharf scum now becoming visible.

“Potions worked, just like the Boss said, ha boys” asserted crossed-eyed, even as he landed a hard hob-booted kick into Shodan’s ribs, cracking one. The others joined in. Shodan found himself uninterruptedly pummeled and kicked; so much so that the constant red haze of pain made it impossible for him to take the offensive. All he could do was curl into a ball to protect vital organs. Bones could be mended.

Loud whistles overrode the sound of boots cracking bone. “Damn. City Watch. Scatter boys.’ Three sets of boots ran off, but not before giving one last kick. “Ya work the docks, ya gotta pay yur dues, boy. Learn ya lesson.” So saying, cross-eyed gave one last boot to the tiefling’s head and ran off.

More footsteps sounded, this time approaching; a stranger’s voice. “Healer! Healer here!” Hands rolled him over. As his eyes were swollen shut he could only feel, not see, the hands laid on his worst injuries, could only sense the healing energy course through him. Then he lost consciousness.

He awoke pain free in a soft cot. “Ah, with us at last. Good. Stay. Rest. I will fetch the Arms Master.” Shodan turned his head to the sound of the voice. He found himself gazing at a kind, grandmotherly face. The folded hands of Ilmater prominent on her gown. As she left, he noticed other activity. People in the uniform of the City Watch, hustling to and fro, other cots with other patients; he was in a City Watch medical center. His observations were interrupted by the appearance of an officer; splendid green and black uniform, trimmed in gold pips, indicating high rank. His face was scarred, with a broken pug-nose. Shodan knew this was someone of authority, as he was trailed by three other sub-officers and a small troupe of watchmen.

“Hello” the officer greeted him briskly. I am Helve Urtrace, the Senior Armmaster of the City Watch here in the State of Waterdeep. Now normally I do not concern myself with simple muggings but in your case I must. You see, the place where you were attacked has been the site of a several murders these past few weeks. Not just simple murders; they had all the signs of cult killings. True that the victims were riff-raff, rapists, thugs, slavers and other criminal types but we cannot allow this kind of activity to continue. So…you will tell us what you know and you will describe your assailants to us and my truthseeker here will verify your words.”

The tiefling knew that if the highest ranking Watch officer was personally taking an interest, then it must be becoming serious. So the best way out was just to tell the truth, as he knew it, of course. And so he did.

When done, the truthseeker nodded agreement. The Armmaster’s features softened. “Heal quickly, my boy”, he uttered , patting Shodan’s shoulder. “And don’t worry, we’ll get those thugs.” With those words he and his entourage left.

*Worry, oh I’m not worried. Those bastards are high up on my grudge list and if I find them first, there will be nothing left for you, oh freakin Armmaster.*

Tormod intrigued Morticia. She had not known any kalashtar previously and so she wanted to study him and his physic abilities; in order to find some way to manipulate him. She ensured that he was always in her company to study and question. She had found that it was not that difficult to persuade him; *to keep in mind for when I truly need him to use him.*

In return, Morticia interested Tormod. Not only because she always dressed in black or in her magic, but mostly because he could not fathom the reason she insisted on always wearing those ridiculous high-heeled shoes. He could not fathom their purpose. Was she some kind of masochist?

They had finished shopping for needed items. They were to meet the others for supper. It was then they heard the commotion. Down a darkened side alleyway, they observed a beating. Two Thayan knights were viciously pummelling a youngster of no more than ten summers. They tossed him back and forth as they took turns smashing his ribs, jaw and face. The lad resembled minced meat.

Watching the beating, and seemingly bored by the violence and the agony of the victim, stood a red-robed older man. Several tattoos covered a bald head.

The two companions had completely different reactions at the sight. Morticia, catching sight of the Red Wizard spat out hate and rage. *Mother f\*\*king bastards!* But she was experienced enough to hurry away. Tormod, on the other hand, was curious. He began to move towards the alley. His progress was drawn short. Morticia’s long black-painted, sharp and pointed nails dug into his arm; deep enough to draw drops of blood.

“Hey” he yelped.

“Are you totally insane!” she hissed. “You don’t want to get mixed up with them. Come on. Quickly!” *Stupid, stupid-but at least he is malleable, my minion to be..*

Tormod’s outcry had drawn the attention of the Red Wizard. He frowned as he spotted the lady in black retreating with her companion. Then his eyes widened as he marked her high-heeled black laced boots.

Dolora was having a marvellous time. She and Baird were accompanying Oriana on a ‘collection day route’. The purpose was to familiarize themselves with the route, the merchants and the collection routine. What Dolora most enjoyed was seeing the fear and respect in the faces of the merchants. The three would walk into a shop. The shopkeeper would then see to Oriana. The Shield Knight would then introduce her and Baird as associates. There would be an exchange of news, sometimes small talk and the ‘protection fees’ collected. Then onward to the next stop.

Also she was working her own agenda and that of her Queen. The third merchant operated a dance supply store and also acted as a dance agent. She let it be known that she was a dancer and was available for ‘private dances’, especially to the rich and famous. A girl always needed extra pocket money, no? Two stops later, the middle-aged proprietress was quite taken with her and let it be known in the code that all lesbians knew. Dolora, sensing this, laid on the charm indicating she too was interested. A small wood carving of a naked woman reclining with a hand between her thighs was snuck into her hand along with a squeeze and a note reading “Want you. Jade Dancer-meet tomorrow.” Dolora wondered if she should bring Taylor to help debauch the merchant or whether it was preferable to be alone the first time. Incorporating the proprietress into the cult would have potential advantages and be a significant coup.

Finishing their rounds, Oriana turned to the other two. “I am taking the proceeds and meeting with Lord Bly. Join with the others for supper and I will rendezvous later”. She stared Dolora up and down with disdain. “And you! Remember what I told you!”

Baird addressed Dolora as they watched the departing Shield Knight. “I know you are not stupid enough to continue to annoy our ‘leader’, so why do you keep doing it? He was referring to the latest episode; Dolora’s choice of appearance for which Oriana had berated her; telling her that it was not a choice for being inconspicuous as they needed to be to do their errands. And emphatically insisted, most irately, that Dolora shape up or ship out. The young dancer had chosen orange as the day’s colour- orange low-cut bodice, orange short skirt, orange slippers and knee socks, all to match her orange hair, orange lips and nails. She appeared as a school slut hooker in orange. But the topping on the cake was the shade of orange; selected to exactly match the colour of Oriana’s hair! Much to Oriana’s exasperation, people had stopped to stare at the duo; the imposing Shield Knight and the tiny, skip-along sidekick in matching color; followed a few steps behind by the chortling Baird.

Ever since teaming up in the Challenge of Champions, the Bane priest knew that Dolora was not the empty-headed fluff that she sometimes personified. He knew there had to be a rational reason, though he had no inkling of her true purpose, nor any suspicion that she had a wide sadistic streak and a was cold-blooded murderer many times over

Dolora replied. “Just testing to determine how much chaos our Lady Oriana and the Shield Knights can bear. I think the limit has been reached and so henceforth you will see a more docile follower of the ‘rules’. Besides it keeps me in their minds, distinguishable from the other lackeys and so in their annoyance will select me to prove myself. When I succeed and my talents prove very useful, enable me to rise higher in the organization. Now you know why.”

Baird just shook his head. “Not really. But I admire your style. So I’m just another lackey?”

Dolora laughed as she tucked her arm around his and pressed her breast into him. “Yes, but you are a handsome lackey. Now, let us go to dinner. Pretend you have just paid for a fancy, expensive escort service.”

*I can really use one of your abilities* he thought, remembering his ultimate goal of bringing Uther to heel. “And what are the going prices for fancy escort services these days”, he inquired, tongue in cheek, never having to pay for sex. He had always got all he wanted gratis.

“Ah, for you my pretty, no charge.“ Just *your soul for my Queen.*

“Why do I not believe you? There is always a price”, he mocked.

Dolora laughed. “True, but I am totally worth it.”

The group sat together at the large table of the Dripping Dagger. The others had already arrived when Baird and Dolora entered. They seemed totally preoccupied. While all the other patrons watched and admired Dolora’s attire, only Tormod commented on it. “You went collecting in that? That’s worse than Morticia’s shoes.”

Morticia, other than glaring at Dolora, did not direct the customary snide remarks at her. Instead she seemed nervous and expectant. Dolora could sense a magic aura surrounding her, as if the wizard was ready to unleash a spell whenever the door was opened .*Interesting. Need to find out what caused all this anxiety in her.*

For his part, Shodan was quieter than normal. His eyes shone murder. The expression conveyed was violence on the edge, waiting to erupt. Strangely, Dolora could whiff residue positive energy. To her this indicated that he had been dosed with a huge amount. Either he transformed into a celestial, highly unlikely, or…”get a lot of healing recently?” she inquired.

“F\*\*k off!” was the terse response. *Well no talking with him tonight.*

There was little conversation during the meal. Only Tormod, Baird and Dolora attempted small talk which quickly ended as the tension was so high. Shodan was deep into himself and Morticia’s total attention was scanning g the common room and surveying the entrance. All gave a bounce as the dark-haired wizard slightly rose into spell-casting position as the door sung open. All calmed down as they recognized Lady Oriana. They all relaxed some as she joined them. All except Shodan, who, though he hid it well, Dolora could, sense his hatred for the shield Knight…*ever since she had first used magic on him to charm. He was not a forgiving fellow.*

“I have grave but important news”, were Oriana’s first words to the group. “One of our caravans has gone missing. We assume it has been waylaid. Lord Bly wants us to track it, eliminate those responsible but mainly rescue who we can and as much of the cargo as we can. Our first priority is the rescue of the merchant Mather Ukkhemn, as he is under Shield Knight protection and is a good friend of our guild. Then it is the recovery of the special cargo, then the rescue of as many others as possible. Prepare yourselves for several days travel and meet at the South Gate at pre-dawn tomorrow. Agreed?”

Each had their own reason for agreeing. In the ensuing questions they were told that the complement of half a dozen guards, two merchants and several drivers. The cargo was the usual with some special items that Oriana seemed reluctant to describe in detail. They finished up and departed to prepare themselves.

“You have done well, child”, confided The Mistress. Dolora had returned to the cult’s headquarters to report all that had occurred. She had provided the names and locations of the shops and stores that were being extorted by the Knights of the Shield. Then she had explained about the missing caravan that they would be commencing the search for. The Mistress had, in turn, described the special cargo and why the cult was interested and what she wanted Dolora to do when and if the caravan was found.

“As well, be sure to enmesh yourself to these Knights. Prove yourself trustworthy to them. Make yourself useful. Go now and prepare. Our Queen is concerned.”

Later, lying in bed, at the apartment she shared with Taylor, she remembered about the wooden figurinee and that she would not be available for the rendez-vous. “Taylor, I have a task for you tomorrow evening.” The pretty, petite blonde raised her head from where her lips and tongue had been busy between Dolora’s thighs.

“But Dolora, tomorrow night, I was planning to… Ahhh” she cried out in pain as Dolora, enraged, grabbed her hair, pulling it with huge force.

“Who is the mistress here? Whose orders do you obey!’

“Yours, Dolora. Yours. Ouch, ouch.”

“Then never talk back to me. Your wishes mean nothing. Nothing! Understood?” The last word was punctuated with two hard pinches on Taylor’s nipple, deep enough to leave indented nail marks.

“Ow, ow. I’m sorry. Sorry.”

“Good. Now tomorrow evening go to the Jade Dancer. Find the merchant I told you about and show her the figurine. That will prove that you are to take my place. I want you to seduce her and debauch her. Ready her conversion to our Queen. It should not be difficult. Upon my return, we will finish her together. Understand?”

“Yes”, was the reply in a meek, submissive voice.

“Good. For your insolence, you will receive five lashes of my whip across those sweet buttocks of yours. But for now, get back to work.” She pushed Taylor’s face back between her thighs.

…*to be continued*