**CHAPTER 2-PART 2-Kobolds? Cold-Blooded? Not As Much As We Are**

The rising sun found the group riding out of the South Gate. The horses were on loan from the Order of the Shield Knights. Being Waterdeep, even at this early hour, hundreds were streaming into the city proper; farmers with their carts, merchants with their wagons, even some caravan trains and travellers of all sorts. The day promised to be fresh and clear.

The group was suitably dressed for and equipped for spending days on a forest trail with two exceptions; Morticia who still wore high-heeled boots and Dolora whose trousers were skin-tight, emphasizing every curve and contour of her torso and whose laced jerkin was tied so loosely that much of her firm, pert breasts were visible.

They followed the main road until they reached a point where Oriana directed them to a secondary wide trail that led into the forest. This they followed for the rest of the morning, eating a hardtack as they rode. Baird paced Dolora.

“For a city girl, you seem to have no problem roughing it. And you ride well. I admit I am surprised. Do you know how to use that thing? He referred to the black, bull-hidewhip curled around her shoulder.”

Dolora rejoined with a laugh. “Oh, this city girl knows a lot of tricks, especially whip ones. I learned to ride very well at a very young age. Both as the rider or the ridee. Want to test drive me?”

“I am not a fool. Wait, Tormod is signaling.” The Kalashtar had been leading the group as apparently he had some tracking skills. That was a surprise. They caught up with the now dismounted soulknife.

Tormod pointed off into the forest thickets. “The wagons turned off here and headed that way” he announced to the group.”

“”Now why would they leave the cut trail?” Morticia frowned. “Treachery or they wanted to avoid others to reach their destination unseen? And why would they want to do that? Perhaps contraband cargo?” She looked pointedly at Oriana. “It would be nice to have more information.”

The Shield Knight looked at each of them. “You have to be committed to the Order to get such details. None of you have reached that level yet. Be content in that you are being paid well and do not go inquiring into matters which do not yet concern you. Am I clear?” Her tone implied she would have no problem gutting any dissent.” There was a stiffing in the air.

Morticia held her gaze and then shrugged. “Fine for now. Let’s continue then.”

Dolora relaxed as Oriana indicated to Tormod to follow into the woods. She had notice the pressure and had readied herself to go to Oriana’s aid should some of the other’s challenge the knight. She wanted no harm to come to the Knight. She had her reasons and besides, she knew what the special cargo was. She had noted Shodan’s hand movement towards his dagger just waiting for any spark so he could attack. His hatred for Oriana now undisguised in his look. Both Tormod and Baird seemed ready to defend themselves and worry about sides later. Luckily, she did not have to as the terse moment passed.

They followed the trail deeper into the forest. They followed it until the sun began to set and decided to find a place to camp as it soon would be dark. Lighting a small fire, they ate some rations. There was no chatting. Oriana then ordered the set-up of watches. Dolora ensured that she and Oriana shared the same watch.

It was the other’s turn to sleep while the two kept the last watch. The night had passed uneventfully. Wrapped in a blanket, Dolora tended the small fire as Oriana kept guard. The eastern sky brightened to announce the start of dawn. Oriana spoke her first words.

“So Dolora, I’m curious, why were you ready to defend me earlier?

“Oh, you noticed that?”

“Don’t be stupid. A good warrior is always aware of her surroundings and what is occurring or about to occur. So why? What could you have possibly gained?”

“Well, you are my entry into your Order. Should something happen to you that opening would be lost.”

Oriana snorted part amusement, part disdain. “You, a Shield Knight?” More snorts. “Don’t insult me or the Order.”

“Oh, not a sword slashing, shield bashing knight. I could never be that. My talents lie elsewhere. I would be useful to the Order in other ways.”

Oriana spat. “Dancing? You are a low-level hired associate. The Order does not need dancers.”

“Perhaps not. But I am sure the Order could use a seductress, an enticer, a spy; one who could lure out secrets, useful bits of information. You have seen how men…and women react to me.”

“Uhmm. And you want to do this because…”

Dolora’s lies came easily and convincingly; one of her talents. ”Because I need to belong to something. I came to Waterdeep to make my fortune. I tried quick riches by entering the champions challenge. Well you know how that turned out. Belonging to the Order would give me stability, security and a chance to move up in society.”

“You would have to prove yourself and your loyalty. Naturally you would have to be discreet. No more attention drawing slut stuff.”

“So, test me.”

Oriana focused on her. “We’ll see.” A pause, then, “weren’t you afraid?”

“What do you mean?

“Back then. What if Morticia had challenged my authority and violence ensued. How can a weakling such as you take care of yourself, let alone try and defend me at the same time?”

“I’m a mage.”

“What!!!?” Dolora’s simple statement shocked the knight.

“Oh a very, very, verrry weak one, but I know some spells. Besides, Tormod and Barid were not going to initiate anything. That leaves just the bitch witch and the psychotic tiefling. Morticia was just testing the waters but Shodan was ready to go. He is the one you have to watch. He really doesn’t like you. *There. A little dash of chaos into the group mix.* I guess you shouldn’t have used magic on him to drain his will.” She gave Oriana her little helpless girl look.

The knight just stared and finally shook her head. “A mage. Who would have thought?” She shook her head once more. “I will take all you have said under advisement. Now wake the others. It is time to continue.”

“Well, look at that”. Tormod had been leading the group, following the wagon trail for the past two hours. He was indicating an upturned caravan wagon lying off the trail, in amongst the bushes. With caution, the group approached. The wagon was deserted, a wheel missing, another smashed. Anything that was not part of the wagon’s structure had been removed. The structure bore scorch marks. Signs of a struggle were obvious. There were no bodies, alive or dead.

Oriana had examined the wagon’s markings. “Yes, this is the one.”

“Here. There are lots of tracks and prints heading this way, deeper into the forest” called out Tormod.

“What kinds? How many?” inquired Barid in a deportment signally leadership.

“What am I, some kind of f\*\*kin ranger” growled the soulknife irritated at the cleric’s tone. “Lots. Going that way. He pointed into the forest. “So, who died and made you commander-in-chief?”

“Stop it!” ordered Ariana. She glared at Barid. “I give the commands here. And there will be no infighting. Understood? UnderSTOOD!” Both nodded. “Good. Then let us be off. Follow the tracks.” She led the way. Shodan let out a scoff and followed.

Morticia took Tormod’s hand, leading him away from Baird. “Some advice *my pretty* *minion-to-be*”, she whispered to him only, keeping up with the rogue. “Keep yourself under control and strike unexpectedly. You and I can aid each other immensely. Shall I explain how….?”

Dolora and Baird were the last. She entwined her arm in his. “Come on handsome. We don’t want to be left behind. So you’re used to giving out orders like a general. Interesting, *something to be checked into* but this group is not used to following military commands and we don’t want to do anything to break up this little group, do we? *It will spoil my plans and I cannot allow that, cleric of Bane.*”

It was nearing dark when they arrived at a large deep ravine. The valley below was filled with bones; humanoid skulls, ribs and arm bones, mixed in with antlers, hoofs and horns. It was a melange of humanoid and animal skeletons. Along the walls of the ravine, rising above the bone graveyard were cave openings; three on the near side, two on the other.

“The tracks lead down into the ravine and then seem to disperse. There are tracks around all the cave mouths” he reported to Ariana. “What do you want us to do?”

The Knight studied the situation. “We check out the caves. Start with the nearest one and work our way across.” She turned to face the others. “We will have to fight the caravan attackers. This will be our first battle as a team. Learn from it. Try and complement each other’s abilities. We are not extorting money now. Kill whatever gets in your way. It is your first test.” The last words were more directed at Dolora.

“Tormod, you are the best of the worse tracker here. Take point. Baird, since you like him so much, you follow. Then the rest of you.”

They filed into the cave entrance. After several dozen feet, the cave widened into a well-worked 30 paced wide and long space before narrowing again. The narrow passage continued another 30 paces to meet with a tunnel to form a T-junction. It was deep enough to be beyond the reach of daylight. Tormod lit a sunrod. The group moved on to the junction.

Morticia had been examining the walls. “Worked stone. Someone lives here.”

“Shodan sniffed. “Smells like a cross between wet dog and stagnant water in here.”

Tormod and Baird reached the junction. “Well look at this” reported the soul knife. “There is a pit here. Not too well hidden. It appears that it was to be a trap.” The two together uncovered a large 10 foot deep and wide pit in front of and passing into the junction. The bottom was lined with sharpened stakes. “Oriana, the pit is too large to jump. We will have to walk down and cross it.”

The knight pondered. “Fine. You two cross over to the other side. We will follow.”

The Kalashtar and the cleric headed down. They made their way across, avoiding the stakes. They were just nearing the opposite end when there was a commotion of snarls and squeals. Along the walls of the pit, four burrows opened up, each revealing a huge, mouth foaming, red-eyed, crazed dire rat; each the size of ocelots, leaping upon the two.

Two rats bore down Tormod, biting and clawing. Similarly, two landed on Barid. At this point, events happened quickly. Morticia spellcast, encasing herself in shimmering force armor. Oriana leaped into the pit, calling on Shodan to help. The tiefling had drawn his dagger but hesitated in joining her. To Dolora it appeared that he was of two minds about aiding the knight.

Meanwhile, in the pit, Oriana hard kicked a rat off Barid, her sword decapitating it in mid-air. Her back stroke sliced through another as it was tearing up Tormod’s back. But this manoeuver exposed her to Barid’s second rat, which vaulted at her, teeth sinking deeply into her thigh, tearing out a large chunk of flesh.

All this occurred in the time it took Dolora to reach into her inherent magical reservoir. Forming the magical energy into strands of force, she materialized brilliant red whip-shaped magic missiles to be launched. Unerringly, they struck the rat, exploding it into a ball of blood, guts and bone.

Barid, free of rats, pushed painfully up, and, black mace in hand, brought it down hard on the last rat’s skull. The effect was the crushing of its head. Silence fell as the rat squealed its life. The whole battle had taken but a few moments.

Now all was quiet as Barid slowly attended to their wounds. Oriana, standing, covered in gore, glanced up at Dolora. She nodded to the mage. Dolora nodded back. *I may have just passed my first test.* Then she noted Shodan and Morticia staring at her, the tiefling with some surprise, the wizard as if mentally entering new data into an equation. “Well good thing I know a little magic, because you two were sure a big help.”

“I’m do not waste my talents on f\*\*kin rats” came back Shodan’s reply. He joined the others in the pit.

“Don’t get too cocky about yourself” were Morticia’s words. “This was nothing.” She left after Shodan.

“*Screw you witch bitch. Just don’t get in my way.”* thought Dolora. She trailed after.

By now, Barid’s healing had dealt with their most serious wounds. “The pit was not the trap” explained Tormod. We were meant to think so while it lurked us into the true trap, those damned rats.”

“Oriana responded, “be it as it may, we have survived and the inhabitants now know we are here. So we are always on alert, weapons ready. Let us show them, we are not to be trifled with. Kill all who would oppose us.”

“Which way at the junction?”

“Doesn’t matter. Pick one. We will explore all until we find survivors and the cargo. Let’s go people.”

At the junction, Tormod turned left. The others followed, ever alert. The tunnel, proceeded straight for about twenty feet, then opened into a large 30’x30’ space. It was littered with all manner of broken discarded, eroded tools, blades, leather pieces and odds and ends. They began a quick search.

“This must be the place where they dump their unusable items but want to keep the materials. Now this is interesting” declared Shodan, picking up some items. “Scales. Fresh too.”

“Let me see” spoke Morticia, taking them and examining them in her light. “Interesting. These are osteodermic scales, the ones lying beneath the surface epidermal scales, commonly found on crocodiles, lizards, certain dinosaurs and of course dragons and their kin.”

“What? How do you know all this? These could have been shed by a dragon? The idea of owning dragon scales had possibilities for coin.”

“Oh please. I know because unlike the rest of you, I am a wizard; a very intelligent and well-read wizard. No not a dragon-from the size and outlay I would say kobolds.”

The others had all been listening to this exchange. Oriana asked “so kobolds, then we will have to go even slower to avoid the traps the tricky bastards are known to secure their lair?”

“The only trap we have so far come across was that pit-rat thing. The scarcity and weakness of this implies to mean that this tribe of kobolds is well on its way to extinction.” She paused in thought. “Most likely competition from whatever resides in the other cave structures.”

“So now we know what we are dealing with. Regardless, we keep alert. Back we go.”

Accordingly the group retraced their steps, past the junction. The corridor kept going, revealing side rooms which indicated more signs of recent habitation. As they moved along, a stench began to permeate the air; a stench of meat rotting. The corridor branched and they turned in the direction of the odor. The corridor emptied into another junction. To their left was a door; to their right, the passageway continued for 30 feet before widening and ending at another door. The stench was strongest at the left door.

“First door first” ordered Oriana. She kicked it down and events unfolded quickly. The broken door exposed a chamber full of rotting meat, Bound and gagged on the floor were three humans from the caravan; two guards and a merchant. All three had been mistreated. Also in the room, lying in wait were a score of humanoid lizard-like creatures. They stood about two and a half feet tall and were covered in reddish-brown-black scales. Their legs appeared sinewy and double-jointed while their hands, ending in long clawed fingers, clutched a small sword or axe. Their jaws, snout and face were crocodilian with two dragon-like horns protruding from their head. A rat-like tail completed their body shape. They sprang into action immediately.

The only one wearing any clothing spoke out a word and balls of force slammed into the knight knocking her back. The others gave loud yelps and charged. Tormod manifested a psychic soul blade; handle in hand, blade inside the attacking kobold. A quick slash up gutted the creature. The smell of fresh intestines added to the rotten meat odour. Shodan deftly side-stepped his attacker, and with an impressive twirl punched his dagger into the back of its skull. Then the two counter-charged.

Oriana recovered and charged in after. A quick shield slash and sword thrust reduced the kobolds by two. Just then, more balls of force struck, staggering her. From the doorway Dolora released her own magic. Again red whip-shaped missiles zoomed from her hand striking the dressed kobold. Striking it, they appeared to fizzle, doing no damage. *What the…CRAP*. *Protected*. A kobold rushed at her, shrieking in draconic. “Die warm-blood”. Before she could react, Barid stepped in between, his black mace swept up into the kobold’s snout, crushing the jaw and lifting it up and back in its death throes.

Tormod and Shodan were busily engaging and killing, when they heard Morticia’s call for backup. “Here, over here. They are starting to break through.” This was followed by loud yips and yelps. The noise came from down the tunnel by the other door. “Go” commanded Oriana, just as two more force balls slammed into her, causing gasps of pain as the magical energy burned into her. The two ran out to aid the wizard.

Morticia had been waiting outside in the tunnel area, when she heard the far door being opened, releasing a small bunch of screaming kobolds. Speedily she spoke arcane word, releasing a magical spell that greased the stone floor ahead of the kobolds. They began to slip and slide, some even fell. All this slowed them down. As they continued forward, more arcane words created a wall of smoke between her and the little humanoids. Still they staggered on, regards of the nausea caused by passing through the smoke. It was at this point she called for backup.

The two dagger experts rushed past her and methodically began to decimate the struggling kobolds. Being nauseated , they offered fierce but minimal resistance. Soon the corridor was strewn with kobold corpses.

Back in the prisoner room, more magic missiles struck at the Shield Knight; enough that they blew her backwards rendering her unconscious, now easy prey. “Barid! Here! Oriana needs help”, shouted Dolora. Her concern was mostly due that she the shield knight was her ticket to better things. She conjured a cold orb to hurl at the kobold spellcaster. It missed, but it kept the caster too busy dodging to spell cast again. Barid promptly dispatched another kobold and hurried to the knight’s side. There he began to heal her. The two remaining kobold soldiers advanced menacingly towards the preoccupied cleric. ‘Keep them away, Dolora”, he barked out. “Keep them away, so I can finish.”

The beauteous maid uncoiled her whip-dagger from her curvy, succulent waist. It was the perfect means, especially in the hands of an expert wielder. Sonic cracks resounded as the whip back and forth buffeted the air. The kobolds were forced to dodge the whip or be lashed and tripped. The reach of the weapon kept them at bay.

Seeing this, the spellcaster shrilled in draconic, “Kill the warm-blood prisoners. Now!” The two soldiers retreated from Dolora. She just watched as the two mercilessly slit the throats of the bound, helpless gagged prisoners. It was about this time that Oriana rose up beside Barid, her body cured of the force effects.

“No. Stop them! We need them alive!” she called out, too late.

Mortica, Tormod and Shodan abruptly appeared at the doorway, the latter two sopped in blood. Shodan, especially, had found the killing exhilarating. “We decimated the tribal warriors” reported the wizard. “There should be no more resistance.” In draconic she addressed the kobolds. “We have found the egg cache. Surrender or see them and the remaining females destroyed, your tribe erased.”

The wizard lizard dropped to its knees, ordering the other two to do so as well. “We surrender. Dead we are useless, alive, we will serve you.”

“A wise choice. It is agreed. You will serve our whim and in return your tribe can re-build.”

“Well played Morticia”, complimented Oriana. The knight next addressed Dolora I an iron-cold voice. “You stupid, stupid slut. You thought-challenged trollop. “She indicated the dead prisoners. “ You just watched as they were slaughtered. We needed them alive. We need to know what happened to the others. A thinking person would have least SAVED JUST ONE OF THEM!” The last was shrieked out in frustration.

AT first Dolora was confused by Oriana’s outburst. She had no particular interest in defending the prisoners; her, especially since none of them were who she wanted to find. Actually she had enjoyed watching their life blood ebbing, seeing the hopelessness and the helplessness in their eyes as they bled out. Then she became angry. Her eyes flashed red as she suppressed the demonic urges to rip and kill.

*You as\*licker. If I didn’t need you…Maybe if you weren’t in need of healing all the time… maybe if I didn’t hold them off so you had time to get healed…maybe if next time ; no not yet. There will be time later.*

Those were her thoughts as she quenched her ire. The image of Oriana being flogged and anal-gang-raped by a dretch horde faded away. She lowered her head as if ashamed.

“I’m so sorry. It’s true. It’s just I am so weak. It took all I had just to keep them off you.” Then she raised her head pretending as if a new thought struck her. “But all is not lost. The kobolds; they will know. And we can make them tell where the tribal treasure is as well.” As she spoke she had moved to the tribal shaman and had placed a dagger to its throat. She spoke in draconic. Her dagger began to cut.

“Speak! The other prisoners, where are they and where is the special cache? Speak or die now.” The dagger cut deeper. The kobold hissed. Then she heard Oriana unsheathe her sword.

“Kill him and I will kill you”, were the knight’s next words. Dolora looked up to see the orange-haired knight standing over her, sword pointed at her breast. The look in her eyes indicated the truth of it.

Slowly and carefully Dolora moved away. ”But why? They’re just kobolds.”

“Yes, but they are our kobolds now. They have made a contract. They are ours to use as we see fit and in return they get to survive.”

It was the word ‘contract’ that made the demon-bred realize her mistake. She looked to the others; Morticia calculating this new development, Shodan anticipating violence…and liking it, Barid frowning and Tormod puzzled. They were all dammed lawfuls, the whole triple damned buch of them.. A contract had been agreed to. It mattered not that the kobolds would survive only as slaves as long as the letter of the contract was upheld. Whereas she and her kin would have tortured and slaughtered the kobolds after getting the needed information, these dammed lawfuls meant for them to survive. It was an error in her behaviour that she meant not to repeat, unless of course, she happened to be the one in control.

She gave out a gasp as if totally surprised. “Of course”, she blubbered. “Oh, I’m such a fuddlehead. I’m sorry , Oriana. I just got carried away about your admonishment for not saving the prisoners that I didn’t stop to think. I’m new at this and this being my first combat and all; I just wanted to please you so much, to prove myself worthy that I …oh please, pardon me this one time and show me, teach me how to act and react and I promise to make you proud of me”…*please say yes you f\*\*kin bitch.* She forced tears from her eyes.

The knight just stared for a moment. Then without warning she backhanded Dolora across her head, knocking her to the ground. As much as her demonic passions raged, she forced herself to lie still on the cold stone floor. Should the knight continue her aggression, then she would unleash those passions and f\*\*k the consequences. But she would wait. A few seconds ticked away.

“Get up”, she heard the knight say. “I expect lesson learned. Next time, I will not be forgiving.” Dolora decided to lie there a bit longer to allow her composure to re-establish itself. She heard Oriana continue, addressing the kobold chieftain, her tone imperious. “Where are the rest of the prisoners? Speak the truth or your line ends here and now.”

“Mercy , great one. Mercy. The others we were forced to deliver to the goblins, in return for a pittance of food. Help us. They have tormented us for too long. Help us against them and we will belong to you forever.”

“Tomorrow, you will release all your available warriors to take us to theses goblins. In the meantime, you will clean up this mess and provide us your best quarters. We will spend the night there and visit these goblins in the morning. Get to work!”

From her position on the floor, Dolora watched as Morticia’s spiked heels thumped by her head. “By now, the goblins may have left nothing for us to retrieve”, were her words to the knight.

“True. But we have to verify and teach these little bastards a lesson they won’t quickly forget; a lesson to teach them to leave the caravans of the Shield Knights alone. Now let us rest and prepare These kobolds have been thoroughly cowed. We own them now. We can rest with no worry.”

“I agree. The watches should be fairly easy. I’ll get Tormod and have the kobolds show us their luxury suite”, she snorted amused. She moved away and once again Morticia’s high heels stood by Dolora’s head. The wizard peered down at her. “Just for the record, your use of magic was pathetic. Magic misslles? That’s it? Just a one trick pony or should I say one trick slut? Stick to what you’re good at. Lying down, thighs apart, waiting for the next penetration.” The high heels clacked away. Dolora made a mental note to never allow Morticia a quick or painless death.

The next face that peered down was Baird’s. He offered his hand. “Come on girl. We’re the last. Time to go”. Dolora grasped his hand and allowed herself to be pulled up. *He truly is beautiful with those celestial eyes.* The kalastar had a more earthly beauty but the ruthless hunger for power that she sensed radiating from him attracted her. Besides Tormod , at the moment seemed to be glued to Morticia. *Actually that may come in useful*. Plans swirled in her head as to how to use him to bring down the witch bitch.

“I really screwed up, didn’t I?” she indicated the corpses that the kobolds were dragging out.

“Them?” Barid shrugged. They couldn’t tell us more than what these kobolds will, and besides they would just have been extra baggage. This way is much cleaner and easier.”

“But Oriana…, her reaction…”

The cleric smirked. “I will leave that to you to figure out.”

Dolora filed that statement away for later study. She stepped into him, her breasts pushed up against his armor and angled so that he could easily gaze upon their ripeness. “So why do you do it?”

He chuckled. “Your seduction techniques are quite wasted on me.” *Perhaps so, but you are staring at my titties and I have yet to use my full power on you. “*Do what*?”* he continued.

“Two things. First why are you being kind to me and second why are you always there to save Oriana’s ass?”

“Well, you and I go back competing against these others, if I remember correctly. That sort of creates a bond, no? And so we should stick together. I help you; you help me kind of thing. *Actually, you will be useful in obtaining what should be rightfully mine and that of the Dark Lord.*

*You’re full of crap, priest of Bane, but I can play along. “*Yes it’s good to have someone reliable near you. Thank you for that. Now, as for the knight?”

His humorous response made her gawf. “Oh, her ass is the best part of her, no? Well worth saving, is it not;-just for its beauty alone. But I do it most likely for the same reason you do…” Now she became alert. *What? How much does he know? Is he talking about my pretend reason or my true reason? Will have to take care around him and pry into how much he knows of the truth*.”…and since I am the only one here who can cure.” *Not true Dark Lord suck, but no need for me to reveal that quite yet. “*So let’s join the others before they become more suspicious then they already are.”

They re-grouped in what the kobolds said was the most luxurious and safest chamber; if dried leaves and branches on the rock floor were luxury. Also they had to share the area with egg clutches and it still stank like wet dog. As they bedded down, Dolora spotted an interaction. Gazing around, she realized she was the only one who spotted it. *Well, that is most interesting*, *yes very interesting.* She lay down, scheming how best to use what she saw to her advantage. Soon she slept, her dreams filed with the many and wondrous ways she could torture her victims.