

VIGILANT

THROUGH SHADOWS AND DREAMS BOOK ONE



A Scarred Lands Novel by
Sarah L. Stewart and Frances Stewart

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THROUGH SHADOWS AND DREAMS I: VIGILANT

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Dedication

To Stewart Wieck, without whom none of this would exist. Thank you for all these wonderful worlds to play in!
—Fran and Sarah

To my gaming group: Fran, Kevin (Kane's player, who provided us with "Lenahr"), Jonathan, Becca, Dean, John (for reading this back when it was just a messy dream), and especially to Amy, for providing Eochaid with a new purpose in life. And to Chris, for listening to my game plots for hours and hours on end.
—Sarah

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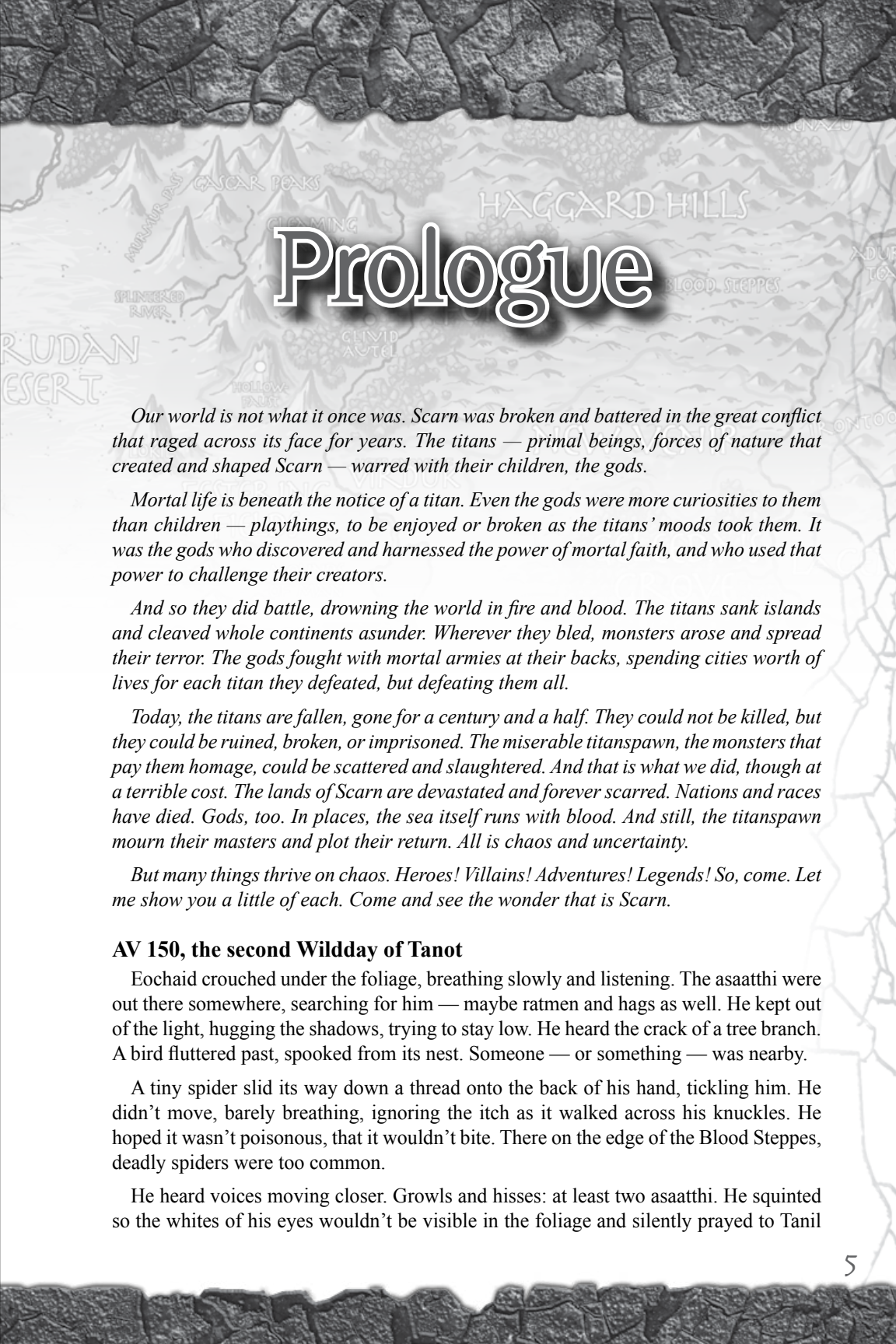
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Prologue

Our world is not what it once was. Scarn was broken and battered in the great conflict that raged across its face for years. The titans — primal beings, forces of nature that created and shaped Scarn — warred with their children, the gods.

Mortal life is beneath the notice of a titan. Even the gods were more curiosities to them than children — playthings, to be enjoyed or broken as the titans' moods took them. It was the gods who discovered and harnessed the power of mortal faith, and who used that power to challenge their creators.

And so they did battle, drowning the world in fire and blood. The titans sank islands and cleaved whole continents asunder. Wherever they bled, monsters arose and spread their terror. The gods fought with mortal armies at their backs, spending cities worth of lives for each titan they defeated, but defeating them all.

Today, the titans are fallen, gone for a century and a half. They could not be killed, but they could be ruined, broken, or imprisoned. The miserable titanspawn, the monsters that pay them homage, could be scattered and slaughtered. And that is what we did, though at a terrible cost. The lands of Scarn are devastated and forever scarred. Nations and races have died. Gods, too. In places, the sea itself runs with blood. And still, the titanspawn mourn their masters and plot their return. All is chaos and uncertainty.

But many things thrive on chaos. Heroes! Villains! Adventures! Legends! So, come. Let me show you a little of each. Come and see the wonder that is Scarn.

AV 150, the second Wildday of Tanot

Eochaid crouched under the foliage, breathing slowly and listening. The asaatthi were out there somewhere, searching for him — maybe ratmen and hags as well. He kept out of the light, hugging the shadows, trying to stay low. He heard the crack of a tree branch. A bird fluttered past, spooked from its nest. Someone — or something — was nearby.

A tiny spider slid its way down a thread onto the back of his hand, tickling him. He didn't move, barely breathing, ignoring the itch as it walked across his knuckles. He hoped it wasn't poisonous, that it wouldn't bite. There on the edge of the Blood Steppes, deadly spiders were too common.

He heard voices moving closer. Growls and hisses: at least two asaatthi. He squinted so the whites of his eyes wouldn't be visible in the foliage and silently prayed to Tanil

that his camouflage would be enough to hide him, and that he'd left no tracks, no broken branches, and nothing more notable than an animal trail.

He could see the asaathhi now as they closed in, their snake tails brushing through the undergrowth, disrupting the detritus of the forest floor. They left a trail and were easy to track, unlike the ratmen. But in this case, Eochaid was the hunted — not the hunter — and asaathhi were much more dangerous than common ratmen.

They came within a few feet of Eochaid's hiding place, tails sweeping — so close. His fingers closed on his sword, but he dared not draw it yet. The sound of the motion and sheen of the metal was too much of a risk. Hiding was still his best chance to complete his mission and bring the artifact to Vesh.

The lead asaath stopped, sniffing the air. Eochaid held his breath, praying the mud was enough to cover his scent. It would be enough against a ratman, but he knew too little about the asaathhi to be sure. The asaath hissed to his brethren, gesturing forward, and the group moved on.

Eochaid waited as the asaathhi moved away, hardly believing his luck. He was the last of his platoon, the last who could keep the artifact safe. With silent thanks to Tanil the Huntress, or any god who would listen, he exhaled slowly and patiently waited several more minutes in case they returned.

Looking down, he noticed the spider had gone.

• • •

Eochaid continued towards the river and away from the Steppes. It was years since he'd last been here, but he'd remembered enough to take tremendous care until he was well past South Fang to avoid the monsters that lurked nearby. If he kept heading east from here he could make it to the relative safety of the Eni River and from there find a trader heading north to Vesh, back to Lave. After all, years ago that was the first long journey he'd made.

As darkness fell, he climbed a tree to rest and wait for moonrise. He would have waited longer, but he needed to keep moving and stay ahead of the trackers. The light of the moons would guide his way.

Belsameth's moon rose first — a sliver, but bright enough on the cloudless night that Eochaid could at least see beyond his nose. He continued on, offering one short, silent prayer out of habit to Belsameth to thank her for the light, and then praying in earnest to Madriel to keep him safe.

Exhaustion started setting in hours later as the second moon rose: the Nameless Orb, fat, full, and foreboding. A bright light in the sky that overshadowed the thin dagger of Belsameth's moon, and an ill omen. When the Nameless Orb shone full, about once every three months, it brought unease and bad fortune. It was the only object in the sky whose cycles did not align with the days, months, and seasons decreed by the gods. While its brighter light was a better guide for Eochaid, it also melted the shadows that hid him from his hunters.

Ratmen thrive on misery, thought Eochaid. No big surprise that they worship the cursed moon. And now it might bring their allies right to me.

As Eochaid moved on, he could hear a distant sound ahead — some kind of rumble or murmur. *The river. If I can make it to the river I'll be safe.*

Excitement drove him faster, though fatigue staggered his steps. Tree branches crowded around him, snagging at his clothes and belongings from the darkness like living creatures. Yet the path, with its rocks and roots, felt familiar, like he'd run this course before.

Eochaid's pack jumped as something struck his shoulder. He threw himself down behind a large tree and slung the pack around to check his precious cargo. There was a crossbow bolt lodged in the pack's leather back brace, which had barely stopped the bolt from tearing into his shoulder. The pack was only holed, not torn. The artifact inside would be unharmed — none of the vigilants' weapons or magic had so much as scratched it.

Back pressed to the tree, Eochaid drew his blades. They'd seen him, and they were too close. He had a better chance fighting now in melee than running and getting shot down. He slung his pack across his chest and then waited, inhaling slowly to calm himself and straining his ears for movement.

Eochaid struck with his left blade as the first asaath came around the tree, slashing across the creature's chest. A second asaath came around from the other side to flank him, putting Eochaid at a disadvantage. Both asaathi pressed their attacks at once, and he barely parried in time against the second strike. Left, left, right — Eochaid and his two assailants attacked and parried in a whirl of steel, sweat, fists, and blood. He staggered slightly when a serpentine tail struck his knee, but lunged back to stab up and under the creature's armor. Viscera and sticky, dark red blood rolled down his arm, and his face twisted into a snarling smile at the tangy smell. *One down*, he thought.

The gutted asaath fell. The second disengaged and stepped back. Eochaid spun to face it as its loaded crossbow rose and fired. The bolt *shirred* as it scraped the artifact in his pack, twisted away from his vitals, and struck his right arm. He charged the asaath, ramming its crossbow with his shoulder, and struck upward at its neck with his left blade. With his right, he weakly stabbed at the asaath's belly as they fell. It was enough; the creature gurgled and died in a rush of blood.

Eochaid rolled to his knees, breathing heavily, the adrenaline of the battle still rushing through him. The bolt in his shoulder had fallen out in the fight. He sheathed his weapons clumsily, his right arm throbbing. He could still flex his fingers. *Not broken.*

Still, he was covered in blood, although how much belonged to him and how much was from the asaathi was not clear. He tugged his scarf from around his neck and tied it as tight around the pulsing, dripping wound as he could with his left hand. He was trained to fight with both hands; tying knots with his off-hand was more difficult.

Eochaid quickly checked the bodies: lightly armored, with only knives and crossbows. *Just scouts.*

He'd seen more of them earlier. The rest — the warriors — would be coming soon, looking for their comrades and for him. There was no time to search the corpses more closely. He staggered to his feet and moved on, his wounded shoulder burning. Asaatthi were known for poisoning their weapons, he remembered Gandy saying. "Easier to run down prey when it's puking its guts out." Speed was now more important than stealth, though he hoped any trail he left would not be too obvious.

As he ran, the forest began to tilt dizzily around him. The rush of the river ahead echoed strangely, and the colors of the trees and stones took on a sickly cast. His feet carried him toward safety, and he trusted them. He could no longer do more than run and not fall down.

• • •

The trees began to thin. The river's roar became lyrical, carrying snippets of meaning, as if the river was calling to him. Not water: voices, and music!

A mess of memory and reality tangled his senses, making it difficult to tell what was real.

He reached the edge of the forest. A stockade wall came into view, with buildings and light beyond it.

Not the river. Gone too far...wrong way?

He moved on instinct, stumbled through the open gate toward the light and the people. His vision swam. He felt as if barbed iron bands squeezed his chest. His right arm was numb, and a tingling cold was fingering its way from his shoulder towards his brain.

The artifact sat heavy against his chest, just as it had when Gandy pressed it into his hands, entrusted him with it. When Drask told him to run. When they turned to fight the asaaththi.

Complete the mission, he thought, and staggered on.

He made his way toward the music and bobbing lights, weaving between buildings. Sweet perfume filled the air, a reminder of warm spring days. It mingled with the scent of roasting meat and fresh bread. Children's laughter echoed. Eochaid rounded a corner and stumbled into a blur of faces. His numb feet tangled, and he bumped into a large figure.

"Hey, watch where you're—" the figure growled.

Eochaid gasped. A hulking gray gargoyle with a mane of flowers glowered down at him. He yelled and threw himself backward, crashing to the ground.

"Whoa, hey! I'm not gonna *eat* you." The creature leaned down to grab him, and he flinched and raised a blood-slicked hand to fend it off. The monster paused and stared at him, surprise on its craggy features. "Someone get help!" it shouted over its shoulder into the crowd. "This guy's bleeding, bad!"

It reached for him again. "C'mere, fella. Let me get a look..."

Weakly, he struck out at the huge hands grabbing his wrists. It caught him anyway, holding him down with rough, strong fingers.

Gargoyle? Doesn't make sense....

He shook his head to clear some of the dizziness there.

"Stop fighting!" the gargoyle snapped. "What's the matter with you?" Its voice was rough, but friendly. Her — *her* voice. She was an orc woman.

Not a monster, then.

But not necessarily an ally. Eochaid tried to wrest free, but he had no strength. His tingling limbs no longer obeyed his commands.

The orc grabbed at the flowers in her hair as they slipped down over one eye — a wreath? "Where's that damn druid?" she bellowed, and Eochaid's ears rang.

"Okay, let's get you up. Can you stand?"

Eochaid shook his head, barely able to move.

"Got it. Okay, I'm going to carry you. Sorry about the indignity." She scooped him up, pack and all, and handed him the crumpled wreath. "Hold this." As she carried him through the crowd, blood dripped onto the flowers, mingling with their colors.

"Let me pass," a commanding voice called out as more people crowded around them. An elf maiden, also wreathed with a flower crown, pushed through the bystanders. "What's wrong?"

The orc jerked her head down at Eochaid. "This guy's been hurt pretty bad. Covered in blood. Can you fix him?"

"Maybe. Find me a place to work and I'll take a look."

Eochaid's eyes closed. He hung in the orc's arms as they discussed where to take him.

"Here. Bring him to my house," said another voice. It sounded somehow familiar, but the effort of breathing left him no spare energy to think. "We can help."

There was brightness and a harsh gasp. "Gods! Eochaid? How—?"

Eochaid's eyes opened to blue eyes looking down at him, just like his own. A boy — no, a *man* held up a lantern, wonder and horror on his face.

Eochaid struggled to speak.

"Shh. Let's get you inside first. Hulda, in here!"

Eochaid's sinking mind grasped at the voice, at the sense of home, of kinship, of brotherhood.

Then he slumped down against the orc's chest, his eyes closing again. *Must be delirious*, he thought. *It can't be him...he's too old.*

His hand swung limply at the orc's side as she walked, boots now thudding across a wooden floor.

"Put him on my bed. In here."

"But the blood...."

“Seriously, don’t worry about it.” Gentle hands cupped and lifted under his arms. The familiar voice continued, close to his ear. “Sorry it’s not your room, Eochaid. Mom turned it into storage a while back. Didn’t think you’d mind. She might have mentioned it in one of her letters....”

Hands settled Eochaid onto a bed. Familiar scents flooded over him, though the effort to draw breath was growing too great for him to think of much else.

Bodies shifted. “Okay, step back. Hey, can you — *umph*. He won’t let go of this pack.” In his ear, the elf’s soft but insistent voice: “Sir, I need you to let go so I can examine you.”

Eochaid clutched onto the artifact. The mission! Still need to complete my mission.

The familiar voice returned. *Too deep. Can it really be him?* “Eo, I need you to let go of the pack, okay? I’ve got it, brother. I’ll watch it and keep it safe. Okay?”

Eochaid nodded. *Yes. Kane. Someone I can trust.* He loosened his grip, arms falling away from the bundle of canvas and straps.

“Jylla,” Kane said, “can you get my mother? She’ll be at the food tables serving pies. She’s wearing a yellow apron and looks...um...like a mom. Her name’s Myriam.”

“Right-o!” squeaked a new voice. “I’m on it.”

Gentle hands removed Eochaid’s shirt, and he heard a sharp intake of breath. The elf began to chant in a low sing-song. His head swam, and he didn’t understand the words. Then his chest started to tingle warmly. *Healing magic.*

The pain in his arm lessened, and sensation returned to his fingers and feet. His breathing eased as the fist around his chest released, and his head stopped pounding. He felt better, but still far from normal. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

The elf maiden stood over him, a slight smile on her face. His brother Kane stood at the foot of the bed, his face uncertain.

“Thank you,” he said. He was home. In Trela, in his brother’s bedroom. *Home.*

“I’ve done all that I can,” the druid said. “I healed most of your wounds. But the poison...I was only able to undo some of the damage and delay its effects for a time. I don’t have the proper magic to cure it. Only that, or an antidote, will work.”

Regret clouded her face. “It’s still in your system, still slowly killing you. I’m sorry.”

Achill flooded his body, an echo of the poison. For an instant he ached with the familiarity of this room, of his brother’s face, ached for all his losses, for his dead friends...for his mother, and the tears she was coming now to shed.

The mission. His mind cleared.

“How long?” Eochaid asked her.

“An hour or two. Perhaps three.”

“*Gods!* Only hours?” Kane raked a hand through his hair in frustration. “I’ll get Radraan. He might be able to help. Cure the poison.”

“No!” cried Eochaid. He sat up shakily and reached for Kane’s hand. “Not Radraan, he’s a cleric of Belsameth. You can’t trust him. If he finds out about the amphora... who knows what he’ll do. It needs to get back to Vesh. Back to Lave. The home commander will know what to do with it.”

The front door slammed open. Their mother called from the next room. “Kane? They said Eochaid is here! He returned for the Carnival?”

Eochaid caught his brother’s eyes. Kane looked at him, at his wounds, and nodded.

“In here, Mom,” Kane called. “Yeah, Eo’s back. But he’s not here for the festival.”

Eochaid’s mother entered, followed by a child — no, a grown halfling woman — and the orc who’d carried him in earlier.

His mother knelt by the bed and threw her arms around him, squeezing tightly, then leaned back and inspected him. “Oh, you’ve been hurt!”

As she made to rise, Eochaid seized her hand. “Mom,” he said, trying to catch her eye.

“Don’t worry, dear, I have clean linen *somewhere*...”

“Mom. It’s okay, the druid healed my...my wounds already.”

Myriam Lenahr’s sigh of relief stung, but Eochaid pushed aside his grief and let the lie stand. *Madriel, let me see her happy for just a few minutes.* She hugged him again, kissing his head. “Oh, but it’s *so* good to see you, whatever brought you here!”

Eochaid smiled a small smile and squeezed his mother’s hand.

“Oh, mercy,” she said, glancing around the newcomers who had followed her into the house. “And I haven’t even greeted your friends, Kane!”

Kane waved away her discourtesy. “No, Mom, it’s fine. We—”

The bed creaked as the little halfling sprang up and crouched on the footboard.

“Hi! I’m Jylla! Good to meet you, Kane’s mother and brother.” She reached forward and shook each of their hands.

“These are my friends. That’s Hulda...” she said, gesturing to the orc, who nodded, “... and Juliana,” she continued, pointing to the elven druid sitting behind Eochaid.

Jylla leaned in closer to Eochaid. “Did you know that your brother is completely bad-ass? He won the archery contest. He beat *me*!” She shook her head in exaggerated disbelief. “Nobody beats *me*!”

“Yeah, he’s impressive,” said the orc, jolting Kane with a slap on the back. “Held his own pretty well on the log roll, too!”

Eochaid laughed at the gush of cheerful chatter and looked over at his brother with a fresh eye. “Guess he takes after our dad. Gods, you’ve really grown up, kid.”

Kane’s smile wiped away a little of the sorrow in his eyes. “It’s been a couple of years since you left, Eo. We haven’t gotten a letter from you in almost two seasons. Yeah, my archery’s improved a lot. I’m planning to be a ranger, just like you.”

Kane had been about sixteen when Eochaid left to join the vigil. The younger brother Eochaid remembered had grown at least six inches and his voice had deepened considerably. A ruddy stubble covered his chin, and a longbow hung across his back. Now he wanted to be a ranger, and he already looked the part. *Two years? Yes, he's of age.*

"No, Kane, not like me. Be a *better* ranger than me. I was a fuck-up as a ranger."

Myriam tutted. "Is that how they teach you to talk up north?" She swatted his head. "You're a vigilant. A vigilant of Vesh. And a good one, by what you said in your letters. They don't use language like that."

Eochaid laughed. "Vigilants are wilderness soldiers, mom. We definitely cuss."

He looked over at Kane and his friends. "While I'd love to catch up with my family, we don't have much time. Juliana, you're a druid, correct? Would you be willing to help the Veshian Vigil on an urgent matter? Something the druids will care about?"

The elf nodded. "Yes. My people have long been friends of the vigils of Vesh. I am willing to assist in whatever way I can."

"Assistance? Is it going to be an adventure?" Jylla chimed. "Adventures are what I was born for. I'm in! When do we leave?"

The orc's grin showed off her chipped yellow fangs. "We'll do a damn sight better with whatever this is than you can do from here on your deathbed."

Myriam gasped. "*Deathbed?*"

"Gods, Hulda!" Kane snapped.

"What," Hulda said, "isn't it obvious? I could tell from the next room, the way you were talking about it. He's a goner."

Tears crowded Myriam's eyes. She glanced between her two sons, hope fading as she saw the grim set to their faces.

"Mom, I've been poisoned," Eochaid explained as he held his mother's hand. "The druid here? She slowed it down some, but it's still killing me. I don't have much time."

Hulda shrugged. "There's worse ways to go."

Myriam's eyes widened. "Radraan! I'll go get him. He knows poisons. I'll pay him, and he'll fix you up."

"No! Mom! Not *Radraan*, he's a..." But she was already gone, running out the door.

"...cleric of Belsameth," he mumbled. "Last thing we need."

"He's a bastard, but at least he's *our* bastard," said Kane. "And he's always had kind of a thing for Mom. If he can help, it's worth the risk."

Eochaid's gut twisted. "Kane, no Lenahr should ever have *anything* to do with Belsameth, or her clerics."

Kane's frowned in thought. Then he nodded. "Okay, Eo. What is it that you need us to do?"

Hulda raised an eyebrow. “*Us?*”

“Whatever you’re doing for my brother, I’m going to help,” Kane replied.

Hulda grunted and nodded. “Alright. You’re handy enough with a bow. And in my experience deathbed promises usually involve bloodshed.”

Eochaid considered his brother’s strange band of acquaintances, crowded into the tiny room around him: the graceful druid, the ebullient halfling, and the towering orc squeezed in the corner. *I’ve come as far as I can. If Kane trusts them, I will as well.* He sighed.

“I’m being followed. Hunted. For *that*.” He gestured to his pack. “The artifact in that pack — an amphora — needs to get to Lave. To the vigilants of Vesh, and quickly.”

Kane grabbed the thongs that tied the pack closed, then looked over to Eochaid for confirmation. Eochaid nodded and Kane opened the pack, lifting out a large leaded cask about eighteen inches tall, with a sealed lid. Intricately carved serpentine coils twisted and knotted all across its surface, and the metal seal on the stopper was stamped with a laurel wreath and a warlike scepter. A fresh burst of queasiness stirred Eochaid’s stomach just looking at it.

The elf gasped. “Those coils are the mark of the titan Mormo, the Serpent Mother. But this,” she murmured, brushing her fingers on the seal, “this is the symbol of a god! Chardun, the Slaver.” She choked out the final word with disgust.

Eochaid nodded. “So you can see why it needs to be taken north. We don’t *know* what it is, but it’s clearly important. Titanspawn will fight to the death to reclaim it. And it’s indestructible.” Eochaid’s voice rasped, his throat drying.

Jylla handed him a clay cup of cool water. “Thank you,” he said. She nodded, visibly pleased.

He sipped the water and continued. “My vigil encountered a group of ratmen, Red Witch Slitherin, in the Haggard Hills. They were heading towards the Blood Steppes. We learned they were to join a coven of hags and other titanspawn who’d found an artifact — something very important to Mormo. Something that contained her very essence.”

Kane’s face twisted in disgust and fear and he nearly dropped the amphora.

“Don’t worry. As I said, it’s indestructible. At least as far as we’ve been able to tell.”

Kane timidly set the amphora down and nodded for Eochaid to continue.

“Marshal Lolharden was unwilling to let them perform whatever foul rites they had planned. She sent my company to hunt the titanspawn down. They were carrying the artifact to the Hornsaw forest. We harried them but couldn’t stop them. We raided their encampment. It cost us dearly.

“But as you see, we managed to seize the artifact. The asaathi, the snakeman minions of the hags, hunted us back across the Blood Steppes. Vigilants stayed behind and fought to allow the rest of us to escape. Good people. I was...” Eochaid paused, working past the tightness in his throat. “At the end, they gave me the amphora, since I knew the general area, and I’m quick and stealthy.”

He laughed bitterly.

"I didn't expect to wind up all the way back home, here in Trela."

"Well, it's safe now," Kane said. The others nodded.

Eochaid shook his head and knotted his hands in the blanket. "No, it's *not*. They'll follow me here. They'll slaughter the town to get at this thing."

Eochaid's chest tightened, and his heart sped up to a gallop. Lights without a source danced at the edges of his sight and he coughed, tasting blood. "Shit."

The room swam. The druid helped him to lie back down on the bed. "Not much time left," he said. "Kane? Are you *sure* you and your friends can take the amphora to Lave? I know it's a lot to ask..."

"You don't need to ask," Kane said. "But they...they're not exactly my friends. We only just met at the festival."

Hulda clapped Kane on the shoulder, staggering him forward. "Hell yeah, I'll help take this trinket north. I'm not letting ratmen, or snakemen, or hags, or whatever, get something this important. If you're killing stuff, I'm in."

"Me too!" piped up Jylla. "And I'm *totally* your friend, Kane!"

"Nor would I ever allow foul titanspawn to gain such a powerful artifact," said Juliana. "Mormo is the villainous counterpart to my lady Denev, the mother of nature. Denev stood with the gods against her fellow titans in the Divine War, and I will stand with you now against Mormo's venomous brood. I swear, by the great mother of the earth, that I will not falter in this quest."

Kane and his new friends settled into planning, preparing to leave with the amphora first thing in the morning. Eochaid let the conversation wash past him. *The mission will continue, even if I don't.* He closed his eyes and drifted in and out of consciousness for a while, waking whenever the druid wiped his face with a cool cloth.

A silky-smooth voice startled him awake. "What an artifact! Is that the seal of Chardun? How marvelous!"

"It's none of your business," Hulda snarled in reply.

Eochaid's eyes focused. Hulda stood in the doorway, staring down a slim man in dark clerical vestments. Though a bit grayer than Eochaid remembered, he was still as unctuous as ever. *Radraan.*

"I apologize for intruding, madam, but perhaps I can be of assistance," Radraan said.

Hulda snorted, looking her own massive, leather-clad frame up and down. "*Madam?*"

"The artifact clearly bears the symbol of Chardun," he continued, ignoring her. "I have Calastian connections; I can see it off safely to Virduk. Surely the best choice to defend a relic of his patron god from titanspawn is the king of Calastia and his mighty armies."

"No!" gasped Eochaid. "It goes to Vesh."

“But Vesh is besieged by titanspawn on all sides,” the priest pleaded, reaching for the vessel. Hulda grabbed the door frame, blocking his path with a powerful arm.

The priest smiled. “I’m sure you all would be rewarded.”

“Radraan,” Myriam interjected from behind the priest. “I asked if you could help *Eochaid*. Can you cure him?”

Hulda lowered her arm. Radraan stepped past and approached the bed. He studied Eochaid’s sweat-slicked figure. Eochaid flinched as Radraan placed two fingers on his throat and concentrated.

“No,” Radraan sighed melodramatically. “No. It is beyond my power.”

Eochaid resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Not tonight, at least,” the priest continued. “Your elf friend here has already done all I could do. But, with Belsameth’s blessing, I should be able to cure him of the poison first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I fear tomorrow morning will be too late,” said Juliana.

Myriam paled.

Hulda hauled Radraan away from the bed. “Well, then you’re no good to us, are you? So get out!”

Radraan wrestled free of Hulda and brushed himself off.

Standing straight, he remarked “I *can* help — someone with my skills would be very useful in a situation like this one.” He turned to Kane. “My boy, surely you don’t trust these *strangers* over me? I administered your father’s *funeral*, such as it was. I’m like an uncle to you.”

Kane, jaw set, shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.” He stood up from his seat in the corner of the room and took a step towards the cleric. “I’d like you to leave now.”

Hulda leaned in to tower over Radraan.

The cleric cast a pleading glance at Myriam, who shook her head. “Thank you for coming, but please go now.”

Radraan composed himself, then turned and left the room. The front door banged shut a moment later.

Jylla went out to the main room, and then quickly returned. “He’s gone, but I wouldn’t trust him to stay gone. What do we do now?”

Kane crossed his arms. “I suggest you three spend the rest of the night here. Mom can make room by the hearth for people to sleep. But I think that one or two of us should stay up in shifts, both to keep an eye on Eochaid’s condition, and to make sure Radraan doesn’t come back.”

And that nothing else comes knocking, either, Eochaid thought as he drifted off to sleep.



A rocking, rattling sound penetrated Eochaid's dreams. In his fever, the amphora danced across the floor, banging against the boards. Then purple light suffused his mind.

A man with a dominating visage and a terrible, penetrating gaze appeared. He wore white, the regalia of a conqueror-king, with a chain fixed about his waist. His sandaled feet were splashed with blood and shards of bone. Eochaid tried to cover his eyes, but his arms would not move, and the vision filled his mind.

"Fools!" the figure boomed in a deific voice that reverberated in Eochaid's soul. "Flee this place, for the spawn of the Hag are upon thee!"

The words burned themselves on Eochaid's mind. He struggled to obey the order, could think of nothing else, but his weakness was overpowering.

Desperately he wrestled his leaden limbs, his panic growing, the order inescapable and ultimate in its importance. Eochaid knew in the pit of his soul that even death was no excuse to disobey the binding voice of the white king. He fought, every breath weaker and more desperate, to raise even a finger. Then a final darkness wiped away everything, drowning even the white king's order.

Chapter One

Two Years Earlier: AV 148, the third Charday of Corot.

Eochaid took a deep breath and stepped up to the city guard standing before the gate.

“State your business,” the guard rumbled.

"I'm here to join the vigilants."

The guard raised an eyebrow under his metal helm. “Oh really? Where are you from?”

Eochaid swallowed hard but kept looking the guard in the eyes. "South."

The guard grunted. “I see. Well, you’ll want the Hall of Command, then. Go to the compound up on that hill, there. Big manor house. You can’t miss it. Good luck, and welcome to Iave.”

Eochaid nodded to the guard and stepped past him through the gate. *Huh. That was easier than I expected.* Someone coming from the Calastian Hegemony, a sworn enemy of the Veshian Vigil, might well face arrest, not directions to the vigil's heart itself.

The broad street was crowded, and Eochaid's eyes widened as he walked. There were people of all kinds. The majority were human — men, women, and children — some with carts or on horseback, others walking like himself. There were also other races: elves, halflings, and even the occasional dwarf and orc. More people thronged this one street than he'd ever seen before in one place. Farmers, hunters, soldiers, and merchants did their own obvious business of the day, but most people carried no tools or weapons to make clear *what* they were about.

Eochaid tried not to stare, at least not too much, and bent his shoulders, sinking into his cloak and taking a protective grip on the great bow slung across his back. He had worried that his dark complexion would make him stand out, though he had the blue eyes of a northerner. Yet no one took particular notice of him until a short man stepped in front of him carrying a large tray mounded with food that hung in front of him by a strap around his neck.

“Pastry? Only a copper! Or a meat pie for three.”

Eochaid stopped. “Um, no, I...”

His stomach, empty since the night before, betrayed him loudly.

“Wait, hold on.” Eochaid pulled out his money pouch, tucked and tied inside his breeches and well hidden, as his mother had suggested, to protect it from pickpockets. Only two gold coins remained inside, plus a scattering of silver and copper. He pulled out a copper and replaced the pouch.

“Just a pastry, please.”

The food-seller took the coin. The hawkish face of King Virduk, the Black Dragon of Calastia, glared up from the coin in judgement. Eochaid tensed. The pastry seller didn’t seem to notice, and dropped the coin in a cup with one hand while passing Eochaid a pastry with the other. “It’s got grape jam in it!” he said, and moved brightly on to a new customer.

Eochaid nibbled the pastry as he walked toward the center of the city. *Grapes? But they’re for making wine.* It was sweet and tasty, if a bit sticky. He licked his fingers after he finished, but they still felt mucky.

What if the home commander wants to shake my hand or something? His forehead knotted. *Do they even shake hands in Vesh?*

He walked on, marveling a little at the architecture of the city. All the buildings were at least two stories tall, some as high as four. Most had walls of granite. Back home, just the temple and granary were made of stone, and only the granary stood taller than 15 feet. Even the road here was made of stone: large square blocks that the horses’ hooves clacked on as they trotted past.

His wonderment continued. The road led into a square at least a hundred feet across, full of marble benches and shaded awnings and sprinkled with podiums. Well-dressed men and women gathered in groups, chatting and gesturing, arguing and whispering. Eochaid spoke Ledean, the trading tongue common to most of Ghelspad, fluently, but was still learning the local Veshian dialect, and he heard many words that he did not understand. His well-worn cloak and road dust were as distinct here as a pigeon’s feathers among peacocks. Eochaid shyly skirted the edge of the square.

The gurgle of water floated on the air. He followed it to a fountain at the Grand Square’s far end. A marble statue of the goddess Tanil stood on a granite boulder in the fountain’s flow, gazing out over the crowd. Wild animals rendered in the same stone drank calmly at her feet. Eochaid sat on the granite edge. Sunlight glowed in the translucent stone of the statue as if Tanil might turn and look him in the eye. A bull elk frozen in mid-sip stood close enough to touch. The assembled gentlemen and ladies took no notice of him. He dipped his hands in the water, scrubbing the goo and grime away in the pool. Hands clean, he readjusted his pack and bow and made his way toward the hill.

The streets narrowed. Tightly packed buildings gave way to walled gardens. A wide, well-used dirt path wound up the hill, bordered by poles topped with brass lanterns. Eochaid made his way up. Leather-clad men and women of various races strode by. They took no notice of him, either chatting with each other or keeping to themselves. Most wore cloaks of brown, green, or gray. Many wore amber medallions. *Vigilants!*

The path ended before a large multistory building of cunningly fitted stone, with walkways on the roof and archers' blinds where soldiers could hold off an attack. A brick walk led up to large double doors at the front. Eochaid stared up, his heart thudding in his chest. The walls towered over him. The doors themselves were of heavier wood than the walls of the house he'd grown up in. The entire structure gave an air of history and grandeur.

One of the doors swung out, gliding on well-oiled hinges. Two rangers stepped out, laughing with each other. The trailing one noticed Eochaid, nodded to him, and held the door open. Eochaid realized he'd been holding his breath and exhaled.

"Thank you," he murmured, stepping through the door.

The elegant entry hall's floor of polished hardwood shone with wax. Eochaid carefully stepped around the large, woven, dark green rug, mindful of the grime of a month-long journey on his boots. Before him, a grand staircase led up to the second floor. Archways of carved and gleaming wood framed the entrances to foyers on his left and right.

Voices in Veshian echoed faintly from the left archway.

Eochaid glanced between the archway and the stairs. No signs beckoned, and no guards appeared to direct him.

As he waited, he undid the leather thongs of his boots, careful not to shake off too much dust as he removed them.

"Can I help you?" asked a voice from the archway to his right. A young woman in servants' dress looked him up and down, tapping a finger on her lips.

Eochaid stammered, "I'd like to join the vigilants."

"I see!" she said. She glanced at his feet.

"Uh...I don't want to track in any mud."

She smiled. "How thoughtful!" Then she turned, beckoning him after her.

Carrying his boots, Eochaid followed the servant through the right-hand archway into the foyer, leaving the voices behind. Well-worn antique chairs and tables cluttered the room. Rugs of fur from exotic creatures covered the floor and thick tapestries adorned the walls.

"Make yourself comfortable while I see if someone is available to speak with you." She gestured to a coatroom nearly as large as his brother's bedroom at home. "You may hang your cloak and things in the closet there, including your pack. They'll be safe with us. Here's a brush for your boots."

Then she pointed to a smaller door opposite the coat room. "And behind this door is a water closet, should you require it."

Eochaid blinked.

"Powder room?" the maid replied. "Rest room?"

She paused, then whispered, "Shitter?"

Eochaid laughed. "Toilet!"

The maiden smiled. “We’ve got indoor plumbing. It’s all very fancy.”

“Yes, thank you. I’m Eochaid, by the way. Eochaid Lenahr.”

“Oh, and I’m Pirezia. Pleased to meet you, Eochaid Lenahr! You shouldn’t need to wait long.” She made a small curtsy and departed down a hallway further into the manor.

Eochaid hung his things in the coatroom, keeping only his bow. He brushed his boots off on the coatroom mat and pulled them back on.

Then he sat down in an overstuffed chair in a corner of the foyer and looked thoughtfully around the irregularly shaped room. Sunlight filtered in through white curtains that billowed at the open window.

Eochaid studied the room’s sumptuous tapestries. A towering man in armor hammered on an anvil the size of a house. The goddess Tanil, dressed in woodsman’s leathers, rested her hands on two bears that lay at her feet like hounds.

But in the one nearest to him the goddess Madriel, the Redeemer, showed her gentle countenance. She stood atop a hill, her wings shining white except for the peacock feathers stretching out behind her. She held her flaming spear above her head where warm rays of sunlight glowed, driving away dark clouds. In his mind, Eochaid heard his mother intoning the morning prayer, smelled the garden earth around the hidden shrine at home.

Voices in Veshian came from the entryway. Eochaid caught a handful of words, some numbers, and most definitely the word “slitherin.” *Ratmen.*

Two men entered the room. The older man wore rangers’ armor, but of soft fabrics and fine stitch work: wealthy but not ostentatious. The one speaking was an elf dressed in vestments and leathers, a cleric of some kind. Neither took notice of Eochaid as they crossed the room and continued down the hall.

They definitely mentioned slitherin, so the stories of vigilants fighting ratmen are true. Good.

He smiled grimly and returned to studying the tapestry. *How did they get all those colors in her wings? It’s made of thread, but it looks painted.*

“Eochaid Lenahr?”

Eochaid nearly jumped out of his own skin. A sun-darkened, strong-jawed man stood only inches behind him.

Eochaid nodded.

“I am Trophion, the home commander’s majordomo. Please follow me.”

Eochaid picked up his bow and followed Trophion down the hall and around a corner. The majordomo walked with a noticeable limp, but Eochaid could still hear his own quiet footfalls over Trophion’s cat-like steps. The man held his right hand a little stiffly behind him; Eochaid noticed that his two smallest fingers ended in scars at the second knuckle.

They entered a windowless room dominated by a large oak desk. Shelves of books and scrolls covered the walls. Sitting behind the desk, a nondescript man pored over a ledger.

He barely glanced up as he dipped a quill in ink and said, "Please have a seat. Trophion, can you please stay? This shouldn't take long."

Eochaid sat in a chair on the near side of the desk. The majordomo remained by the doorway.

"Please spell your full name and your town of origin," instructed the clerk.

"Eochaid, E-O-C-H-A-I-D, Loren, L-O-R-E-N, Lenahr, L-E-N-A-H-R. I'm from the village of Trela, T-R-E-L-A. It's in New Venir."

The clerk looked up from his writing. "New Venir? That's...unusual. Venirians all worship Belsameth the Slayer! What under Tanil's eye would move you to join the Veshian Vigil?"

Eochaid hesitated and looked down at his lap. "We weren't... We didn't..."

"Son, speak up. You *what*?"

Eochaid looked up at the clerk. It was then that he noticed the man wore a lacquered pin on his shirt: a bow, symbol of the goddess Tanil. He remembered the tapestry in the hall, the clerk's oath.

"We did *not* worship Belsameth."

The clerk gestured with his quill. "Go on."

"My mother is a devout Madrielite." Eochaid's voice steadied. "We have a secret shrine. We always worry the priests of Belsameth will find it, but they never have."

"I see. So, you came to Vesh to get away from persecution."

Eochaid shrugged. "Worshipping Madriel isn't *illegal*, but the Belsamites would have given us trouble if they knew."

"Then why join the Veshian Vigil?"

"My grandfather was a vigilante. On my mother's side. His name was Eochu Airem. I'm named after him."

The clerk raised an eyebrow and flipped back his ledger. "What vigil was your grandfather part of?"

"I don't know. He and my grandmother died over twenty years ago. I don't know much about him — only what my mother told me."

"Do you know when your grandfather left the vigil?"

Eochaid shook his head. "No, but it was before my mother was born. She was nineteen when she had me, so she's about forty-four now...at least forty-five years ago."

The clerk sighed. "That will take some time to find, then. Trophion, I think the home commander will want to speak to this one."

"I'll see if he's available," Trophion said. He left the office, leaving Eochaid alone with the clerk, who stood up and scanned over the bindings of various books on the shelf, occasionally pulling one out to read the cover and return it. "You've given me a

challenge today,” the clerk muttered. He thumped a heavy volume down and turned the pages, squinting.

Eochaid sat still as the clerk pulled down several more books. The man took no further notice of him.

After long minutes, Trophion returned. “The home commander is available to see him. Keep hunting for those records.”

“Will do,” said the clerk, and waved Eochaid towards the door with ink-stained fingers, eyes still locked on the text before him.

Eochaid stood up and followed the majordomo further into the manor house. At the end of a hall, they entered a huge room with one whole wall entirely made of windows, their glass shot through with flecks of mica. Sunlight spangling off the chips streamed through and glinted in the golden wood of a massive table. At the table’s end sat the two men who had walked past Eochaid earlier, the older man at the head of the table and the cleric sitting at his left hand.

“Please sit,” said the older man, speaking in unaccented Ledean.

Eochaid took the nearest seat, a couple of chairs down from the older gentleman. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’m Home Commander Kelemis Durn. This is Erem, a priest of the Huntress. Trophion tells us that you hail from New Venir and that you wish to join the Veshian Vigil. I’m curious about the sort of man who’d travel all this way to serve our country.”

“I’m from the village of Trela. It’s a border town on the river between New Venir and Lageni, in the very north end of the country. We’re right on the edge of the Blood Steppes.”

The home commander shook his head. “Tell me about *you*, not where you’re from.”

Eochaid paused, shifted in his seat, and tried again.

“I’m a hunter. Trapper, mostly. I’ve been taking care of my family since my father died.”

“Who’s taking care of them with you away?”

Eochaid stiffened, a frown tugging his mouth. He stilled it and answered politely.

“They’re taking care of each other. My younger brother’s a hunter too, and quite capable of earning money by it. There’s other local hunters that he’s been training with. Between that and our farm they’ll do well, and my mom can handle herself.”

The home commander nodded and gestured to Eochaid’s bow. “Fine-looking bow for a young archer.”

Eochaid blushed. “I’m okay. Not as good as my father, though. I’m hoping to get better. Stronger.”

“May I see it?”

Eochaid laid the bow on the table in front of the home commander with a tiny rattle of wood on wood. Durn picked it up and turned it expertly in his callused hands.

“An elven longbow.” A light of pleasure graced the home commander’s eyes. He flexed the wood gently. “Hell of a draw. Magical?” he asked the cleric.

The elven man gestured over the bow and then shook his head. “But masterwork, nevertheless.”

Kelemis Durn glanced back over Eochaid’s small frame. “You can *draw* this?”

“N-no sir. But I’m learning, and I can use an ordinary bow well enough. As I said, I’m more of a trapper. It’s my father’s bow. I’m trying to learn it.”

“I see.” Durn nodded. He laid the bow down gently and leaned towards Eochaid. “How did your father die?”

Eochaid inhaled against the stab of pain, the memories still — forever — fresh, the blood in his mind’s eye still a vivid red, the musk and dank fur still stinking. “Ratmen, sir. Killed and...*eaten*...by slitherin on the Blood Steppes. I was hardly more than a kid. I couldn’t save him.”

Durn’s eyebrows knotted. His gaze felt heavy, looking deep into Eochaid’s eyes, considering him almost as if he could see into Eochaid’s memories and judge their truth. Then the home commander bent his head.

“So you want to fight slitherin, is that it?”

“I want to protect my family, and destroy the things that would hurt them,” Eochaid retorted. “I’m hoping the vigil will teach me how.”

Durn frowned. “Understand, we don’t give training without merit. And *if* you should earn your medallion, you’re joining the Veshian Vigil for life. I’m not just kitting you up to run back to the Blood Steppes and hunt those verminous titanspawn around your own village.”

“A life’s what I’m looking for, sir,” Eochaid said. “It was this or be conscripted by the Calastians.”

The home commander raised an eyebrow. “Conscripted?”

“Prince Urlis kept them out, but he’s since given up. They’re in the capital now, taking able-bodied commoners and sending them to fight in Durrover. It was a matter of time before they reached us in Trela.”

A cough sounded from the doorway. The clerk, a dusty tome in his hands, stood at attention. “Home commander, I believe I’ve found the relevant record for Lenahr’s grandfather,” he said, walking to the table and opening the book. He traced a careful finger down a long column of handwritten entries, tapping at a paragraph in businesslike script.

Kelemis Durn read. Eochaid struggled to resist leaning in himself. The home commander pursed his lips and glanced at the cleric, who raised his eyebrows and nodded approval.

The home commander laughed. “Protecting people, you said? Well, recruit, we’ve had others join for less. And if you want slitherin to fight, I dare say you’ll have them. But think carefully. By joining us you make yourself an enemy of New Venir.”

“I understand, sir,” Eochaid said. “I have no loyalty to New Venir. I’m hoping once I establish myself that I can move my family north to Vesh. My brother deserves better than dying for Calastia.”

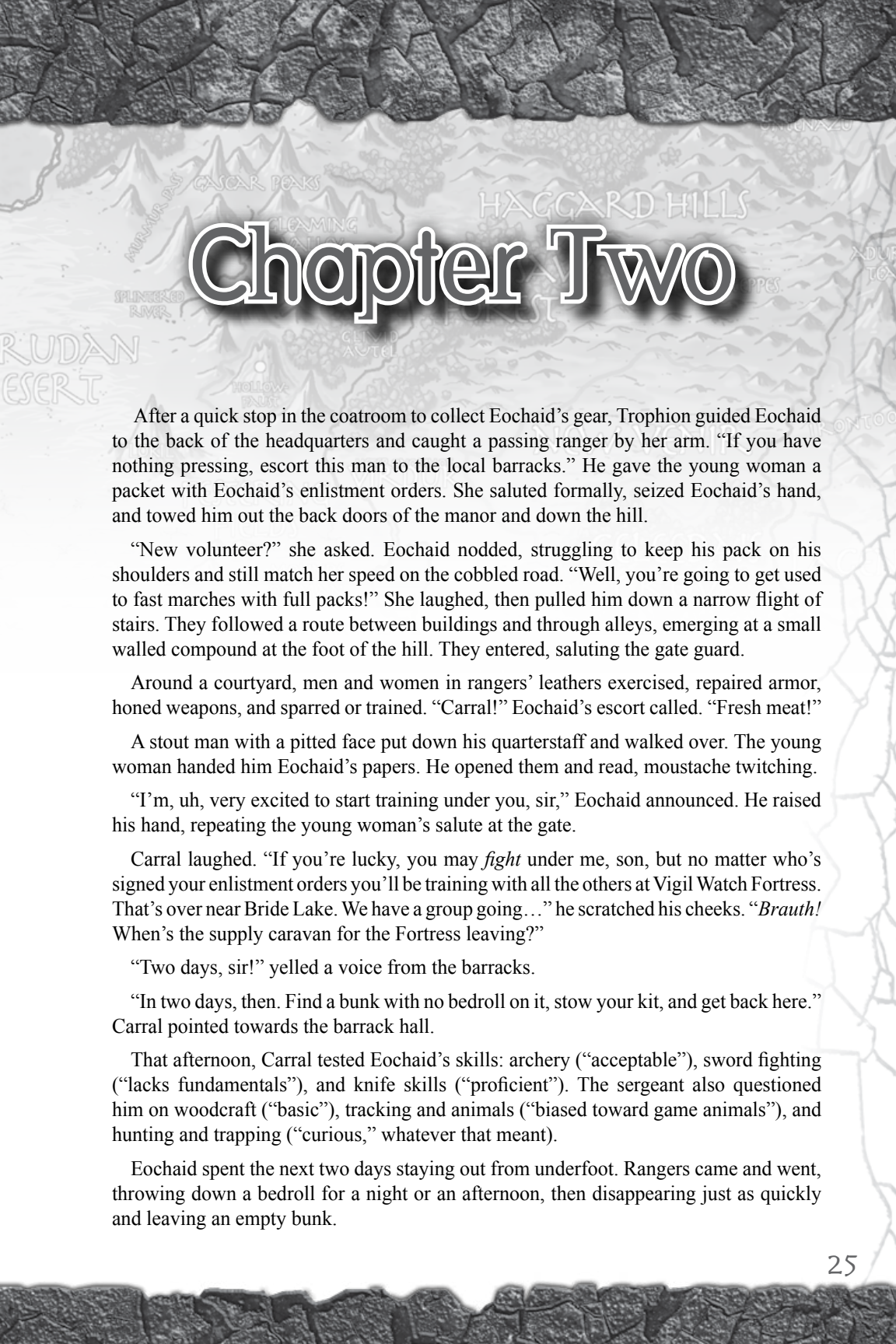
In Veshian, the home commander asked, “How’s your Veshian?”

Eochaid paused, and replied slowly. “I know a little...words. I’m still...learn?”

The home commander chuckled and reverted to Ledean again. “It sounds like you have *a lot* to ‘still learn.’ But that’s fine. Trophion, get him an escort to the barracks, and deliver a message to the Sergeant that he’s to find out what this young man can do. And sign him up for language classes.”

Eochaid gasped in amazement. “So I’m in? I’m going to be a vigilant?”

The home commander shook his head. “We’ll see. You join the recruits for now. Whether you prove yourself and earn a medallion is a different story.”



Chapter Two

After a quick stop in the coatroom to collect Eochaid's gear, Trophion guided Eochaid to the back of the headquarters and caught a passing ranger by her arm. "If you have nothing pressing, escort this man to the local barracks." He gave the young woman a packet with Eochaid's enlistment orders. She saluted formally, seized Eochaid's hand, and towed him out the back doors of the manor and down the hill.

"New volunteer?" she asked. Eochaid nodded, struggling to keep his pack on his shoulders and still match her speed on the cobbled road. "Well, you're going to get used to fast marches with full packs!" She laughed, then pulled him down a narrow flight of stairs. They followed a route between buildings and through alleys, emerging at a small walled compound at the foot of the hill. They entered, saluting the gate guard.

Around a courtyard, men and women in rangers' leathers exercised, repaired armor, honed weapons, and sparred or trained. "Carral!" Eochaid's escort called. "Fresh meat!"

A stout man with a pitted face put down his quarterstaff and walked over. The young woman handed him Eochaid's papers. He opened them and read, moustache twitching.

"I'm, uh, very excited to start training under you, sir," Eochaid announced. He raised his hand, repeating the young woman's salute at the gate.

Carral laughed. "If you're lucky, you may *fight* under me, son, but no matter who's signed your enlistment orders you'll be training with all the others at Vigil Watch Fortress. That's over near Bride Lake. We have a group going..." he scratched his cheeks. "*Brauth!* When's the supply caravan for the Fortress leaving?"

"Two days, sir!" yelled a voice from the barracks.

"In two days, then. Find a bunk with no bedroll on it, stow your kit, and get back here." Carral pointed towards the barrack hall.

That afternoon, Carral tested Eochaid's skills: archery ("acceptable"), sword fighting ("lacks fundamentals"), and knife skills ("proficient"). The sergeant also questioned him on woodcraft ("basic"), tracking and animals ("biased toward game animals"), and hunting and trapping ("curious," whatever that meant).

Eochaid spent the next two days staying out from underfoot. Rangers came and went, throwing down a bedroll for a night or an afternoon, then disappearing just as quickly and leaving an empty bunk.

His second day, Eochaid left the compound and wandered the marketplace looking for booksellers. Finally, he found what he was seeking on a neglected shelf in an inkseller's shop: a thin, well-worn volume of *A Traveler's Guide to the Nation of Vesh*, on which he spent his last two gold pieces after dickering furiously with the shadowy halfling shopkeeper. He convinced the shopkeeper to throw in a scroll and some ink, so he could write a letter home to tell his family that he'd been accepted.

He asked around the marketplace until he found some traders that planned to eventually head south, and convinced them to deliver the letter.

The morning of his third day, the rangers bundled his gear on the back of a cart and handed him the reins to a disinterested horse. It was the longest trip he had ever taken on horseback, and his backside did not enjoy the journey. But as the towers and halls of Vigil Watch Fortress rose above the forest, his pains and worries diminished.

The thick walls perched on a rough ring of stone that looked like it had been raised out of the earth itself, which perhaps it had. Sturdy towers watched the land for miles around, and the town of Bride Lake clustered close around its armored guardian, roads like spokes traveling out in all directions. The gates of the fortress were thick and heavy enough to crush a man between them as they closed, and inside the fortress wall was enough room for a battalion of rangers to eat, sleep, and train — which they were.

The caravan driver handed Eochaid over to an errand boy who guided him to the main hall, where a scribe read his papers, assigned him a bed, and sent him to the quartermaster. The red-faced dwarf at the quartermaster's hall loaded him with a rough bedroll and a cloak and loose shirt in vigilant colors, then pointed him to the mess. At the mess hall, a fellow recruit handed him a bowl of stew and a hunk of crusty bread, which Eochaid devoured. Then he followed the other recruits back to the barracks and blearily found his assigned bunk, where he dropped his pack and collapsed.

Drums woke him in the morning. Five other recruits rolled out of their beds, dressed, and ran to the field. Eochaid climbed stiffly from bed, pulled on his new shirt and cloak, and hurried to join them. At the door of his bunk hall, he turned back and stuffed his belongings into the trunk at the foot of his bed, all except his father's bow, which he slid carefully under his bunk.

• • •

The Divine War shook Scarn to its foundations. The seasons went mad: a week of summer followed by a year of winter, and then a month of autumn, then summer again. The heavens themselves shook. The moons left their ordained paths, disrupting the tides. The very stars fell, darkening the sky.

At the end of the war, the eight victor gods set about putting things right.

They put Belsameth's Moon on a regular course: twenty-five days from new moon to new moon. They steadied the seasons and made them even and constant in length. They

raised new constellations of stars in the sky to honor powers that aided them in the war. Each constellation ruled the heavens for one cycle of Belsameth's moon. They ordained new months around that same cycle: sixteen of them, two named for each victor god. Each season encompassed four months, and each month they divided into three eight-day weeks. They named the days for themselves as well, and reserved the final day of each month for the titan Denev, the only one of her kind to stand with them against her brothers and sisters.

Then they declared a new calendar to mark time. Year One AV (After Victory) began on the first day after the last of the titans had fallen, so they said. On that day, the gods brought into being their new spring.

• • •

Eochaid began his training with the Veshian Vigil on the first day of the month of Tanot, the second month of spring, one hundred and forty-eight years and one month after the end of the Divine War. It was Corday.

"Your schedule," Sergeant Arborneath said, "is as follows." The lean, wiry elf stalked back and forth before Eochaid as she talked, one finger idly tracing the intricate vine-and-spear tattoo on her forearm. Eochaid's stiff new boots and leather armor pinched him. He remained as still as he could manage.

"We wake at dawn, break our fast, then train in weapons — swords or bows, depending on your needs and ability. After lunch, we move to the classroom to study what skills you may need from books, like politics, geography, and history. Each Madraday and Charday afternoon, we perform specialized training based on your expected assignment within the Vigil: the scouting or healing arts, or magic, if you have the skill for it. After dinner you return to the material you've studied during the day and commit it to memory unless we assign you other work. In your case, Lenahr, that would mean your lessons in Veshian.

"We take our rest at the end of each month on Denday, to honor Mother Denev. You and your fellow soldiers can train in whatever weapons or skills you choose that day. And of course we celebrate high holidays as dictated by the gods: the Four Days of Land and Seasons, Divinities Day, and the holy days of Madriel and Tanil."

Arborneath paused. "Something to ask, recruit?"

"Uhh, no...ma'am," Eochaid muttered. *So few holidays! At home we revere the holy days of all the gods.* On the other hand, he supposed, the vigilants probably didn't burn animals for Vangal or fast and clean themselves in lye for Chardun.

"Another regulation," the sergeant continued. "Do not carry weapons you are not skilled enough to use immediately. This is a working fortress, and vigilants are *always* on duty. Your enlistment papers say you are qualified in the use of knives, so you will carry a knife at all times unless you're in your bunk. If I certify you with other weapons, the vigil will assign them to you to carry as well."

Once Arborneath finished her lecture on the ins and outs of his new life, Eochaid followed her to combat training. His fellow recruits clustered around a figure in flashing armor on the training field. “Recruits, line up!” the sergeant hollered, and Eochaid leapt to join them as they scrambled into a ragged line.

Sergeant Arborneath waved over the armored figure. He was an orc, and he wore plate mail armor of a brilliant metal, enameled with a cross: four swords, all pointing outwards. In his hands, he carried a very large sword.

“We have a special guest today,” the sergeant said, and gestured to the armored man. “Sir Van Gravelfist, of Mithril. He’s a paladin of Corean, and newly sworn to their Order of Mithril Knights. Mithril has sent him to train beside us as part of their alliance with the Behjurian Vigil. He’ll train with one of your squads.”

One of the recruits snickered. “Never heard of an orc paladin before.”

Arborneath twitched a graceful ear and pivoted on her heel to face the line. “You will respect our special guest.”

The paladin stopped his practice, jabbed his greatsword into the ground at his feet, and leaned on its pommel.

The sergeant’s gaze burned, even though Eochaid was several people down from the snickering trainee. Eochaid imagined being pinned by those eyes and shuddered. He kept his own eyes carefully forward.

“No, it’s fine,” the paladin said, voice deep, but with a warmth and smoothness his tusks belied. “It’s true, actually. I’m not the first of orc blood to become a paladin — a few served in the Divine War. I *am* the first half-orc to join the Order of Mithril Knights, at least on record. I’m not surprised you think I’m unusual. Being a half-orc is rare enough. It is my hope that while I train with you, I can teach a few new things about the greater world.”

The young woman standing next to Eochaid cocked her head and raised her hand. The paladin gestured to her with the hilt of his greatsword. “You.”

She straightened, shaking her brown ponytail. “Worldly wisdom aside, what can *you* teach us? Vigilants don’t wear plate mail or wield greatswords. We have to be quick and travel light. That’s impossible in heavy armor.”

Arborneath laughed. “He’s not here to teach you seedlings how to fight in armor, but how to fight someone who *wears* armor.”

Recruits groaned and muttered. “How are we supposed to fight someone in plate mail? That’s not fair!”

“Let me show you,” replied the sergeant.

She drew her weapons, a rapier and a dagger, and circled the half-orc as he hefted his sword. The massive, chiseled blade was as long as she was tall, and she looked tiny with it hanging over her head. “Watch where and how I strike. Never parry a greatsword; that will only bend or break a light blade like mine. Even with heavier weapons you’d likely catch the back of your own blade in your forehead.”

The half-orc turned warily, keeping the killing edge high and following the dancing elf. Then she flicked out her arm, and the massive blade dropped, sweeping through the air. Arborneath leaned under the blade, and it tore the air just behind her head. Her dagger stabbed out, just glancing off Van's shoulder. She skipped lithely away as the paladin turned his sword in the air and cut another half-circle back towards her before recovering the blade to its position, poised over his shoulder again.

"You must dodge," the sergeant said. "Wait for your opponent to swing, and strike at a vulnerable point in his armor. There are many, if you know where to look." Cat-quick, she aimed a thrust at the paladin's left leg. The killing blade dropped again, but Arborneath rolled to his right and jabbed her dagger at the pit of his right arm. The paladin grunted in pain, lowered his blade, and laughed. "Well aimed, ranger."

The sergeant saluted the paladin with her rapier. "You put too much faith in your greatsword," she retorted. "Large weapons require great power, which generally requires a large swing, exposing those vulnerable areas." The paladin pursed his lips, nodded, and hefted the sword again.

Eochaid watched the elf and half-orc spar. The paladin took several more reserved swings at the vigilant, but she twirled clear each time. As Van raised his sword again, Eochaid noticed a bright blue slash on the gambeson under the orc's plate armor. "Her blade left a mark on him," Eochaid whispered to the recruit next to him. "What is that?"

"It's there to indicate where she struck," she whispered back. "The training yard's enchanted. Weapons can't do any real damage unless their magic's stronger than the field. They glamor the weapons to leave marks behind that show where you've been hit. Although the bruises will tell you well enough. I've got plenty from last week to prove it."

Eochaid squinted. Indeed, a faint blue shimmer outlined all the weapons being used. And now the paladin had three splotches of blue on him.

The elf raised her hand. Van dropped the tip of his blade to earth. Sweat dripped off his jaw, and in the cool air his breath steamed. Arborneath approached him and tapped the blue mark on the paladin's chest. "As you can see, my strike to the armor did him no damage. But here..." She turned the orc and pointed to his underarm. "And here..." She pointed to his neck. "These would have reached flesh. This neck wound, had it penetrated, could have easily killed him.

"Another tactic," she continued. "Exhaust your foe. Swinging around a greatsword takes a lot more energy than using a lighter one-handed blade. So wear him down. Wait for him to make a mistake, and then strike."

"It's going to take a lot more than *that* to tucker me out," laughed the paladin.

The half-orc's laughter was contagious, rippling through the recruits. Eochaid wondered if the paladin wasn't flirting with the vigilant, but he enjoyed the break in tension, whatever the source.

Arborneath gestured to the weapons racks. "Alright. Each of you take up a short sword and knife and try it out. Rank Ones on the training dummies, and Rank Twos take turns

with Sir Van. Those of you waiting to fight Sir Van can practice with each other until it's your turn. Remember, you're to strike at the unarmored vulnerable points under the arm and behind the knee. Avoid the head for now, and wear helmets. Our protection magic is good, but you can still take out an eye."

The other recruits grabbed up weapons and gear, then dispersed among the training stations. Eochaid collected a knife and helmet, then hefted a short sword. He played with its balance and swung it a few times to get a feel for it. The sword was lighter than the branches he and other children had played at sword fighting with in the fields at home. The blade was sturdier than a knife's, twice as long, and sharpened on both edges. He flourished it uncertainly.

"Pick a dummy, Lenahr, and let's see if you have a feel for the blade," the sergeant said.

Eochaid chose a free training dummy. He hefted his weapon, then slashed down at the dummy's outstretched arm, connecting with a finger-numbing *thunk*. He frowned and stepped back. *That doesn't feel like the right approach.*

"No, Lenahr, it's not an axe," the sergeant said. "A short sword's no good for chopping away with sheer strength — it's a *light* blade, with a sharp edge and a good point." She grabbed his arm at the wrist, maneuvering him into a new pose. "Blade in front. Tip towards your enemy. Keep the weapon in line. It's more important to hit in the right place than to hit hard. Understand? Now practice — arm, arm, leg, leg, dodge."

Arborneath patted his shoulder and turned to the other students. Eochaid focused on the dummy, the sword's tip between them. *Arm*. He stabbed out at its arm and felt the blade strike straw and wood. He pulled the blade out and struck again. *Arm*. Strike. *Leg*. Strike. *Leg*. Strike. *Repeat*.

He lost track of the number of times he completed the routine after reaching ten, and his mind began to wander. The blade felt light in his hands. He began to flourish it a little between strikes for his own amusement, to twist on the recovery and do more damage to the straw. He drove his strikes in from different angles, feinted at imaginary counterblows. He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, trying to match the lightness of the blade in his own steps.

"Lenahr!"

Arborneath shook her head at him, her mouth slightly open.

He stopped. "Sorry. I was getting bored."

"How *old* are you, Lenahr?"

"Twenty-four."

"Ah," the sergeant said, "That explains a few things. You're small, not young. Fully grown and clearly not a Rank One. Okay, go over and spar with Jax. He'll show you the routine."

Eochaid looked more closely at the other recruits in his area. They were a wide variety of genders and races, but most of the humans were much younger than he was, still in their teens.

He walked to the sparring grounds. Older recruits swung, sidestepped, parried, and laughed. Jax, it turned out, recognized him from the barracks the night before. He was just a bit older than Eochaid. His dark brown hair and short beard suited a ranger, and he moved with the confidence of determination and practice.

“Jesson Jax,” the man said, holding out a hand.

Eochaid shook Jax’s hand. “Eochaid Lenahr.”

“Stuck you in the wrong group, didn’t she?” Jax asked.

Eochaid shrugged.

“Don’t let it bother you. Elves sometimes have a hard time judging ages among other races. She’s over a century or something. Rank Ones are still in their teens; a lot of the new recruits are.”

Eochaid and Jax sparred, trading between attacker and defender. When the sergeant called a break, Eochaid tallied the blue streaks on each man’s armor, and they had marked each other fairly equally.

“I like the short sword,” said Eochaid. “More than the bow. It’s more...fun.”

Jax laughed. “Fun? You think sword work is *fun*? You’re weird, Lenahr.” But he clapped Eochaid on the back as they left to clean up.

Chapter Three

Eochaid took his bowl of stew, rind of cheese, and hunk of bread and looked around. He recognized only a few faces from the training yard, and all were engrossed in their own conversations.

Then the woman who'd explained the 'marking' enchantment earlier gestured to him to join her table.

"I'm Amra Varith," she said.

"Eochaid Lenahr... is my name," he replied, sounding out the Veshian phrase carefully. In Ledean he continued, "Good to meet you."

She smiled and spoke in Ledean. "It seems she raised you out of Rank One as fast she did with me last week."

Eochaid nodded. "Turns out I'm a lot older than she thought."

Amra grinned. "I'm only 19. I just know what I'm *doing*. I used to train with a ranger. Taught me everything already."

"Oh?"

"Okay, not *everything*. But well enough to get past Rank One in swordsmanship."

Eochaid smiled at her cheekiness and listened as she rambled about how she'd come to join the vigil. She and a friend, Aronis, played 'orcs and vigilants' when they were kids. As soon as he was old enough he went off to join the vigilants, leaving her behind until she grew old enough to follow.

As she spoke she grew distant, absently tucking a loose hair behind her ear where it had come undone from her long braid. "Now he's off fighting rats and hags," she said.

Jax's laugh cut through the clatter of the hall.

He pushed through the crowded room, several other recruits following. "This is Lenahr," Jax said, dipping his head at Eochaid. "These are your bunk and squadmates, Lenahr. I'm pretty sure you had too much sleep in your eyes to note them this morning. Miller, Wainwright, Hutchling, and Gandy." Jax made a flurry of introductions, and then the whole group fell to their food and to talk about the training, the meals, and various other topics.

Eochaid noted each name and face: Miller was the short shy boy, Wainwright the girl who laughed at everything, Hutchling was the man with the Madriel symbol on

his vest, and Gandy was the half-elven woman. But though he tried to pay attention to the conversation, over half was in Veshian, and the others made little allowance for his confusion and tiredness.

“Hey,” Amra interrupted. “Lenahr here doesn’t speak good Veshian. Keep it to Ledean!”

“No, it’s okay...” Eochaid replied. “I’ll never learn if everyone around me speaks Ledean all the time.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that,” said Jax. “Half the afternoon lectures are in Veshian. You’ll pick it up fast enough.”

Eochaid groaned.

Amra patted his arm, “Don’t worry. I’ll teach you Veshian. We’ll probably be in a lot of the same classes. We can share notes.”

Eochaid smiled. “That’s very kind. Thank you!”

• • •

The first afternoon lecture was an introduction for the newest recruits. The room was full of benches and tables, with inkwells and quills for writing. A bookshelf lined one wall, full of books and scrolls. At the front of the room hung a large map of the continent of Ghelspad. Most of the map was in black and white, except a wide red area on the right, indicating the blood sea. Eochaid sat next to Amra, who’d arrived too late the prior week to attend. Five other recruits found their own places. Sir Van sat alone on a bench, seemingly eager for the lecture to start.

A grizzled veteran entered the room and stood at the lectern. “I’m Captain Damian Wildsen of the Beltanian Vigil,” he said in Ledean. “You will call me captain or sir. Today I’m going to teach you the Vigil Oaths, and the basic history of the Veshian Vigil.”

“First off, the oaths.” He pulled out sheets of parchment.

“You will be given a copy of this, so you will not need to write them down.”

He started reciting without even a glance at the sheets, eyes piercing each recruit in turn as he spoke.

“One, obey the people of Vesh and their chosen leaders in all things.”

“Two, obey lawful commands as you would the people of Vesh.”

“Three, honor the goddesses Tanil and Madriel, and aid Corean the Avenger and his followers whenever possible. Honor and respect the followers of Denev the Earth Mother, save when their actions prevent the execution of lawful duties.”

“Four, defend the weak and avoid taking innocent life.”

“Five, oppose the titanspawn and the enemies of Vesh in every way possible.”

The veteran’s eyes reached Eochaid in their sweep across the room. “Six, you are a vigilant for life.” Eochaid’s pulse sped with excitement. He nodded. Wildsen’s gaze moved on.

“Seven, obey these oaths, for they are the heart and soul of the vigils.”

He handed the stack to the nearest recruit. “Pass these out, recruit.” The young cleric got to her feet and went from desk to desk, handing out the carefully lettered, thick, durable parchment pages.

“Recruits, I expect you to memorize these. You will recite them every morning after your morning prayers and every night before you fall asleep. You will recite them while you eat, while you fight, while you *shit*, and while you fuck. Fifty years from now I want you to know these oaths better than the names of your closest family and loved ones.”

Someone snickered in the second row. The captain waggled his bushy eyebrows and stalked down the row of benches. He stopped when his shadow fell on a young ranger, still a teen, with flaming hair and pale, freckled skin that rapidly grew paler.

“Recruit, did you find something amusing?”

“No, sir,” the boy squeaked. “I just...didn’t know we could *fuck*, sir.”

A quiet wave of snickers drifted through the room. The captain curdled the boy with his eyes for a long second.

“What you do in your own time, what little you’ll have *of* it, is your own business. That said,” he continued, turning to the rest of the room, “there are rules about this. Sexual relations require consent among all parties involved. Coercion means *discharge*, with disgrace. That also means no intercourse with an inferior rank — that’s coercion, which makes it forbidden.”

Amra shifted in her place. When Eochaid glanced, concern and frustration had sketched lines on her face which she struggled to conceal.

The captain continued. “And I don’t want anyone catching the pox or getting pregnant, so be sure to see a cleric or herbalist for proper protection before you so much as hold hands.”

In the next part of his lecture, the captain described the various vigils: their locations, responsibilities, and posts. The names and places organized themselves in Eochaid’s memory without much passion until the Arcernoth Delta Vigil.

“The Delta is part of the Mourning Marshes,” the captain said. He pointed to the edge of the bloodstain on the map, just below the Veshian border. “The vigilants in Arcernoth keep our southeast border from being overrun by hordes of slitherin titanspawn. The rats have invaded time and again, but they always break against the strength of Arcernoth Delta Vigil.”

Once Wildsen finished his lecture, Amra raised her hand. “Sir, can recruits choose which vigil they join?”

“It’s considered. Vigilants should go to vigils that best match their skills. Those with a knack for sailing, for example, go to the Maritime Vigil. But we also must balance our forces. Less popular vigils like Pelpernoi, and dangerous ones like Arcernoth Delta, get reinforced after they take heavy losses. However, we typically assign more experienced

vigilants to those posts, while new recruits go to vigils that get less action to get experience in the field before serving in a more dangerous post.”

“Is Arcernoth Delta particularly dangerous?” Amra asked.

The captain tilted his head. “Certainly. Maybe not *the* most dangerous post. That would probably be the Lolharden. They’re right in the heart of the plains of Lede with the orcs, the proud, and Vangal’s horsemen. The Marsh Vigil comes a close second. It sits in the middle of a stinking swamp full of mud, disease, insects, and filth — Chern’s very arsehole. Once you’ve served in the Marsh Vigil you’ll never feel clean or dry again.”

“Surely it can’t be that bad!”

“Oh, it is. I served there for a year. A year was enough.” He looked at his hands, as though he might still find mud under his fingernails. “Near a fifth of the Beltanians served some time in the southern marshes. You learn fast there, but most just see out their year and transfer.”

“Those who stay are some of the toughest, strongest, most stubborn vigilants there are. And Marshal Silverblade is one of the best. I’d gladly serve with him again if it wasn’t for all the mud. He’d give even Kelemis Durn a run for his money if he should run for the office of home commander. But he’ll never leave the marshes. At least not until all of the hags are exterminated and the slitherin come to heel.”

Eochaid was too excited about the slitherin to be concerned about the mud. He was determined to be chosen for Arcernoth Delta. *I’ll need to work extra hard if they don’t normally send new recruits. But that’s my vigil.*

• • •

The rest of the afternoon was a blur of lessons, bouncing from skill to skill: geography, starting a fire in the rain without using magic, and packing properly for a ten-day march.

Amra took notes during the geography class and reviewed them with Eochaid over dinner. Their books, maps, and parchment took over half the table, so the other recruits left them alone.

After explaining her notes, she rested her head in her cupped hands and scrutinized Eochaid. “So, where exactly are you from, foreigner?”

Eochaid sighed. *I can’t avoid this forever.*

She smiled. “It’s okay, you know. You’re not the only recruit from outside Vesh. Sir Van’s from Mithril. Miller’s from Hedrad. It’s just unusual for foreigners to join the Veshian Vigil.”

“Sir Van’s technically not a recruit. And I’m not sure he’s originally from Mithril.”

“Whatever. My point is that it’s about what’s in your *heart*. Not about where you’re born. If your heart is Veshian, is devoted to the Veshian way of life, that’s all that matters.”

Eochaid nodded. “Yeah. That makes sense, I guess. My mother’s talked about the vigilants for as long as I can remember, and it’s always been my dream. Her father was a Veshian vigilant. Somebody important, maybe. I think he’s why Kelemis Durn let me join.”

“Wait, you’ve met the home commander?”

“Yeah, he interviewed me when I signed up.”

“Whoa, that’s exciting! What’s he like?”

Eochaid scratched his head. “Um...important? Intimidating. But warm. Kind of like a...” Eochaid paused, his father’s face appearing in his mind, and a pang of loss in his heart. He blinked the image away. “Like an uncle.”

Amra grinned. “Anyway, you still haven’t answered my question. Where are you from?”

Eochaid took a deep breath and exhaled. “New Venir.”

She squinted, confused. “Where is *that*?”

Eochaid shook his head. “North of Geleeda’s Grove. You’ve...never heard of it?”

She dug out the map of Eastern Ghelspad from their geography work. “Where on the *map*?”

“Here,” he said, pointing to the southern border of the Blood Steppes.

“Whoa. That must be...600 miles from here?”

“Give or take. My family lives about thirty miles northeast of Deriz,” he said, finding the city on the map and pointing. “It’s on the river Eni.”

“So you’ve traveled a lot. You might not need much help in geography.”

Eochaid shrugged. “I just traveled from there to here with traders. Up the Eni River, across Mountain Tear Loch — it’s called Denev’s Aquifer on this map — and then across Vesh to Lave, and finally on horseback to here.”

She followed his journey on the map, eyes widening.

He continued. “Beyond that I basically just know the Eni River area and the very southeast corner of the Blood Steppes, but only up to about the edge of the South Fang region. It’s insanely dangerous, though there’s good hunting if you know how to avoid the titanspawn.”

“What’s in South Fang?”

“Firewrack dragon.”

Her jaw dropped. “You’ve seen a dragon?”

Eochaid shook his head. “No. Just its minions. Slitherin.”

“So you’ve fought slitherin?”

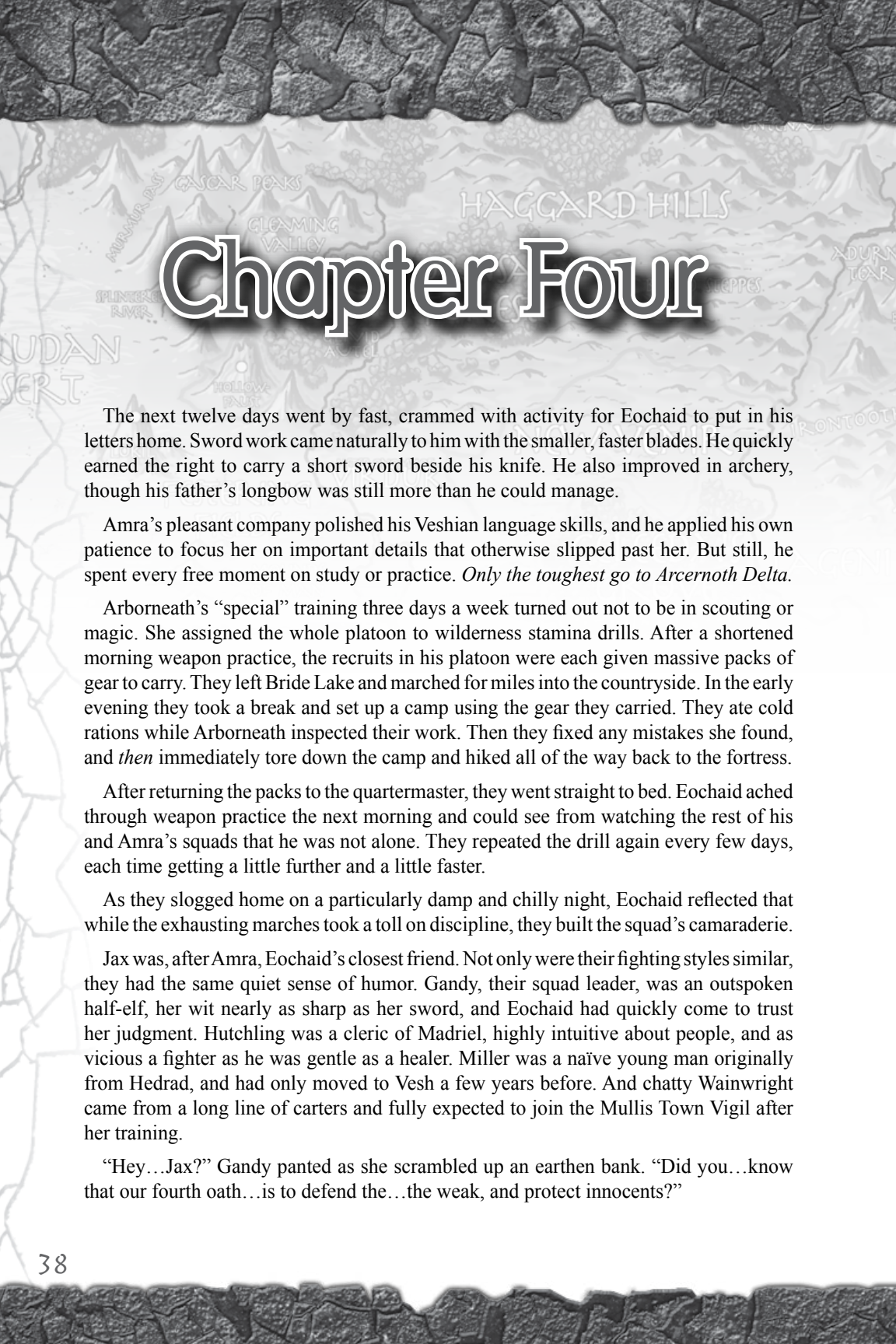
He shrugged again, “Not alone. Sometimes our hunting groups would encounter one of theirs. But we made sure to hunt in large numbers, especially after my father was killed.” His look darkened. “His death taught us a lesson, and no one in the village hunts alone

since then. Slitherin never bother a large group.”

She looked more closely at the map. “You know, they’ll probably want you for Pelpernoi Vigil if you know the area near the Haggard Hills.”

Eochaid shook his head. “No. I’m doing everything I can to get into Arcernoth Delta.”

She nodded, “Me too.”



Chapter Four

The next twelve days went by fast, crammed with activity for Eochaid to put in his letters home. Sword work came naturally to him with the smaller, faster blades. He quickly earned the right to carry a short sword beside his knife. He also improved in archery, though his father's longbow was still more than he could manage.

Amra's pleasant company polished his Veshian language skills, and he applied his own patience to focus her on important details that otherwise slipped past her. But still, he spent every free moment on study or practice. *Only the toughest go to Arcernoth Delta.*

Arborneath's "special" training three days a week turned out not to be in scouting or magic. She assigned the whole platoon to wilderness stamina drills. After a shortened morning weapon practice, the recruits in his platoon were each given massive packs of gear to carry. They left Bride Lake and marched for miles into the countryside. In the early evening they took a break and set up a camp using the gear they carried. They ate cold rations while Arborneath inspected their work. Then they fixed any mistakes she found, and *then* immediately tore down the camp and hiked all of the way back to the fortress.

After returning the packs to the quartermaster, they went straight to bed. Eochaid ached through weapon practice the next morning and could see from watching the rest of his and Amra's squads that he was not alone. They repeated the drill again every few days, each time getting a little further and a little faster.

As they slogged home on a particularly damp and chilly night, Eochaid reflected that while the exhausting marches took a toll on discipline, they built the squad's camaraderie.

Jax was, after Amra, Eochaid's closest friend. Not only were their fighting styles similar, they had the same quiet sense of humor. Gandy, their squad leader, was an outspoken half-elf, her wit nearly as sharp as her sword, and Eochaid had quickly come to trust her judgment. Hutchling was a cleric of Madriel, highly intuitive about people, and as vicious a fighter as he was gentle as a healer. Miller was a naïve young man originally from Hedrad, and had only moved to Vesh a few years before. And chatty Wainwright came from a long line of carters and fully expected to join the Mullis Town Vigil after her training.

"Hey...Jax?" Gandy panted as she scrambled up an earthen bank. "Did you...know that our fourth oath...is to defend the...the weak, and protect innocents?"

“As it happens...” he said, hauling Hutchling up the slope, “I did. Did you know that we’re...supposed to oppose the enemies of Vesh...even while carrying these gods-damned packs?”

Wainwright snickered. Miller grumbled.

“Fifth...oath,” grunted Hutchling.

Eochaid put his shoulder to Hutchling’s pack and heaved. “Did...you guys know... that we get to *fuck*?”

A paroxysm of laughter seized Hutchling and Jax, and they toppled and rolled down the bank and into the creek below. Even Miller snickered. Then, in unison, Gandy and Wainwright shouted “...but first you see the blasted *cleric*!”

• • •

Finally, the spring holiday arrived: the second Wildday of Tanot, the second month of spring. It was Eochaid’s first day off since he’d arrived on the last day of Corot, the previous month. Even the usual morning drum reveille felt almost festive.

The day was filled with athletic competitions like the ones Eochaid remembered from the holiday at home: archery, wrestling, weightlifting, stick fighting, and various contests of balance and stamina. About the only contest missing from home was the tug of war, which Eochaid never liked much anyway. He joined in the archery and balance games and took second place on the log roll.

Sergeant Arborneath and many other followers of Tanil the Huntress left on a hunt in the early morning and returned in the afternoon with meat for the evening feast. The courtyard and dining halls were decorated with colored lanterns and flower chains. The smell of grilled venison and boar filled the night air, mixed with the scent of flowers. Musicians began to play, and barrels of ale were rolled out from storage.

In a corner of the courtyard, Eochaid sat with his squadmates slurping from mugs of ale. They rested their sore muscles and watched as townsfolk from Bride Lake laid the tables for the evening feast.

“Is this celebration anything like where you come from, Lenahr?” asked Jax.

“Yeah, a lot actually,” Eochaid replied. “Although I won’t know for sure until after the feast.”

“Why, what happens after the feast?”

Eochaid took a sip of ale, contemplated his drink for a moment, then calmly replied, “An orgy, usually.”

Several of his squadmates gasped, and Jax and Miller spit out their drinks in surprise. After he stopped coughing, Miller stared at Eochaid.

Eochaid smirked. “I *am* Venirian. Aren’t we known for that sort of thing?”

Miller paled, “You...? In a.... Really?”

Eochaid shook his head. “I mean, I’m sure they happen in the capital. Small villages like mine aren’t exactly known for orgies. I’ve had a wild night or two, but nothing quite that...broadly attended.”

His squadmates laughed and joked, enjoying their ales as a cart loaded with thick planks rolled up.

“I wish things around here had a little more...broad attendance,” Gandy lamented. Eochaid looked over to where she was gazing and saw Sir Van was across the courtyard heaving a great slab of wood onto each shoulder. He had won the wrestling completion earlier in the day and was still wearing only his breeches.

Hutchling laughed. “I hate to break it to you, Gandy, but he’d be more interested in me than in you.”

Gandy looked at Hutchling, confused. “But you’re both—oh!” She peered at the blond man. “Are you sure?”

Hutchling nodded wistfully, watching Sir Van. Across the courtyard, the half-orc laid the sturdy planks edge to edge in front of the musicians’ stand to form the first section of a dance floor. His back muscles gleamed and stood out sharply in the slanting sunset light.

“Oh, I’m sure.” Hutchling said. “And I’d *happily* accept his attention if he was available. But he’s clearly already taken.”

“No!” Wainwright whispered. “*Who?*”

Hutchling laughed, and his eyes sparkled conspiratorially. “Have you ever seen him look at Lieutenant Scehzar, of the Behjurian Vigil? He goes all dream-eyed and follows him around like a lost puppy. And the lieutenant...well, it’s definitely reciprocated. I’ve never seen anyone run their fingers through an orc’s hair like that before, and Sir Van *really* seemed to be enjoying it.”

Gandy hid her face in her hands. Wainwright giggled. “That’s so charming,” she murmured.

Eochaid glanced curiously at Jax, who shrugged and shook his head. “I’ve got no reason to doubt Hutchling on this. He’d know.”

Miller sputtered. “That would be...that’s illegal in Hedrad. You’d be *executed*.”

Wainwright and Jax fell silent.

Hutchling paled. “Remind me to never go to Hedrad.”

Eochaid exhaled sharply. “That’s certainly harsher than any law in New Venir. Hell, that’s harsher than in Calastia, and slavery is legal there. I’ve never heard of any place where it’s *illegal* for men to love other men, never mind treating it like a major crime. That sounds unreal.”

Miller shook his head. “Oh, it’s very real. You can be fined just for smiling in Hedrad. Sodomy gets you the same punishment as murdering a priest.”

“And they’re our *allies*?” Gandy muttered.

“There’s worse punishments than death, though,” Miller continued. “There’s a reason my family left the city.”

The whole squad shivered at whatever might be “worse than death.”

“And on that cheery note,” said Jax, “let’s get some more ale.”

• • •

After the feast, Wainwright dragged Eochaid on to the dance floor. She was pleasant enough, but he kept an eye out for Amra. When her squad finally arrived, Wainwright just laughed and rolled her eyes.

“Go off with your sweetheart.”

“She’s not my sweetheart.”

“Whatever — go. I’ll dance with Hutchling. He may prefer men, but he’s nearly as graceful on the dance floor as *you*.”

Eochaid’s face grew hot at the compliment.

Wainwright went off in search of Hutchling. Eochaid made his way across the crowd to where Amra was chatting with her squadmates. He greeted the group, and then made a deep and formal bow to Amra. He held out his hand and said in his best courtly Veshian, “Would my lady care to dance?”

Amra laughed. “Seriously Lenahr, I did *not* teach you that.”

Eochaid stood up and smoothly replied, “I did know *some* Veshian before working with you. Or would you prefer I speak in Shelzari or Calastian?”

Amra looked surprised. “Wait, you speak Shelzari? And Calastian?”

Eochaid blushed. “A *little* Calastian. About as well as I now speak Veshian. I came from a trading town. We heard lots of languages.”

Amra took his hand, leading him to the dance floor. “Well, aren’t you just full of surprises? You know, if you’re a polyglot they’ll want you for the Semanye Vigil. They say it’s full of spies. They need people who understand Calastian.”

Eochaid shook his head. “Arcernoth Delta.”

Amra grinned. “Of course.”

In unison, they said, “Me too.”

• • •

After three dances Amra stopped and pulled Eochaid back off the dance floor. Once they were far enough away from the music and revelry to hear each other speak, she said, “We have to head back to the barracks soon.”

Eochaid frowned in disappointment.

“Tomorrow’s Charday, and that means another day-long hike for our platoon,” she told him. “I need some sleep.”

“Seriously? After *tonight* we have a hike? That’s torture!”

She shrugged. “That’s training for you. Have to make us tough.”

Eochaid sighed. “No ‘broad attendance’ for me tonight, then.”

Amra laughed. “What?”

Eochaid shook his head. “Nothing. Just a joke with my squad. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

After Amra left, Eochaid tracked down his squadmates. “Is it true that we’ve got another hike tomorrow?”

His squad looked daggers at Gandy.

“Hey, I’m just our squad corporal,” she protested. “I don’t decide what the platoon does. You gotta convince Sergeant Arborneath. She’s platoon leader. And her orders come from the captain! He’s probably the one who decides those things.”

Hutchling squinted. “Arborneath just spent all day today hunting. Do you really think she’ll want to spend tomorrow hiking?”

Jax sighed. “Gandy’s right. She’s a hundred-whatever-year-old wood elf. She can hike fifty miles a day for a solid month. Do you really think two days in a row in the woods would faze her?”

The whole squad groaned. They finished their ales, Hutchling and Wainwright danced one last dance, and the group of them headed back to their bunk house.

Eochaid shook his head. “As soon as they find one of us they’ll catch on. We have to mix things up.”

As seekers, Miller and Hutchling impressed Eochaid with their ability to notice the smallest thing out of place. Of the opposing squads, only Amra evaded capture.

The next round, Arborneath broke them up into pairs. “Hide with your partner — if one’s caught, both lose,” she said, and paired Jax with Hutchling, Gandy with Miller, and Eochaid with Wainwright.

“How romantic,” Hutchling quipped as he looked over the pairs and then gave Jax a wink.

“Get over yourself, Hutch,” Jax replied. “And Miller, don’t *you* go getting fresh with your commander, either!” Miller turned berry-red.

The starting horn sounded. Gandy glared at her squadmates. “Remember what you’ve learned,” she growled. Then she dragged Miller into the woods.

• • •

Eochaid brought Wainwright to the cleft in the tree trunk. “Nice!” she exclaimed loudly. He glared at her, and she quickly clapped her hands over her mouth.

They crouched down, the crevice barely deep enough for the two of them. “We can’t see if anyone is coming,” she whispered.

He put his mouth against her ear. “It doesn’t *matter* if they can’t see us either. Now *quiet*.” She nodded.

The horn sounded. Padding footsteps crossed the clearing. Eochaid cupped his hand to his ear, but the sounds were too faint to follow.

Wainwright wrinkled her nose. She sniffed. He grabbed her shoulder. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to cover her mouth. Her powerful sneeze rattled the leaves around them.

“Gotcha!” whooped Amra as she yanked back Eochaid’s cloak.

Eochaid wrenched his hands self-consciously away from Wainwright and immediately felt foolish for doing so.

Why’d you do that? Amra’s a friend. Stop acting like she’s more!

Amra didn’t seem to notice, and just laughed as she helped Wainwright to her feet. Eochaid scrambled after them.

“You need a *lot* more practice if you want to earn a medallion,” Amra told Wainwright.

“I hope you get paired with the clumsy paladin,” Wainwright muttered in return.

Each round Arborneath set a harder challenge, but each squad rose to match it. One squad gave up hiding and simply outran their pursuers. Another round, Eochaid used mud to camouflage himself and his squad.

By the evening the platoon was exhausted but cheerful, covered in mud, twigs, and sweat. Arborneath, while not effusive in her praise, was more generous than usual. Around the campfire, the sergeant described the elven ways of woodland stealth. "I'm pleased with how many of these techniques you applied on your own." She also congratulated Eochaid and Amra as the two stealthiest rangers in the platoon. "You'd both be excellent choices for the Ganjus Vigil."

Eochaid shook his head and said "Arcernoth..."

"Delta," Amra finished.

Arborneath raised her eyebrow in surprise. "Interesting. I'll make a note of that." As she turned away, Eochaid and Amra shared a determined grin.

After her lecture the recruits sat around the fire, chatting over the highlights of the day.

"You're a natural at this, Lenahr," Jax said.

"At hiding, maybe," quipped Sir Van. "Not so much at seeking. He circled me for a good minute and didn't spot me."

"You're green," Eochaid grumbled, "like a giant tree frog."

The others chuckled. Sir Van gestured at his mud-covered chest, and said "With this mud all over me, I'm surprised you didn't *smell* me."

The laughter was infectious, and Eochaid's belly ached from it.

Gandy poked him in the arm. "I heard what the sergeant said to you. You and Varith really want in Arcernoth Delta?"

Amra and Eochaid both nodded.

"Well then, I hope you enjoyed being covered in mud today."

Chapter Six

Dear Eochaid,

We are so thrilled to receive your letters. So proud of you! Know you will be a wonderful vigilant. Your training sounds very hard. Don't overdo it. Marching so many miles in one day sounds very unreasonable. I know you'll master your father's bow soon.

The Carnival this year was very boisterous. Young Gladys danced with Kane all night. Would make a good wife for him, but is much too forward.

The flowers are blooming and butterflies fill the garden. Filled the feeder. So many birds! Woodpeckers and cardinals vivid, others puffed up against the wind. Wonderful to watch.

Eat well. Is the food terrible? Bland? Wish I could send treats, but they'd never survive the trip. Took two months for your letters to get here.

Love,
Mother

So,
Gladys won't leave me alone. How do you
deal with girls?
Don't get killed.
Kane

Chapter Seven

Hard work made the weeks go by quickly, and Eochaid barely had time to write the occasional letter home. They learned endurance by swimming in the icy water of the lake. They experienced the beguilement of illusion spells and magic meant to frighten soldiers off the battlefield. They trained in mental tricks to help them keep secrets even when tortured.

Their training shifted from working as a squad to individual roles within the vigilants. Hutchling studied with the senior clerics, honing his healing skills and divine magic. Wainwright showed a flair for mounted combat. Miller trained in scribe work, sums, and figures. Gandy and Jax focused on their archery.

Arborneath tapped Jax to become a scout, and Eochaid had hoped to join him. But despite his prowess in close-quarters fighting and stealth, despite his hours of library study, he had no natural eye for tracking and observation. Jax and his fellow scouts saw things Eochaid simply did not.

Instead, he joined Amra and trained as a stalker. The vigilants sent in their stalkers when numbers alone wouldn't win a battle. He learned to cross enemy lines to terrorize them in their camps, killing guards, distracting patrols, sabotaging equipment, and paving the way for a larger vigilant force.

Eochaid and Amra also learned other skills particularly useful for the Marsh Vigil: wetland survival, swamp combat, and everything they could read about the slitherin.

Through all of it, friendship encouraged Eochaid to succeed: the support of his squadmates, who cheered him on, and his shared dedication with Amra to reaching their goal. His only regret was that the two pillars of his success were hard to keep in harmony. Amra's drive and competitive spirit often ruffled feathers among other squads, and Eochaid frequently found himself making peace.

Eochaid found his own peace in the many late nights he spent in the library hall, consuming tome after tome of lore. Sometimes Amra joined him, but often the only others sharing the quiet hall with him were vigilant mages, who watched him curiously. The librarian even suggested that he would make a good wizard. This surprised Eochaid, and he thought briefly about it. Magic did fascinate him, but the study of the arcane arts took years of training just to get started. No, he knew which skills he needed for Arcernoth Delta.

• • •

Eochaid struggled through a wordy book translated from High Elvish into Veshian.

“The scholar Darenavi was the first to suggest that the ratmen evolved from rats exposed to the viscera or magic of the fallen titans. This certainly holds true for the Diseased, the most numerous of the broods that infest the Mourning Marshes.”

Broods? There's more than one kind?

“Darenavi belonged to the cleric order that sought to purge Scarn of Chern’s corrupting essence. These elves followed rumors that the titan’s grave lay under the Marshes that formed in the bloody tidal wave that accompanied Kadum’s demise, that it was the Plague Lord’s presence that gave rise to the festering pockets that ooze among its swamps and bogs.”

And Arcernoth's in the middle of all that.

“As she and her fellows slogged through the mire, at every abscessed pocket of magic they came across they encountered rats that walked like men. Darenavi observed them drinking at the foaming pools, bathing in the upwellings of ichor, and penned her conclusion: as Chern had twisted the elves of Termana, so his corpse was shaping this new race.”

By the time he fell into his bunk, Eochaid’s mind reeled. The red-fanged, hairy monsters of his nightmares were not one type, but many! The flesh and essence of different titans had twisted each brood in different ways, into White Wraiths, Forge Crawlers, Foamers, and Red Witches.

Even setting aside the horror of a dozen races of creeping rat warriors, the Marshes were also home to monstrous snakes, spiders, and alligators, as well as titanspawn: hags, evil spirits, spider-eye goblins, slime reavers, and miredwellers. They all sounded horrible.

I'll rise to the challenge.

• • •

Spring gave way to summer, and with it came Divinities’ Day. The holiday was purely religious in nature, and everyone was expected to attend temple services. The day was set aside to celebrate the gods’ final victory against their parent titans at the end of the Divine War. It was 148 years since the war ended, but many elves, dwarves, and others were old enough to have been alive then and remember.

The vigilants agreed that all the gods, and the titan Denev, deserved their respect and thanks, when appropriate. But devotion was reserved for those gods that mirrored the Veshian ways and morals: primary Madriel and Tanil, and to a lesser extent Corean, Hedrada, Enkili, and Denev. The dark gods Chardun, Belsameth, and Vangal were thanked and respected, but not generally prayed to.

The Vigil Watch Fortress temple was too small to contain everyone at the fort: over two hundred members of Beltanian Vigil (about two-fifths of the full force), about eighty

recruit trainees, and nearly a hundred other miscellaneous members of other vigils. So once again the massive courtyard hosted the celebration.

Eochaid's platoon joined the other two trainee platoons in his company, standing and watching at the back of the courtyard at dawn. A high stage had been set up in front so that everyone could see. Vigil Marshal Dareatha Keloi gave a fine speech, commending both her vigil and the recruits on their achievements over the year. Then the high priestess of Madriel and high priest of Tanil each gave a blessing, and together they led the community in prayer as the sun's first rays crept down the walls towards them.

Eochaid wondered a little at the scale of the ceremony and the passion of the crowd. The only priest in his little village followed the dark goddess Belsameth, and while most of the citizens of his village paid respect to her, it was not true devotion. His own family worshipped Madriel. Each Madraday at dawn his mother would turn over the secret stone in the garden with the goddess of light's symbol hidden on it, looking carefully around before leading their prayer. Eochaid had known from boyhood that the worship was dangerous, but that it meant something important to his mother, if not to him.

But here, with hundreds of people reciting the words in unison, he felt a great stirring. As the sun's light touched the crowd, people looked up, raising their arms. Eochaid sighed as the light caught him, bathing him in unexpected, buoyant warmth. The two clerics raised their holy symbols and called out. Stately, shining figures formed behind them, each coalescing into a beautiful woman over ten feet tall, one unfolding glorious shimmering wings and the other brandishing a bow. People around Eochaid dropped to their knees, and the rest soon followed, Eochaid among them. The prayer echoed off the fortress walls, and Eochaid raised his own voice. The two goddesses shone through tears of joy in his eyes.

The prayer ended, and the visions faded into a sparkle of sunlight. Even still, Eochaid felt mighty, like he could take on the whole world just at that moment.

After the crowd dispersed, Eochaid and his squad met Hutchling, who'd been with the other clerics chanting on stage. He was taking off his religious vestments. Eochaid looked at him in wonder.

"How did they do that?" he gasped.

Everyone from the squad gawked as Hutchling only gave a half shrug. "You mean the visage ritual? Yeah, it's perfect for Divinities' Day. Gets everyone inspired."

"But..." stammered Eochaid. "I feel so...so..."

"Blessed? Euphoric? Yeah, that's the point! Have you never felt divine magic before, Lenahr?"

Eochaid took a deep breath to re-center himself and nodded. "Our village cleric healed me once or twice when I was injured. But it was nothing like *that*."

Hutchling smiled. "I bet it wasn't. A simple cure spell has nothing on a big ritual like that. You all should feel extra special for at least the rest of the day."

Jax and Gandy nodded, smiling dizzily. Even Miller looked a little flushed.

“You know, we’ve got about an hour before this afternoon’s pageant,” Hutchling said. “Lenahr...let’s do something special for you today.”

The cleric clapped Eochaid on the shoulder. “That bow you keep under your bunk? I bet, with the power of today’s blessing and a little extra magic, that you’ll be able to shoot it.”

Eochaid’s squadmates roared in agreement and dragged him back to their bunk house. Uncertain but encouraged by their enthusiasm, he gently drew his father’s bow from under his bunk. Then Jax grabbed one of his shoulders, Hutchling the other, and they steered him towards the archery range. Amra and her squad also joined the group when they saw them all cross the courtyard.

“The spell I’m going to cast only lasts for a few minutes, so get everything ready now,” Hutchling said once they arrived.

Eochaid struggled to string the bow, but Jax and Gandy stepped up to help him, pushing down together while he looped the bowstring.

“Damn, Lenahr, how do you normally string this thing?” Gandy asked.

Eochaid grunted, “I sort of...um...sit on it?”

Amra laughed. “You don’t worry about breaking it?”

“I don’t think it’s possible. For me, anyway.”

Gandy held the bow while Eochaid pulled on his archery gloves and bracers. The creak of the leather when he flexed his hands, the familiar pressure of the bracers...he took the bow from her with much greater reverence than when they were stringing it.

He glanced around. The rest of their platoon and a handful of vigilants gathered at the range, watching from the sidelines. Eochaid’s heart raced, not used to being at the center of so much attention. Holding the bow’s grip in his left hand, he stroked the smooth, strong wood of the upper limb with his right, trying to remain calm.

“This doesn’t feel right,” he said, lowering the bow.

He tried so step away and backed into Gandy. She peered over his shoulder. “I don’t think we damaged it or anything.”

“You trying to weasel out of this, Lenahr?” Amra asked.

“He’s not weaseling out of anything!” Gandy snarled back.

Eochaid glanced between the two women. “No, I mean...it feels wrong using magic. I should *earn* this.”

Amra nodded, but Gandy rolled her eyes and sputtered.

Jax held up a hand. “Stop, stop,” he said, and Gandy clamped her mouth closed on whatever rebellious answer she’d been brewing. Jax put a hand on Eochaid’s shoulder and turned him back around to face the targets. In a quiet voice he asked, “Lenahr, how big was your father?”

In his mind's eye Eochaid imagined his father holding the bow, standing in the doorway of their house. He waited for the image to melt into blood, into his mother's screams of loss, but the day's rituals calmed him. Instead, his father smiled over his shoulder as he hefted his game bag. "He was over six feet tall. Six two, maybe."

"And you are...?"

Eochaid shrugged. Wainwright stepped up and compared her height with his. "He's about an inch or so taller than me. Five foot seven, maybe."

Jax continued. "And how broad was your dad? At the shoulder?"

Eochaid pictured his father again, filling the doorway. He held his hands up, about three inches wider than his own shoulders on each side.

"So what you're saying is your father was about as big as Sir Van. Do I read you right?"

Eochaid shrugged. "Not as bulky."

"Muscular' is the word you're looking for," said Gandy.

"Not as muscular then. But yeah, I guess. He was... healthy, you know. His white hair made him look older, but he went gray young, I think. He was older than my mother, but not *old*. And hunting and farming kept him in good shape."

"So," continued Jax. "A man about as large, but not quite as 'bulky' as a half-orc warrior, previously owned this bow. And you, a little guy — no offense..."

Eochaid shrugged. "It's true."

"You...expect to someday use *this* mighty bow *without* magic."

Even with the benediction of two goddesses coursing through him, Eochaid's heart fell. He sighed.

Jax squeezed Eochaid's shoulder. He leaned in and whispered in his ear. "Lenahr... *Eochaid*...take the gift. Stop *thinking* for just this *one* moment. *Enjoy* this."

His first name echoed inside Eochaid. *I've been 'Lenahr' for months*. He looked into Jax's eyes and saw the kindness and concern there, the faith.

I need to do this to honor my father.

Eochaid nodded and took an arrow from Gandy. He saw Amra standing next to her, smiling her encouragement.

Hutchling said a prayer to Madriel, then touched Eochaid's arm. "Strength like a bull," the wiry priest said, and Eochaid felt the power surge through him. He nocked the arrow and drew the bow, the string creaking as the arrow reached his ear. Grinning like a fool, he released the string.

He completely over-shot the target. They all cheered.

He managed another ten shots before the spell wore off. He did — eventually — hit the center of the target.



The afternoon and evening were devoted to sharing and hearing stories about the deeds of the gods.

There was a pantomime play on the stage where several of the children of Bride Lake acted out the defeat of Kadum. Eochaid found it highly entertaining. He knew the story quite well, being that Belsameth was a central figure in it, but never could have imagined it performed that way. The children clearly took their parts very seriously — no one would dare to risk offending a god — but they did overact, especially the young lad in the shaggy goat hide playing Vangal. It was really difficult not to laugh.

The boy playing Kadum wore a long brown coat, the back of which was held by a child wearing polished armor. The girl playing Belsameth ripped open Kadum's coat and pulled out a paper heart from inside of it while the boy playing Chardun wrapped Kadum in paper chains. The girl lifted the heart over her head and cried out "I will take this heart and use it as a footstool in my throne room! On the moon!"

Vangal then dragged Kadum to the edge of the stage and pushed him off. Kadum squeaked and several people dressed in blue caught him as he fell. Then the people in blue pulled a big red blanket over themselves and Kadum. Children dressed in red came out and threw red flower petals into the air and up on the stage.

Vangal looked out at the audience, raised his hands up, and in a deep, warrior's voice cried, "Oh no! I seem to have turned the sea to blood!" He paused, smiled broadly, and made a huge shrug. "Oh well!"

The three children playing the gods then danced in a circle in celebration, just before the entire cast got back up on stage to take their bows. The audience whooped and hollered and gave them a standing ovation.

When it was over Eochaid asked, "Who was the character in the shiny armor?"

Jax looked shocked. "You don't know about the Golem?" He turned to look behind him. "Hey, Sir Van. Lenahr here doesn't know about the Mithril Golem!" he said, pointing dramatically at Eochaid.

The shining knight looked up from his conversation with Lieutenant Scehzar. The lieutenant shrugged and waved the paladin along.

"You didn't need to interrupt him," mumbled Eochaid.

"Oh, no. If *anyone* is going to tell you about the Mithril Golem, it has *got* to be a Mithril Knight."

Sir Van wore his full plate mail and carried his helmet, apparently ready for battle at a moment's notice. He carefully sat down on the bench opposite Eochaid's squad, watching them but saying nothing.

"Are you all right, sir?" Eochaid asked.

The half-orc's jaw worked. "Your celebration of Divinities' Day is very...informal. This is hardly fit for the great Corean the Champion. You should spend more of the day in prayer and contemplation."

"Sorry, sir," replied Jax. "But you *are* supposed to be on an exchange. That goes both ways, and this *is* how we celebrate."

Sir Van grunted.

Jax continued. "It's our custom to share stories. Might you tell us a tale about Corean? The story of the Mithril Golem?"

Sir Van sighed and set his helmet on the bench beside him. "Alright."

He paused for a moment, eyes going distant, and then began.

"During the war, armies of the Divine races fought desperately in every corner of the land. The Lord Corean knew that it was beyond even his power to be everywhere at once, and set about making a champion to stand in his place—the Mithril Golem.

"While it only echoes Corean's righteous presence, it's still a wonder to behold. The golem stands over a hundred feet tall and inspires all who gaze upon it. The first time I saw it, it filled my heart with devotion, and I knew even then that I wanted to do something worthy in Corean's name.

"When the evil gods were scheming to fight Kadum, they called on Corean. He was busy forging the blade he would use to cleave the titan Golphagga, so he sent the Mithril Golem to assist them in his stead. First, Belsameth bedeviled Kadum with trickery. Before the Earthshaker could discover her ploy and crush her, the Mithril Golem gripped Kadum's tail and set its mighty feet. Kadum flailed and shook with enough power to humble mountains, but the Golem was immovable and held fast.

"Then Kadum wrestled the Golem, trying to tear himself away, and crushed its shoulder. But still Corean's champion did not budge. As they wrestled, Chardun wrapped Kadum in his magical chains and bound him to a boulder a hundred feet high. Belsameth cut out Kadum's heart, and then Vangal hurled his bleeding body into the sea.

"After the battle, Corean's champion traveled north to the edge of Ghelspad to watch from the cliffs, should Kadum rise again. The followers of Corean built the city of Mithril around it, and when we needed swords to fight those who'd see the titans rise again, it gave its own flesh to our forges." He reverently tapped the hilt of his sword.

"There's a grand temple built around the Mithril Golem where it rests, with great doors ready to open the moment the Golem wakes again to defend the city."

The half-orc stopped. The listeners stared, as if seeing a shining figure filling the distant sky.

"Thank you," said Eochaid. "I can see why they wanted *you* to tell me that."

Sir Van nodded, picked up his helmet, and stood. "You're welcome. I understand the need for cultural exchange, but now I must serve my own customs. Please excuse me."

He turned and walked toward the temple. Lieutenant Scehzar's shoulders sagged as he watched the shining figure leave.

Amra approached with a wave of greeting and Eochaid's friends stirred from the reverie of the paladin's story.

"What happened? Sir Van seemed sad," said Amra, as she sat.

"I think he struggles," observed Hutchling. "He was born among the orc war-bands of Lede, but he found his place in the Order of the Mithril Knights. And now he's here, with...well, we're not a war-band, but we're certainly not paladins. I can't imagine it's easy for him."

"Hey, he has Lieutenant Scehzar to cuddle up with," said Gandy, elbowing Hutchling in the side. "Maybe a little togetherness will help him get the *stick* out."

Amra glared at her. "Don't joke about the man's dedication," she snapped. "Shouldn't half-breeds like you stick together?"

Stunned silence overtook the bench. Gandy's face went pale, and Eochaid saw the luster of tears in her eyes. Then she rose, turned, and walked away into the crowd.

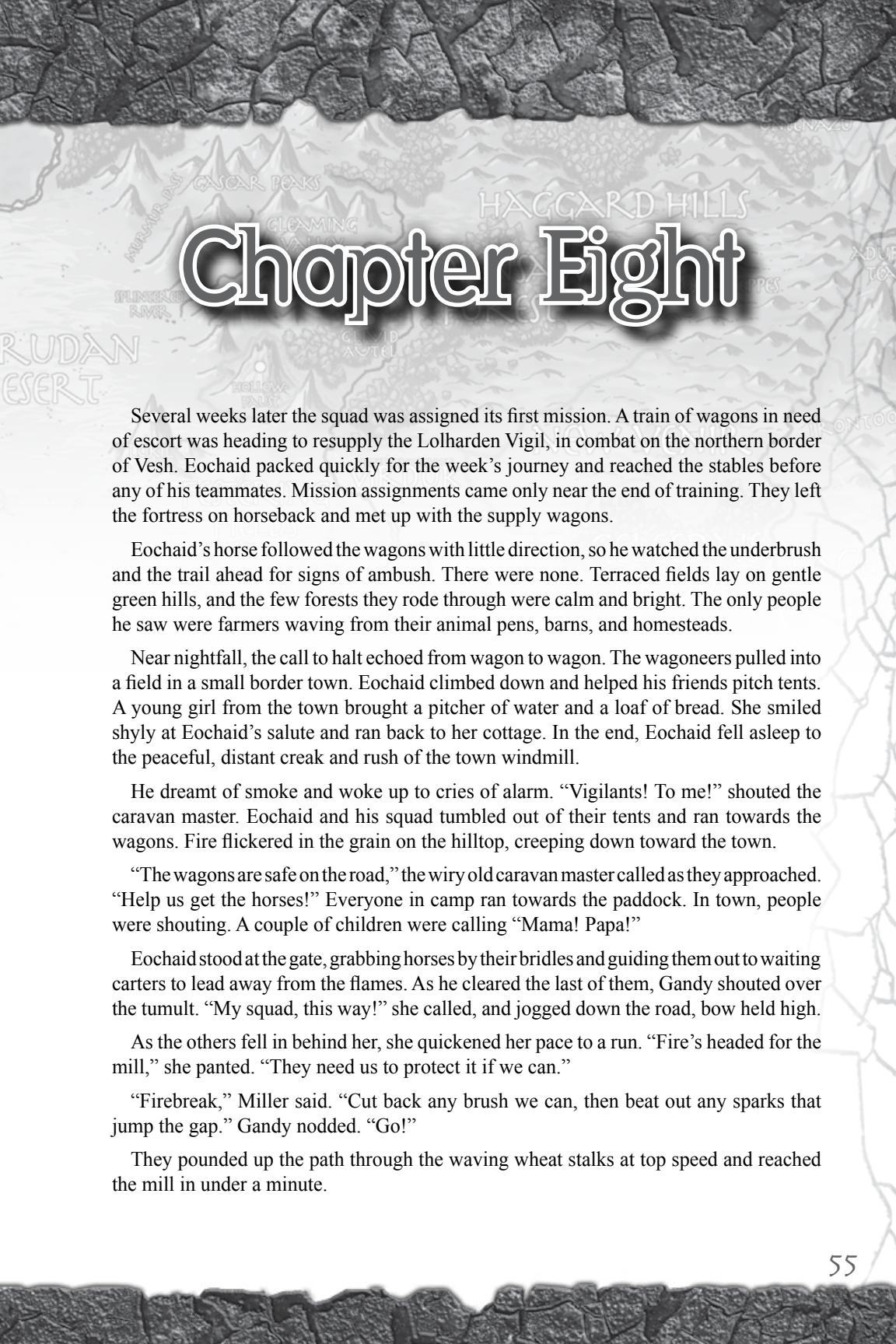
Eochaid leapt to his feet and followed. He caught up near the stage. Gandy stood by a pile of discarded props, trying hard to cry without being noticed by the throngs of people.

He glanced around quickly. The mountains from the set had been taken down, and behind them was an area where they could be away from the crowd. "Corporal," he said, and gently tugged her toward the quiet spot. She followed.

"I don't know why she'd say something like that," Eochaid said. "It was horrible, and I'll talk to her about it."

"No," Gandy sniffled. "No, there's no point. I thought that here in the vigil I'd be done with the 'half-breed' remarks, but it's the same everywhere."

All Eochaid could do was hold her as she cried.



Chapter Eight

Several weeks later the squad was assigned its first mission. A train of wagons in need of escort was heading to resupply the Lolharden Vigil, in combat on the northern border of Vesh. Eochaid packed quickly for the week's journey and reached the stables before any of his teammates. Mission assignments came only near the end of training. They left the fortress on horseback and met up with the supply wagons.

Eochaid's horse followed the wagons with little direction, so he watched the underbrush and the trail ahead for signs of ambush. There were none. Terraced fields lay on gentle green hills, and the few forests they rode through were calm and bright. The only people he saw were farmers waving from their animal pens, barns, and homesteads.

Near nightfall, the call to halt echoed from wagon to wagon. The wagoneers pulled into a field in a small border town. Eochaid climbed down and helped his friends pitch tents. A young girl from the town brought a pitcher of water and a loaf of bread. She smiled shyly at Eochaid's salute and ran back to her cottage. In the end, Eochaid fell asleep to the peaceful, distant creak and rush of the town windmill.

He dreamt of smoke and woke up to cries of alarm. "Vigilants! To me!" shouted the caravan master. Eochaid and his squad tumbled out of their tents and ran towards the wagons. Fire flickered in the grain on the hilltop, creeping down toward the town.

"The wagons are safe on the road," the wiry old caravan master called as they approached. "Help us get the horses!" Everyone in camp ran towards the paddock. In town, people were shouting. A couple of children were calling "Mama! Papa!"

Eochaid stood at the gate, grabbing horses by their bridles and guiding them out to waiting carters to lead away from the flames. As he cleared the last of them, Gandy shouted over the tumult. "My squad, this way!" she called, and jogged down the road, bow held high.

As the others fell in behind her, she quickened her pace to a run. "Fire's headed for the mill," she panted. "They need us to protect it if we can."

"Firebreak," Miller said. "Cut back any brush we can, then beat out any sparks that jump the gap." Gandy nodded. "Go!"

They pounded up the path through the waving wheat stalks at top speed and reached the mill in under a minute.

The windmill's sails fluttered in the smoky air overhead. Eochaid hacked furiously at a bramble at its base. *Flames are moving awfully fast*, he thought. *How will we protect the sails?* He yanked the last branches loose. "Hutch, can you call down rain or something on those sails?"

"My magic isn't that powerful," Hutchling answered. "Can you cut them down?"

Eochaid nodded. "Jax, take the other one," he shouted. One on each sail-arm, the vigilants jumped and clambered up the lower sails, cutting the ties that held canvas to wooden frames. Eochaid met Jax at the hub, where his friend peered into the smoky distance.

"You see something?" Eochaid asked. Jax pointed and said, "What in Chardun's Hell are those?"

Figures capered and scampered in the flames, their red eyes glowing like bright coals even over the light of the blaze. They walked at the head of a wake of fire, grabbing burning branches and lobbing them ahead, waving merrily when new flames erupted. Though the edges of the fire crept toward the mill, the path itself pointed straight to the town.

"Gandy!" Eochaid yelled as he scrambled back down the wooden arm. Gandy looked up as one of Jax's arrows struck the ground near the receding creatures. "Fuck," she snarled. "Jax, slow them down! The rest of you, follow me!"

They pelted down the curving path back to town. Jax's arrows flickered by in the firelight, pointing to the foe. Eochaid couldn't tell if the archer's shots brought any of them down. He drew his two short swords as he ran.

"We're not going to make it!" shouted Miller.

Gandy nodded. "We'll draw them here," she called, skidding to a stop and leaping atop a stone fence. "Hey! Hey, you horse-fuckers! Over here! *Here!*" She waved her arms like a madwoman. Miller and Wainwright hollered their own obscenities, while Hutchling banged his spear on his shield.

"Gandy!" Eochaid called. The corporal glanced at him. Eochaid tapped his chest and pointed to the side, parallel to the flames. Gandy nodded, grinned, and raised her bow. As Eochaid ducked behind a shrub and pulled his cloak up to his eyes, one of Gandy's arrows thrummed by, dangerously close. He heard a hoarse cry, and then the roar of fire moving closer, as if the wind had changed.

Acrid smoke reeking of scorched flesh clawed at his nostrils, as of an overripe carcass on a funeral pyre. He choked desperately but stayed silent. A misshapen figure pattered out of the fire. Gandy's arrow exploded through its skull. It fell and rolled downhill. Five more darted after it.

Eochaid pounced on the closest one as it passed. He drove his short sword deep into the creature's vitals and wrenched it free of the falling body in a single smooth motion that came naturally after day upon day of practice. Some distant part of Eochaid, a cold and collected part, took pleasure in seeing such rewards for that effort.

Gandy drew her rapier, but one struck out at her before she could use it, raking her belly with its claw. Eochaid stepped in behind it and sank his other blade into its armpit. Adrenaline coursed through him as the stricken creature fell at his feet. Another beast snarled and snapped at Eochaid with grotesque, gnarled fangs, but missed as an arrow — Jax's — caught it in the leg. Eochaid whirled and struck out with both swords at the creature's neck, beheading it, and kicked its corpse down onto the ground.

He looked around him. Only a few seconds had passed, but all the monsters lay on the ground, still. Miller was on his knees, puking out the stench. Hutchling pressed his hand to Gandy's abdomen as if to heal her. "It's not working!" he cried. A fresh wave of odor rose from the greasy blood of the beasts. Wainwright and Gandy coughed furiously. "Move!" gasped Gandy.

Hutchling and Wainwright half dragged, half carried Gandy down the hill to the path as the rest of the group scrambled with them. They collapsed once they reached clear air. Hutchling raised his hand again and closed his eyes. His hand glowed dimly as he laid it on Gandy's abdomen, and when he lifted it Gandy was whole.

Eochaid stood between his friends and the fire, as close as he could get, staring into it, bloody weapons ready. Nothing moved but the flames. His whole body still tingled in excitement.

"That was all of them!" Jax shouted, running down the hill to meet them. "Holy hounds, Lenahr, you wiped out *three* of them!"

"What *were* those things?" asked Miller.

"Charfiends, I think," said Wainwright. "I read about them. Probably started the fire. They like the smell of burning people."

"Unholy creatures," said Hutchling. "My spells never failed me before — it's as if they drove away Her light."

"Lenahr?" Someone touched Eochaid's shoulder, and he spun around, barely holding his swords in check. Gandy searched his face. "Lenahr, you are okay?"

Eochaid smiled. "Fantastic." He wanted to find more monsters to kill.

Chapter Nine

They delivered the supplies and turned for home. At a roadside campsite on their fourth night, Eochaid heard familiar voices. He walked between campfires until he found Amra's squad. "Lenahr!" Amra said, smiling up from the campfire. Sir Van made room beside the fire for him to sit.

"Well met," Amra said. "Did you enjoy playing nursemaid to a bunch of carts?"

"I did indeed, Corporal," he said with a grin. "What mission'd they send your squad on?"

"We went to Mullis Town and helped kill a pack of gorgons!" crowed Amra's squadmate Piper.

Eochaid paused. *Even a low gorgon would eat the lot of us and spit out the buttons*, he thought. "Really? And what was it like to fight them?"

The paladin laughed. "They didn't," he said. "Even I was only there to join the skirmish line that drove the beasts into the trap."

"I shot an arrow at one," Piper said.

"You *thought* it was one," Amra countered. "We were just there to carry water and run messages for the Mullis Town Vigil!" The other recruits laughed and threw twigs and grass at Piper.

"Mundane work still makes masters," Sir Van observed. "And you all might have died if the pack had climbed the embankment instead of following the stream into the spearmen. It may have been a training mission, but the risks were real."

• • •

The recruits joined parties for the rest of the trip. When they returned to the fortress, a runner from the division captain's office found them in the stables and saluted Amra. "Captain wants you, ma'am!"

"I'm only just back," she said, collecting her gear and bedroll.

"I know, ma'am. Told me to fetch you first thing," the runner said.

Amra glanced nervously between the young errand boy and her horse and gear.

Eochaid said, "I'll see to all that. I'll bring your stuff by your bunk when I'm done."

"Thanks," she said. With one more uncertain glance, she turned and followed the runner. Eochaid saw both their horses stripped of their tack, fed, and cared for, and then carried his double load of gear to Amra's empty bunk house. Her squad, he supposed, had gone to the mess already. He waited. He stowed her pack and unrolled her bedroll on the bunk. He waited some more.

Booted feet sounded on the stairs. Amra appeared at the doorway, her eyes red-rimmed. Only when she reached her bunk did she become aware of Eochaid.

"Aronis," she stammered. "His whole squad, they...they're missing." Then the tears began, and Amra Varith, ranger and vigilant candidate, collapsed on her bunk and wept like a child.

Eochaid sat down next to her on the bed and held her tightly as she sobbed. Her sorrow broke some barrier inside him, removed the doubts that kept him from touching her, from opening himself to her, from asking the questions in his heart. The tears washed away his concerns. In her choking grief, he heard his own unbearable keening the night after his father died, and he longed to comfort her. And then he remembered.

"Hey," he whispered, "I'm going to tell you a story. One I've never told anyone."

Her sobs slowed. He rocked her gently, stroking her hair. "When I was a boy," he began, "maybe three years old, my father went missing. He went out hunting alone and didn't come home. I was terrified. I didn't sleep at all that first night. They sent out searchers, but he was gone without a trace. I remember my mother saying 'Papa's gone, little one. Madriel's taken him away.' Even now I remember how it hurt. Mom told me that I cried myself to sleep every night for ages. They searched again and again, but they never found him."

Amra sniffed, and mumbled into his chest. "I thought you said that you were a teenager when your father died."

"I was. He wasn't dead. Not yet, anyway. Because when I was about seven, he came back. Just wandered into the village, looking for a barge to take upriver. He didn't recognize us, any of us! Something had happened to him, some kind of injury, we never found out exactly what. But Mom took him in, convinced him that we were his family. He was odd and distant, but still kind. Still fatherly. I was so happy, so deliriously happy. Eventually he seemed to remember us, but it was fuzzy...inconsistent. But he stayed with my mother, and less than a year later my brother Kane was born."

Amra's breathing steadied. Her grip on him eased, though her head stayed pressed into his cloak.

"Mom said it was a miracle from Madriel. She set a rule — never hunt alone. Dad grumbled, but eventually all the hunters adopted it. It was harder to sneak up on game with large groups, but we were a lot safer from titanspawn like ratmen. I loved it when he took me along. Later Kane too, if we were only setting snares and pit traps."

"How did...how *did* he die?" she asked in a quiet voice.

Eochaid froze, but took a deep breath and continued. “When I was about fourteen, my father went hunting. We weren’t low on meat, and there was a big trip scheduled already in a few days, but he wanted to go right away. There was just no stopping him. Mom insisted that I go as well, though I don’t think he wanted me to. She seemed especially worried that day. Maybe they had a fight? I never found out.

“We traveled far into the Blood Steppes. Much farther than usual. We passed up some good game on the way. Dad insisted that there was better further out. He kept reminding me that it was our job to take care of Mom and Kane. We were getting too close to South Fang, the firewrack dragon’s hunting grounds, and I got worried. Dad stopped and gave me a hug. Then he told me to wait for him in the foliage and keep cover while he scouted ahead.

“I thought he’d be back in a minute or so, but it was...a long time. Eventually I went out searching, calling his name. Then I found a trail of blood.” *So much blood*, he thought. “It led to a den under some tree roots,” he continued, voice trembling. Amra had gone very still in his arms.

“Inside there was blood everywhere. Gnawed bones. Still...” *Still flesh and tatters of clothing on them*, he thought.

“A dire rat den. One attacked me, bit me, but I managed to get away. I ran, and hid, and ran some more. Eventually our hunting group found me. One of them took me back to the village while the others looked for Dad.

“The hunters came home later that night. They’d fought a group of slitherin, gotten back father’s pack and bow. I don’t remember much more. I got really sick. Bad enough that Mom fetched the village cleric to heal me.”

He blinked. Amra was stroking his hand.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was supposed to be comforting you.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. It helped.”

She was quiet a moment, then looked up at him. “You think...you think Aronis could still be alive?”

Eochaid sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

Amra stood up, leaving Eochaid’s arms cold and empty. “Okay then.” She wiped off her face on her sleeves and straightened her clothing. “I have to go.”

Eochaid blinked. “Go? Where?”

She grabbed her rucksack and opened her footlocker. “The Mourning Marshes. I have to find Aronis. If he’s alive, I have to find him. And save him. Before he isn’t.”

Eochaid leapt to his feet, grabbing her hand. “Wait. You can’t just...go!”

“Yes. I can. I’ve finished my training. I’ve been in combat. I can do this.”

“With no supplies or...or any preparation,” he retorted. “Alone. People *die* alone.”

"Then come with me," she begged, putting her hand on his. "You're right that it's dangerous, but I *have* to do this. You could help me! A pair of vigilants—"

"We're *not* vigilants!" Eochaid protested. "If we left, it'd be desertion! They'd follow us and—"

"Good! That's all I want," Amra sobbed. "To get them out looking for Aronis!"

"For *us*," Eochaid shouted. "To lock us up! We need the vigil's help — it's not as simple as walking out that gate tonight!"

"Yes! It is!" she snarled, and lashed out with her free hand, ripping the other from his grasp. She stormed out of the bunk house. Eochaid's face stung. He touched his cheek with trembling fingers and felt blood running freely down his chin from the gouges she'd dug. He closed the lid of Amra's trunk and went to the infirmary.

When Eochaid saw Amra among the morning crowd in the mess hall the next day, some of the tension he carried fell away. She looked up at him for a moment, her face empty. Her eyes slid to his cheek. Then, expression never changing, she looked away again.

• • •

Later that week, Hutchling found him in the library. The young cleric sat down at Eochaid's table without saying anything. Eochaid looked up from his map of the Marsh Fleets region in the Mourning Marshes. Hutchling opened and closed his mouth. "Uh, so, your girlfriend—"

"She's not my girlfriend," Eochaid interrupted.

"...your *lady* friend was thrown out of the captain's office twice this week."

Eochaid nodded.

Hutchling peered into Eochaid's eyes. "Listen, I... we've all heard about her childhood friend at Arcernoth. Her suffering's obvious, even if.... Well..."

"Where are you going with this?" Eochaid asked.

Hutchling sighed heavily. "You know it's a lost cause, yes? You're training for Arcernoth. You know the quality of men they have down there. If *they* aren't searching for him, it's because he's not out there to rescue."

The memory of blood and splintered bone flickered in Eochaid's mind. He nodded again. Hutch got up from his seat and put his arm around Eochaid, squeezing reassuringly. Then he sighed and let Eochaid go. "Just... the only thing worse than one person dying is two."

Hutch stood up and turned to go. Eochaid said, "Hutch..."

The young cleric turned, waiting.

"What's really on the other side? You know? When you die."

Complex emotions crossed Hutchling's features, surprise and others less clear-cut. When they settled, he stared into the distance with a melancholy smile. "The gods take us up,"

he said. “They gather our souls to them, based on the lives we lead and who we revere and serve. If you follow Madriel, you live forever in sunlight, free from hardship and turmoil. If you follow Tanil, you run as an animal in perfect autumn forests. If you follow Hedrada, I...well, I suppose it’s a land where your sums always balance, or something.”

Eochaid chuckled, despite himself.

“But the point,” Hutchling continued, “is that you’re *happy*. When your life here ends, if you’ve served your deity, your soul goes to its perfect home.”

“Do you have to revere them?”

Hutchling smiled. “Depends on the god. I wouldn’t laugh at Vangal — well, you should *never* laugh at Vangal — but I know Madriel doesn’t care if you worshipped her as long as you’ve done right in the world. Most gods choose our souls based on our actions, not our prayers.”

“How do we *know*?” Eochaid asked.

Hutchling laughed. “Look around you, shit-for-brains! The gods and titans left their boot prints on all our asses. Arborneath is almost old enough to have *seen* it. And she *has* seen Tanil’s Eternal Glade.”

Eochaid blinked.

Hutch smiled and nodded, his eyebrows raised. “Died saving King Thain of the dwarves from a shadow elf assassin. He paid to have her raised. Costs almost a king’s ransom, though. More if you don’t have the body. And not every soul *wants* to come back.”

Eochaid nodded.

“I know you’d never give up on a friend,” Hutchling said, “But where Aronis is now, I think she’d be better off letting go.”

the wax and old stone of the home commander's sunlit meeting room, the first time he'd heard this same admonition.

Yes. I want this life. I can make the world safer. And once I earn my way in the vigil, I can bring Mom and Kane here, too. A weight eased inside of Eochaid and he sat up straighter.

The silence passed. "Recruits, to your feet," the captain said.

The platoon stood. Tanil's priest rose. "O, Huntress, be witness to this event. May your watchful eye call out any false oaths spoken this day!" The lanterns guttered and danced as a breeze of forest air flowed from the dais through the hall.

"Vigilants," the captain called, "step forward and take your oaths!"

One by one, the recruits stepped forward, repeated the oaths, called out "So I swear before the gods," the words like an echo that refused to fade.

When the last recruit finished, Madriel's priestess stepped forward. As sunrise dappled the walls of the temple, she opened her arms. "The gods hear your oath and witness its truth. May you serve with their blessings. Now you are vigilants."

• • •

A few days later, Sergeant Arborneath announced the arrival of vigil assignments. The squads waited in their bunk houses as, vigil by vigil, she called the recruits to her office.

Wainwright was the first member of their squad to be assigned.

"Mullis Town, just as I expected. My family comes from a tradition of carters for over six generations. When I'm not guarding teamsters, I'll be fixing wagons. Look me up if you ever find yourself traveling the Cordrada Corridor."

Jax went next. He returned carrying the medallion of Semanye Vigil in Durrover.

"The spies!" exclaimed Gandy.

"They're not spies," Jax insisted.

The squad applauded and Eochaid clapped his friend on the back.

Jax laughed. "You would have been great in Semanye," he said. "You're subtle and quiet, and trained in infiltration. Excellent qualities in a spy, if that *is* what we are. But you *had* to want the Marsh Vigil."

"You might be right," replied Eochaid. "But I worked hard for this. And...I haven't been chosen yet."

They chatted nervously, the remaining recruits awaiting the call.

Next was Miller, assigned to the Hornswyth Vigil. "Too close to Hedrad for my liking."

"It's at least two hundred miles from Hedrad!" insisted Hutchling.

"Like I said, too close. But apparently, we overlap with Arcernoth. So I might get to

work with Lenahr again!”

Eochaid sighed. “It’s not a done deal, but that would be nice.”

Gandy was assigned to the Ganjus Vigil.

“Typical,” she griped. “Just because I’m half elf. As soon as my first year is up, I’m moving.”

“You could join Lenahr in Arcernoth,” said Miller.

“Not *that* exciting!”

“I haven’t been...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know,” said Gandy.

The others passed around the amber medallions that identified their vigil and granted them enchantments useful in the regions where they would operate. Eochaid turned Wainwright’s ambered chunk of adamantite, watching it glitter. He studied Gandy’s flower petal and Jax’s chunk with a saw-toothed blade of grass inside.

And through it all, Eochaid fidgeted. *How is Hutch so damn composed?* The cleric sat on his bunk, smiling and joking as if waiting only for the dinner bell to sound.

Then it was finally Eochaid’s turn. He nearly ran to meet with Sergeant Arborneath.

• • •

Amra was already there when he arrived, eyes straight ahead and posture stiff. Arborneath stood behind her desk, and a tousled, roguish, well-traveled blond man in his late twenties, wearing vigil colors, leaned in a corner of the office. Eochaid saluted. Arborneath waved him into the room.

“Say hello to Captain Skywarder, recruits.”

“Hello, sir!” they both snapped.

Arborneath smiled. The smile faded. “So, you two really want to muck about in the swamp, do you?” the sergeant asked.

Eochaid lit up.

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Amra, stiffly.

Arborneath glanced skeptically at the other vigilants.

Skywarder pursed his lips, then nodded. “It’s not often that Arcernoth Delta takes on raw recruits. It’s like learning to swim by drowning. But I haven’t heard of any as determined to get in as you two in a very long time. And stubbornness is definitely of benefit in the Mourning Marshes.”

Arborneath opened a box and pulled out two vigil medallions. At the center of each

was a piece of amber with a tiny insect trapped inside, a caterpillar. As she put the two medallions around their necks, she saluted. “Congratulations, vigilants.”

“Meet me at the stables tomorrow after breakfast,” the blond man said. “We’ll ride out to Riverrock by noon. Dismissed!”

Eochaid gripped his new medallion fiercely in his hand.

Amra saw the grin on his face and returned a brief smile of her own as she turned for her barracks.

His friends cheered as he entered the room: “Arcernoth! Arcernoth! Arcernoth!”

Eochaid raised his hands in triumph. They formed a circle around him, waving their medallions, all talking at once about the adventures they would have.

“What does your medallion do again, Lenahr?” Miller asked.

“Helps me to hide and lets me walk on water twice a day,” he laughed.

Hutchling sat quietly on his bunk, smiling and laughing with them, but not dancing.

“She’s taking forever to call for you, Hutch,” Gandy noted.

“Oh, I already spoke to the Sergeant.”

“And?”

“I can’t decide.”

Silence fell like a cloak. Hutchling shrugged. “I’m a cleric. And a good one, apparently. I pretty much have my pick of vigils. Clerics are wanted everywhere. And since Lenahr here taught me how to climb a tree, none of them are worried about me keeping up.”

The room erupted again, four voices arguing over each other about the benefits of Hornswoth over Ganjus over Mullis Town over Semanye. Eochaid thought of the bloody swamp of the Delta, imagined gentle Hutchling waist deep in mud and gore, and stayed silent.

“Stop, stop!” Hutchling cried. “It’s great that you all love me. I am deeply flattered...”

Jax smirked and shook his head. “Nah, we just need a good cleric.”

Hutchling rolled his eyes at Jax, and then paused. “I...think I’m staying in Beltanian.”

“You’re going to become a *teacher*?” asked Gandy.

“No,” laughed Hutchling. “Have you looked around here? Beltanian Vigil is over five hundred strong. But less than half that is here at Bride Lake. Only the trainers are here full time.

“No other vigil travels quite like Beltanian — they go on all these *special* missions. Everyone else patrols specific regions on the Veshian border. But Beltanians...that’s the vigil that travels the *world* for the home commander. They’ve even gone as far as Termana, a whole other continent! If you really want to change the world, that’s the one to join.”

The dancing and conversation resumed. Miller produced a small bottle of surprisingly

strong liquor, and Hutchling improvised a complicated jig with Gandy in the center of the room. Echoes from the courtyard told Eochaid that his squad was not alone in its revels.

Wainwright took Eochaid aside. “We could have been together, you know, if you hadn’t spent your whole time here pining after Varith. But you lost your chance with me.”

Pining after — wait, are you...?

Eochaid stared. She studied his face and smiled a half smile.

“Good luck with her,” she continued, soberly. “Maybe, after she’s done mourning, you two will work it out.”

• • •

Something shook his shoulder, jolting Eochaid awake. His hand struck out, closing around a wrist. He turned to the intruder. Amra, a full rucksack on her back, swords on her hips, and bedroll hanging from her shoulder, smirked down at him in the moonlight. He relaxed his grip and she pulled her hand free.

“Pack your things if you’re coming with me,” she hissed.

Eochaid looked around the dark room. His squadmates slept. There were no sounds from the courtyard. He shook his head in confusion.

Amra looked down imperiously. “We have our medallions now, like you wanted. So let’s go.”

Eochaid looked up into her eyes. Amra radiated an icy determination, tight-lipped, hands on her hips.

Eochaid chewed his lips, then nodded. He slipped out of bed and put on his pants and boots. He quietly shoveled the rest of his gear from his trunk into his pack while Amra held it open for him. His new medallion banged against his bare chest. The bow gleamed in its place under his bunk.

Once we leave here, we’re never coming back.

He lifted it to his shoulder.

“Lenahr? What are you doing?” Hutchling whispered from the next bunk. Eochaid looked up at him, his finger to his lips.

Hutchling’s gaze shifted, focusing on Amra, and he nodded. Sitting up, he gestured to Eochaid, who walked over and crouched down next to him. Amra continued shoving things into Eochaid’s pack.

“Following your heart?” Hutchling whispered to him.

Eochaid looked Amra, then back at Hutchling and shrugged. “We’re going to the Mourning Marshes. To find Aronis.”

Hutchling’s eyes widened for a moment, and then narrowed in understanding. “You’re

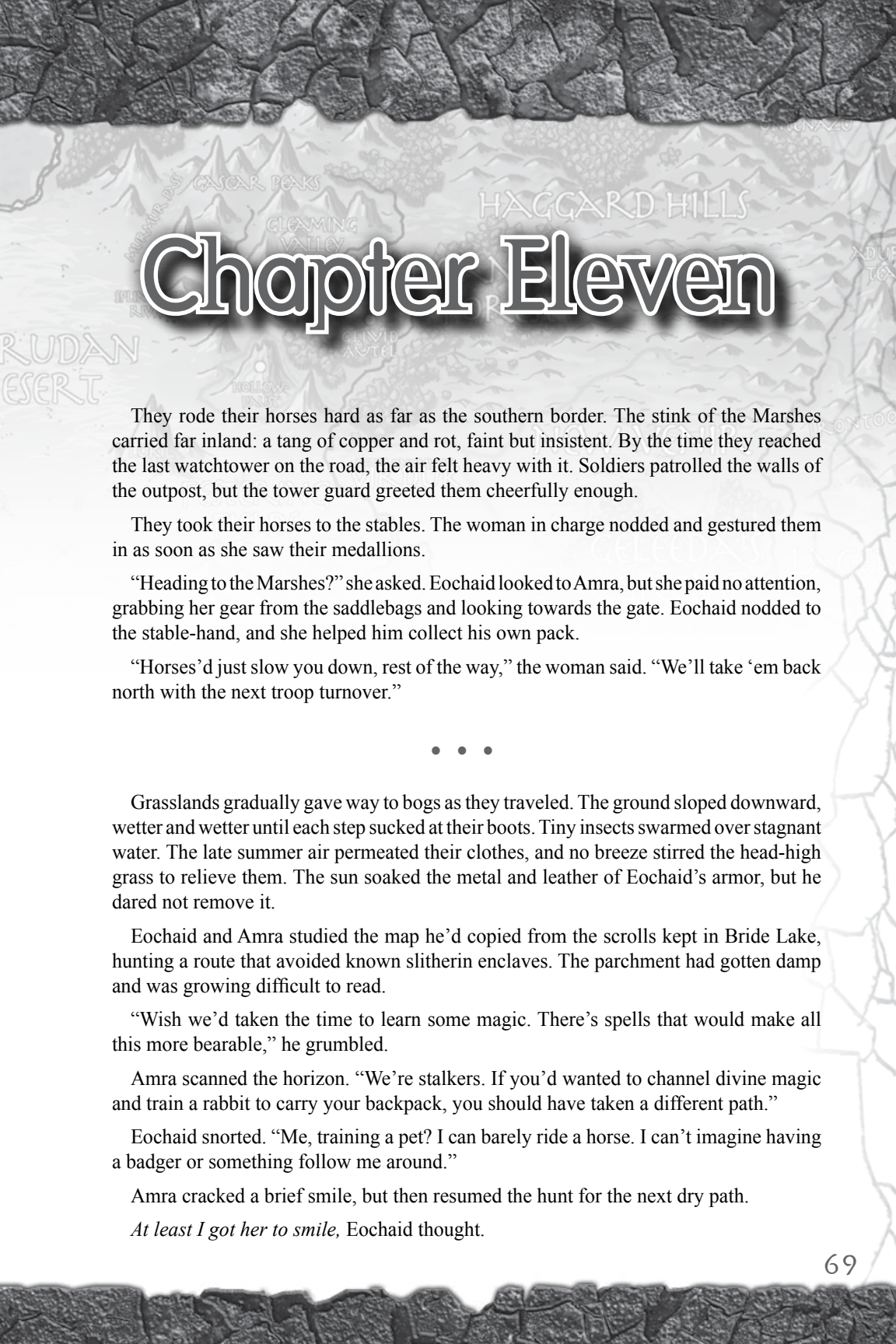
an idiot. You know that, right?” he muttered.

He pulled Eochaid close and whispered in his ear. “I couldn’t decide because I was seriously considering Arcernoth.” Eochaid heard his voice catch, and Hutchling glanced at Amra. Then he locked his gaze on Eochaid. “Don’t get hurt — I won’t be there to heal you.”

Hutchling gripped Eochaid in his arms and held tight. Eochaid put his own arms around the wiry cleric. He squeezed back, gently patting the tense shoulders. “I’ll be careful,” he murmured. After a moment Hutchling pushed him away and barely whispered, “I’ll miss you.”

“Now get out of here before I decide to tell someone,” Hutchling finished, eyes shining, and turned over in his bunk, shrugging up under his blanket.

Eochaid took his pack and weapons from Amra and they crossed to the door like ghosts. He turned back once, taking in his sleeping friends, then shouldered his load and left.



Chapter Eleven

They rode their horses hard as far as the southern border. The stink of the Marshes carried far inland: a tang of copper and rot, faint but insistent. By the time they reached the last watchtower on the road, the air felt heavy with it. Soldiers patrolled the walls of the outpost, but the tower guard greeted them cheerfully enough.

They took their horses to the stables. The woman in charge nodded and gestured them in as soon as she saw their medallions.

“Heading to the Marshes?” she asked. Eochaid looked to Amra, but she paid no attention, grabbing her gear from the saddlebags and looking towards the gate. Eochaid nodded to the stable-hand, and she helped him collect his own pack.

“Horses’d just slow you down, rest of the way,” the woman said. “We’ll take ‘em back north with the next troop turnover.”

• • •

Grasslands gradually gave way to bogs as they traveled. The ground sloped downward, wetter and wetter until each step sucked at their boots. Tiny insects swarmed over stagnant water. The late summer air permeated their clothes, and no breeze stirred the head-high grass to relieve them. The sun soaked the metal and leather of Eochaid’s armor, but he dared not remove it.

Eochaid and Amra studied the map he’d copied from the scrolls kept in Bride Lake, hunting a route that avoided known slitherin enclaves. The parchment had gotten damp and was growing difficult to read.

“Wish we’d taken the time to learn some magic. There’s spells that would make all this more bearable,” he grumbled.

Amra scanned the horizon. “We’re stalkers. If you’d wanted to channel divine magic and train a rabbit to carry your backpack, you should have taken a different path.”

Eochaid snorted. “Me, training a pet? I can barely ride a horse. I can’t imagine having a badger or something follow me around.”

Amra cracked a brief smile, but then resumed the hunt for the next dry path.

At least I got her to smile, Eochaid thought.

“The Lolharden Vigil keeps wolves.” He continued, slogging after her through the tall wet grass. “I didn’t read anything about Arcernoth Delta training animals. Do you think they have them?”

“Doubt it,” she replied, then paused, probing the silt with her pole, “but if they do, it would have to be giant frogs. That’s the only thing that could survive out here.”

“Or birds,” Eochaid countered.

“Sure, birds. Bet Marshal Silverblade has a great big crow or something.”

The thickening mud and unpredictable channels of water quickly absorbed their attention and smothered their conversation.

• • •

Over the course of the day they nearly ran afoul of several nasty creatures. Once, they ducked into a thicket of ferns just in time to see a pair of dog-sized spiders hauling a garfish as large as Amra out of the water on thick web-lines. Another time, two spined lizards wrestled in the channel they were about to cross before snapping and snarling their way off into the reeds. The third time, they heard something enormous slithering along through the scrub, but only saw the ten-foot-wide trail of crushed foliage and broken branches it left behind.

They continued through the marsh until late afternoon. Trees clawed their way out of the grasses: short and stunted at first, then tall and tangled, covered in other plant life. Vines and ferns festooned the branches, choking the limbs. The deep shadows and dappled light made it difficult to tell fauna from foliage. They learned to step carefully after Eochaid nearly lost a leg to something gnarled with pincers.

When the sun was low on the horizon, they looked for a place to camp. Amra pointed out a large, dead tree with low enough branches to climb. It might have been an oak tree long ago but was now only a trunk and branches covered by an overgrowth of grasses, moss, and leafy plants. They clambered up, disturbing a nest of small vipers that had made their home in the crotch of a large limb. They pulled trailing vines around them to hide behind, then ate cold rations and huddled close together under their cloaks. Amra took first watch while Eochaid curled up, back against the tree trunk.

He slept lightly and woke in darkness to the sound of something moving below. The night was blindingly black, the air heavy with rain that refused to fall. He closed one fist around the hilt of his sword and reached out the other towards where Amra would be. Her hand clasped his. Something large lumbered past, scraping against the trunk of the tree so the branches rustled. They held still and didn’t relax again until it was long gone.

Eochaid took his own watch. As Amra slept, he listened to unfamiliar animal cries, thrumming, barks, and choruses. He counted the stars that peeked between the leaves. He felt he should pray but had no idea what to say or to whom.

In the morning, they pored over the map again.

"It would be somewhere near here," Amra said, tapping on the map just east of the words 'Marsh Fleet.'

The Marsh Fleet was a region in the marsh filled with the wreckage of lost ships. Foamer slitherin were known to build nests aboard the vessels. It was over 100 miles from the Blood Sea, and yet new ships regularly appeared there. Magic, Eochaid figured. Before they went missing, Aronis' squad had been scouting one such new addition to the fleet.

They ate, bundled up their gear, and made their way down to the mist-covered ground.

They traveled for several hours, keeping to the underbrush and moving slowly through the haze. The marsh was full of drowned villages whose leaning skeletal remains sometimes jutted out of the muck and cattails, but such places attracted the more intelligent and predatory creatures of the marsh.

Amra grabbed his arm. "Listen." A rattle echoed through the mist, like a bundle of quill pens being shaken. Another rattle from another direction, then a series of them. Memory stirred Eochaid to action almost before he knew what he'd recalled. He grabbed Amra and ran toward a nearby darkness in the mist, which resolved into a half-sunken wall. They threw themselves down in the mud and ferns.

Two shadows skimmed by silently above their heads. Eochaid looked up as a third swooped in and landed. A man-sized reptile with leathery wings and cruel talons croaked once, then scuttled up the mass of masonry and leapt into the air, quiet as a breath.

More shadows passed. They waited. Nothing further. "Miredwellers," Eochaid whispered. "We should go." They fled the ruins, glad their luck had held.

By midafternoon the shadows of hulls and masts were visible through the mist, and they could hear the creak of yard arms and the flapping of sail cloth. Yet, Eochaid realized, there was no breeze. The air was still and stagnant. Amra pointed ahead, eyes burning with almost fevered determination. They stalked between the wrecks, skirting close to their wooden hulls.

Faint voices halted them. Eochaid found the remains of a rowboat, fallen from its rotted davit long ago. The two of them scrambled under it.

Four slitherin slunk out of the mist, burly, black, and shaggy. They all wore jewelry, or had rings and shiny trinkets tied in their matted fur. They muttered to one another through yellow teeth.

Though his heart hammered as if it might escape his chest, Eochaid's mind felt calm. He gripped the handles of his blades and gauged the distance to them. Amra locked her fingers around his shoulder as he leaned forward to pounce. She shook her head. He gritted his teeth. They walked past. *Turn around, you vermin*, he thought. *Turn around! Let me see you! I've come all this way. And this time I'm ready.*

He squeezed the hilts of his swords so tightly he could feel the bands of their leather wrapping through his thick gloves. In his mind, he could feel the growl of steel sliding between ribs, the warmth of blood soaking through cloth, the resistance of flesh and metal as he yanked the blade free and whirled around to strike again.

They waited for several more minutes. His ardor cooled. His grip on his sword hilts loosened. The ratmen did not return.

Amra whacked him on the back of his head. "You almost got us killed!" she hissed at him.

She's right. That was stupid. "Sorry," he whispered. "It won't happen again."

She shook her head. "You had the right idea. Just not when we're outnumbered. We need to know how many there are before we risk engaging."

They shared a grim nod, then continued their search.

As the day progressed, the mist only closed in more tightly. While it hid them, it also covered everything else. "I don't think we're going to find anything until this burns off," Eochaid hissed. Amra waved him away in annoyance.

A short while later, she froze, and then rushed forward. A ship's prow stuck out of a soil bank as if riding an earthen wave. She scrambled through the mud and grassy hummocks to reach it, and he followed her. Stuck in the softening wood, about head height, was an arrow. She reached up and yanked it free. She looked at him with a grim smile, her eyes shining. "They were here."

He took the arrow and studied it. The broad arrowhead was Veshian steel, barbed for hunting. *From the vigil's fletchers, for sure.* He nodded. She continued forward, combing the ground for tracks in the dimming light. He followed, but the clinging mist was so thick he could barely see his muddy feet.

"I don't see anything," he whispered. "Even Arborneath couldn't track someone through this."

Amra said nothing. She returned to the grounded ship and circled out again. Eochaid paced after her for fear of losing her in the gray. She cursed under her breath and returned to the ship again, pacing like a caged cat.

"The light's failing. We should find shelter and wait this out," he suggested.

"No. I'm done waiting."

"The mist will clear," Eochaid said.

"*When?*" she snarled, eyes blazing. "Coward!"

He stepped back. As Amra seethed, he pricked up his ears, listening for any movement in response to her outburst. Nothing stirred in the deepening dark.

"The ratmen," he murmured, "can see in the dark. They can hear better than us. Who knows, maybe they can *smell* where we've been. To win the fight, we have to plan ahead. *You* said that."

Her jaw worked. "Until the mist clears," she growled. "No longer."

Eochaid led as they picked their way clear of the mud-locked fleet.

• • •

Eochaid woke to the sound of rain and a sense of absence. He glanced around their damp nest in the thicket of bushes, but Amra was gone. He grabbed his pack and crawled out into the mire.

The haze was gone. Though little light reached him through the thick clouds, he could still see well enough to follow Amra's boot prints, and he knew where she would go: straight as an arrow back to the old ship sinking into the marsh.

The rain spattered, then poured, then roared. Water cut channels in the mud, and the clumps of grass became islands. Eochaid reached the ship. Amra had cut an X in the soft wood. He circled out until he found a broken patch of reeds and picked up a trail of scrambling boot prints. Thunder underscored the sound of the rain.

Eochaid traveled as fast as he could, eyes locked on the ground, losing the track and finding it again, going further and further into the muck. The water rose until he could no longer see footprints, and could only peer through the downpour for broken vegetation. He splashed from hummock to hummock, tracing Amra's course in the broken reeds and cattails.

The trail went cold. He struck out on the straightest line he could but faltered at a raging torrent that rushed down a channel in the grass. He turned back to the last mound of broken reeds he'd found and stuck his staff in the mud to mark the spot. He pressed on again at an angle to his previous path, only to sink to his chest through a floating island of peat and have to claw his way out.

Again and again he returned to his staff, picked a direction and searched for more signs. Each time he found nothing. Panting, he leaned on his staff. The water continued to rise. In desperation he sought out the highest tree-covered hillock still above the water line, yanked the staff free and plunged toward it through the flood.

When the ground went out from under him he kicked ahead, driving the pole into the mud beneath, fighting through to the next clump of brush. He heaved himself past and pushed on. Halfway to the hill, he heard the groan of wood and the whoosh of something huge sliding through the rushes.

Eochaid glanced up just in time to see the hulk of a ship, masts snapped but afloat, coursing down the channel towards him. He took three strokes towards the channel's edge before the wedge of wood was on him, grinding him under, pushing him into the silt, tearing and tumbling him. The weight drove the air out of his lungs.

Then it was gone, carried away by the current, and Eochaid was in utter darkness. His eyes burned. His lungs burned. He had no sense of direction.

Shit, shit, shit!

He swept his arms out through the invisible morass, feeling nothing solid, no up, no down. He reached for his neck, found the chain of his vigil medallion, and followed it with his fingers to the amber pendant. *What was the word to activate it?*

He gripped the little nugget tightly and shouted the charm as loud as he could, the words bubbling through the water and silt. The muck seemed to jet around him, tearing

his hand from the medallion, nearly ripping off his pack and boots. Then he was in the air, the roar of the rain in his clearing ears, floating a hairsbreadth above the water. He coughed up globs of viscid watery ooze.

Rain sluiced the grime out of his eyes. He blinked the last of the grit away and sought out the copse of trees. Then he struggled to his knees, rose to his feet, and stumbled towards them, floating like a bedraggled ghost on the surface of the torrent.

He pulled himself up through the grass into the trees, fell against a gnarled trunk, and howled, the sound tearing from his raw throat and echoing in the rain. Then he curled into his sodden cloak and closed his eyes.

• • •

Gray light filtered through the branches. Slow rain dripped, pooling on his cloak. He lay huddled on his side.

A marsh bird called. Something splashed and thrashed in the water. Eochaid lay still.

Another splash, somewhere else. Eochaid raised his head. A quiet rustle in the grass. He peered around the tree. A black, scraggly form crept through the grass. It reached the edge of the channel and peered out, a crude spear in its long-fingered hand: a slitherin. It lanced the water, then pulled back a wriggling fish. Chuckling to itself, it slipped the fish in a bag and moved up the stream.

Eochaid picked up a fist-sized rock. He wrapped his mud-caked cloak around him and crawled out the back of the thicket and down the mound. When he reached the water, he touched his amulet and murmured the charm. His feet rose from the mud. His footfalls made no sound as he slipped across the channel and into the grass.

He scanned his surroundings. The creature was alone, and it was smaller than the ones he'd seen patrolling between the ships. Eochaid crept quickly along the stream, closing on his prey by sound, moving when it moved. Another splash. Muttered chittering. Quiet footfalls.

Eochaid stepped from behind the last clump of cattails. The creature's back was to him. He brought down the rock.

The ratman pitched over into the mud. Its spear floated, caught the current, and drifted away. Eochaid dragged the unconscious slitherin by the leg. At the water, the creature's head went under. The dragging was easier, though, without the mud and reeds to pull against. The slitherin coughed and spluttered, but could not muster the strength to shake loose.

Eochaid hauled it up the slope and into the trees. It keened eerily as he tied its hands to a branch. He knelt in front of it. Its eyes struggled to focus. Blood dripped from one large ear. This one had few adornments in its fur — just a silver bracelet knotted at its shoulder.

"There was a woman here last night. Did you see her?"

The black eyes looked back at him. It moaned again.

“*Me*,” he barked, thumping his own chest. “People like *me* have been here. Where are they now?”

The creature flinched. It chittered and squealed and flapped its ears. It pulled at the rope around its hands, fingers clutching the air.

“You speak Ledean?” he said, in the trader’s tongue. “Shelzari? Calastian? *Any* human tongue?”

The creature chittered and squirmed away, pushing back against the tree.

Eochaid sighed and dropped his hands to his sides. The slitherin looked up at him. In a single movement, Eochaid drew his sword out of its scabbard and cut the creature’s throat.

Chapter Twelve

His map was a useless, soggy mess of mud. *Accurately depicts the marsh*, he thought. Riverrock was south, though, and on a large enough river to recognize if he struck it. He did his best to find the sun, then gathered his gear and left the thicket behind.

• • •

Eochaid heard the river before he saw it: a great rushing sound. He scrambled through the underbrush, exhausted and anxious to reach the landmark that would point him to safety.

The river was murky. It rushed between reedy shores, more like the channels in the marsh than the waterway he'd known as a child. Large rocks covered in moss of varied colors poked up from the center, water foaming around them. Some of the foam had a strange pinkish hue.

He stood looking at the river, trying to decide if he should go up- or downstream. His beard stubble itched, as he'd had no way to shave in days. Biting insects buzzed around him, so he pulled a cloth from his sodden pack to tie around his face to keep them away. His hair was matted, and he discovered dried blood mixed with the mud. *Captain Wildsen wasn't kidding when he said I'd never feel clean or dry again.*

Based on his memory of the map, he decided to head upstream and set out along the river. *If I spot the Blasted Oak, I'll know I'm heading in the wrong direction. Petty sure you can't see it from Riverrock.*

Hours later, the sound of the river changed, its rumble more pronounced. A giant granite promontory split the river in two, turning the two flows on different paths and creating a tumult of foam and whirlpools. Long ago, before the Divine War, a town had been built in the shadow of the giant stone, protected on three sides. Kadum's Deluge had reached even here and scoured the town away. The vigil fort was built overlooking the ruins of the old town, its walls and towers standing high above the river fork. Eochaid walked along the shores of the northern river, approaching the fort from the landward side.

Eochaid scanned the fort walls but saw no bridge, no ropeway, no ladder. The recent rains swelled the river and enraged its waters. He carefully checked for threats. Seeing nothing, he made his way out of the high grass to the water's edge and waved both arms over his head, hoping to catch the eye of those on watch. After a minute or so he heard a horn blow, and he ducked back under cover.

A rowboat was readied on the far shore and made its way across the river. As it approached he scrambled into the water. The man at the oars backed water and crabbed towards him, stern first. Eochaid caught the transom, and the rower struck out immediately for the far side again.

“Lenahr,” he gasped as he dragged himself into the boat. “I’m Eochaid Lenahr, reporting for duty.”

“You’re a mess, Lenahr,” said the oar man. “Sit tight, and I’ll have us back to the fort in a few minutes.”

Eochaid slumped, letting his exhaustion win for the first time in days. Once they reached the shore, another ranger helped Eochaid out of the boat while several others dragged it back up the embankment. Eochaid carried his bow while the ranger hefted his muddy pack and led him into the fort.

A heavy gate split the eastern inland wall. It opened just wide enough to let them and the people carrying the boat inside. There was a bustle of activity in the courtyard. Men and women in worn, stained leather with carefully polished metal fittings cleaned and oiled their blades, patrolled the walls, or talked loudly over food and drinks. Somewhere a hammer rang on steel.

He noted the vigilants, much older and harder than those who served at Bride Lake. All the human and halfling men had shaggy beards, and both men and women had their hair cut short or tied back in tight braids. *Guess I won’t bother shaving*, he thought.

An officer approached his group. They all saluted, Eochaid’s hand coming up last. “This is Lenahr, sir,” said the vigilant with Eochaid’s pack.

The officer grunted. “Captain Skywarder’s going to want to see him right away,” he said. “Follow me, Lenahr.” Eochaid took back his pack and followed the officer into the fort.

Where Vigil Watch Keep was grand, with broad hallways and airy ceilings, Riverrock’s hallways embraced him as he walked, the large, rough blocks of stone leaning in closely. It felt like a warren or a mine more than a building. It felt impregnable.

They entered the captain’s office, and Eochaid remembered to salute. Standing at a table covered in maps and charts and letters was Skywarder, looking no more tousled or unsettled than he had been in Arborneath’s office. “Lenahr! You’d have been here yesterday if you’d just left Bride Lake with me. What in Chardun’s Hell happened to you? Where’s Varith?”

Eochaid tightly gripped his pack, knuckles white. “Lost, sir. I lost her somewhere in the Marsh Fleet.”

“We should send a search party then. Sergeant Blake—”

Eochaid shook his head. “There’s no point, sir.”

Captain Skywarder’s gaze softened. He sat down behind his desk. “Lenahr, have a seat,” he said quietly. “Tell me what happened.”

Eochaid slowly set down his pack and found a chair. For a moment he considered his filthy clothes, but all the furniture was of solid, well-polished wood, without cloth that could easily pick up dirt. He sat heavily in the chair.

“She...we...I couldn’t wait until noon to leave, sir. Amra — Vigilant Varith — and I took horses out before dawn and made our own way to the marshes.”

“How did you end up at the Fleet?”

“We...I got lost, sir. Our map got wet, and we couldn’t read it. Took a wrong turn... or something. There were slitherin, but we managed to evade them. There was heavy mist during the night and we got separated. I was searching for her when the rainstorms hit. The area flooded. I think...she...I couldn’t track her in the floodwaters.” He looked down at his hands, clenched on the edge of the chair. His eyes were hot, his chest tight. In a hushed voice he said, “I think the bog had already taken her before the flood hit.”

“Sergeant Blake, wasn’t Aronis Mordain’s squad investigating the Fleet before they went missing?”

Eochaid’s head shot up.

“Yes sir,” said the sergeant.

Looking Eochaid straight in the eye, Skywarder asked the sergeant, “...and weren’t Mordain and Varith both from the village of Moor?”

“I believe so, sir,” the sergeant replied.

“That stretch of marsh seems to have it in for anyone from Moor.” He stared for a long moment at Eochaid, hard eyes unsettling in his boyish face. “Lenahr, do you have *anything* else to add?”

Eochaid swallowed and shook his head. “No, sir.”

The captain sighed. “Sergeant, take Lenahr to get cleaned up and then show him to the eastern bunk house. He’s to join Balak’s squad.”

“But he’s a stalker, sir! I thought he and Varith were for my platoon.”

The captain shook his head. “It seems Lenahr here has a few basics yet to learn before he’s ready for missions. Dismissed.”

Eochaid’s jaw dropped, but he grimly snapped it shut. *Doesn’t matter. I deserve it for letting Amra down.* He picked up his pack and followed the sergeant out of the office.

Chapter Thirteen

Balak's squad, mostly older vigilants, performed work around the compound: guard duty, kitchen work, carpentry, and other labor. Once he'd recovered from his journey, Eochaid's first duty was digging out a compost dump for trash and table-leavings.

Balak was a kindly older man, his face creased with laugh lines. Decades of sun had browned his skin and burned every hair off his head, except for a fringe of scraggly gray that he proudly tied into a thin, greasy braid. "Boy, how'd you earn Captain Skywarder's ire? I didn't even know he had ire to earn!"

Eochaid just shrugged and stuck his shovel in the rich, muddy earth in the corner of the inner walls of the fort, just beyond the rock that formed its foundations. Even without a shirt, Eochaid was already covered in sweat and grime before he'd dug a foot down, and he'd be three feet deep and digging out ten feet wide before he was done.

Balak sat on a stool at the edge of the hole, a sharpening stone in his hand and a leather bag of arrowheads at his feet. He pulled a dull broadhead from the bag and worked its edge on the stone. "Well, you'll suffer for it, but you'll do it productively," he chuckled, "and you won't have to do it alone."

Eochaid's shovel hit something hard. The soil didn't go far before it hit bedrock. "That's far enough down, son," Balak said. Eochaid scraped along with the shovel until he uncovered the rough-cut stone buried in the soil. Balak smiled. "That's it — now dig it out square, ten feet on a side, to that depth. When you've dug a full wagonload, we'll cart it out."

Eochaid looked up at Balak. "Not complaining about the work, but why don't we just dump the trash into the river?" he asked.

"Don't want to foul the waterways. We bury it and it turns into loam, returns to the earth. Dumping would be bad for the fish."

"Have you *seen* that river?" Eochaid scoffed. "Those fish are already too diseased to eat."

"Denev's doing her best to heal the earth, son. We're not going to make it harder for her." The old man smiled and threw a clod of dirt at him. "Besides, we *use* this soil. You've seen the miserable plants that grow out here — the soil's ruined! This compost goes into our vegetable patches."

THROUGH SHADOWS AND DREAMS I: VIGILANT

The old man laughed. “I heard tell that when Arcernoth Delta was first established, they had to assign the clerics as cooks just to keep the troops from being poisoned. You, my boy, are shovelin’ the future security of the vigil there.”

Eochaid looked at the mounds he’d dug up: dark soil, rich with worm castings. He nodded and returned to shoveling.

Balak paused in his scraping. “Can you hear me okay doing that?” he asked, pointing down at Eochaid with an arrowhead. “I’m to lecture you on our vigil’s standing orders. Apparently, you need reminding on some of them?”

“Probably,” Eochaid replied, answering both questions.

“Good, ‘cause now’s as good a time as any.”

Balak’s cheerful recital and humorous interjections passed the time as Eochaid dug. The standing orders were different than the vigil oaths: guidelines rather than vows. Wise field strategies, like marching single file, or always posting shared watches. Due to the independence required to be a good vigilant, they were flexible and open to some interpretation. Eochaid was already familiar with them, though Arcernoth Delta’s orders differed a bit from Beltanian’s.

But one phrase in particular echoed in Eochaid’s mind after Balak recited it: “Lies are poison in the bloodstream of the vigil.” It nagged him like a broken tooth. Wasn’t a small lie worthwhile to protect the memory and reputation of a lost soldier — a lost friend?

I didn’t lie about enemy movements, or the flood, or how she died. Just why she died. No matter. I’ll dig my ditches, peel some root vegetables, and move on.

• • •

At dinner, Eochaid sat with some of his new squad in the workshop, eating a stew of turnips and dumplings. They were a motley lot. Two human brothers, both scarred and battered, one missing a foot and the other a little sun-touched. A red-headed woman who was master carpenter and bowyer. The dwarf and halfling who ran the fort’s smithy. The elf apothecary, who had enough scars he might have fought in every battle in the vigil’s history. And Mattock — Eochaid was unsure if it was her name or a nickname — was a huge-muscled dwarf who oversaw and expanded the fortifications. Others, too, but even Eochaid found it hard to keep track of them all.

In the fortress’s close quarters, they had only two small bunk rooms. Eochaid slept in a hammock and stowed his gear in the rafters. The bowyer Belasius, seeing his father’s bow coated in grime, had practically snatched it from his pack, tutting over it. “Have it back by morning,” she said, cradling it like a sick child.

Eochaid puzzled over the group’s existence. Squads usually had only six people at most. This one was closer to the size of a platoon, and its work scattered them across half the fortress on a given day. Perhaps what defined the group was that they were the remainder left behind when the rest of the vigil was divided into squads.

A spoon tapped Eochaid's chest. Eochaid looked up at a one-eyed man who gestured to his medallion. "Best wash that ditch-scum from your amulet. Wouldn't want to be called Traitor."

Eochaid paled. He grabbed a scrap of cloth from the workbench, dipped it in his water cup and scrubbed the dirt off his medallion. *Traitor, for having a dirty medallion?* "Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't know." Chuckles rippled around the table. Eochaid froze, then glanced around the room at the amused faces.

"You don't know Traitor's story, Lenahr?" asked Balak.

The sentence's construction caught his ear: 'traitor,' the Veshian word that Eochaid had taken to mean 'conspirator' or 'defector' wasn't a just description, but also a name!

Eochaid shook his head.

Balak took a long draw from his cup and set himself to his true craft.

"There's eleven vigils today, but there *used* to be twelve. Dark Motak was one of the first vigils formed. They defended the eastern Veshian border that's now under the care of the Beltanians. Stretches the Beltanians a bit too thin, if you ask me, though it explains why they're so big. Only the Marshes really need a vigil that large."

The other vigilants knocked their cups on the table and shouted "Delta!" Balak cheered along, then waited for them to quiet down.

"Well, this demon-lord Mortaxus, a nasty Chern-spawned fuck, had an army in the Kelder Mountains, raiding western Vesh. This was toward the end of the Divine War. The high elves had already gutted Chern in Termana, but *this* pestilent bastard just wouldn't give up. His magic made the dead walk again, so our troops were fighting their *own* fallen comrades.

"Veshian high command called the vigils from across the land, Dark Motak included. They were stealthy, mostly stalkers — defined the specialty, no doubt. They were led by Jovian Traitor, the stealthiest motherfucker of them all. Traitor was ordered to take his vigil deep into enemy territory and find their weak points. But the vigil fell into an ambush that drove them into the Kelder Steppes. They retreated into a cave in a deep canyon, with no way out, surrounded by titanspawn and undead.

"Jovian Traitor went alone to parley with the titanspawn commander. When he returned, he told his troops that no quarter would be given and that they would fight to the last. His soldiers shook in their boots. So Traitor made up a potion to give 'em...said it would make 'em all strong and brave. Each vigilant drank, but instead of stirring 'em up, it paralyzed 'em. Traitor slit the throat of each and every person under his command. The titanspawn stood over them and watched him do it. He'd traded his life for the lives of his vigil.

"The only one to survive to tell the tale was a fellow named Lorindale. He didn't drink the poison — guess he was brave enough without it — and the enemy let him go. They sent him to tell the Veshian command what happened to demoralize the Veshian army. Poor bastard put down his swords forever and became a bard.

“Traitor went on to become a general in Mortaxus’ army, leading the titanspawn to several victories. They’d likely have conquered Vesh, if it wasn’t for Belsameth.”

“Belsameth?” Eochaid asked.

“Yep. They say one full-moon night she appeared and slaughtered Mortaxus herself. Guess she didn’t like some uppity demon-lord siding with the titans. With him dead, his army of corpses crumbled to dust and the titanspawn ran back to the mountains. And Jovian Traitor was never seen again.”

“So,” asked Eochaid, “what does this story have to do with dirty medallions?”

“Well,” said Balak, leaning in conspiratorially, “you see, when a vigilant breaks his oaths, his medallion turns black as sin to mark him as a traitor, so it never happens again.”

“But I thought they never found Traitor,” piped the halfling who cared for the fort’s chickens. “How did they know his medallion turned black?”

Balak rapped the halfling on the head. “It’s a *story*, you idiot. That’s how stories *work*!”

Eochaid made a note to clean his medallion as regularly as his weapons and armor.

• • •

Eochaid stood by the massive bar that locked the main gate. The sentry had blown the horn call for ‘returning scout on the shore,’ and today he was on gate duty. He and a man from the combat squads were in charge of heaving the bar and opening the gate all day for those going in or out.

The sentry in the gatehouse whistled. Eochaid grabbed the leather grips on the bar and heaved. The other man lifted his end, and they shifted it off the bar arms. Eochaid lowered his end and hauled open the massive gate while the other man held the bar. His arms ached, and this was only the third time opening it today.

A group of scouts, laughing and un-stringing their bows, tramped their way inside. Eochaid stood at near attention and waited for them to clear the gate. One of the men, a tall, lean, wiry man with curly blond hair worn long in the back, elbowed a fellow scout. “Hey, look,” he said, “the supports have some fresh meat!” The other scouts turned and chuckled.

The blond man leaned in, inspecting Eochaid from his boots to his head. “Huh — usually you have to be pretty old and far gone to end up on support,” he mused. Eochaid locked his teeth together and his eyes on nothing.

“Skywarder hasn’t said, but we all know you did something. Gross insubordination, maybe? Incompetence?”

The words buzzed in Eochaid’s ears like bees, stinging and stinging. His heart raged, but he kept his face cool, stilled his body, and kept the roar inside him.

“Leave off, Holtz — the kid survived the Marsh on his own after the rats killed his squadmate,” another of the scouts grumbled.

Holtz smirked scornfully, then slapped Eochaid's shoulder. "I suppose someone's got to do the scut-work," he said. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of chances to prove yourself." The scouts wandered off to the great hall. Eochaid pushed the gate closed, grabbed the muddy end of the bar, and heaved it back to his shoulder.

• • •

As twilight fell, Eochaid trudged down the stairs to the workroom. He went to the washbasin and scrubbed the mud from his hands.

Belasius, the bowyer who'd repaired his father's bow, looked up from her fletching and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Eochaid dried his hands, took a rough-edged sword and sharpening stone, and worked at the nicked blade. Belasius maintained her stare.

"What?" Eochaid snapped.

"Well, to start, your shoulders are so tight I can hear your collarbones grinding," Belasius replied, "and you're *sawing* that blade, not sharpening it."

Eochaid dropped the blade back on the workbench with a clatter. His head fell back on his stiff neck. "I had gate duty all day today. Every call of the horn from dawn to dusk."

"And?"

"And? It's mind-numbing."

Belasius' eyebrow rose further. "And?"

"The work's dull, but I'm used to that. It's meant to be punishing. But the people are just...."

"...shitting on you?" Belasius smirked.

Eochaid clenched and released his fist in front of him. "There's this scout — Holtz. It shouldn't have gotten to me. But...I joined to fight. I *trained* to fight. And I spent all day today opening a door. I'm here digging pits and peeling roots and counting arrows while others defend the fort. The work I do means nothing, and I didn't need that pointed out to me."

Belasius shrugged. She flicked a sliver of wood out of her hair and cracked her knuckles. "We're all alone out here, Lenahr. This vigil's more like a ship on the ocean than a fortress on a border. There's a lot of work in keeping us from disappearing into the Marsh, and there's nobody here but us to do it."

Eochaid shook his head. "It's not that. All of us get scut-work. It's that I haven't had anything *else*. I'm not a carpenter, I'm a stalker — a hunter. I'm not practicing any of my skills doing the work they give me, the way you are."

Belasius smiled wryly. "That I can understand. Well, there's not much to hunt out here that any sane person would eat." She paused. "Well, there's chuul, of course. They're

pretty tasty if you roast them right. But as you said, this is punishment. Listen, I don't know what you did, but Skywarder will let you off soon. He'll assign you to the stalkers and you'll be out in the cold, dangerous, dripping, blood-frothed, rat-infested, venomous marshes for as long as you can stand upright."

Eochaid's frown loosened.

"Now," she said, "file down that edge properly or I'll have you peeling tubers in the rain tomorrow."

• • •

Eochaid learned how to tar leaks in the fort's roof. He crawled the rafters clearing out bird nests. He hand copied a map of the shifting channels in the Marsh. He carted stone to the top of the wall for a new rampart. He helped build a new rowboat to replace the leaky, rotting one. He scraped congealed muck out of the channel that brought water to the fort's small farm. He ran messages. He twisted yard after yard after yard of rope. And he waited.

Chapter Fourteen

There are many military organizations on the continent of Ghelspad. Nearly every country or city-state has some form of military, be it army, navy, guard, or city watch. But some such organizations are specifically established as special forces and elite troops. Many of these are carryovers from the Divine War. Most were created based on need, ambition, or divine guidance.

Among these elites, the allies of Vesh include the Order of Mithril (paladins of the god Corean, based in the city of Mithril northeast of Vesh) and the Order of the Morning Sky (followers of Madriel devoted to fighting the undead, and whose main headquarters resides within the borders of Vesh itself). The enemies of Vesh include the Black Dragoons (followers of the god Chardun located in the country of Lageni, part of the Calastian Hegemony south of Vesh), the Horsemen of Vangal (who pillage and raid in the name of Vangal the war god on the plains of Lede at Vesh's northern border), and the Twilight Wardens (elite slitherin warriors, devoted to their titan creators, and who are pledged to defend their territory in the Mourning Marshes from their enemies). But ally or enemy, all of these organizations have explicit structure, and all swear allegiance to a particular god and moral code, even the wild and chaotic Horsemen. They each work with united purpose and are adept at unit combat.

The Veshian Vigil is different from these others, and unique in Ghelspad. While vigilants honor the goddesses Tanil and Madriel, they are not guided by them and do not strive to evangelize their word. While they are disciplined and can work as a cohesive unit, they favor independence and flexibility over precise maneuvers by phalanxes of soldiers. Vigilants may seem less disciplined to members of the other orders, but they are no less trained and skilled, and the elite among them are as dangerous as any warrior on Ghelspad, and more so than many.

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Eochaid met his new squad at the quartermaster's.

"Your ring," Corporal Sennet said, handing Eochaid a copper band engraved with symbols. "Put it on. Don't take it off."

"What does it do?" Eochaid asked.

His new squadmates laughed. “Lets them work us longer and harder,” one of them quipped.

“After a week of wearing it,” Sennet said, “you won’t need more than a couple hours’ sleep and a few sips of water to march on. Won’t be useful for today’s march, but any stalker or scout should have one.”

The little ring didn’t feel especially powerful on his finger. He glanced at his squad, but none of them laughed or seemed to be watching him. *Must be for real.* Eochaid nodded. “Anything else, sir?”

“Oilskin cloak. Oiled hip-boots. For the rest, pack for about a week in the field. Your regular armor and weapons will do fine. We leave in an hour.”

Eochaid loaded his pack, pulled on his new boots and cloak, checked his swords, and jogged to the gate. He was the first of his new squad to arrive by a good ten minutes. He was also younger than any of them, quite the opposite of his experience in training. These were the men and women who would help him refine his craft, to master what it truly was to be a Veshian vigilant.

The squad crossed the river and marched north and east, Sennet briefing them as they hiked. “The slime reavers are up in numbers, and they’re raiding into Vesh again. They strike a village and fade into the marshland with their pillage and prisoners before the regular army can catch them. Our scouts are watching a big group that’s probably the one responsible. We’re to join the forces already hunting them — bring them up to a full platoon. Orders are none of the reavers makes it home.”

The squad was large enough that most foes gave them a wide berth, and they traveled fast, following charted paths that kept them out of the water and woods much of the time. Eochaid’s squadmates joked and shared stories about the slime reavers — frog-like beings the size of men, less cunning than slitherin but born to marsh-fighting. By nightfall, they were over halfway to their rendezvous.

They slept (for what little time they did) in sling seats hung from branches, half the group asleep and half on watch. “You sleep the full four hours, Lenahr,” Sennet said.

“Kind of you, sir,” Eochaid joked, and the rest of the squad chuckled as well.

Eochaid slept poorly. His squad muttered to one another, sharing stories about the slitherin: fighting them, and the violence they perpetrated on the surrounding lands. The odor of mud and moss and the sound of water on leaves filled his dreams with towering ships crewed by ghastly ratmen that chased him and buried him under waves of ooze.

He woke rattled and anxious for the fight, and found the march to the meeting site almost more restful than sleep. One foot in front of the other, pulling boots out of sucking mud, following the vigilant in front of him, just as he had in training.

They met up with the rest of the force in the late afternoon. Sennet huddled with the other corporals to plan their strategy. Eochaid joined his squad, roping up their packs and hanging them out of the way and out of view of the ambush site. Sennet returned. “Scouts say they have prisoners, so we’re going to hit hard and fast, understand? Our

squad's going to spring the trap from behind — kill off their spellcasters and head-men. Except for you, Lenahr.”

Eochaid's heart jumped. “Sir?”

“I'm sure you can fight, but you're still young blood. You're to run down any stragglers that slip the net, and to guard our archers...in case the ‘frogs’ have the same idea as us. And remember — they're amphibious. Watch the waters.”

Eochaid chose a position on the flank of the archers, hiding in a tree near a deeper channel. The archers hid in the brush on a slight rise. From Eochaid's position he could see them, but also see down into the stream. The rest of the vigilant force hid in the mud and grasses further forward, waiting for the sign to attack.

A vigilant scout padded up to the archers and passed a message. The archer corporal gestured to Eochaid: *enemy close*. Eochaid flashed an acknowledgement. The men on the ground vanished into cover. Eochaid went as still as wood.

Insects buzzed. Water bubbled. In the distance, Eochaid heard coughing, then a sob. The *thwack* of a wooden staff on flesh. More sobs. A gurgling stream in a language that, though Eochaid didn't speak it, was clearly invective and threat. More blows, and cries of pain.

A marsh-piper's call — the signal to attack. The archers popped to their feet and loosed a volley. Roars. The clash of blades. The archers fired again. Eochaid couldn't see the battle and didn't try. He stayed focused on the water and woods below him. The archers fired again. The sounds of battle grew louder. There was a beast's roar, louder and deeper than a man or a slime reaver should make. Eochaid tensed but stayed put.

Bubbles. A slow ripple in the cloudy water, a cluster of shapes just visible beneath the surface and only from above. *From the ground the reflections would hide it.*

Eochaid counted three frog-like figures swimming stealthily down the channel. He eased his hands down to his blade hilts and rose to the balls of his feet, ready to drop after the slime reavers passed.

Then they turned.

The three figures kicked their way toward the bank behind the archer blind. The first one reached the shore and silently raised its head from the water: broad and frog-like with huge eyes, nostrils on top. It lifted a spear from the water. Two more heads surfaced and two more man-sized ‘frogs’ drew spears.

Silently, Eochaid mouthed the word to invoke his amulet. He dropped like a cat from the tree and landed on the surface of water now as solid to him as dry ground. He crept within striking distance. The first slime reaver raised its spear.

Eochaid's swords drove up and under the creature's crude turtle-shell armor, deep into flesh. It grunted wetly and fell. One of the others crept on toward the archers. The third turned on Eochaid.

Eochaid yanked his swords free and slipped left, putting the reaver who'd spotted him in the way of the one that hadn't. He struck, but only one of his blades caught flesh. The

second reaver turned back and began its own circle, staying well out of reach but looking for an opening. The archers, unaware, stood and loosed another volley.

The nearest reaver leapt at Eochaid, jabbing at him on the way by and diving into the water with a splash. Eochaid managed a stab to its side as it passed. He saw blood in the water but had no time to look further. Instinct turned him as the other reaver sprang, covering 15 feet in a jump, slashed him and scuttled back. A distant pain called from his shoulder.

Eochaid ignored it. He charged the reaver and stabbed out at it, catching it in the leg. The reaver croaked some guttural words and drove its spear at Eochaid's chest, snagging and tearing the leather.

A dart flew by him from behind, but Eochaid didn't turn to find the source. Instead, he stepped inside his opponent's next spear thrust and tackled it. The creature squirmed and rammed him with the haft of its spear as they twirled. Eochaid growled and threw both arms around its enormous neck, hauling it back. Its feet danced, finding no purchase against the water surface.

The second reaver gabbled angrily and warily aimed a dart. Eochaid lifted his foe and jammed a sword into its back, twisting and ripping as he went. The yellow eyes widened and the slimy body spasmed mightily and went limp.

Aspear rammed into Eochaid's ribs, driving out his breath. He staggered across the water, blood spattering and splashing. Beneath the surface, the last reaver kick-turned neatly and aimed another blow. Eochaid rolled backwards towards the bank, breath bubbling. He raised one sword, the other gone somewhere in the struggle. The reaver erupted from the water with a splash and charged by him, too fast for Eochaid to strike back at. He closed, lashed out with his blade, missed as the dexterous frog-man ducked. It dove back into the water. Eochaid turned, but the mud and foam hid all traces of movement. He raised his blade, back to the rushes.

Another splash. A net caught him around the head and arms. He howled, twisting his sword, trying to get its edge into the slimy cords and cut himself loose. A flash of yellow eyes. A raised spear. A shout, possibly his own.

Then a volley of arrows caught the reaver, dropping it on the spot. Hands dragged him up the bank, and he fell in the archers' blind, bleeding heavily.

• • •

The rescued villagers sobbed and laughed, sometimes both at once, and helped the rangers make camp and see to the dead. Eochaid lay still, both hands on the bandage that stanching the flow of blood from his chest. The squad's cleric inspected him dubiously. "Three wounds, and this one in your chest is bleeding into your lungs." She laid hands on Eochaid, muttering a prayer. Eochaid felt a balm spread through his aching body. The bubbling in his lungs subsided, and the burning left his joints.

“You were also poisoned,” she muttered. “I’ve gotten rid of that, but I’ve already used most of my healing grace on the poor bastard who lost an arm when that reaver druid turned into... well, whatever that monster was.” She turned to Corporal Sennet. “He’s walking wounded — good enough to march on his own, but keep him with the civilians, out of any skirmishes on the way home.”

Sennet sighed and dropped Eochaid’s lost short sword at his side, covered in muck and weeds. “You’re lucky to be alive, young’un.”

“But I am,” Eochaid said.

The corporal sighed. “Tell me what you did wrong.”

Eochaid stuck out his chin defiantly. “I followed your orders. I stayed out of the main fight and protected the archers. I jumped the reavers because I knew I had them unawares, and I knew I could get a quick kill to turn the fight.”

“Yes, you held back and waited. That’s good vigil tactics. And you struck at the right time. That’s good vigilant bravery. But then you didn’t call for help — that’s stupid.”

“Someone had to—”

“*Someone*. We’re in *platoon* strength, Lenahr! You had four allies with *bows* ten yards from you for the calling! Trying to win alone when you have allies to hand is reckless.”

But I took out two of them before they had me, Eochaid thought, but he only nodded.

“The day will come, Lenahr,” Sennet growled, “when the vigil needs your all. Today wasn’t that day. When that time comes, your orders will be clear about it. In the meantime, *standing* orders in Arcernoth Delta Vigil, which I know for a fact Balak spent a month drilling into your head, are that we don’t waste resources. You pledged your life to the vigil — we decide how you spend it.”

Eochaid nodded again. Sennet turned away to other problems. Eochaid picked up his sword and pulled himself back up to his feet.

I’ll just have to find a way to get all three next time.

• • •

Next time wouldn’t be for a while, as the winter rains hit the marshes just as the platoon returned to Riverrock. The river was so high that crossing back to the fort was difficult. One of the fort’s mages cast a spell that tamed the waters, but it barely lasted long enough to get everyone easily across. Still recovering from his wounds and exhausted from too little sleep, Eochaid had to be reminded to use his amulet to cross.

Eochaid followed his new platoon to their quarters and fell into his new bunk. He slept well past morning reveille, but no one disturbed him. He eventually woke to the roar of a downpour on the roof. Seeing the other empty bunks, he jumped up in a panic.

“Relax, Lenahr,” said Jadestone, one of his new squadmates. She sat on her bunk two beds down in the corner of the room, polishing her weapons. She was an elf, and confident

but reserved and quiet. “Corporal said you could take the day off and sleep in, given you’re still recovering and adjusting to your ring. He’s giving you some slack, so you better appreciate it. Don’t expect him to continue once you’re feeling better.”

Eochaid flopped back down on his bunk. “Thanks.”

He took stock around him and realized that most of his things were still in the room with Balak’s squad. He’d get them later. Dozing a bit, he pondered his new ring.

“Jadestone?”

“Jade is fine.”

Eochaid nodded, “Jade...when you don’t need to sleep much, or eat...what does the squad do when not in the field or on duty?”

Jadestone leaned forward, tilting her blade in the lamp light to check its shine. “Most of ‘em drink. Lucky for us Marshal Silverblade likes his beer, and keeps it well stocked as ‘essential to the morale of the vigil.’ They also gamble, or play ‘pits and pebbles,’ darts, or cards. But elves don’t sleep like humans, so I’ve never known any different. I’ve always read.”

Eochaid brightened. “There’s books here? I thought I knew the fort well already, but I haven’t seen a library.”

Jadestone shook her head. “Nothing formal, unless the officers have something tucked away. But we get some books shipped in. They mostly get traded around. You just need to ask.” She gestured to a small pile of books on the stool next to her bunk.

Eochaid peered at the titles from where he was, too tired to move. “What kind do you read?”

He was surprised to see Jadestone look down at her lap and blush.

“Romance, mostly. There are a couple of writers I like. From...” she took a breath. “From Shelzar. It might not be your thing.”

Eochaid smiled. “I’ll read anything if I get bored enough. But my mother had a bunch of Shelzari romance books. They were basically what got me interested in reading.”

Excitedly, she asked “You speak Shelzari?”

Eochaid yawned. “Yeah. Shelzari and Ledean are my native languages.”

“Wait...you’re not Veshian?”

He turned over to his side, pulling his pillow down to burrow into it. “Nope. Originally from New Venir. Came to Vesh...” he yawned again. “Came to Vesh to join Arcernoth Delta and save the world from slitherin.” The pillow was gone, the mattress stuffed with wool, and both were much too comfortable after nights of sleeping in trees, and months of sleeping in a hammock.

“Well, you’ll get your chance come spring, after the rains.”

Eochaid barely heard her as he drifted back to sleep.

• • •

The winter rains hit the marshes hard. While the region was known for its rains (the Blood Monsoon decades earlier had pummeled the coast continuously for years with torrents of water and blood) the winter was harsh, cold, and windy, with near-constant rain or icy hail. Marshal Silverblade called an early halt to the vigil's fighting season. Only Skywarder's small patrols braved the weather, scouting the marsh for enemies despite the risks.

Once Eochaid fully recovered, he volunteered immediately for patrol duty. He came back from his shifts soaked to the bone despite his weather gear. They tramped for hours up and down the muddy tracks, but nothing moved. Nothing threatened but the cold and the slippery ground. The slitherin stayed hidden, presumably holed up in their nests for the winter.

There wasn't even a need to hunt, if there had been game to find. Nearly a fifth of the vigil had magic sustenance rings, and supplies were teleported in every few days from Vesh. If it came down to it, the clerics could summon up food magically.

Skywarder also assigned Eochaid to watch duty on the wall, and he and the other watchers huddled under oiled hoods to keep the rain from their eyes. But visibility was low, and there was little to see. Once he spotted a mire wyrm, an 18-foot-long, eel-like beast, all muscle and spines with a maw of razor-sharp teeth, slithering its way along the river bank. The archers took aim, but the beast ignored the fort, wriggling past and leaving a flattened furrow in the grasses and reeds. But even that enormous creature could never have climbed or dug through the fort's thick stone walls. With water from the rain, Eochaid realized they could probably survive a siege indefinitely. But the only things besieging them were wind, water, ice, and boredom.

While Eochaid had finally joined a squad with purpose, now the weather caged him, and he prowled the halls and walls like a trapped wolf. Though none of his new squadmates were unkind, most were distant, with none of the warmth and camaraderie of his old squad at Bride Lake or even Balak's crew. They only chatted when they had beer or dice in their hands. But the flat beer — so unlike the spiced wines of home, or the hearty ale at Bride Lake — turned his stomach, and while he learned the rules of their games, the subtleties of gambling eluded him.

"You're a *weird* one, Lenahr," commented Sennet one night, as Eochaid sat with the others in the great hall over dice and piles of coins.

Eochaid frowned. "I'm no good at this."

"That's what I mean — you *should* be. Why'd you call Chester's last roll?"

Eochaid scratched at his itchy beard. "He needed four titans, and that seemed unlikely. It made sense to call him out."

"But didn't you see Chester grinning like a damn fool? That's his 'tell.' Especially when he's been drinking. You didn't notice everyone else chose to pass?"

Eochaid shook his head.

Sennet rubbed his temples in exasperation. “How can you be so obtuse when you’re so good at bluffing?”

Chester laughed. “Lenahr’s the only thing that’s kept me in this game — I can always win back enough to get through to the next decent roll!”

“Bluffing?” Eochaid asked. “I’m supposed to be lying about what I rolled?”

Sennet leaned in and peered closely at Eochaid. Eochaid crinkled his nose at the Corporal’s sour, beery breath. “Yes, you godsbedamned nitwit! You think it’s just about whether Enkili favors you with a good roll? You mean you *haven’t* bluffed, this whole game?”

Eochaid shook his head. The other players stared.

“He’s completely placid,” Chester wondered. “Good hand or bad, I never know what he has until he shows it!”

Sennet grunted. “Lenahr, all you have to do to master this game is figure out how to use that. Make ‘em think you got good dice by not giving it away when you don’t. Or keep people from passing when you *do*, to keep ‘em betting. You have to beat the *people*, not the odds.”

Eochaid had little fun in the dice games. Though he could win his own rolls, the others quickly learned that he was a sucker for even their simplest bluff. Then the scouts, and in particular Holtz, who Eochaid had mostly avoided, nicknamed him “Loose-fingered Lenahr.” The nickname spread quickly, and stuck even after he gave up trying to bet on the “instincts” Sennet was so sure he had. He lost less money betting on odds alone but made no friends, and calculating probability while being insulted and laughed at was not recreation, it was work. Eochaid decided that he preferred reading in the bunk room with Jadestone.

Chapter Fifteen

A month after Grim Day, the shortest day of the year, the wind and rain stopped dead after an especially stormy night and the morning dawned clear and exceedingly cold. As Eochaid walked out of the barracks for his turn at guard duty, he found the courtyard glistening brightly under a thin coat of ice. He steadied himself with an effort, taking the same small, careful steps as others were using to cross the yard. He heard a sharp curse and turned to see Mattock, the dwarven stonemason, crash down the stairs of the northeast watch tower. He skidded over to her and helped her up.

“By Goran’s half-beard!” she cursed. “I think I broke something!”

Other vigilants converged and they gently helped the swearing, angry dwarf to the infirmary. There were two or three others already there with minor injuries from slips and falls.

The head medic gestured them to a bench as they entered the hall. Mattock growled. “I’ve broken my *ass*, you useless prayer-peddler! A bench is the *last* thing I need!” Eochaid steadied her, and she waved him off. “You’re already late for our shift, Lenahr — just avenge me if this idiot kills me.”

• • •

Never before had he seen such ice, a glaze over everything. In the south, winter brought frost, and sometimes snow, but not ice storms like this. He edged carefully up the stairs, particularly over the spot where Mattock had tumbled. He reached the top of the tower and greeted the two watchers on duty.

“Mattock fell on her way up. You’ll have to find someone else to join me.”

The two vigilants grumbled but fell silent when they reached the treacherous stairway.

Eochaid shivered as he made his way to the battlement, wrapping his arms around his chest and shoving his gloved hands into his underarms to keep warm. As he looked out, his breath caught.

A white world glistened in the morning light. Everything was edged in sparkles and bangles of sunlight that danced in the slightest breeze. The reeds closest to the bank bent low, coated in ice. Archways of weighted grass carried dripping icicles, and the rattle

and creak of heavy-laden plants was like a chorus. Even the muddy surface of the river gleamed and glittered in the early brightness. Eochaid exhaled, his breath a shining cloud that rose, fading into the light.

His eyes roamed from horizon to horizon. For just this one morning, the marshes were beautiful.

A motion within the glitter caught his eye — something shaking the marsh-grass far to the northeast. He shaded his eyes, squinting against the glare. Something charged through the clumps, shaking loose the ice. The figure was dark, and tall enough for its head to remain above the grasses. *Human? Slitherin?*

As he watched, Eochaid made out two other lines of motion, closing on the figure in front. Whatever ploughed through the grass there, he couldn't see it.

He jogged carefully to the guard-shack and fetched the spyglass in its leather case. Pulling it out, he focused in again. The figure in front slid, tumbled down a bank and vaulted a channel to the other side. *A person, not a rat*, he thought. He twisted the lens, aiming at the two followers. For a moment, one of them crested a rise, and he saw matted fur and a long, scabby tail raised to balance the creature as it plunged on.

Dire rats.

He scrambled to the signal horn and blew the alarm call for 'approaching threat.' On the wall, he heard archers repeat the call. Boots and bows clattered. He glanced down, and a row of bowmen were at the battlement, arrows nocked. The gatemen looked up at Eochaid. "There's a man out there, I think!" Eochaid called. They waved back. One grabbed the bar. The other shouted for a boat and crew.

Eochaid raised the spyglass again. The fur-clad figure had reached the last channel before the river, crossing it hip deep, and was waving its hands overhead. It hauled itself from the water and began a final sprint to the bank. The two rats closed relentlessly, their yellow teeth and gleaming eyes now clear through the glass as they pounded along.

Arrows flew below. Through the glass, Eochaid saw the shafts arc into the grass around the rats, which turned in their mad dash, running at angles and weaving, still closing distance with the desperate runner near the river.

The runner burst from the rushes at the edge and staggered along the bank, paralleling the churning, icy flow. Eochaid heard the scrape of the boat over the yells and tramp of boots below, the twang of bows. The figure waved again, this time toward the boat-launch, then looked behind at the motion in the grass. Another wave of arrows. The rats dodged but didn't slow.

The figure on the bank looked at Eochaid. He saw desperate eyes locked on his. Then the panting wretch by the bank drew back and dove into the flood.

Shouts and calls rang up from the courtyard and the wall, people passing the news as the whole vigil scrambled out to help, or at least to see. Eochaid glanced up from the glass. The boat hauled furiously against the current, crabbing towards the bobbing figure.

Strong arms reached out over the stern, hands grabbing desperate hands, and then the boat crew hauled the bedraggled runner up and in, spilling into the boat.

The rats turned and faded back into the marsh, pursued by a final flight of arrows. The figure in the boat was small next to the crew, likely a woman instead of—

No. It's impossible. His heart raced in his chest. He nearly dropped the spyglass in shock, raised it again. The vigilants clustered close around the figure in the rowboat. He growled impatiently for them to move so he could see clearly. He caught a glimpse. Under the filth and grime...no beard.

It has to be someone else. His view wavered as his hands shook. He braced his elbows on the edge of battlement and looked a third time. *It's her. Great gods, it is her.*

He set the spyglass on the ground and ran to the stairs. "Shit!" As fast as possible without breaking his neck, he scampered down using both hands and feet, slipping and sliding.

By the time he made it to the courtyard, the vigilants were carrying the sodden figure through the gates, dragging the boat in behind them. He crossed the flagstones, half running, half skating. Vigilants shouted at him, but he heard nothing as he ran to her. She was leaning against another vigilant, who stepped back as Eochaid ran up. Eochaid caught her, holding her tight against his chest.

"You're alive! You're alive!" He choked. "Thank the gods. Amra. You're alive."

A crowd surrounded them. "She needs the infirmary," said a vigilant.

Eochaid nodded and scooped Amra up. She shivered violently in his arms. "Lenahr," she gasped. "If you made it here, then I...." Her eyes drifted closed, her arms weakly clinging around his neck.

The other vigilants steadied him as he carried her across the icy courtyard. She was so light it terrified him — nothing but skin and bones, wrapped in filthy furs of some unknown creature. Her feet were wrapped in cloth, and he could see blood oozing through. She was icy cold, and her nose was blackened by more than dirt. He rushed her as fast as possible to the infirmary.

Two vigilants had gone on ahead, and the medics had a bed prepared when he stepped inside. He laid Amra down and then knelt next to her, gripping her hand as if she might fade away. The duty clerics leapt to work, one immediately chanting with hands outstretched, the other peeling back the grimy furs. Eochaid pressed his forehead to Amra's hand. *Madriel, please, please....*

"Frostbite...malnourished...exhaustion. Ouch — what's this? That's some nasty scarring, and not recent."

As the priestess of Tanil prayed, Eochaid felt life return to Amra's hand. It warmed, but she remained unconscious.

Eochaid felt a hand on his shoulder. Mattock stood behind him. "They fixed my tailbone. You stay — I'll finish your watch." Eochaid nodded in thanks as Mattock left the infirmary.

The second cleric finished her examination. Eochaid looked up. Amra was covered in warm blankets. The cleric held the dirty furs. She looked at Amra and said, "Well, we've fixed the frostbite, and her other physical wounds. She'll still need rest and food. But the scars... I fear there may be psychological damage as well. Not as easy to heal."

Still kneeling next to the bed, Eochaid looked down and absently petted Amra's hand. "It's my fault," he whispered. "If I'd kept looking, or we'd sent a rescue party..."

"Vigilant!" Fingers snapped in front of Eochaid's face. He looked up, startled.

"There is nothing you could have done," Captain Skywarder said, kind eyes firmly on Eochaid's. "There was no way you could have known. With the flood you described, you made the right call. Now stop beating yourself up over *her* foolishness."

Eochaid's eyes stung. He gasped and swallowed, then nodded, gripping her hand tighter.

"Get him a chair." Skywarder ordered.

Eochaid stood. A chair was placed behind him. He pulled it up next to the bed, never letting go of Amra's hand.

"She's going to be a mess when she wakes up," Skywarder continued, "and you're the only one here she knows. So you stay." The captain's voice softened. "I don't think we could tear you away from her side in any case."

The captain sat down in another chair next to Eochaid. Putting his hand on Eochaid's arm, he quietly continued. "It may be that they tortured her. Lucky for us she wasn't captured by the Diseased. What they do is worse than torture. I'd guess the Foamers kept her as a slave. But we don't know what else they've done to her. We have to take it slow. Keep her calm. Assure her that she's safe."

Eochaid nodded, mutely.

"And do *not* take the blame for this, son."

Eochaid swallowed and wiped the back of his hand across his face, clearing away hot tears. He took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

"Good." The captain clapped him on the shoulder and stood.

"Notify me when her condition changes," the captain told the clerics as he left the infirmary.

• • •

Before Eochaid had his ring, he never considered how much time people spent sleeping. He sat and pored over Jadestone's copy of *The Poems of Krainin Pum, in the Original Shelzari*.

Eochaid read, then napped, then read again, then napped again, only interrupted when a healer came to check Amra or apply more healing magic. Behind him, people came

and went with the usual little hurts and complaints that arose most days, plus a number of bruises and dented skulls from falls on the ice.

He awoke from a nap to the rustle of blankets. Amra tossed her head and mumbled. Then she kicked out, moaning louder. Her arms went protectively to her face. The duty cleric leaned in, her gaze not unkind. Eochaid looked to the healer, who smiled sadly.

“We’ve healed her, checked her for poisons and disease, even cast spells to lift any enchantments or mind control the slitherin may have put on her. Nothing more we *can* do,” the healer said. “Just watch her. This sleep is for her mind, not her body — we can’t heal those wounds for her.” She patted Eochaid on the shoulder and left him alone.

When Amra did wake, it was sudden. Eochaid looked up from his book and her eyes were open. For a moment she studied the infirmary like a prisoner gauging her guards, but then she smiled at him.

“How long have I slept?”

Eochaid stretched, his spine crackling. “Uhh, twelve hours or so, I think.”

Her eyes widened. “And you’ve just sat there reading the whole time?”

“I napped some, and I used the privy. I wanted to be here for you.”

She smirked drowsily. “Sap.” He smiled at her.

She put a hand to her face, feeling the places that had been touched by frostbite. “Guess they healed me. I don’t feel any pain, anyhow.” She frowned. “Hungry, though.”

“Good!” Eochaid said. “I’ll get you something!” He jumped up and jogged through the halls to the kitchens, where he begged a bowl of strong broth with an egg in it and some crusty bread. He carried the tray to her bedside, dipped the spoon in the soup and held it out to her.

Amra snatched it from his hands. “I’m not a sick goat, Lenahr — I can feed myself, you idiot!” She laughed and gulped down half the bowl, then slowed to savor the rest. She paused and looked at him. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

Eochaid held up his hand and wiggled his fingers. “Magic vigil ring. Don’t need to eat. Hardly need to sleep or even drink anymore,” he said.

“Handy,” she said.

“Not everyone gets one, though. Mostly those of us who do long patrols.”

“Huh,” she said. “And how many of those are stationed here now?”

They passed an hour just talking about the fort, Amra asking questions and Eochaid answering. He told her about his missions, about the various platoons and officers, his fellow soldiers, the duty cycles, the boredom of winter. She concentrated as if taking mental notes, drinking in quickly the information he’d assembled over the course of months.

“I shouldn’t push all this on you at once,” he said.

“No, I...I need to get up to speed quickly if I’m going to fit in.”

"You don't have to jump in right away. They'll give you time to recover."

"I feel fine. I just need new weapons and armor."

"I think you need rest," he argued. "You've been gone over seven months. Whatever it was that happened to you...you need time."

Amra's eyes narrowed. "Do you *want* me to tell you what happened?"

Eochaid's thoughts swirled. *Yes. No. Not now. Why did I even...* He shook his head. "I'm just glad you're safe."

"Nowhere is safe," she snapped. "This *world* is not safe."

"We're trying to *make* it safe," Eochaid retorted.

"The vigil is *failing* to make it safe," she snarled, hands tight on the edge of the bed. "Aronis is *dead* because the vigil fails to make things safe!"

Amra shook where she sat. Eochaid shut his mouth, his heart pounding.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She took a shaky breath.

"You know for sure?" he asked gently.

She nodded. "Yeah. I'm certain now."

They sat in silence. Amra looked off, in deep thought. Eochaid absently smoothed her blanket.

Skywarder's voice caught Eochaid's attention. The captain stood in the infirmary doorway talking to the duty cleric. He nodded to Eochaid, finished his conversation, and approached.

"Vigilant Varith," he said. "Your reappearance is something of a minor miracle!"

"Ready to serve my vigil, sir," Amra said.

Skywarder smiled but shook his head. "You've undergone a terrible ordeal, vigilant. I'm amazed you're awake. Besides, you're skin and bones. Build your strength and sleep as much as you need. The clerics will tell me when you're ready. I won't ask anything at all of you until then. I've freed Lenahr from his duties to help you, but only as much as the healers allow, yes?"

"As you say, sir," Amra replied.

• • •

The medics cleared Amra the next day to recover in her bunk. Eochaid stood with her as Sennet welcomed her to his squad, but his gaze drifted from them to the cleric, who spoke quietly and anxiously to Skywarder on the far side of the infirmary.

Sennet and Eochaid guided Amra, who walked unsteadily but eagerly, to her new bunk. Sennet gave her a new amulet, sustenance ring, and a fresh uniform, and the rest of the platoon dropped by over the course of the day to introduce themselves. Eochaid's heart eased a bit — Amra tired easily, and there was a brittleness that glinted behind her eyes at times, but overall she acted more like the Amra he remembered from Bride Lake than the driven hunter he'd followed in the marsh or the feverish wreck he'd carried in from the gate.

Chapter Sixteen

Time flowed faster for Eochaid with Amra present. She rested, she ate, they talked. When Skywarder called Amra for debriefing, Eochaid escorted her to the marshal's office. That day Eochaid worked whatever jobs Balak could find that would keep him near the fort, and he watched constantly for Amra to emerge. *If she didn't want to talk to me about it....*

Skywarder and Amra came out of the keep together. She smiled, but her eyes were tired. Skywarder shook her hand and went back inside, and Eochaid dropped the boot he'd been oiling and jogged to her. "You all right? What did they...?"

She sighed heavily. "Won my first victory here," she said. "They believed me, and I'm on active duty."

Eochaid hesitated. Amra rolled her eyes. "Slitherin Foamers caught me — the big ones. They drugged me, kept me as a slave, and I don't remember much of anything — don't want to remember. I escaped. I gave the vigil a lot of useful knowledge they wouldn't have otherwise, and they're happy to have me back. That's all I'm going to say about it. But they did give me this."

She held up her right hand and Eochaid saw a heavy gold ring, different from the sustenance ring she wore on her other hand.

"It protects me from the slitherin, so they can't find me with magic. *Nobody* can get inside my mind now." She looked down at her hand for a moment, turning it over. Relief settled on her face, and she stood a little taller, as if a burden had been lifted from her.

"And now I just want a drink," she said.

She looked up and flashed a brief smile. Eochaid caught a glint in her eye that he was uncertain of. He put on a smile of his own. "Then let's go get you a drink," he said.

Eochaid brought her to the great hall. The rest of Skywarder's company was well into their evening carouse. Amra sat at a table, and he fetched them some glasses. Amra took to the bitter beer much more comfortably than Eochaid had. The drink eased the tension from her shoulders and when she joined in the loud laughter, shouted insults, and bawdy conversation of the hall, the edge Eochaid had imagined in her voice was gone.

The topic of conversation, it seemed, was how many drinks you'd have to have in you before so-and-so could have your trousers off. Mattock was declaiming loudly that she'd have any man in the fort, drunk or sober, "...as long as he's got a beard or pigtails I can grab!"

Eochaid stayed because Amra was laughing. The whole spectacle seemed the sort of thing Hutchling would have done in the mess hall, except rawer and cruder, and without a decent spiced wine to help him see the humor in it. The room was crowded, the conversation boring, and Holtz — sitting at the table behind Eochaid — kept elbowing him “accidentally” in the spine.

“But the one man,” Mattock said, “who I’d happily lay even if he was bald as an egg would be Captain Skywarder.” Laughter rippled around the room and turned to roars when Mattock raised her hands in supplication towards the captain’s office.

The hoots and laughter died down as Mattock went for more beer.

“If you ask me, Skywarder’s a waste of an attractive face,” Holtz grumbled.

“Because he’s an officer?” someone asked.

“Pfft. Who cares about that? No, because the man’s a damn *golem*,” scoffed Holtz. He stood and struck a ridiculous heroic pose. “Ho-ho! No time to bed you, I’m afraid. There’s *scouting* to be done!”

The snickering from the neighboring table grated on Eochaid’s worn nerves.

“He doesn’t like women. Or men,” Holtz sneered. “Or anyone.”

“It’s none of our business who the captain is or is not interested in,” Eochaid snapped.

Holtz turned to Eochaid and choked out a laugh. “Why are you of all people defending him, Lenahr? The captain put you on shit duty for fifty days!”

Amra cocked her head. Eochaid didn’t acknowledge her. “The punishment was fair,” he said, quietly but evenly.

“Fifty days?” asked Amra. “What happened?”

Eochaid clenched his teeth for a moment. “It was an issue between me and the captain.” He glared at Holtz. “I served it, it’s done.”

Holtz leaned close over Eochaid, staring at him. He looked between Eochaid and Amra, then back to his cronies at the neighboring table. “It was about *her*, wasn’t it, *Loose-fingers*?”

Eochaid stood up and glared at Holtz. “I said it’s *done*.”

Holtz leaned back. He beat Eochaid by half a foot in height and many pounds of muscle. His smirk filled Eochaid’s vision.

“Okay, yeah,” Holtz said, “there’s *something* going on here.” He leered and poked Eochaid in the chest. “You? Her? The captain? Maybe Skywarder isn’t such a limp-dick after all.”

An icy fury filled Eochaid. He pushed Holtz’s hand away, eyes never leaving the bigger man’s.

Holtz grabbed Eochaid’s collar and shoved him back against the table, his laughter turned to a snarl. “That’s it, isn’t it? He fucked her...”

Rage and steel filled Eochaid's mind. He felt his hand close, tightening and tightening.

Holtz continued. "...you got jealous—"

"Lenahr! Stop!" Sennet's command cut like an axe blow. Confused, Holtz looked down. Eochaid's knife pressed against his belly, a hair's breadth from slicing him open. Before either man could react, two vigilants pulled Holtz off Eochaid, while two others grabbed Eochaid's upper arms.

Sennet stepped between them, nose to nose with Eochaid. "Outside, *now!*" He pointed to the door. "Go cool off!"

Eochaid yanked his arms free, flipped his knife around and sheathed it. Holtz was pale. He looked Eochaid up and down as if seeing him for the first time. Eochaid turned and stormed out of the room.

He kept walking until he was in the courtyard. Rain pelted down, soaking him. He leaned against the wall and tilted his head back, rain spattering his face. His body cooled, but his mind whirled. *I wanted him dead. I wanted to gut him.*

"Lenahr!" Eochaid glanced around, blinking the water out of his eyes, hand to his knife hilt again. Amra stood in the rain, the light from the hall behind her, squinting into the gloom. He stayed silent. She spotted him and offered him a mischievous smile.

Eochaid let go of his knife and wiped his clammy hand on his leg. *The fight is over. The fight is over.* He drew a deep breath, trying to wrest his mind away from the dispassionate part of him that had put his hand on the knife. *What am I supposed to say to her?*

Amra walked over. He stiffly drew himself upright, tried to put on a mask of...what *should* he be feeling? She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. He let her pull his head towards hers, and she kissed him hard on the mouth.

His muscles slackened. His nerves eased. He could feel his heart beating again, steady and fast. He closed his eyes, melted into the kiss, and slid his arms around her waist.

When she finally broke away, he opened his eyes dizzily. "Wha...?"

She smiled impishly. "That," she said, "was insanely hot."

Eochaid blinked. "The kiss?"

"That, too. But what you did in there? I had no *idea* you were like that."

"I could have killed him!" he exclaimed. Then, in a hushed voice he said, "I *would* have."

She shook her head. "You wouldn't have *killed* him."

Eochaid remembered the knife, already in his hand, already prepared to strike upward into Holtz's heart...

She looked away for a moment, then back at him, running her finger down the front of his wet shirt. She bit her lip. "So..."

He frowned, thoughts still spinning. "So?"

"I think we need to...unwind. Would you be up for that?"

The rain pattered down. Eochaid's head felt full. He understood the words Amra said, but couldn't find a meaning that felt like it fit this moment: the fight, the knife, the rain, the kiss.

A half-smile bloomed on Amra's lips. "You know...relax together?" She nodded at him.

He nodded back, dumbstruck.

"Do you know a place where we can be alone?" she asked.

As a...couple? Ahh, just answer her and figure it out later. "Yeah," he muttered. "There's a rafter above the back storage room," he recalled, desperately trying to think clearly. "There's a cloth tied to the handle of the storage room door — if you pin it up then people know not to go in unless it's an emergency. I learned that the hard way when Balak forgot to warn me. And there's a couple of other—"

She placed her finger on his lips to shush him. "That'll do fine," she said. She ran her fingers into the tangle of beard on his cheek, took his hand and kissed it. Her eyes went from his grubby nails up to his eyes. She smiled. "Clean up, meet me back at the barracks in an hour, and take me there."

She pulled away and left him staring after her as she walked back into the building.

• • •

Eochaid returned to the barracks from the bathing room. He had washed, trimmed his beard, and pared his nails. He pulled his bunk's curtain closed and put on a clean pair of trousers and a new tunic. He pulled on his belt, hand reflexively snugging his knife's sheath against his hip. Then he undid the belt, slid the knife off, and placed it by his pillow.

He pulled back the curtain and reached for his boots. Jadestone entered the room, several new books in her arms. She looked him up and down. "You look like you're getting ready for a tryst, Lenahr."

Eochaid said nothing and struggled to get his boots on quickly.

"Gods, you *are*! Varith?"

He glanced up. From Jadestone's amusement he could tell how baffled he must look. "She says she wants to unwind. Somewhere where we could be alone. I'm not *entirely* certain what that means, but..."

Jadestone laughed. "I'm pretty sure what she means by that. Is this your first 'romantic rendezvous'?"

Eochaid shook his head. "No! But...never like this," he said. *She's right*, he thought. *I just never expected....* He considered. "She's been through a lot. And...shit, for all I know this is *her* first...rendezvous."

"And you don't want to fuck it up?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

Jadestone walked over to him, hands behind her back, and inspected him carefully. “Just be careful then. Go slow, even if *she* wants to rush. You’re right, she’s only just healed up. Be clear. Ask what she wants. She may be less hale and hearty than she thinks, so judge carefully where to stop. And...let her change her mind. She was out there for months — who knows what’s in her heart right now?”

Eochaid paled. “You think the rats...?”

Jadestone shrugged. “We don’t actually know *what* they do to their slaves. She’s one of the few to survive it. Just the fact she won’t talk implies bad things.”

Eochaid vigorously nodded. “I understand.”

He brushed down his tunic and waited on his bunk. Amra returned to the bunk room on the hour, looking Eochaid up and down appreciatively. He got up and took her hand.

“Have fun, kids,” Jadestone muttered as they left the room.

• • •

Eochaid pinned the rag of cloth to the storeroom door and closed it behind them. Amra pulled her boots off. “Not much to look at,” she said.

“No,” Eochaid said, “The spot is hidden up in the rafters, there.”

Amra smiled. “Aaah,” she said, and climbed the creaking ladder.

Eochaid took off his boots and followed. There, sitting on a platform of rough wood that was worn smooth over years of use, were a pile of blankets and pillows, a lantern, some dried flower petals, and a shabby book of poetry.

Amra crawled over to the pillows and made a small nest from them. “Perfect,” she said. She rolled in, and then gestured for Eochaid to join her. He sat down beside her, nervously straightening the pillow underneath him.

“Relax,” she told him, placing her hand over his heart. She leaned forward and kissed him. He breathed her in, one hand reaching up behind her neck, the other braced on the pillows. She tasted sweet and tangy, salty and wet. His chest felt tight and light at the same time. His heart pounded in his ribcage.

She pulled away, leaving him momentarily gasping. He stroked her hair. “This is what you want?” he panted.

“Of course,” she retorted. She pushed him down into the pillow nest, and flipped one leg over to straddle him, her weight on his upper thighs. She pushed his tunic up. His belly tightened as her nails caressed the sensitive skin there. She bent over him, lips brushing his stomach, hand gathering more fabric, so the kisses could travel up, over his chest, towards his collarbone.

He pushed himself up and shrugged the tunic off, setting it aside. He tangled his hand in the brown of her hair and grabbed her waist, drawing her in and kissing her again, lips opening gently to receive her.

She returned the kiss, but then pushed him back down. The hand on his abdomen slid lower, to the drawstring of his trousers, scrabbling at the knot.

"Whoa whoa whoa!" he cried, reaching down to take her hand. "Slow down—it's okay."

She tilted her head. "I picked up protection at the infirmary — we're fine. I thought this is what you wanted."

Her dark eyes searched his, her mouth a puzzled frown. Her long brown hair fell across her shoulder, brushing his chest. He inhaled deeply, and squeezed his eyes closed. "Oh, it is. It definitely *is*. Gods, I don't even *know* how long I've wanted this. But...."

He opened his eyes. Her face was still so thin, skin still rough from harsh wind and gnawing cold, but seeing her still filled him with glory. He found her beautiful, and his body shared the sentiment.

He took a deep breath to calm himself. "But I also want to do what you want. I want things — *this* thing — to be good for you."

She smiled. "I see. Okay. We can do that."

"Wait there." She climbed off him, pushed him back on the pillows, and crawled over to the blankets. She swirled one around her shoulders and crawled back, covering them both.

"Hold on," she said, and struggled for a bit under the covers. One arm snaked out from under, tossing her shirt, trousers, and underclothes next to his abandoned shirt. He held his breath as she curled up against him, warm and soft. Just as he started to relax again, she reached across his body and drew his hand to her breast. She murmured softly as he rolled on to his side and slowly caressed her.

"Like this?" he asked quietly.

"Mhmm...." Her breath fluttered across his arm.

He leaned in, gently kissed and nibbled her neck and shoulders. She melted against him. She grabbed his other hand and pulled it around toward her. His shoulder creaked in protest.

"Wait, wait — I don't quite move that way. Here." He shifted her around so her back faced him. He wrapped each of his arms around her belly and pulled her close, breathing in the scent of her hair.

"Is that okay?" he murmured.

"Mhmm," she said again, and drew his left hand back to her breasts. He cupped her gently, following her lead. She entwined the fingers of his free hand and slid it between her legs.

He hesitated. "I still think we're going too fast."

"Don't care," she growled, and guided his hand into warmth and wetness. His fingers obeyed hers, stroking where and how she demanded. She moaned softly. Through his skin he felt her heart race, his own galloping to match. He slid down, tightening their embrace, kissing and nuzzling the back of her neck. Her curves wriggled against his belly. His fingers quickened, and her cries took on urgency. He pressed her to him, his hips against the back of her thighs, the hardness between his own legs looking for something to move against.

She let go of the hand at her breasts and clutched at the blankets. He moved between breasts and nipples, gently keeping each nipple erect. “Yes,” she hissed. He smiled, happy to discover something she liked without her explicit direction. Her other hand gripped his thigh. Between her legs, he circled out slightly, away from the point of her greatest heat. She whimpered in response and clutched at his hand again.

“Trust me,” he whispered in her ear. She hesitated, then nodded in response. His fingers roamed more broadly, gently brushing across her center on occasion, bringing her just to the edge. She moaned and panted, clutching at his arm.

He loved this. He loved her. But he dared not say it. It was too soon. *This* was too soon. But she seemed to need this.

Her legs clamped together and she sharply cried out, writhing in his arms. He felt a pulsing under his fingers. He pushed down with those fingers, letting her move her body against him as she wished, and embraced her tightly. She cried out, thrusting wildly against his hand again as the shocks ran through her body. Finally she stilled, breathing heavily, and he slowly moved his hand to rest against her thigh.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, turning around to face him.

“Wow, indeed,” he said, kissing her on the nose. “You’re amazing.”

“I’m amazing? *You’re* amazing. How did you do that?”

Eochaid laughed. “That was mostly you. I was just along for the ride.”

She smiled — the first loose, easy one he’d seen from her since her escape. Warmth burst in his chest, and he felt himself smiling in return. She kissed him, chastely this time, and he smiled all the more. He ran a strand of her hair through his fingers.

She thought for a moment, her smile turning into a mischievous smirk. “It’s *your* turn now.” She bit her lower lip and pulled at his trousers.

Eochaid gently grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands back. “No. Not this time. Next time, maybe...if you want a next time.”

“Yeah. Definitely. But why not *now*?” she demanded.

Because I need to know for sure that you’re okay first, he thought. “Maybe I just don’t rush things the first night?”

Amra snorted and poked him in the chest. “You’re Venirian.”

Eochaid rolled his eyes. “Not *all* Venirians are hedonists. Especially ones with Madrielite mothers.”

She sighed dramatically and rolled back on the pillows. “You’re not a prude, Lenahr.”

“And you’re not a rutting vixen, babe. We can wait.”

“What did you just call me?”

“A vixen?”

“No, the other one.”

“Babe?”

“What’s that?”

Eochaid squinted in thought. “It’s a Shelzari word. Comes from the word for infant, but doesn’t mean anything like that. It’s a . . . nickname. Sort of like ‘dearest’ or ‘darling,’ only *much* less formal. A casual endearment. Not serious.”

She frowned. “I don’t like it. Just Amra or Varith is fine. No cute nicknames.”

It was the least cute thing I could think of. Then he remembered ‘Loose-fingered Lenahr.’

“Sure, no nicknames.”

They talked quietly for a while, then Eochaid held Amra while she dozed. He jumped at an insistent hammering on the door. “Hey in there,” A voice cried out, “That’s a love nest, not a bunk house!”

“Shit,” Eochaid mumbled. “Give us three minutes!” Amra reached over for her clothes, the blankets dropping away.

Eochaid held in a gasp of shock. Several wide, curving scars twisted like snakes on Amra’s back as she moved in the lamplight, like deep, black wounds that had closed over ash or dirt. A long one sliced across her shoulder blades. Another wound around her back and swept across her hip. *What could do that? How did I not feel those?*

He quickly looked away, before she could see it in his face. *I remember the medic saying it, but...gods!* His anger and sorrow, so recently quieted, awoke and prowled. He folded and piled the blanket and pillows as she dressed, then pulled on his own shirt. She climbed back down the ladder and threw him his boots. Then she opened the door.

Holtz stood there with another man and a woman. Eochaid recognized the woman from his platoon, but the man was unfamiliar to him. The man was hanging on Holtz, his hand up the scout’s shirt. The woman was leaning against the wall, bored and impatient.

Eochaid froze on the ladder, eyeing the scout, his face deliberately neutral, not sure what to expect.

Spotting Eochaid on the ladder, Holtz’s eyes widened. He swallowed hard and paused, just briefly. Then Eochaid saw him compose himself. “Varith and Loose-fingers,” he said, nonchalantly. “I shoulda known you two’d be in here. Outta the way.”

Catlike, Eochaid jumped down the ladder and walked out into the hall, stepping out of their way.

The woman pushed herself off the wall and dragged Holtz into the storeroom. The laconic man followed after them and shut the door behind him. As it closed, Eochaid heard Holtz mutter something to the woman. Then they laughed, and he heard the ladder creak.

Amra chuckled. “Well, he seems to have taken the lesson,” she said.

“Lesson?”

“Not to fuck with you, Lenahr.”

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning shortly before dawn, Captain Skywarder summoned Eochaid. “You’re with me on patrol today, Lenahr.”

“Yes, sir!” Eochaid followed the captain to the gate. He quickly realized that while other patrols were going out, he and Skywarder were going alone.

Sennet must have told the captain about what happened with Holtz last night. But he’s taking me on patrol, not to his office. What does this mean?

They journeyed downriver along the south side of the promontory. Frosty grass crunched under their feet, the landscape otherwise eerily silent in the predawn hours. Eochaid shivered a little and pulled his cloak tighter around him.

The sky lightened as they walked, slowly revealing a rare clear day. Eochaid tried to keep an eye out for movement in the distance, but his attention shifted to what to say when Skywarder asked him about the fight.

As they clambered over the ruins of a building sunken by the shore, Skywarder paused and turned to look back at him. “Lenahr...”

Here it comes.

“Why did you join the vigil?”

Eochaid stopped his apology before it started. *Not...what I was expecting.* “To protect the world from the slitherin, sir.”

Skywarder’s brow furrowed. “There’s more dangers in the world than just slitherin.”

“I know sir. But it’s a place to start. Where I think I can make a difference.”

“It’s personal, isn’t it?”

Eochaid nodded. “They killed my father, and continue to threaten my family.”

Skywarder nodded back but squinted skeptically. “But how will fighting slitherin here in the Marshes help your family in...where was it, New Venir?”

“After I’ve established myself, saved some money, I plan to move them north to Vesh. Help my mom buy a new farm, maybe,” Eochaid explained. “Mom’s always talked about Vesh. When we were young she told us stories she learned from my grandad. But

she had the family farm in Trela — her garden, her flowers, her friends and neighbors. Moving wasn't practical."

"You'd make a lot more money as a mercenary or adventurer."

Eochaid shrugged. "Probably. But I figured it would be easier to move them if I was a Veshian vigilant — prestige can count for more than money." *Although I'm building both very slowly so far.* "The vigil is also a cause I believe in. Mercenaries are out for themselves. I'm not doing this for myself."

"Good reasons." Skywarder paused, scrutinizing the growing glow on the horizon. "Keep a lookout for me, if you please," he directed.

Eochaid acknowledged him and climbed atop a broken wall where he could see more. He scanned the area and listened for movement while Skywarder bowed his head toward the sunrise. He could barely hear the captain whisper — words of devotion to the goddess Tanil.

After a time, Skywarder's whispers faded into the background as Eochaid focused his awareness on his surroundings, keenly aware of every rustle, every shift of shadow as the light filled in the landscape. A cold breeze came up. Eochaid tried not to shiver, stiff after standing still for so long.

Skywarder finished his prayers and gestured for Eochaid to come back down. "Here," he said, and muttered a few words, made a gesture, and touched Eochaid on the arm. Eochaid's ears and nose warmed up immediately and his shivers eased. Skywarder repeated the words and gesture and touched his own chest.

"That should take the teeth out of the cold."

"Thank you, sir!" Eochaid said gratefully.

"This is my daily routine," the captain replied as he started to move again through the ruins. "No need for us to suffer the weather."

Eochaid followed. "Back in training, a mage once told me that I'd make a good wizard, but I don't see it." Eochaid said. "Magic like that...eludes me."

Skywarder glanced back at him, appraising. "You might have made a good wizard, if you hadn't followed the path you're on." He picked a careful route through the loose stones and frozen puddles. "But that's arcane magic, which comes from either the head or the will. Divine magic, like what I use, is different. It comes from the heart."

Eochaid's stomach fell. "So you're saying I have no heart."

Skywarder laughed. He stopped and turned to face Eochaid. "No. I didn't mean to imply that. You're clearly very caring. I saw how well you looked after Varith. What I mean is... arcane magic develops either through study, as with wizards, or force of personality, as with bards. Divine magic — what clerics and rangers channel — arises from devotion. It takes wisdom, not cleverness."

Eochaid tilted his head. "So you're saying I'm clever, not wise?"

Skywarder smiled. “Just so.”

“Then I...don’t have what it takes to be a good ranger.” Eochaid’s spirits dropped even more.

“Probably not,” admitted Skywarder, “but that doesn’t mean you don’t make a good vigilant. You well know that plenty of vigilants aren’t only rangers.”

“Clerics and wizards...”

“And those with a roguish approach to fighting.”

“Roguish?” Eochaid inquired.

“The stalker skillset. Strike your enemy from the shadows. Attack their vitals. Find their vulnerabilities. Flank, feint, or hide. Anything to keep the enemy off balance.”

The realization dawned on Eochaid. “All things I’ve been learning to do...”

“Exactly. And you’re likely a natural at them, too.”

Eochaid nodded.

“You might have an easier time if you stop trying to be what you’re not...” the captain jumped down a short ledge, grunting as he landed. “...and be who you are.”

So sneaking and killing is what I’m meant to do?

A short while later the river widened and became calmer. Skywarder approached the riverbank. “Use your amulet,” he ordered. Eochaid said the words to invoke his vigil medallion and walked out behind Skywarder across the river’s flowing water.

Skywarder was quiet and much more cautious after they crossed. They journeyed southward for a few miles, keeping low to the ground and behind cover whenever possible. Skywarder frequently stopped to examine tracks or spoor while Eochaid kept watch. It reminded him of hunting with his father as a boy.

Eventually they came upon a small clump of trees. “We’ll climb those to get a better view,” Skywarder said, and cautiously started up through the trunks. Eochaid followed, but because he was looking out rather than down, his foot crunched through leaves into a hole full of hibernating tar beetles. Though the two vigilants quickly dispatched the creatures without taking any wounds, the beetles splattered Eochaid’s legs with sticky black goo that congealed in the cold.

“Never seen these little pests in winter,” Skywarder said. “You can clean off while I scout.” He checked ahead, and then helped Eochaid up into one of the trees. They settled in the branches 20 feet above the ground.

“That was...distasteful,” muttered Eochaid.

“One of the many hazards of the Mourning Marshes,” replied Skywarder. “Just be grateful it wasn’t something worse, like a swamp gobbler.”

Eochaid nodded. *Two more subjects to read up on when I get home.* He broke off a dead branch and began scraping the hardened tar off his legs.

“Just to be clear,” Skywarder said, carefully levering himself up to a higher branch, “I am aware of what happened last night.”

Eochaid sighed. “I figured that’s why you brought me out here.” He paused in his scraping. “I shouldn’t have pulled the knife on Holtz. I was out of line, and I agree to whatever punishment you think appropriate.”

“Even fifty days of scut-work?”

Eochaid swallowed hard but nodded.

Skywarder chuckled. “The whole vigil gets tense when we’re cooped up over the winter, Lenahr. Why’d you think I go out on so many patrols? But you have to channel that temper of yours. Aim it at your true enemies.”

“The slitherin.”

“Possibly. Those who threaten the safety and security of Vesh and Ghelspad, certainly. There are much greater threats out there — like the cultists who think we’d be better off with titans walking the land again. Several cults lair here in the marshes.”

Eochaid waited, but Skywarder didn’t elaborate. Instead, he pulled out a spyglass from his bag and scanned the region around the tree. Eochaid went back to cleaning his trousers.

Skywarder finished his sweeps of the horizon and lowered the spyglass a few minutes later. He looked down at Eochaid, half smiling.

“Lenahr,” he sighed, “Let me clarify something. *I am* glad about how you spoke up for me. Vigilants oppose cruelty and lies. Though what Holtz said about *me* wasn’t entirely wrong.”

“Sir?”

“What did he call me? A cold fish?”

Eochaid’s face burned. “Limp dick,” he mumbled.

“Ah, *that* was it.” Skywarder nodded. “Crude, but close. Holtz and I disagree over the nature of ‘passion.’ Those sorts of activities just... don’t interest me. My energy goes into the job. And Tanil understands. She gives me comfort.”

“Tanil, sir? The goddess of the hunt?”

“You’re not a follower of the Huntress, are you?”

Eochaid shrugged. “I grew up a Madrielite. But I pray to Tanil when it’s appropriate.”

Skywarder nodded and continued. “I doubt she feels *exactly* the same way as I do. But I believe she understands me, at least a little.”

“She speaks to you?”

He shook his head. “Not in words, no, but in feelings. When I pray. When she grants me her gifts I feel her power. Her compassion.

“I wasn’t abused like her, so I know it’s not exactly the same thing. Though many of her followers abstain from sex, I don’t know how many feel like *I* do. I’ve spoken to a

couple of them who say they feel broken — more like how she feels, perhaps. But I'm not broken — this is just who I am."

Eochaid listened, following the words but sensing more meaning behind them than he grasped. *Not something I understand, but not really my business either.* "Why are you telling me all of this, sir?"

"Vesh is a country of many races, many backgrounds, many origins, from transplanted Venirians to 'abstentious' Tanilites. Some divine, some redeemed. It's the same in the vigil. If we are to join together to protect this land, we must accept each other."

"I think I get it, sir." Eochaid paused. "So...er...am I being punished?"

Skywarder shrugged. "But don't—"

"...do it again. Got it. I'll peace-bond my blades when I'm in the fort."

Skywarder chuckled and returned to looking through the spyglass. "I hope you have more self-control than that."

I'm not so sure.

• • •

Eochaid was flicking at a last patch of tar when Skywarder muttered a curse and watched something intently through the spyglass. Eochaid searched the horizon where the glass pointed. If there was motion, he couldn't see it. He waited, tense but still, until the captain lowered the spyglass.

"Slitherin hunters on the move. Too far to tell which brood. It seems our respite may be over. They're gone now. We should go as well."

Eochaid followed the captain down from the tree. They headed northward again, but Skywarder took a different route back. They traveled through another ruin. Eochaid searched the brush nervously, waiting for the clatter of beaks and the shadow of mire dweller wings.

"Wait here," Skywarder whispered. "I'll scout ahead." Eochaid nodded, and Skywarder padded off between the leaning walls and slumped roofs.

Eochaid waited in the shadow of a leaning shack, its roof pushed in by moss and brown, decaying ferns. Dry branches tapped and creaked. He watched his slow breaths fog the air. His shoulders tensed. Shadows crept in at the edges of his mind, a superstitious dread of waiting alone for someone important.

He growled under his breath, tugged his cloak around his face, and carefully slipped out of the shadows along Skywarder's path. The captain had left few traces. He resisted the urge to call out, and instead climbed a crumbling stone staircase and edged to an empty window casing under shadowing eaves where he could see across the sinking town.

Eochaid saw motion. Skywarder knelt by a pile of rocks, levering aside a heavy fallen slab. He reached into the hole beneath and pulled out a tube—a map case, perhaps—and slipped it into his pack. Then he lowered the slab and piled rocks back on top of it.

Eochaid felt a pang of shame. *He's fine, and I'm an idiot. I have not been cursed by the gods.* He drew back from the window and slipped silently down the stairs, retracing his steps to the collapsed shack. *He's the captain, doing some vigil business that can't be trusted to a raw recruit like me.*

Skywarder returned. "Okay, it's safe." He led Eochaid through the ruins and back towards the fort.

• • •

It was nightfall by the time they arrived back. "Decent work, Lenahr," the captain said as they approached the gate. "You're free to go. As for me, I have my report to make to the marshal."

Eochaid returned to his bunk, where Sennet and Jadestone were talking over steaming tea. Amra was not in hers.

"Assigned light work today," Sennet told him. "She's on wall watch. Northeast tower. But don't bug her, she's on duty."

Eochaid made his way up to the tower. *I just want to check on her. Just to make sure she's doing okay.*

He stopped as he reached the top of the stairs and looked around. Amra leaned on the battlements to the north, looking out across the river. He silently stepped out of the guard house where he could see her better but stayed several feet away.

She did not hear him approach. Her hands covered her face, and her shoulders shook slightly. *Is she crying?* One of her hands reached out to clutch the wall. *No, she's...laughing!*

Her laughter was nearly silent. Her lips moved, but she spoke in hardly a whisper. He couldn't hear her only a few feet away. *Is she praying?*

She nodded, almost as if in a conversation, but then she saw him and turned her head. "Lenahr!"

"Hey."

"How was your patrol?" she asked.

"Informative. Slitherin are on the move again."

"You saw them?" She looked out across the marsh, then laughed. "Yes, of course you did."

"Combat missions will be starting up again soon."

"Good, good." She nodded.

"Were you praying just now?"

She stared at him for a moment before answering. “Yes. Yes, praying to Tanil. Thanking her...for...” she took a deep breath. “Thanking her for helping me get home.”

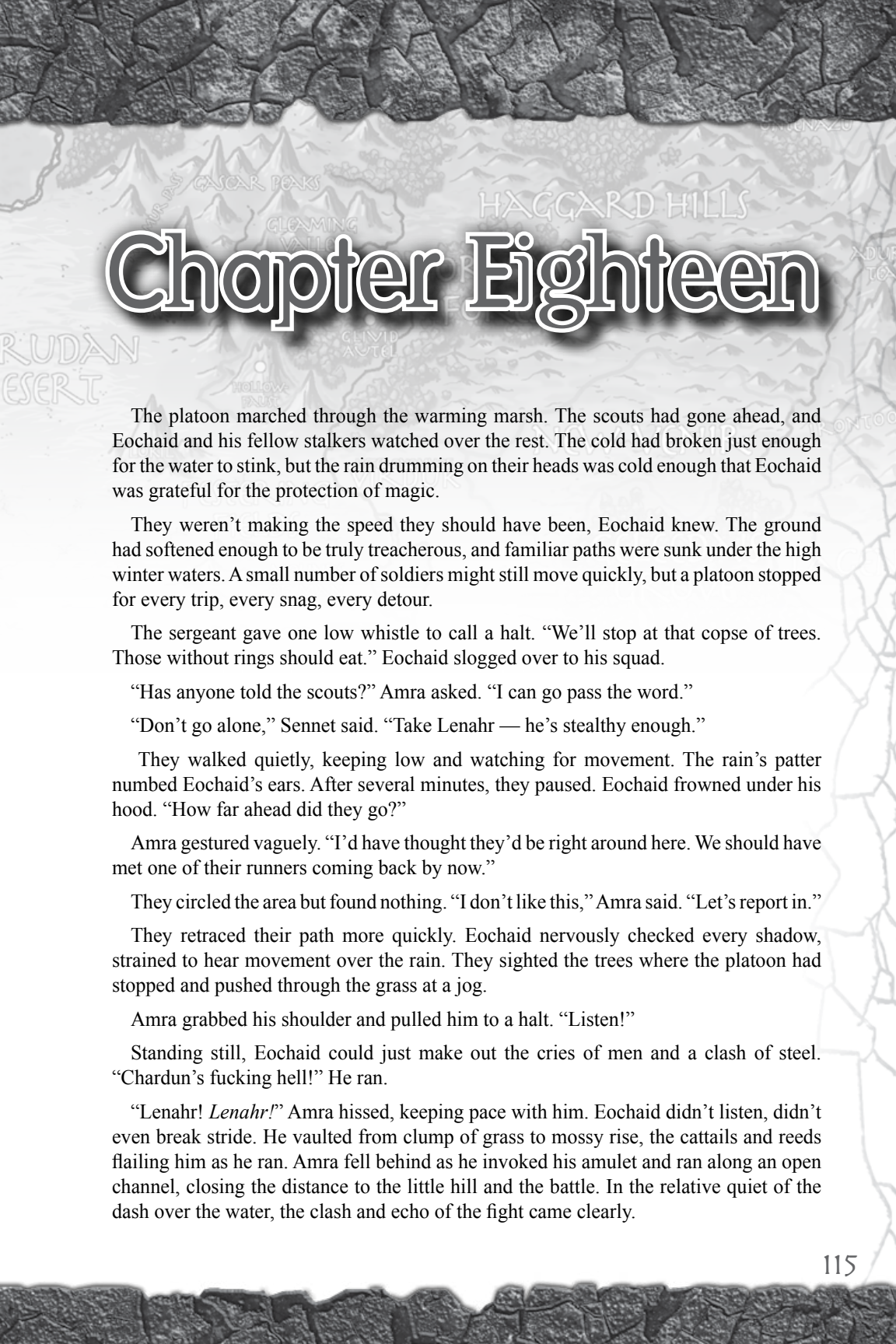
He stepped over and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad she did. I’m very glad you’re home.”

She nodded and looked down at his hand. “Yeah. Me too.”

“Good. Okay...yeah.” He let go and stepped back. “I’ll see you in the bunk house later, okay?”

“Yeah. See you later.”

He left the tower, relieved. *She’s finding solace with Tanil. That’s good.*



Chapter Eighteen

The platoon marched through the warming marsh. The scouts had gone ahead, and Eochaid and his fellow stalkers watched over the rest. The cold had broken just enough for the water to stink, but the rain drumming on their heads was cold enough that Eochaid was grateful for the protection of magic.

They weren't making the speed they should have been, Eochaid knew. The ground had softened enough to be truly treacherous, and familiar paths were sunk under the high winter waters. A small number of soldiers might still move quickly, but a platoon stopped for every trip, every snag, every detour.

The sergeant gave one low whistle to call a halt. "We'll stop at that copse of trees. Those without rings should eat." Eochaid slogged over to his squad.

"Has anyone told the scouts?" Amra asked. "I can go pass the word."

"Don't go alone," Sennet said. "Take Lenahr — he's stealthy enough."

They walked quietly, keeping low and watching for movement. The rain's patter numbed Eochaid's ears. After several minutes, they paused. Eochaid frowned under his hood. "How far ahead did they go?"

Amra gestured vaguely. "I'd have thought they'd be right around here. We should have met one of their runners coming back by now."

They circled the area but found nothing. "I don't like this," Amra said. "Let's report in."

They retraced their path more quickly. Eochaid nervously checked every shadow, strained to hear movement over the rain. They sighted the trees where the platoon had stopped and pushed through the grass at a jog.

Amra grabbed his shoulder and pulled him to a halt. "Listen!"

Standing still, Eochaid could just make out the cries of men and a clash of steel. "Chardun's fucking hell!" He ran.

"Lenahr! *Lenahr!*" Amra hissed, keeping pace with him. Eochaid didn't listen, didn't even break stride. He vaulted from clump of grass to mossy rise, the cattails and reeds flailing him as he ran. Amra fell behind as he invoked his amulet and ran along an open channel, closing the distance to the little hill and the battle. In the relative quiet of the dash over the water, the clash and echo of the fight came clearly.

He charged over the last stretch of grass and shrubs into the trees and scrambled uphill. Snarls and animal cries, yells and sword blows. As he drew near, the sounds grew more infrequent. Then someone crashed through the brush and branches ahead of them. An elven vigilant, an arrow sticking out just below his shoulder blade, ran toward the open marsh. Before Eochaid could call out to him, a crossbow bolt slammed into the small of the vigilant's back and knocked him flat.

Eochaid ducked behind a vine-covered tree. A slitherin, gray-furred and wearing a grimy cloak, pounced on the fallen man. Eochaid leapt, closing one hand around the creature's windpipe as he drove his sword into its breast with the other. It fell forward, driving the blade even deeper, and died quickly.

"Back!" Amra grabbed his shoulder as he pulled the sword loose and rolled the dead ratman off the fallen man. He shrugged her off, reached for the vigilant again. Amra twisted her fist in his cloak and hauled him off. "He's *dead*, Lenahr! They lost! If you don't want to join them, we have to hide. *Now!*"

The battle noises had all but died away. It was agony, but Amra was right — with any force large enough to ambush a full platoon of vigilants, if they charged straight in they'd just be adding corpses to the pile. They doubled back to the tree and crouched under cover.

The fight was over.

A great many ratman voices gabbled from the clearing. Eochaid strained his ears and heard a few human groans. He lay down and edged forward under the tree's curtain of vines until he could just see out. Slitherin walked among fallen bodies, trussing some of them to poles. A pair of large ratmen prodded a vigilant wizard to his feet. They bound the man's hands and gagged him. Other ratmen gathered bows and swords.

Eochaid couldn't see enough to count survivors, but he saw enough ratmen to know that even the full platoon would have been heavily outnumbered. Amra crawled up beside him. She pointed to one of the bigger slitherin and whispered in his ear. "A Twilight Warden — elite troops. They don't just show up out of nowhere. The slitherin intend to take this area and hold it."

Eochaid's gut clenched. A column of ratmen formed, some carrying limp figures, a few herding bound vigilants. Then a slitherin Eochaid couldn't see called a command and the column moved out through the trees.

They waited several more minutes in silence. A couple of harsh slitherin voices called to one another in the clearing, somewhere out of view. Their footsteps came closer, passing near. Three gray ratmen approached the body of the fallen elf and his dead pursuer. All wore the filthy cloaks, and each had unique markings painted in their fur in muted browns, greens, and yellows. They hissed and growled to one another, then dragged the corpses back towards the battle site.

Amra tapped him on the shoulder. He nodded. They crept silently out of the vines. The slitherin had dropped their dead companion. Two of the ratmen bent over the dead elf, going through his pockets. The third had looped rope around the corpse's ankles and was lashing it to a pole.

They attacked together, Eochaid cutting the throat of one of the two corpse robbers, Amra doing the same to the one with the rope. Two bodies fell immediately. The third ratman hissed, drew its dagger, and tried to back away, but the vigilants circled and hemmed it in. It aimed a blow at Eochaid. He parried and struck back, slashing the creature's arm. Then Amra struck from behind, a quick, hard blow between its shoulders, and the creature fell, its stinking cloak flopping around it.

The two vigilants closed ranks, ready for counterattacks. None came.

Eochaid turned over the ratman he'd killed. In its hand it clutched the dead vigilant's amulet. He ripped it loose and put it in his pocket. He cut the man's legs free of their bindings. "Were they planning to take his body home?"

"Yes," said Amra. "They wouldn't want to waste it — elf's their favorite."

Eochaid glanced up. Amra nodded, her face still as stone. Eochaid's gorge surged violently. He turned away from the dead man and spent a moment mastering his roiling guts. "Let's check the rest."

They searched the battlefield. Bodies, both vigilant and slitherin, lay in a haphazard pile. Eochaid counted eight vigilant corpses. The last he turned over was Sennet. The Corporal's hand had been cut off, and his back laid open by an axe blow. The slitherin had taken his medallion, and those of all the other fallen vigilants.

"Fuck," Eochaid said.

"Medallions may be what they were after," Amra said.

"We have to get back to Riverrock."

"What?" Amra responded. "No, that's not what we have to—"

Eochaid marched off in the direction of the fort. "They took some of them alive. We need to plan a rescue, get more troops—"

"No!" Amra snapped. She grabbed Eochaid and spun him in his tracks. "Listen to me! These robed ones, the ones that made up most of the attack? They're the *Diseased*! If we wait even a *day* on the rescue, there won't be anything alive worth bringing back."

"There are two of us," Eochaid growled. "You said yourself we *can't* win alone."

"Can't win a straight *fight*, shit-brains," she retorted. "You run at everything full tilt! We have to go in quietly, cut every throat between us and the prisoners. I know a way, but we have to go *now*."

"What way?"

Amra pointed to the bodies. "Find every small weapon we can carry. I'll explain."

Eochaid searched the corpses, setting aside knives and short swords on a trampled cloak. Amra rolled over two of the slitherin and removed their cloaks, sleeve over her nose and mouth to keep down the odor. "The Diseased have rituals," she explained. "Every dawn and dusk. They worship the Nameless Orb — call it 'Relief from Sorrows.' The whole warren will be there, anyone who's not on watch.

“And they’re rats. Every slitherin warren has bolt-holes. There’s always a tunnel that leads away from the main entrances, one that’s well hidden, that they can collapse behind them as they run. That’s how I escaped.”

Eochaid bundled the cloak around the cache of weapons and stuffed it in his pack. Amra held out one of the stinking cloaks to him. “But,” she said, “There will be a guard.”

• • •

The cloak itself felt diseased. Its odor surrounded him. Every trickle of water dribbled more of its stench onto Eochaid. Every movement worked it deeper into his clothes, his hair, even his skin, as if the cold piss of the titan of disease was pouring down on him.

They followed the tracks of the slitherin raiders for miles through the swamp, moving swiftly before the rain could erode the signs. Finally, they came to a place where trees shadowed a long hill above the marsh, a peak of drier land in the wet. Tumbled piles of rubble suggested a town had been here once, before rivers of blood had drowned fields and farms and homes.

On the ridge line, Amra pointed out a longhouse, just visible through the trees. They stayed in the water, working their way around the hill to its far side, then up and into the cover of the brush.

“Look for a guard,” Amra said. “Close by the hole rather than in it, so as not to give it away.” They moved silently, searching each area before moving on to the next.

Eochaid spotted the guard by looking for places he’d choose to hide. The ratman hunkered under a rotting wagon, one wheel broken, slanted into the dirt. They watched the guard for half an hour to be sure. It faced a tumbledown ruin of moss and moldering beams that had once been a sturdy building. “This is our entrance,” Amra said.

They waited. The rain fell.

When he noticed the light diminishing, Eochaid un-stiffened his muscles, gently flexing arms and legs without moving from cover. Amra rose. “Follow my lead.”

They pulled their hoods low and hunched a little in the cloaks. Amra stepped out and approached the wagon. Eochaid walked behind her, drawing his swords under the cloak. The guard slithered out of his hiding place. He sniffed the air, then chattered a greeting. Amra hissed something back, and the guard tilted his head. Then, as she stepped close, Amra’s hand shot out. She stabbed upward into the guard’s chest and stepped back. He grunted quietly and folded over.

They stuffed his body in the space under the wagon and went to search for the entrance. It was a thin trench dug out from under the fallen roof that dove and opened into a tight tunnel once it reached the tangle of beams. They moved single file, hunched over. Eochaid could feel the claw marks on the walls where the earth had been dug out. A strong odor of rotting flesh and waste clogged the air.

They walked for over a minute. Then very faint light tinged the walls at the next bend. Eochaid slowed. At the turn, he leaned carefully out. Flickering lavender light showed a wider space ahead. Something moved there, and quiet moans and coughs reached him in the corridor.

Eochaid pulled off the filthy hood, the odor still in his nostrils. He drew both blades and advanced.

The room was perhaps 20 feet on a side. A cluster of flimsy-looking cages sat in the center. Living figures lay in them, moving fitfully. On the walls, strange symbols glowed, and instruments, sharp and dull, hung from hooks. A lamp full of something black sputtered on a shelf, producing bright violet flames and smoke. Mounds of filth lay haphazardly on the floor.

Eochaid approached the cages. As he grew closer, the smell grew worse. He frowned. The sickly stench that had plagued him for hours, the one that wreathed the cloak...that smell roiled off the people in the cages.

A grunt. Something shoved its way out of the refuse pile at his feet and stood: a gaunt, grimy, reeking figure, all wiry muscle. Its eyes gleamed deep in its head. It sniffed, then opened a mouth full of sharp teeth. Eochaid raised his sword. Tongue licking the air, it snuffled at him, then keened and cowered back. It knelt on all fours, nuzzling and licking his boots.

Amra stabbed it through the skull. "This is what they do to the humans they catch."

"So she was—"

"*Was*. Better she's dead. Better they all are," Amra said, gesturing to the cages. Listless eyes watched Eochaid, but none of the limp, bleeding, boil-ridden figures reached out. *Gods*, Eochaid thought. *I can't save you too.*

Amra motioned toward a doorway. "The new prisoners are this way."

"No," Eochaid said. "Not yet."

"We can't save these, Lenahr," she said.

"We can," he said. "We can send them to Madriel."

The bars of the cages were made of mere reeds, pathetically easy to break open. Eochaid stepped inside and quickly did the work, dispatching each of the occupants cleanly in moments. Another one of the shambling creatures emerged from the dirt, grunting inquisitively, but Amra killed it before it could approach. In a few minutes, Eochaid was soaked in blood, but the room was still.

"Now we can go."

Under her breath, Amra said "Stealing their prize *and* killing Chern's holy slaves? They're going to be so mad!"

Good.

Amra led him from room to room, carefully avoiding one doorway, slipping through another. Drums and flutes reached them from somewhere ahead, but always at a distance. They reached a well-trodden room. Four large brass bowls on tripods surrounded a stone dais. The contents stank. Eochaid did not examine them. Three other doorways led away to other rooms.

Amra leaned close to his ear. “The priest quarters are through there,” she whispered, pointing to a curtained archway decorated with runes and stonework. “They’ll be at the ceremony, though, which sounds like it’s *that* way.” She jerked her head towards the widest archway. “That leaves one more route.”

She pulled her hood up closely around her face, and Eochaid reluctantly did the same. They padded to the doorway and listened. Rustling. A cough. More rustling. The dull *thwack* of wood on flesh, and a rat-like snarl. Amra nodded. They walked in.

A handful of humans and elves lay on the floor, limbs carefully tied. The wizard was there, his gag replaced with a leather strap. All of them were covered in bruises, and most of them had blade or arrow wounds as well.

One slitherin stood over a crumpled figure, an iron-shod cudgel in its hand. Another crouched by the wall, running its fingers along the haft of a spear. It looked up as they entered. Amra threw a dagger that caught it between the eyes. Eochaid leapt at the cudgel-wielder and sliced open his throat.

“Who’s that?” one of the prisoners asked blearily. It was Holtz. Eochaid pulled back his hood and held his fingers to his lips. Holtz whispered. “How did you find us?”

Eochaid gestured to Amra. “She learned some of their tricks while they had her.”

Eochaid cut Holtz’s bonds. Amra helped the figure on the ground — Jadestone, who had already nearly wriggled her way out of the ropes binding her. Amra handed her a dagger, and then leaned close to Eochaid to whisper.

“Free the rest of them and get back to the first room, with the cages. I’ll meet you there. I’m going to check the priest quarters for the medallions.”

Eochaid shook his head. “It’s too dangerous. Medallions aren’t worth the risk.”

Amra smirked. “Nice that you care so much, Lenahr. See you in a couple minutes.” She patted his shoulder and slipped away quietly back down the passage.

“Clearly no arguing with her, huh?” whispered Jadestone. Eochaid grunted in agreement.

He handed his dagger to Holtz, who cut the bonds of the elven archer, Koneru. Jadestone freed the wizard — Cooper, Eochaid recalled — with Amra’s knife. Eochaid went to the last prisoner, a tough ranger called Darl, and sliced open his ropes with his short sword.

“Is this everyone?” he quietly asked the group.

“Everyone still alive,” explained Jadestone. “They had Brook’s body, too. They took it away for their ritual.” She gestured in the direction of the drums and chanting.

Brook was an elf. Eochaid didn't mention what the 'ritual' would have been. He removed the bundle of weapons from his pack and passed out more swords and knives.

"They ambushed the scout party," said Holtz. "Knocked me out. When I woke up they were hauling me back to camp. Never saw what happened to Rickers and Vaughn. I'm pretty sure they're dead. It's like they knew *exactly* where we would be."

"Amra said they had some twilight wardens. They plan things out, like we do." He glanced quickly around. Two dead rats with crude weapons. Five badly beaten vigilants without armor, but armed and angry. "We ready?"

The group moved quickly and quietly. No guards appeared to stop them, and the ceremony continued in the distance. They reached the cage room. Eochaid's companions flinched back in disgust at the carnage and the odor.

Jadestone looked quizzically from the ragged bodies to Eochaid, but he shook his head and pointed to the passage out. "Not now," he whispered. "Get outside. I'm waiting for Amra."

Holtz led the others down the passage. Just as the pad and scrape of their movements began to fade, Amra entered. She smiled grimly and hefted the sack she carried. "Not all, but enough," she said. "Let's move."

When they reached the final trench under the roof, they kicked out the rotting beams that held up the tunnel exit. They squeezed out just as the stone wall and roof tumbled down onto the sunken ground above the collapsed tunnel.

The sun had set. They found the others hiding nearby. The ranger Darl cast a spell on the group to hide their tracks, and the wizard Cooper enchanted Holtz so the scout could see in the dark. With Holtz in the lead and Amra and Eochaid watching their flanks, the vigilants set out for Riverrock. Of the 20-strong platoon from the morning, only seven vigilants trudged home.

Chapter Nineteen

Shortly after dawn, the exhausted group straggled onto the final stretch of reeds and grass, and the fortress hove into view. Jadestone saw the towers and sobbed once, nearly tripping over her own feet. Eochaid grabbed her shoulders. “Almost there.”

“Medallions on,” Amra ordered from the front of the group. One by one, the marchers lifted out of the muck.

As they crossed the channels and hummocks, a sentry horn blew ‘returning patrol.’ *Wrong signal*, Eochaid thought bitterly. *We’re a returning mission, not a patrol.* He squinted at the wall. Figures began moving, first two or three, then a fistful. A new signal blew: ‘Emergency, troops in danger.’

They met the rescue force from the fort before they reached the river. A cleric accompanied by archers and swordsmen charged out to meet them. “Are you from Blake’s platoon?” the cleric asked.

“We’re what’s left of it,” Amra said.

The fresh rangers from the fort fell in behind the group, covering their retreating backs. The cleric walked beside Amra, asking questions and listening. By the time they crossed the river, half the fort’s clerics had turned out to meet them.

“Gloves and masks,” said the cleric with Amra. “Nobody touches them otherwise. They’ve been among the Diseased.” The rangers at the gate cleared a path straight to the infirmary, where clerics surrounded each wounded vigilant.

Eochaid and Amra had collapsed on a bench, watching the clerics fuss over their companions. He scratched absently at his neck. During the march home his armor had begun to chafe, and the raw spots itched maddeningly. He ached down to his bones and felt the chill of his wet, sweaty clothes acutely.

A passing cleric glanced at Eochaid, eyes taking in his mired clothing and the bloodstains on his armor and vest. “We’ve got the rest covered. Where were you wounded?” she asked.

“I wasn’t,” Eochaid said. “Not my blood.”

The cleric froze. She craned her head, looking at his itching neck. Her face went gray. She seized his shoulder, yanking him to his feet. “With me. Now!”

The elven cleric dragged him across the room into a small side chamber. Shelves stocked with linens and bandages lined the walls and a stone tub full of water squatted in the middle of the room. The cleric muttered a prayer and touched the tub. The water began to steam.

"I'm fine," Eochaid insisted. "I'm just cold and itchy. My weather protection's worn off."

The elven cleric peeled his collar back. "These are *boils*, and you're flushed and shivering. You were doused in viscera in a Diseased warren. You have contracted an illness, possibly *several*. If we don't hurry, you could be dead within hours.

"Now, strip down completely, get in the tub, and scrub. We can probably save your leather armor — set it down here. Put your clothes in this bag. We'll have to burn them. Can't risk the contamination spreading. I'll be back in a few minutes. Yell if you feel yourself passing out."

She turned on her heel and left.

Hands shaking, Eochaid removed everything but his amulet and ring and stepped into the tub. He found a soap bar and scrubbed furiously, from his hair all the way down to his toes. Several patches of skin on his abdomen, arms, and legs puffed red and itched badly, but he resisted scratching.

The cleric returned. "Stand up," she said. Eochaid blushed but obeyed, his knees aching as he rose. His shudders grew worse, even in the warmth of the little room. The elf studied the discolored patches on his belly, one of them beginning to blister. "Looks like Scarlet Shaking Pox to me. But much faster-acting than usual. Plenty deadly, and I'm guessing it's been combined with something else."

"Lucky for all of us we caught it quickly," she muttered. Then she gestured and touched his brow with her gloved hands. Between one breath and another the itching faded. In another moment, the deep ache and the chills that shook him had stopped as well. She pulled a towel, a clean linen robe, and a pair of sandals from the shelf. "You should be cured. Dry yourself off and put these on. We'll get your leathers back to you once they've been decontaminated."

Eochaid glanced gratefully down at his body, no longer discolored, and toweled off.

• • •

Amra passed him as he returned to the main infirmary. Her skin was blotchy, and a rash was starting on her forehead. The cleric she was leaning on hustled her into the bath chamber. One of the medics was washing the bench they'd sat on with an astringent, while Jadestone and the other survivors looked on nervously. Another medic picked up Amra's blood-spattered bag with metal tongs and carried it out of the room. Eochaid stood to one side and clutched his robe around him.

A cleric was examining Koneru, the other elf they'd rescued from the slitherin. "No signs of disease," she said. "Just the physical wounds."

"No rash and no fever with these three either," another of the staff said, gesturing to Jadestone, Cooper, and Darl.

"We may have been lucky," said another medic. "I don't think it's spread beyond the two obvious cases."

"What? But I feel sick," insisted Holtz. "My stomach fucking hurts."

"That's called 'hunger,'" the medic snarled. "You scouts and your damn rings."

A pair of vigilants from the kitchen brought a basket to the doorway. "We'll take it from there," the medic called. "Just put it down at the door."

Amra returned from the bath just as the medics distributed the food. Eochaid and Amra stayed out of the way as the others sat up on their bunks and ate. "You two eat, too," The cleric told them. "Magic rings or not, you'll recover faster."

Though he wasn't hungry, the smell of the warm bread and herb-roasted chicken compelled Eochaid to dig in. He'd nearly forgotten how good food could be.

Holtz shoveled through his plate, gnawing chicken bones and tearing off hunks of bread.

"Just how long have you been wearing that ring, Holtz?" Cooper asked the scout.

"Since I joined Arcernoth," Holtz answered between mouthfuls of cheese. "Over six years."

Cooper shook his head. "Sustaining yourself on magic that long is not good for you. It's just as well that you're getting a break from it."

Holtz held up his hand, revealing the sustenance ring he'd already reclaimed from Amra's bag.

Cooper snorted. "I think your break should be longer than a week."

"Don't care," the scout mumbled as he took a bite from a chicken leg. "Don't like having to shit."

Cooper wrinkled his nose in distaste. "It's bad for the humors. Your natural rhythms will break down. Proper food and sleep are important for a healthy body and mind."

"You're a wizard," Darl pointed out. "Isn't magic your life-blood?"

"Yes, exactly. Which is why I *do* know better. I wouldn't wear one of those things even if offered. I need a full night's sleep. Two hours a day is not adequate time to dream. I rely on the Dreamlord Erias for visions and inspiration."

"Speaking of sleep," Darl yawned. He waved down the head cleric. "Can we head back to our bunks now?"

She shook her head. "Some of you might also carry diseases, and we can't purify all of you today. We'll need to keep you here for now for isolation and observation. We cured Lenahr and Varith, since they were clearly infected. Unless you start showing symptoms, the rest of you are waiting until my clerics refresh their spells tomorrow. You can leave after that."

She turned to Eochaid and Amra. "You two can go. The captain is waiting for you."

• • •

Skywarder was waiting in the hallway. He smiled grimly as they approached. “It’s good to have you back safe.”

“It was pure luck that any of us survived,” Eochaid explained. “If Varith and I hadn’t been out looking for the scouts, nobody would have made it home.”

“Tanil’s blessed you, then. Follow me. The marshal’s waiting to hear the details.”

Skywarder escorted them through the fort to the marshal’s office. A broad table dominated the spacious room. Most of the vigil’s officers were crammed in around it — the company captains, various lieutenants, the three battalion majors — and Vigilant Marshal Kinthas “Silverblade” Ardante, who stood at the table’s head. Eochaid saluted self-consciously and tidied his linen robe as best he could.

Eochaid had only seen Marshal Silverblade from a distance and knew little about him. The marshal was in his early 30s and not overly tall — only slightly taller than Eochaid — but he was densely built and commanded respect. He had a strong nose, wide forehead, deep-set eyes, and his hair was slicked back. His beard was cropped short, similar to Eochaid’s, as was popular in southern Vesh. At his belt hung the magical silver scimitar that gave him his nickname.

“Langold, you didn’t tell me they’d come straight from the infirmary!” the marshal said to Skywarder. “Sit, you two. You look like you need it.”

Langold?

Skywarder fetched stools from a corner of the room and set them at the end of the table for Eochaid and Amra. *Huh. The marshal’s on a first-name basis with our captain. Bet they have some history together.*

Ring or no ring, Eochaid had been awake for over a full day, and was grateful for the marshal’s act of kindness. He suppressed a yawn.

The marshal also sat. “Now,” he said, “tell me the details of what happened.”

Amra began. “Sir, we were about halfway to our rendezvous when Sergeant Blake called for a rest. Vigilant Lenahr and I went ahead to alert our scouts. We couldn’t find them.”

The marshal looked at Eochaid for confirmation.

“We found no sign of them,” Eochaid agreed.

“We went to alert the main force,” Amra continued, “On the way we heard battle, and we ran back.”

“I ran back.” Eochaid interjected. “Amra — Vigilant Varith — stopped me from running in blindly.”

Amra continued. “We missed the fight. They outnumbered us at least three to one — mostly Diseased, but we saw Foamers, Brown Gorgers, and others. I saw at least two

twilight wardens. Over half the platoon was dead. We saw them tie up a few survivors and march them off.”

“Jadestone saw most of it,” Eochaid added. “She said the slitherin used magic to knock out or disable people when the attack started. That’s probably also how they took the scouts.”

The marshal interrupted. “Lenahr, we’ll get detailed reports from the others after they’re released from the infirmary. Please continue with just the highlights of what *you* saw.”

Eochaid nodded and continued. “Vigilant Varith knew we had only one hope of rescuing our people. We disguised ourselves and followed the trail to the slitherin warren. She found a back way in — a bolt hole. At dusk, we snuck in while the Diseased were performing their evening ceremony.”

Eochaid thought of the cages, and the wretches inside them. Words failed him.

Amra took over again. “We found the prisoners. There were just a handful of guards, easily taken down. Then we snuck back out to the bolt hole and collapsed it behind us to delay pursuit.”

“Don’t forget about how you went back for the medallions,” Eochaid reminded her.

“Yes, the medallions. While Vigilant Lenahr guided the others out, I snuck into the priest quarters. The Diseased priests were all at the ceremony. There was a bag there with our captured equipment — vigil medallions, rings, and other magic gear. Not quite everything, but most of it. I took it and snuck back to meet up with the others.”

“Very brave of you, Varith,” noted the marshal. “A wise risk — we don’t want that many medallions in the hands of our enemies.”

“Thank you, sir. After we made it out, we used the few spells we had left to cover our tracks and travel quickly through the darkness. We made it back to the fort without any other incidents.”

“Good thinking and planning on your part, Vigilant Varith. Commendable.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Eochaid felt a surge of vicarious pride. *She deserves it — the rest of us would be dead if she hadn’t been there.*

The marshal turned to Captain Skywarder. “How heavy were our losses?”

“Thirteen dead or presumed dead, sir, including all platoon leadership and the clerics. Seven survivors, including Varith and Lenahr here. Two amulets and at least two rings lost, as well as the weapons and armor. We still need to do a full inventory.”

The marshal stood up and paced at the head of the table. “Twilight wardens so close to Riverrock could indicate that the slitherin are expanding their territory. We’ll meet this afternoon to plan counter-strategies. Until we can put them in place, triple our mission strength, even if it means fewer missions. Full companies, not just platoons. Full battalions if need be. Slitherin do not attack a superior force, so wherever we can’t beat them in stealth, we’ll outnumber them.”

He turned back to Eochaid and Amra. "Vigilants Varith and Lenahr, you are dismissed. Get some rest. You both did well."

Skywarder gave them a nod and tight smile as they left the office.

• • •

Eochaid and Amra returned to the barracks. Their bunk room was still, the lanterns unlit, the bunks neatly made. It stood mostly empty often enough, but this time it felt abandoned. Most of the occupants would never return. He brushed his hand over Sennet's trunk as he walked by it. It was cold and solid.

He sat heavily down on his bunk, head in hands. His eyes burned. He breathed in deeply — slowly, lest a sob slip out. It was simpler when they were in the warren, where he could bend his feelings to a purpose, use cold rage to complete the job. But here in the barracks there was nothing. No friends left to rescue, no enemies to receive his anger. Just his grief and the empty bunks.

He felt arms flow around him, a warm body pressing up against his back. A kiss on the back of his neck. "You're sad," she said quietly.

He lifted his head to look at Amra and brushed away tears. "Of course. You're not?"

Amra shrugged. "It's bad...the situation, I mean. But I hardly knew them."

She'd been at the fort for less than two weeks, Eochaid realized. One night of carousing. A week of light duty. This had been her first mission with his squad, with any of the platoon.

"They were all good people." He explained. "Good comrades. I wasn't enthusiastic about the drinking and gambling, but I had some fun. Some good times. And now... they're *all* gone."

"Except Holtz."

Eochaid snorted. "Yeah, Holtz."

"He has his uses, I think."

Eochaid shrugged and looked down at his lap.

He felt her settle in next to him to sit on the edge of the bed. "Hey," she said, leaning forward to kiss his cheek. He looked up at her face. Her eyes searched his for a moment, then she leaned in to kiss him, her arms sliding around his neck. He returned the kiss for a moment, but then gently pulled back, shaking his head.

"I just need to sleep."

Amra shrugged playfully, leaned down, and pulled off his left sandal.

"I can do that myself," he grumbled.

She smirked up at him and grabbed at his other foot. He sighed and kicked off the other sandal. Once his were off, she yanked off her own and joined him back on his bunk. "Now lie down," she ordered.

He sighed and settled back onto the bed. "Satisfied?"

She knelt beside him and picked with one hand at the front of his robe, resting her other on his shoulder. He caught the hand on his chest and held it. "Amra..." he muttered, squeezing her hand tenderly, pulling it away from the robe's opening, placing it instead by his heart.

She leaned in and started nuzzling him on the neck.

He shifted under her hands. "Now is not a good time, Amra."

"Shh, shh, shh," she hissed. Her hand moved in small circles on his chest. He tried to push it away. She sat up and pulled away but looked him over, licking her lips.

"Amra, what..."

"Shhh."

She climbed onto him, straddling him across the hips and rubbing against him.

"Amra, no."

She laughed and leaned down. "Your voice says no, but your cock says yes."

"A summer breeze would make my cock say yes."

"Nevertheless," she said, but then kissed him and murmured, "you don't have to do anything. This is all for you." She nuzzled his chest again.

He breathed in her scent — soap, musk, her. It made him dizzy.

Maybe it's for the best. Forget, for just a little while. And this is what I want, isn't it?

"Fine," he said. "Do what you want."

She grinned. The hunger in her eyes unsettled him.

She pulled open his robe and then her own. She hid nothing this time, the scars on her body evident, almost proudly displayed. One fat line wound its way over her hip and across her abdomen. As she sat above him, disposing of her robe, he gently ran his thumb across it. There was no roughness to the skin, as if the scar was painted on. She paused what she was doing and looked down at his hand as if noticing it for the first time. He pulled away.

"Does it hurt?"

She shook her head. "It did at the time. But no, not now. Not at all." Her eyes unfocused for a moment, looking somewhere beyond him. "They're just a part of me now."

The scars and her acceptance of them called up a pang of guilt in his already aching chest. He wanted to give in, just live in the moment and lazily enjoy it. He couldn't fault her skills, or her understanding of his body. She moved on top of him, drawing him in, but he felt no pleasure. He was blinded by rain again, failing to find her, lost in the marsh. He tried to put it out of his head, focus on what she was doing.

Distracted, he almost missed it when she started to cry out, trembling above him. He gripped her thighs as she rode him through her own pleasure.

She collapsed across his chest and sighed. After a few seconds, she began to move again.

“You...” he was surprised to hear his voice shake. He swallowed and took a deep breath to steady himself. “You don’t have to. We can stop now.”

“Uh-uh,” she insisted. “I’m not going *anywhere* until you’re done.”

Emotions burst like a cacophony of fireballs in his mind. Sorrow. Rage. Fear. Love. Devotion. Frustration.

“Fine,” he growled. He pulled her towards him and flipped them both over so he was on top of her. She laughed and wrapped her legs around him. He silenced everything else, focusing only on moving, thrusting. The pleasure finally ripped through him, hot and sharp. He shuddered to a stop, sweaty, sticky, and gasping.

“There,” she whispered. “That wasn’t so bad.”

But it was bad. Not in his body, which still tingled, but in his gut.

She slipped out of the bed and went to the wash basin in the corner of the room to clean herself up. He looked away to give her some privacy, and his guilt crept in from wherever it had hidden. His grief, at least, had subsided.

He felt something cold and damp slap him across his hip. She’d tossed a wet linen at him. “To clean yourself up.”

He nodded his thanks and cleaned off the stickiness. She put on underclothes and a shirt and went to her bunk.

“Hey,” he called out to her, as he pulled on his own nightclothes. “You can sleep with me here...in my bunk.”

She looked at it dubiously. “It’s rather narrow...” She sighed. “Alright. It’s only for a couple hours.”

She lay beside him under his blanket, and he wrapped his arms around her. *This. This is better. Much better.*

Then exhaustion stopped all thought.

• • •

Eochaid woke several hours later. Amra was gone. The bunk room was empty. He curled up under his blanket; the grief surrounding him again, flowing over him like icy, turbulent water.

Chapter Twenty

It was early evening when Mattock found him.

Just because he didn't need to sleep didn't mean he didn't want to, and his sorrow had sapped him into a fitful half doze.

Shuffling footsteps crossed the bunk room. A strong, callused hand grabbed his foot and pulled. "C'mon," Mattock said, her voice slurred, "Yer missin' it." She dragged him several inches down his bunk.

He yanked up the covers around him. "I'm not dressed."

"So get dress...t." She dropped onto the next bunk with a thump. "I'll wait."

"You're drunk."

"Not drunk enough. And you're not...drunk at all." She kicked his trunk. "Pants."

He dug out shirt and trousers from his trunk and changed. "I'll come with you, but don't make me drink that...swill."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Tastes like elf piss. And not even *good* elf piss — Forsaken elf piss or somethin'. Nah...we broke out the good stuff. Dwarven ale. Shez...Shesel..." She waved her hand. "Rum stuff. An' C'lassian branny. Good stuff."

Eochaid's eyes widened in surprise. "Calastian brandy? Where'd you get that?" He remembered his first taste of it: his 17th birthday, a cold winter night in the first week of Belsamer. His friends chipped in to buy him a bottle from a passing trader, or so they claimed, and they shared it in a barn. He remembered being warm and happy, although as much from the company as from the brandy.

She grinned sideways. "Ever'body broke out their secret stashes."

Eochaid snorted a short laugh. "Okay, Mattock. I'll try your secret stash of fine beverages."

"Good. Los' too many drinkin' buddies t'day." She wobbled to her feet as he searched for shoes. "Res' of us gotta stick t'gether, Lenny," she said, prodding him on the shoulder.

Lenny? She is shit-faced.

He followed her through the fort, across the courtyard to the great hall. Its courtyard doors were open, and light warmed the walls. People crammed the room, many drinking, shouting, and laughing. He'd never seen so many carousing there before. Even the

sentries on the wall glanced in as they walked their posts. One of them caught his eye and nodded solemnly.

Mattock dragged him inside, through the crowd toward a table where Balak was pouring drinks for all comers.

“It’s a party?”

“A wake. Lost a dozen people today! Need to drink. Get pissed. Need to cry out an’ warn the gods they’re coming!” She raised her mug high (where’d she gotten it?) and roared. Those close around them raised up their drinks with her, shouting and stamping their feet.

“Hey, Balak,” Mattock hollered. Balak was filling mugs and cups as fast as revelers snatched them up.

“Give Lenny here some of the good stuff,” Mattock ordered. “No elf piss!”

“Lenny?”

Eochaid shrugged, gesturing to himself. “Lenny.”

Balak laughed. “Doesn’t suit you, but she’s likely set on it. What do ya want?”

“She mentioned Calastian brandy.”

“Brandy for Lenahr! Sorry...’Lenny.” He grinned and handed Eochaid a glass of amber liquid.

Eochaid tasted his drink, savoring the flavor. It warmed his throat and belly.

“You gotta *chug* it, not sip it,” Mattock complained.

Balak threw a rag at her. “It ain’t beer, ya harpy. Be civilized for once. That’s strong stuff — he’ll get drunk sipping that glass just as fast as you swilling yer beer. Guzzle it down, it’ll make ya sick before yer tipsy.”

Mattock guided Eochaid over to a table of familiar faces from her oversized squad, his former bunkmates. They made room for him at the head of the table, and Lewis (the halfling chicken keeper) patted the chair.

“Tonight’s for your platoon,” he explained. “You’re the only one of them here.”

“Where’s Varith?” he asked.

Mattock shrugged. “Couldn’t find her. ‘S hopin’ she was with you.”

“I saw her a few hours ago walking with Captain Skywarder,” Lewis said.

“You should have waited until the others are released from the infirmary,” Eochaid said. “I don’t know enough to speak for the whole platoon.”

“Couldn’t wait that long,” Mattock countered. “Nemorga’s gotta know to fetch ‘em!”

“I don’t think the god of death needs any help,” Lewis pointed out. “I think this is just an excuse for you to get drunk with as many people as possible.”

“Gotta make it *loud*, make up for the voices we lost,” Mattock continued, quaffing from her mug.

Eochaid took another swallow of his own drink and watched the assembled vigilants. Some people were animated, laughing and gesturing to each other. A few even danced on a tabletop to music from a lute. Most were quieter, drinking in small groups. He noticed that many of the officers were there, including the marshal, who moved around the room clunking his mug with each person, toasting at every table.

"Half the vigil's here," he said. "What happens if the fort's attacked during this party? No one here is in any condition to fight."

"No worry," Mattock said blearily. "Clerics can quick-sober us up. Boom! Right as rain."

Every few minutes someone would shout a toast to one of the fallen. "To Sennet!" someone cried out.

"To Sennet!" the room roared.

"To Sennet," Eochaid echoed. He drained his brandy glass. It burned his throat, stung his eyes, and set him to coughing for a moment.

Belasius, the bowyer, clapped him on the back. "I'll get you another drink. Something better for toasting."

She came back a minute later with two glasses of clear liquid. "Balak said you didn't like the beer, so this will have to do. Figured I'd try it too."

He took a sip. It didn't have much of a taste, but it was extremely strong. "You trying to kill us?" he said, coughing.

She sighed and shook her head. "Numb us." Her face fell. "Brook would want me to live."

Ouch, wrong thing to say.

"You and Brook?"

She nodded. "I made his arrows strong and true. He made my heart sing. I wish my arrows had been enough to keep him alive."

Eochaid's heart fell, and he looked into the empty glass. "I'm sorry. I didn't know Brook very well. But he was brave. And..." he paused, struggling for something comforting to say. "And...he's with Tanil now."

She glared at him and growled. "*Fuck* Tanil! She didn't need him yet. We had *plans*. We were going to open a woodworking shop in Lave. Have a ton of cute red-haired half-elven babies. But that's gone!" Her hands shook as she squeezed her glass. Her voice quieted. "And Tanil won't *take* me if I go before my time."

He leaned over and wrapped an arm across her shoulders.

"To Brook!" cried Mattock.

"To Brook," Eochaid and Belasius echoed, each taking a swig of the strong, clear drink.

• • •

Someone was shaking his arm. He leapt to his feet and grabbed at swords he wasn't wearing, toppled over his stool, and scrambled at the edge of the table to stop himself from falling. Belasius moaned, passed out across the table, and Mattock's loud snores resounded from under it. His stomach violently protested the sudden movement, and he searched around him for a container.

Someone thrust a basin at him. He snatched it with shaking hands. His guts heaved. He sank to his knees and set the basin down on the floor. Hands flat on each side of the basin, he continued to be sick for several moments.

His insides finally calmed down and he sat back, his head still pounding.

"Wish I hadn't missed the party."

Eochaid looked up. It was Holtz.

"Here," Holtz said, holding out a flask.

Eochaid shook his head.

"No, no — it'll help," Holtz insisted. "It's not drink, it's medicine. Clears up the pounding head, angry gut, dry mouth...whole deal."

Eochaid gratefully took the flask and downed its contents. The potion was minty and cool, and eased the pounding in his head.

"Thank you," he said, returning the flask.

Holtz smiled wryly. "No problem. Been there many times myself. Let's get you cleaned up — captain wants to see us right away."

Holtz rambled to Eochaid on the way to the latrines. "Long day in the infirmary for me. We slept, and then we played some cards. Well, Jade and Coop read. And then Mattock snuck us a couple bottles. Slept more last night. Like a rock, too! I haven't slept that much in...I don't remember when. Anyway, no one got sick, but the clerics cast their spells at first light just to be safe. Apparently, some of the worst shit takes weeks to show up and then, bam! You drop dead. So yeah, happy to be cured. Pity we missed the wake."

After Eochaid finished up in the latrine, he splashed cold water on his face and rinsed the bile from his teeth.

"What does the captain want?" Eochaid asked Holtz.

"Probably to tell us where we're getting assigned next," Holtz answered. "I'm guessing they'll split us up, send us to different squads. Right now he's debriefing Koneru, Darl, Coop, and Jade. He sent me to fetch you, since I was done with my story — wasn't much for me to tell."

"Where's—"

"Varith? She's already there. C'mon, hustle."

When they reached the bunk room, Eochaid's armor had been cleaned up and was waiting with a new uniform. He donned it and followed Holtz to the captain's office. As they jogged across the courtyard, Holtz asked, "So Varith. She a good fuck?"

Eochaid glared darkly.

“Sorry! Sorry! Just kidding. . .keep your knives sheathed. It ain’t my business. Got it!”

They arrived at the captain’s office. Captain Skywarder gestured to two empty chairs after Eochaid and Holtz saluted. Jadestone, Amra, Darl, Koneru, and Cooper were already seated.

“This attack changes things,” Skywarder began. “We need a lot more information on what the slitherin, and especially the twilight wardens, are doing. I’m particularly concerned about different broods working together, especially the Red Witches.”

I didn’t see any Red Witches there. What did I miss? Eochaid made a mental note to read up on the mysterious brood.

“You’re all good vigilants,” Skywarder continued. “I don’t want to lose any of you to a different company. We’re planning to field larger forces, and I need many more patrols to support them. You all worked well together, so the lot of you will form a new squad under Sergeant Nagel’s platoon. Nagel’s platoon is already big, so you’ll effectively report directly to me. Bride Lake’s sending relief troops when they can. We’ll likely restructure things when they arrive, but that won’t be for a while — probably summer.”

The knot in Eochaid’s belly shifted. The shadow that lay on him lifted at the hope of action.

“Vigilant Cooper, I need you to read up on stealth spells.”

“Not a problem,” Cooper replied. “Illusion magic is a specialty of mine. It’ll be nice to expand beyond evocation for a while.”

“Good.” Skywarder continued. “Now, for a squad leader. . .it’s a tougher call. Jadestone is the most experienced of you—”

Jadestone interrupted. “Don’t want it!”

“I thought that might be the case,” Skywarder replied.

Jadestone sat back in her seat as Skywarder continued. “Experience counts, but so does leadership. I know we have several other veterans on the squad. Who here is willing to step up?”

Eochaid considered. *Promotion might help me convince Mom to come to Vesh. But I haven’t earned it yet.*

A long moment passed. Darl and Koneru exchanged a glance, and Cooper looked nervously at Holtz.

Jadestone spoke up. “It should be Varith, sir.”

It was obvious. Eochaid was half surprised the suggestion hadn’t come from him.

“She was her squad’s corporal in training at Bride Lake,” he added.

Skywarder looked at the group. “Do the rest of you agree?”

Everyone nodded. Skywarder frowned, looking over the group. He pinched his lower lip.

“Vigilant Varith,” said Skywarder, “what do you say?”

Amra had been quiet up until that point. She had a small smile on her face as she nodded. “I would be honored.”

Skywarder considered Amra for a moment. “So be it. On a probationary basis for now. I’m trusting the incident last autumn is well behind us.”

“Yes, sir!” Amra sharply answered.

“Good. The squad will bunk in Koneru and Cooper’s barracks. I know three of you are already bunking together, but Cooper has the most to move. Faster and easier just to move you all in with him.”

“I appreciate that sir,” Cooper replied.

“Questions? No? Good. Corporal Varith, please stay for some further briefing. The rest of you are dismissed.”

Amra gave Eochaid a smirk and wave as he left the room. *She deserves it.*

• • •

Eochaid’s new squadmates went from bunkroom to bunkroom, collecting their things for the move into their new barracks.

Cooper summoned a magic floating disc that made the job much easier. It followed him around like a silent, invisible puppy, carrying their trunks. It seemed the fastidious and particular young wizard had some bit of magic to handle every drudgery. Other than his magic staff, he looked more like his fellow vigilants than like a typical wizard — no robes or pouches or pointed hat. He wore the standard vigil uniform and cloak, minus the usual armor.

Koneru, an elf like Jadestone, helped Eochaid pack his things. He was an archer, and well suited to that role. He was darker-skinned like Eochaid, with sharp eyes that missed little. He kept his long, dark hair in tight braids, and a feathery pattern of tattoos adorned his elongated ears.

“I didn’t know you were an archer, Lenahr,” Koneru remarked as Eochaid pulled his bow out from under his bunk.

Eochaid hadn’t so much as touched the bow in months. “I’m not. Not really. This was my father’s bow. I mean, I *can* shoot with one. But it’s not my preferred weapon.”

“Lenahr prefers knives,” joked Holtz. “He likes things close and personal.”

“That he does,” Amra agreed, as she and Holtz heaved her trunk onto Cooper’s magic disc.

Holtz chuckled.

Eochaid felt his cheeks burn. Jadestone’s face slackened, and distaste flickered at the corners of her mouth. The conversations of the others continued uninterrupted, little jokes and friendly observations.

Koneru said something to Jadestone in Elvish. She chuckled mirthlessly and pointed to Amra. Koneru asked another question. Jadestone muttered something longer in Elvish, and Koneru's eyes widened. He looked Eochaid up and down as they heaved Eochaid's trunk onto the disc next to Amra's.

"What?" Eochaid asked him.

"It seems you're a...man of surprises," Koneru observed.

The others left the room with Cooper's disc. Eochaid stayed behind to help Jadestone pack the last of her books. They worked in silence for a little while.

"What did Koneru ask you?" Eochaid asked.

She smiled. "He...he wanted to know if you were sleeping with Holtz or with Varith."

"What!?"

"The question is a little less...candid in Elvish."

He frowned.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Is your relationship with Varith a secret?"

He shook his head. "I guess not. But what was the second part?"

"He asked if I was sure. I told him how you almost gutted the prick in the great hall."

Eochaid blanched. Jadestone patted him on the shoulder. "This will be an interesting squad."

• • •

While each barracks room was similar, the small differences in the new room were just enough to ease Eochaid's melancholy. Cooper had roomed with another wizard. A sturdy bookshelf lined the far wall of the room, covered in scrolls, leather folios, glass retorts, and mysterious clay jars. The room had its own stove, the brickwork stained in odd colors and the metal blackened and pitted.

Beside the door, someone had roughly shaped the symbol of Tanil in a shallow alcove, and a hawk feather sat in an offering bowl. The stone around the symbol was darker where the clerics who'd also once shared the room had touched it on their way out. Their incense still lingered on the air, even though their equipment was packed away.

Darl took a bunk next to Cooper's that previously belonged to the deceased wizard. He happily conceded most of the shelves to Cooper, save for one nearest his bunk, where he put several books on slitherin and the other creatures of the marsh. Darl was in his early 30s and had broad shoulders and strong arms — and a crooked nose and teeth, likely earned in battle. Darl was the picture of what Eochaid, as a child, imagined a ranger would look like.

Koneru had moved to the bunk in the corner that had belonged to Brook, which had slightly more space. Eochaid and Jadestone took the bunks on the wall opposite from

the long bookshelf. Amra took the bunk kitty-corner from Eochaid, while Holtz took the last bunk nearest the doorway.

The room also had a small table, several chairs and stools, and a small writing desk between Holtz and Jadestone's bunks. With all its new occupants, the room was full, but not uncomfortably so.

"Vigilant Lenahr," Amra said once they'd settled in, "a word in private, please." Eochaid followed her outside and down the hall. As soon as they were out of sight, she pushed him up against the wall and kissed him.

"Amra, stop." He pushed her away and looked around to make sure they hadn't been seen.

"Why?" she asked, licking her lips. "I want to celebrate my promotion, and we're back on duty tomorrow."

"Your promotion is exactly why. You're my commander now. This is against the rules."

She snorted. "Don't be silly. You're a man. You can't 'coerce' a man!"

"I'm...I don't think you—" he stammered. *Can't you? Can you?* He shook his head. "Well, it's still against the rules for officers—"

"But I'm *not* an officer. I'm just a corporal. Not important enough to count."

"But it's still favoritism."

"Established relationship, then. We were already fucking before I was promoted — it *doesn't count*."

Fucking? Is that all this is? Eochaid's ears burned.

Amra sighed. "Fine. We'll keep it a secret then. I'm sure we can convince the rest of the squad not to tell anyone else. But right now, I want to celebrate. Find us one of those hidey places you know about."

Eochaid guided her reluctantly to the room where the blacksmith kept raw iron stock for weapons. The iron was cold to lie on, even through a blanket, and it was mustier than the storeroom, but fewer people knew about it.

We're both stalkers. We should be able to keep this quiet.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next morning Eochaid's new squad joined the regular patrol rotation, watching for slitherin in whatever area Skywarder assigned to them. For the most part, they operated on their own, trekking the marsh at night when the slitherin were most active. Vigil orders on scouting missions were to stay hidden, record enemy movement and numbers, and report their findings to Command. "Only engage the enemy if you're discovered, or if a low-risk opportunity presents itself," the marshal told the assembled vigil when he laid out his new strategy. "Your lives are valuable. Hit the enemy from cover, and don't be there when they retaliate."

Amra defined 'low risk' rather broadly, though, and found a lot of opportunities. The squad used its unusual mix of troops to full advantage, harassing enemy patrols at range, then picking them off when they tried to hunt down the archers. Cooper could use magic to misdirect the enemy, shielding his friends and exposing the enemy. Cooper's magic provided a massive advantage on the attack: Eochaid became accustomed to lying in wait, invisible, striking at foes from their flanks or rear. The shrewd mage even saved Eochaid's life.

That day, Skywarder came with them. They were clearing a patrol route where the slitherin had twice attacked other patrols, seeking out the raiders behind the attacks. When Holtz found the three Foamers in a camouflaged blind by the trail, he stayed watching them while Jadestone reported back to Amra. Skywarder waved Amra on, and she planned the attack.

"Lenahr and Jadestone will go out on each flank," she said. "The captain, Darl, and I will advance on Holtz's position. Koneru and Cooper will hold back just in sight of them and be ready to support us in case of surprises. We'll observe them in case this is a trap. If not, then when I signal the attack, Lenahr and Jade will move in close. Then they wait for us to move and jump them when they react."

Skywarder nodded his approval. "Let's give it a go."

Eochaid worked his way to his position and settled in to watch the targets. The three big ratmen were barely visible, leaves and moss covering them. They kept remarkably still. Eochaid, still as wood himself, lay and watched them for a long time, searching the area around them for any movement or sign of allies. There was nothing. The three rats were alone.

A marsh-bird call — Amra's signal to get ready. Very carefully, Eochaid slipped from his place and belly-crawled close enough to strike. He felt an insect caught up inside his shirt skitter its way out, and he waited for the attack.

An arrow hit one of the Foamers. Holtz and Darl popped out of the brush and charged, yelling and brandishing their blades.

The three Foamers stood and drew javelins, one lagging behind as it struggled with the arrow in its neck. Eochaid popped to his feet and saw Jadestone do the same. They had the enemy's back.

Someone called out nearby in a guttural, growling voice. Eochaid's muscles seized, locked in place like iron. He tried to advance, tried to raise his swords to strike, but couldn't. He could feel his limbs, but they ignored his will. His confusion lasted only a second. Something large approached behind him, splashing through the muck.

A wave seemed to wash over him, and his body was his again. "Lenahr!" he heard. "Run!" He glanced towards the shout. Cooper waved and pointed behind him. Eochaid dove forward on instinct, tucked and rolled and popped back to his feet. Just behind his hiding place, a hulking ratman wielding a greataxe recovered from a swing and charged towards Eochaid. Another of the burly Foamers followed it, and behind them he saw a small, black, wizened slitherin raising its hands and gesturing to cast a spell.

Eochaid dodged backwards through the reeds and scrub, putting distance and obstacles between himself and his pursuers. An arrow *thwipped* by him into one of the advancing slitherin. Holtz yelled something obscene at the same time as a ratman shrieked in incoherent pain. Then a tremendous roar ripped the air. "Mauler!" Skywarder yelled, and Eochaid glimpsed a massive, pale, hairless, lumpen figure bearing down on the others.

The spellcaster slitherin opened its palms at Eochaid. A shadow passed over him, blocking his sight, but in the same moment, Cooper called out an incantation too, and the darkness around him vanished. "Ha, you old hag!" Cooper shouted. "Try another one! I can turn back anything you've got!"

One of the big rats barreled through the brush at Eochaid, axe held high. *If I keep falling back*, he thought, *I'm going to lead these two right into Koneru and Coop*. He'd already moved behind the front line of the fight — he could see Amra's group engaged in melee with a towering nightmare, a ratman ten feet tall with spiked, armored fists the size of Eochaid's chest. Holtz staggered, one sword caught in the ribs of a fallen Foamer while he parried furiously with the other.

Crap. I'm the rearguard. He set his jaw, checked his footing, and raised his blades.

The first Foamer hacked at him. He beat the point back and countered, circled off to the side as the second tried to outmaneuver him. Then they both struck and he parried desperately. His off hand wasn't quite fast enough, and the heel of a heavy axe tore his gauntlet and wrenched his wrist. Clenching both swords, he dove and rolled clear, springing back to his feet and raising his blades again.

The two slitherin hissed to each other and spread out again. Eochaid maneuvered carefully, keeping himself out from between them, threatening them when they struck but staying on the defensive. Even in the chill swamp, the effort left sweat running down his neck.

Cooper and the slitherin spellcaster traded arcane attacks and counterattacks, flame and eldritch energy arcing. Eochaid caught glimpses of the others fighting hand to hand, but could spare little attention from dodging his snarling, powerful foes.

The Foamer on his right backed away from Eochaid. The other whirled its axe, driving him back. Eochaid adjusted his grip and prepared a counterattack. Koneru shouted a warning and Eochaid realized his position: His attacker was between him and Koneru and Cooper, and the other ratman was bearing down on them.

Eochaid feinted to the big Foamer's right. Then, as it raised its axe, he dove by its left hip so close that its tail brushed his shoulder on the way by. He charged across the soggy ground toward the back of the other ratman, leapt into the air, and sank a sword into its shoulder.

The Foamer yowled and swung its axe, slamming into Eochaid's chest and bowling him over. The beast had two arrows in its chest. Its comrade closed the distance as well, towering over Eochaid in the muck. Both readied their axes.

"Duck!" Cooper shouted in heavily accented Shelzari. The two ratmen half turned to face the mage. Eochaid submerged as far as he could in the mud. A concussion smacked his back, and he felt a flash of heat even through the wet and the weeds. Something heavy landed on him.

He clawed his way back to the surface and spat out a mouthful of mire. An awful burned smell displaced the odor of mud. He squirmed free and wiped his eyes. The two Foamers lay in the mud, charred and blasted.

Cooper grabbed his arm and helped him up. "Fireball," he said, and pressed a flask into Eochaid's hand. "Drink this and get back in there!"

Eochaid pulled the stopper from the little container and gulped it down. The grinding pain in his chest and arm subsided and some of his strength returned. He shook the mud from his swords, turned toward the fight, and advanced.

By the time the fight was over, they'd killed all the slitherin and not lost a single vigilant. Holtz posed on top of the massive, smoldering 'mauler,' to which he'd delivered the killing blow. The others laughed. Even Eochaid found the man's bravado almost amusing for once.

Skywarder whistled. "Time to move out. If these fellows have friends, let's avoid them." The squad formed up and slipped through the marsh back home.

"Very nicely done today, vigilants," Skywarder said as they reached the river outside Riverrock. "That was a well-sprung trap, but you pulled together and turned it back! I'm impressed, especially considering this squad has no healers."

Eochaid dropped back in the group to walk with Cooper. "Thank you," he said. The mage nodded. "Why'd you shout in Shelzari?"

Cooper smiled slyly. “Deduction,” he said. “You’re from New Venir, ergo you speak Shelzari or Zathiskian. The slitherin speak neither.”

“But not *all* Venirians speak Shelzari.”

Cooper chuckled. “That’s why I had the healing potion ready.”

• • •

Later that evening the group chatted in their barracks. Amra was off somewhere — Eochaid figured she was conferring with the captain. Cooper was already out cold, snoring quietly behind the privacy curtain around his bunk. The rest had gathered on the opposite side of the room, too physically tired from the long day for the noise and rowdiness of the great hall, but not tired enough to sleep.

“I had my doubts about hauling a wizard on reconnaissance,” Holtz was saying. “But Coop’s good. Quiet. Resourceful. Saved *your* ass, Lenahr.”

“He did,” Eochaid agreed.

Holtz grinned and poked Eochaid’s chair with his boot. “You got in over your head, huh?”

Eochaid nodded. “I did,” he sighed. He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

Holtz poked his chair again. “For someone so fast with a knife, you didn’t do so well when it came down to it.”

Eochaid fought an icy pang of anger. He felt his body loosening, preparing for a fight, the friendly tiredness of the day melting away. He took a deep breath to interrupt it.

“Stuff it, Holtz,” said Jadestone. “Remember, Lenahr isn’t even a year out of training at Bride Lake. The rest of us have far more experience.” She caught Eochaid’s eye. “You’ve done fine. I wouldn’t expect you to take on two Foamers by yourself.”

Eochaid recalled the fight, the two burly ratmen. He frowned. “What was that *other* thing? The mauler?”

“A twisted creation of the Red Witches, they think,” Darl answered. “From what little we’ve learned, they start as regular slitherin. The Witches feed them potions — titan’s blood, all manner of toxins like that. They grow so quickly they start to rupture. Priests cut the flesh to allow the bones and muscle to expand. That’s why it was covered in all the scars.”

“That’s horrific,” said Jadestone.

“I agree. Not sure how any of them survive the process. When it’s over, you have a monster that’s ferociously loyal to a single master, like a ten-foot hound. Likely the one we killed belonged to that Black Pelt sorceress we faced.”

“Wait — not a Red Witch?” Eochaid asked.

Darl shook his head. “No, that was definitely a Black Pelt. Only ever seen *one* in the marsh before, though, and his throat was already cut. Black Pelts and Red Witches *really* don’t like each other.”

“So, broods working together is unusual?” Eochaid asked.

“What we’ve seen lately? Damn right,” Darl answered. “The broods trade but they never mingle, unless they’re with the twilight wardens. I’ve been in the Marsh nearly ten years and I can count on one hand the times I’ve seen more than two broods work together.”

The door to the bunk room opened. Amra entered carrying a small crate. She nudged the door shut with her foot and carried the crate over to the table near the stove. There, she opened the little box and set out vials of liquid and jars of powder. She produced a metal pot and poured one of the vials into it. A heavy, gluey odor filled the room.

“What have you got there?” Jadestone asked.

Amra opened one of the powders, spooning some into the pot as well. “Making lacquer.”

“Lacquer?”

“I was disarmed today,” Amra grumbled. “Thing would have had me if the captain hadn’t stepped in. I refuse to be weaponless again. They have claws, so I will too.”

Jadestone raised an eyebrow, considered, and then got up to join Amra. “What are you using? They’ll need to be quite hard, but I’d bet we can make them pretty, too.”

Amra glanced up and smiled tentatively. “Thank you.” Jadestone pulled up a chair, and the two chatted quietly about resins, varnishes, and pigments.

“That’s very...courtly of them,” Darl mumbled.

Eochaid shrugged. “I’d love a way to have a weapon ready at any time.”

“With your temper?” Holtz scoffed.

“Easy, Holtz,” Darl interjected.

“Hey, I killed a maunder today! I think I have a right to—”

“Helped kill,” Darl clarified. “And hush, you’ll wake up Coop.”

“Fine,” Holtz grumbled. “I’m hitting the sack.”

Eochaid and the other men went to their respective bunks. From his bunk, Eochaid watched Jadestone and Amra carefully brush clear varnish onto her fingernails.

“Are you sure you don’t want magenta?” Jadestone asked. “It’s the Shelzari style.”

Amra shook her head. “Maybe after I grow them out longer. Blood red claws.” She laughed quietly. “I’ll need red leather armor to go with them.”

“I was thinking more with a gown. But sure, red leather. That works, too.”

Amra glanced over at Eochaid, lamplight softening her face. “Do you want to see me in a gown?” she asked him.

He smiled. “Sure. You’d look lovely in a gown. Magenta, or green, like your eyes.”

“Huh,” she grunted, and went back to focusing on her nails.

Jadestone studied the two vigilants.

“What?” Amra asked impatiently. She waved at the other vigilant and held out her hand, its nails dry.

Jadestone smiled half a smile, then applied another layer of lacquer. “Just picturing you in green, with Lenahr in blue. You’d look very handsome together.”

Amra coughed out a single laugh.

Eochaid lay back on his bunk, imagining what it would be like: him and Amra dressed up like nobles, among the dancers in a stately ballroom. Beyond his wildest hopes, but a pleasant fantasy to carry him into sleep.

• • •

The next day Captain Skywarder brought the squad before Marshal Silverblade. Eochaid and the others stood at attention. The marshal considered them from behind his desk.

“Skywarder and I discussed your achievement yesterday. Well done. Your performance has led me to a change in our strategy.

“Our patrols observe and avoid combat because they’re small,” Silverblade continued. “But your squad fights the way I’d actually prefer to. You draw out the enemy, sound out their forces, hit and run, pick off stragglers and scouts. Well, I’m authorizing it officially.

“You’re now the hidden blade among our scouts. Keep observing, but strike targets of opportunity as well. Do not engage *large* raiding groups, but hound the smaller ones. The slitherin aren’t the only ones who can play dirty tricks.”

“Yes, sir!” Amra saluted, and the rest of the squad snapped their heels.

“Any questions?” the marshal asked.

Holtz raised his hand. “Sir, does that make us a kill squad?”

“Not exactly,” the marshal replied. “But you’re the only squad in Skywarder’s company whose mission specifically involves killing and intimidating the enemy. You are there to make sure the slitherin respect and fear our scouts.”

“Yes sir!” said Holtz, giving a sharp salute.

The marshal clapped Skywarder on the back. “You’ve got a good group here, Langold. I’m interested to see what they’re capable of.”

Skywarder grinned boyishly. “Me too, sir.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Over the next two months the squad developed their new routine. Skywarder would set their patrol area. They'd explore the region as stealthily as possible, often staying in the field for multiple days. Cooper would create a camouflaged magic shelter to rest in on longer trips — just a bubble of force, but still enough to keep the weather out.

They hunted for slitherin, always observing and reporting, but striking as often as they could find an advantage through numbers or strategy. The early spring was a time of good hunting for Eochaid, stalking the nights and killing unseen. Each battle, Amra found new ways to surprise and strike fear into the ratmen. Darl and Jadestone, with their longer experience in the field, helped Eochaid refine his techniques, and Darl's collection of books fed his knowledge of all things slitherin.

But then the flow of enemy patrols and fighters dwindled and entirely stopped. The squad spent the better part of two weeks in the field without seeing more than a few hunting groups.

"This is ridiculous," moaned Holtz as they returned to the barracks. "Four days in the marsh, and the only thing we have to report about is a bunch of teenage ratmen chasing around a mire wyrm in heat."

"It *was* ridiculous," laughed Jadestone. "I mean, did you see those rats piss themselves when the second mire wyrm showed up?"

"It's mating season, right? What did they expect?" Amra chuckled.

"I'm not saying—" Holtz interrupted.

"Rite of passage," Darl commented. "Groups of adolescent Foamers fight mire wyrms to prove themselves as adults. Pregnant mire wyrms in particular — considered a delicacy."

"Wait," said Eochaid. "You said it was in heat."

"Oh, she was," said Darl. "But the second one was pregnant — you can tell by the stripes. Probably the first one's mate. Those young Foamer idiots didn't bother to check."

"Wait, they were *both* female?" Eochaid asked, confused.

"Oh yes, mire wyrms are hermaphroditic." Cooper explained. "They'll both be pregnant. A few weeks from now *hundreds* of baby mire wyrms will be born and wiggle their way into the marsh."

Jadestone nodded sagely. “Yes. Always, *always* check your boots when you sleep in the field during mire wymn season.”

“Who cares?” lamented Holtz, as he flopped down on his bunk. “We haven’t had any excitement for weeks. It’s like the slitherin went back into ‘hibernation’ or whatever the fuck it is they do during the winter.”

Eochaid shrugged. “Maybe the slitherin are fighting someone else? The slime reavers. Or the...what are they called...the skeins?”

“What are you *complaining* for, Holtz?” Koneru snapped at Holtz. “I’m happy the murderous vermin are staying in their holes!”

Holtz popped to his feet. “I’m going to ask around the other patrols. Find out where there’s some action.” He stormed out of the barracks, set on his new task.

“Any excuse to drink,” Jadestone observed.

• • •

Eochaid heard Holtz through the door while he and Amra were still in the hallway, his tone peevish and impatient. “Why’d *he* have to come back?” Eochaid muttered. “I was actually having a pleasant night.”

Amra shrugged, straightened her shirt, and opened the barracks door. Holtz paced by the table. Jadestone sat on her bunk, studiously ignoring him, nose in a book. The rest of the squad, Eochaid observed, had sensibly gone elsewhere.

“There you are! Where have you two been?” Holtz barked. “And why didn’t you invite me?”

Eochaid glared at him.

“Forget it. Just look at this!” Holtz gestured to a map on the table. Amra went over for a closer look.

Eochaid sat by Jadestone, who was quietly reading on her bunk. “He’s been like this for nearly an hour,” she muttered to Eochaid. “I hope you two can calm him down. It’s impossible to read, and I’m just at the good part.”

“It’s a map of the marshes,” Amra said, glancing at Holtz. “And...?”

“I asked around,” Holtz explained. “Look where the other patrols went this week — here, here, and...here,” he said, dragging his finger across the map.

“Yes, and we’ve been over here and here,” she said, pointing to another area. “So what? Patrols cover different areas. That’s the entire *point* of patrolling.”

Holtz continued to rant. “And why are the others out *constantly* when we’re sitting here back at base a third of the time?”

Jadestone rubbed her forehead. “He’s waiting for the other patrols to see movement, something for us to—”

“But they *saw* movement!” he said excitedly. “All sorts of slitherin! Multiple broods, working together. Practically an army out there. While *we’ve* seen crap! Why aren’t we being *sent* to those areas? We’re the strike squad. We could *do* something about it. The other patrols are just *observing*. Why post us in the dead zones?”

“Maybe Skywarder doesn’t think they’re so dead,” Eochaid suggested. “Maybe he’s gotten word something’s coming. I mean, he has other sources....”

“Meaning what?” Holtz asked.

“Other patrols. From other companies in the vigil,” Eochaid said. “Or spies or something.”

“What in Chardun’s Hell are you talking about, Lenahr? There are no ‘other patrols’ in the vigil. There’s us, and Skywarder’s other squads, who I just *spoke* with. The other companies are for fighting, or logistics, or guarding the border against raiders. We’re the only ones who scout out troop movements.”

“Yeah, Lenahr, what are you talking about?” Amra asked, crossing her arms and cocking her head.

Eochaid felt their eyes bore into him. His mouth felt suddenly dry, and something shifted in his belly. He looked down for a moment to collect his thoughts. “A dead drop. Skywarder had a secret cache in the marsh. For messages.”

Holtz leaned in close. “Cache? Messages from who?”

Jadestone put her book down. “The vigil doesn’t use message drops. Too much risk of enemies finding them and breaking a code.” She put a hand on Eochaid’s arm. “Lenahr, what did you see?”

Eochaid took a deep breath and explained. “A few months ago, Skywarder took me out on a patrol. Just the two of us, to talk.” He looked up at Holtz. “It was the day after our...confrontation in the great hall.”

Holtz grunted, but gestured for Eochaid to continue.

“We talked...about a lot of things. But on our way back to the fort Skywarder detoured us through some old ruins. He asked me to stay back and keep watch, but I followed him.”

Amra raised an eyebrow at him. “Of course you did.”

“I just wanted to make sure he would be okay. ‘Don’t hunt alone.’”

Amra nodded grimly.

“He dug through a rock pile and pulled out a message tube.”

“Did he see you?” Amra asked. “Does he know that you saw him do it?”

Eochaid shook his head. “No. No, he didn’t see me.”

Amra looked stunned. She snorted out a humorless laugh, and sat down hard on the next bunk over, lost in thought.

How did I not think it was strange? Eochaid thought.

Holtz slapped the table. “He’s a spy,” he said, “A fucking rat spy.”

Eochaid's face flushed. "No, I just said, he's *got* a spy—"

Amra shook her head. "Odds of us placing a spy among the slitherin are about as high as—"

"...the slitherin finding someone to spy on us," Jadestone said, finishing the thought. "No. No way. There is *no way* that Skywarder is a spy for the slitherin. He's the *best* of us."

Holtz got up and started pacing. "But he's up to *something*."

"Maybe," said Amra. "Maybe not. Lenahr might actually be right. Or it could also be something innocuous. Or completely unrelated to the slitherin."

Holtz threw his hands in the air. Jadestone opened her mouth to speak. Eochaid's stomach churned.

"*But until we know for sure*," Amra interjected, "we shouldn't do *anything*, because Jade is right. Skywarder is the best of us. And we don't want to drag him through the mud if he's done nothing wrong."

Holtz stopped pacing and turned to face them. "We can't just do nothing."

Amra shook her head. "We *don't* do nothing. We look for evidence. Proof that Skywarder is up to something, or that clears his name. Would that satisfy you, Holtz?"

The tall scout's jaw worked as he considered. Then he nodded.

She turned to Eochaid. "Lenahr, does anyone other than the four of us know about this message cache thing?"

Eochaid shook his head. "I haven't mentioned what I saw to anyone else, if that's what you mean."

Amra nodded, "Good. Okay, then we keep this between the four of us for now until we know more."

"And then what?" Jadestone asked.

"I guess it depends on what we find out," Amra answered. "So, do we agree?"

Jadestone nodded immediately.

Amra looked at Holtz. "Yeah," he grumbled. "But just until we know more."

"Lenahr?" Amra asked.

"I agree with you," he said. *I need to fix this.*

Holtz turned to Amra. "So how *do* we find out more?"

Amra thought for a moment, then smiled. "We search the captain's office."

"Uh uh," Jadestone interjected. "I am *not* searching the captain's office. I won't tell anyone about this, at least until we know more, but I'm not digging around in the man's private files."

Amra looked at Eochaid. He sighed. "I don't like the idea, but yeah, I'll help."

"Good, because after Jade, you're the stealthiest one of us."

Eochaid blinked. “I am?”

Holtz snorted. “Lenahr, you’re like a fucking shadow. I forget you’re in the *room* half the time.”

• • •

Eochaid and Amra waited until after dinner to approach Skywarder’s office. Amra convinced Holtz to stay behind — less suspicious if they were noticed.

The hallway outside the captain’s office was empty. “You wait here,” Amra directed. “What if someone sees me?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. Tell them you’re waiting for somebody. But give me a whistle if someone does come, twice if it’s Skywarder.”

Amra slipped into Skywarder’s office and closed the door behind her.

Eochaid felt very exposed. There wasn’t anywhere particularly good to hide, just a few dimmer areas in the overlapping torchlight. It seemed absurd even to try. *Sometimes the best hiding place is right in plain sight.* He leaned against the wall outside of the captain’s office, trying to look like he belonged there.

Distant footsteps sounded on the stairs. They came nearer, down the passage toward the office.

Eochaid whistled casually. Captain Skywarder walked around the corner.

“Lenahr! What are you doing here so late?”

Eochaid straightened. “I wanted to talk to...you, sir.”

“Oh? What about?” The captain started towards the door of his office.

Eochaid stepped in front of him. “Not here, sir!”

“Not here?”

“The topic is...personal. I’d rather talk somewhere more informal.”

Skywarder paused and turned to face him.

“Your office is...kind of for orders and reprimands, sir.”

Skywarder laughed. “I see. Yes, alright, I understand. Somewhere more informal....” He considered for a moment. “How about we take a walk on the wall?”

“Yes. That would be perfect, sir.”

As they stepped away from the office door, Eochaid fought the urge to glance back. *I hope no one else comes down here while we’re gone.*

Skywarder interrupted his thoughts. “So what is it you want to talk about?”

Eochaid glanced around the hall, thinking, his mind still on Amra. “Relationships, sir.”

"Relationships? You know that isn't my strong suit," Skywarder replied, smiling. "Why not someone with more experience? Holtz, perhaps?"

"No sir! He's...part of the problem." Eochaid started to lead the captain back down the hallway towards the courtyard.

"Part of the...? Listen, Lenahr, I was joking about Holtz," said Skywarder. "But if he really is involved, I agree — we should talk."

Eochaid's thoughts raced as they walked in silence across the courtyard and up the stairs to the wall.

Now what in Madriel's Heaven would I need to talk to the captain about, alone, that involves relationships? And Holtz, of all people! He walked as slow as reasonably possible, buying time. But their destination arrived too quickly, and Eochaid had nothing of use.

Skywarder took a small stool and a crate from the tower's guard house. They walked down the battlements, out of earshot of the people on watch. As they sat, Eochaid looked up at the sky for inspiration. It was a mostly clear night, and the stars glittered above them.

Skywarder followed his gaze and smiled. "Lycæus the wolf," he pointed out. "And on its tail, Rukha the roc. It will be Enkilot in three days."

"Hard to keep track of the months out here." *I've been part the Veshian Vigil for well over a year!* "The only constellation I know on sight is Vespis."

"The bat. Your birth sign?"

Eochaid nodded. "It means I'm a light sleeper."

Skywarder chuckled. "More than that — it means you're most at home in the night. The most settled. The most alive."

Eochaid tilted his head. "Hard to believe that constellations less than a hundred and fifty years old can influence our lives that much."

"Easier to believe when you know it's the gods that hung them," Skywarder countered.

Eochaid shrugged.

"In any case," Skywarder continued, "we're not out here to chat about stars and theology." He looked at Eochaid expectantly.

Eochaid looked his hands. "Yes, sir. I'm just.... Now that's we're out here, I'm not sure where to...begin."

"Try the beginning."

Well, that should eat up some time. Um, how far back can I go? Hopefully far enough for Amra to finish her search. "I was betrothed back in Trela, where I grew up."

"A fiancée?" Skywarder sounded surprised.

Eochaid nodded. "We weren't quite out of our teens yet when we got engaged. Her name was Emily. She wanted to start a farm, have lots of babies. I wanted that too, or I

thought I did. But I wanted to do other things *first*. See some of the world. Some of the places the traders and traveling minstrels talked about.”

“And join the Veshian Vigil?” Skywarder asked.

Eochaid shook his head. “That was just a fantasy. Not part of any real plan. I just wanted to travel a *little* before settling down. To Shelzar. Or maybe just Femulyae. Or even Deriz — shit, I was twenty and hadn’t even seen our closest city. So I kept making excuses to put off the wedding. Eventually, she caved. She had family about twenty miles away, an aunt and some cousins. We visited them, spent a holiday there. But the place was no different. It was still just Trela — on a hill, instead of a river. Nothing new.

“We were there two, maybe three days. Then one afternoon I saw her in the barn with some boy. Friend of her cousin, I think.”

“You were jealous, then?” Skywarder asked.

Eochaid waved his hands. “That’s not it. Fidelity isn’t a *thing* in New Venir. You’re not expected to be faithful. There are pockets — a few people like my mother, some small villages — where the bond of marriage is still considered solitary. But in general, no one cares much as long as it’s clear who’s going to inherit what. So I couldn’t *be* jealous.

“But he was *hurting* her. He had her by the hair, had his hands all over her. I was furious. He was a good head taller than me, but I slammed him right up against the wall. I would have beaten the shit out of him if she hadn’t stopped me.

“She claimed it was just a mistake. We went back home to Trela, acted as if nothing happened. But she...lost interest in me. Stopped pressing me about setting a wedding date. Folks in town stopped asking me about it, even.

“My mother told me to break the engagement. To go to Vesh and follow my dreams. She said Em wasn’t good for me...”

“But?” prompted Skywarder.

“But I adored Em. She was soft and gentle. She smelled like winter candy and jasmine. Her skin was like sweet honey, her—”

Skywarder coughed. “I’m sure she was lovely.”

“Sorry, sir.” Eochaid put a hand to his forehead. “I’ve been reading a lot of Shelzari poetry recently.”

The captain sighed impatiently. “And so, what *happened* with Emily?”

“She eventually ended it. Went off with a miller’s son from Corwin, I think. Had a baby. Has another on the way...born by now, actually, if my mother’s last letter was accurate. I left for Vesh.”

“So, why is it Emily’s story you’re telling me? What does *she* have in common with Amra Varith?”

Eochaid suppressed a startled glance at the captain. *It's that obvious, isn't it?* He looked down at the stone under his feet and thought. "Nothing, really. Em was dark, while Amra's fair. Em was soft. Amra's hard. Amra's athletic, battle ready. Emily baked pastries."

"That's all superficial," Skywarder interrupted. "How they look, what they do. What are they both *like*? Is there nothing in common *there*?"

Eochaid thought. "They're both smart. Helpful. Driven. Moody. Sexy — sorry sir."

Skywarder waved him on.

"They're...both demanding. Irrational, sometimes. They both really like to be in charge. And neither of them..."

Neither of them is in love with me.

The thought stung more than he expected. Em never truly loved him — was never *in* love with him. *He* stayed for *her*, and only left when she pushed him away.

Amra kept her distance. She hadn't even implied that their relationship was more than casual. Eochaid knew that to expect more was foolish — she still loved Aronis. *Maybe that's why she's so angry all the time*, he thought. *She doesn't want me in his place...*

He realized Skywarder was talking.

"Relationships within the vigil happen. It's just a fact. Dedicating your life to the vigil is hard. People seek the comfort of others like themselves, and most aren't like me. I can see how unhealthy it would be to forbid attachments. I may not be interested, but give me some damn credit.

"But we do dangerous work. It takes its toll, in both heartache and blood. I see few couples that last, and devastation too many times."

"Like Belasius and Brook?" Eochaid asked.

"Just so. I worry about Belasius. She wants to go back in regular combat rotation, but I feel I should hold her back."

Skywarder sighed. Then he drummed his fingers on his knee. "If you want to pursue Varith, I could transfer you to a different squad if you'd like."

"What?" Eochaid shook his head. "No. That is...not now. Maybe after the relief troops arrive. I'm happy where I am, sir."

"But what about your situation with Varith? And what does it have to do with Holtz?"

"Holtz?" *Oh yeah, I forgot about that.* "Holtz just..." Eochaid wracked his brain. *Holtz just what?* "Holtz is flirting with Varith."

"So, jealousy then? You want to be with her before he steps in?"

Eochaid stood up and paced. "I already said, I don't *get* jealous. I pulled a knife on him because he was disrespectful. Amra — Varith — and I aren't like that."

Shit, he's going to figure out that we're already together if I keep talking. Hasn't Amra finished yet?

“So you *don't* want to pursue a romance with Varith?” Skywarder asked. “Lenahr, I think I’ve failed to understand your problem. I can’t help you unless I—”

Eochaid caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head slightly to look. Amra stood further down the wall, torchlight flickering across her face, looking out to the Marsh. *Praying again?*

Eochaid turned to the captain. “No, Sir. You’ve been quite helpful. Helped me get my thoughts in order. Get my head on straight. Thank you.” He shook the captain’s hand.

Skywarder looked up dubiously. “Glad I could be of help, I suppose.”

Eochaid saluted and jogged back to his barracks to wait.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Amra didn't come back right away. In the barracks, Eochaid tried to be patient. Holtz and Jadestone kept glancing his way, but the rest of the squad was back from their social time in the great hall. Eochaid pretended to read in his bunk but couldn't concentrate.

When Amra entered the room, he sat up expectantly and rushed across the room toward her. Koneru snickered. "You're like her lost puppy, Lenahr."

Eochaid ignored the archer, but Amra hissed at him. "Not here!" She dragged him out into the hallway.

"What happened? What did you find?" he whispered, once they were out of earshot of the squad.

"There's definitely something going on. We need to find somewhere to talk."

Holtz burst into the hallway. "Told 'em I had to take a piss," he explained.

Jadestone followed him a moment later, rolling her eyes. "The four of us skulking around together. That's not weird and suspicious at all."

"The storage room?" Eochaid suggested.

No one they passed took notice of them. The room was vacant when they reached it, and Holtz hung up the rag on the latch as he closed the thick door.

Jadestone and Holtz each sat on boxes, while Eochaid leaded up against the ladder that led up to the loft. Amra paced the small space, fidgeting.

"This is not the circumstances that I'd hoped to get any of you in here," Holtz joked, but his expression was serious. "Alright, Corporal. Out with it — what did you find?"

"Holtz, you were right," Amra began. "Captain Skywarder's interfering with the patrol assignments on purpose."

"For suspicious reasons, though?" Jadestone asked.

Amra pursed her lips. "I don't see how it could be anything else. He has the next four days of patrols planned and mapped. He's creating gaps in our lines, holes that we don't cover and paths where someone could travel."

Holtz growled. "He's setting up for an attack on the fort?"

"No, this is all out in the marsh to the west," Amra said. "The fort's well covered, but people could move through those marshes and we'd never know."

Eochaid saw his own queasiness reflected in Jadestone's face. Holtz had a wolfish glitter in his eyes and a suppressed smirk on his lips.

"How?" Jadestone asked. "He couldn't do this, not without—"

"The *marshal* signed off on it," Amra said. "I saw where he approved the orders. He's seen the maps and the plans. Whatever this is, he knows."

Jadestone frowned. "Well, so... it's legitimate then? He's acting under orders."

Holtz laughed. "You *stupid*—"

"*Holtz!*" Amra snapped. "We don't know, Jade, that's the problem. If it stopped at Skywarder, I'd have said 'Fair enough, it looks suspicious, and let's take it to the marshal.' But this goes further. I can't think why they'd hide a mission from us, but they might. At the same time, unless one of you has a connection to the home command, we no longer have someone we can safely *ask*."

Amra let her words hang in the air. Jadestone looked lost, her eyes unfocused, her fingers twisted together in her lap. Eochaid tried to imagine going before the home commander, standing in that sunlit office and making his allegations. The image was laughable.

"Our only hope," Amra said, "is to go to the rest of the command staff. But I'm not doing that without some hard evidence that this is treasonous, or at least criminal. And whether it is or not, I don't want us to spread this any further than we have to. Nobody outside our squad's to know about it." She swept each of them with her gaze.

"We're on our own with this."

• • •

The next day the squad set out for a round of patrols. After they reached their assigned region, Amra held a meeting with the full squad to explain the situation. "I don't like dragging all of you into this, but I don't think we can do what needs doing without you," she said, "especially Coop. I don't think we can find the answers we need without magic."

Cooper sat on his haunches, eyes closed, fingers tented, lost in thought.

"This seems so...unlikely," Koneru said. "I mean, *why* would they be doing whatever this is?"

"Unlikely or not, it's happening," Amra said.

Jadestone nodded. "We're doing this to figure it out," she said. "Trust me, Koneru, we're not all convinced Skywarder's the next Traitor. But if he's about to...I dunno, sell us out to smugglers or Blood Sea pirates, it shouldn't be hard to find out."

Darl grunted. "I can go along with that. We're vigilants — we have the discretion we do for a reason. And if we're being posted where there's no enemy, we're not wasting time in doing it."

Koneru sighed and shook his head. "Okay, if Darl's in, I'm in. But by Tanil's sacred fox, I hope you're wrong."

Amra smiled at Darl and Koneru, and even flicked a grateful glance at Jadestone. Then she knelt by Cooper.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. "I'll need toenails."

Eochaid blinked. "What?"

• • •

Scrying, Cooper revealed, was tricky business. The spells involved worked much more reliably on those known to the caster, and worked best when cast with some token of the subject, ideally a physical part.

"Nothing like an arm or leg," Cooper laughed. "Hair, fingernails. Even spit or tears, if they'd keep. Although I do wonder...how much more effective would it be with an actual limb or digit...?"

"Coop," Jadestone said, "Research on your own time."

Eochaid and the others scouted the immediate area, then set up a guard rotation. Cooper sat in his magical shelter with Amra to protect him and went to work with his spells.

The patrol produced nothing useful from either scouts or sorcery. On their return to Riverrock, Cooper submerged himself in books on divination, and Jadestone volunteered to obtain something of Skywarder's. The rest of the group found ways to distract themselves and keep clear of the bunk room — partly, Eochaid learned, because channeling arcane magic through one's body generated heat. When Cooper was testing his spells, the room quickly became stuffy and close.

Amra kept Eochaid busy. After their return, she rather lustily hauled him to one of their secret spaces within the fort. Once they were finished she spent half an hour talking excitedly about how to trace Skywarder's comings and goings from the fort. "I doubt we'll see anything useful while he's in the fort," she said, "and Coop's spells have limits. We have to catch him when he's meeting whoever he's working with."

"If he's meeting someone," Eochaid replied.

Amra laughed. "You're so trusting sometimes, Lenahr. It's what I love about you!"

Despite the mockery in her tone, his breath caught in his throat and he couldn't help but laugh along.

He kissed her.

"Wha...?" she said.

He kissed her again, rolling her back onto the makeshift bed.

“This is new,” she remarked, playfully.

• • •

It took two more days for Jadestone to complete her task. Amra sent the others to talk to anyone they knew in other companies, to seek out any unusual changes. Other than the marshal’s orders that combat forces travel and attack in larger groups, nobody had noticed much. The combat platoons were still going on regular missions against raiders on the border, and the rest of the fort ran much as it always had.

Only for Amra’s squad did it seem different. Eochaid would admit he had a poor sense of others’ moods, but even he felt the changes in rhythm and disposition in the bunk room. Conversations were terser. People fussed over small things. Those who drank did it with more abandon. And Holtz picked fights.

The worst was their second night back. Amra dragged Eochaid to the great hall for drinks. Mattock invited them to her table, and even found Eochaid a glass of Shelzari rum, cheap stuff but much more to his taste. Eochaid smiled as the burly woman talked about her war with a nest of mud wasps she’d stumbled on in the fort’s lumber stores.

Then an earthenware mug shattered a few tables away and Holtz’s voice cut the air. “Leave off her, old man — if she feels like fighting, let her fight!”

Eochaid turned on his bench. Holtz stood holding a broken crockery handle in his dripping fist, his other hand on Belasius’ shoulder. Balak, a look of shock on his face, sat next to her on her other side. Beer splattered on the floor, and a few droplets ran down Balak’s forehead into his bushy eyebrows.

Eochaid and Mattock both rose from the bench. When the powerful dwarf saw him stand, she nodded her determination, and they worked their way towards Holtz through the crowd.

Balak wiped his forehead with a callused finger. “Son, she’s not the first here to lose someone, and I can tell you—”

“When’s the last time *you* swung a sword, Balak? If I wanted to hear your bedtime stories I’d a joined your mop squad.”

Balak’s face turned purple. His knuckles were white where he held the edge of the table. Very slowly he rose to his feet. Eochaid and Mattock glanced at each other again and prepared to seize Holtz. Then Amra put her hands on their shoulders and stepped through between them.

“Holtz, *attention!*” she snapped. Holtz spun sloppily, saw her and opened his mouth again. She raised a hand. “Does Skywarder throwing you in the stockade help with *any* of our problems?”

Holtz froze. Then he looked around the hall. Every eye in the room was on the little group, and Eochaid saw no sympathy in them.

Holtz gave a pleading look to Amra. She didn't move, head erect, shoulders firm, and back rail-straight. Eochaid could feel the intensity of her gaze as if he'd been the one standing in front of her.

Holtz deflated visibly. He turned to Balak and bowed. "Sorry, sir. In my cups more than I thought." He dropped the broken handle and strode from the room.

Mattock breathed a sigh of relief. "Wasn't sure whose blood I'd be mopping up."

"Lenahr," Amra said, and jerked her head after Holtz's retreating back. "With me."

Holtz stamped across the courtyard to an archery target and punched it. Then he leaned against the curtain wall. They crossed the courtyard after him. At the low shed next to the targets, Amra said "Wait here. Make sure we have some privacy." Eochaid stood by the shed, watching the courtyard. Amra approached Holtz.

"What pissed you off so badly you drew the whole hall's attention to yourself?" she asked him.

The tall man shrugged. "Belasius. She wants her revenge, and they won't let her have it."

Amra cocked her head, hands on her hips.

"What?" said Holtz. "I understand how the fuck she feels. Ollander and I might not have, y'know, *loved* each other, but I'd crawl over this wall naked if I could lay hands on the rat that killed her!"

Amra nodded. "She was at the ambush?"

"Koneru said they nailed her to a tree. She died hanging there. Bleeding."

Amra bowed her head. "I remember her, from when we were checking for survivors."

"If Belasius wants to avenge her man," Holtz growled, "then they should let her. She's better than being stuck on Balak's invalid squad, just like Lenahr was."

Amra reached out, gripped his arm. "I'm not asking you to be calm, Holtz. *Stay* angry. But direct it where it belongs — at the enemy. You'll get your share of blood. Just trust me to tell you when and where, okay? Keep a clear head."

Holtz slumped, then nodded.

"Take a walk," Amra said. "Bank your fires a bit. Let me see what I can do for Belasius."

When Holtz returned to the barracks he was less boisterous, but Eochaid saw a worrisome intensity in his gaze and tried even harder to avoid his company.

• • •

Jadestone tossed a brown glass vial on Amra's bed.

"What's this?" Amra asked.

“Skywarder’s shaving water,” Jadestone said.

Amra’s jaw dropped.

Eochaid sat up on his bunk. “How in Chardun’s Hell did you get that?”

“Observation,” Jadestone replied. “It’s Taniday. He always trims up before he goes to the shrine. I lurked around his room and offered to dump his washbasin for him.” She tapped the vial with her finger. “Plenty of bristles in this.”

Amra picked up the vial and pocketed it. “Impressive, Jade,” she said. She smiled. “Don’t worry, this will soon be over.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Another fruitless patrol. Skywarder did nothing of interest no matter when Cooper observed him. He walked the marsh with his men, stared at his maps, and wrote reports of enemy strengths. He did not wander the marsh alone, or fire arrows with messages over the wall, or chortle over sacks of money and gems, much to Holtz' disappointment.

"We need to catch him at the right time," Cooper said. "It takes time and a lot of my energy to memorize and cast the spell, and I can only watch him a short time for each casting."

Jadestone frowned as she oiled her sword. "I'm not happy that Coop's replaced all his 'thunder and lightning' spells with this divination stuff," she muttered. "It's still mire wyrm mating season."

They returned to the fort again. Cooper locked himself in the bunkroom with his books to look for other spells and chased the others out if they made the slightest noise. Amra went off on some errand of her own, and Eochaid found himself wandering the deeper hallways of the fort and craving solitude.

He climbed to the wall in the evening. Birds followed the shifting winds inland from the distant sea, and yellow-green leaves budded on some of the sturdier trees. Someone laughed. Eochaid glanced back, and Skywarder was there, wearing the same disarming smile he almost always had.

"The wall's where we go to think, eh, Lenahr?" he said.

Eochaid saluted, then leaned on the battlements. "Cooper's, uh, in a mood, sir. He's studying some kind of spell and keeping the room to himself."

Skywarder smiled. "Your whole squad's been quite focused lately," he said. "Corporal Varith's brought you together better than I expected. I spoke to her today to compliment her on how she defused the situation with Holtz in the great hall."

Eochaid laughed nervously. "No knives pulled."

"I know you care for the corporal. It speaks well of her — and of you — that you're finding ways past this."

"Well, Holtz and I have come, uh, to an understanding. Sort of a truce," Eochaid stammered.

Skywarder's eyes crinkled. He hesitated. "Lenahr, I...well, I don't know that I actually *helped* you much the other night, but...it sounds as if you and Holtz are *working* together. Your squad's unified very well, under tough circumstances." He paused again, seemed to strain for words. Then he patted Eochaid's shoulder. "We've asked hard things of you. I'm hopeful that soon your loyalty and patience will be rewarded."

Skywarder nodded, almost to himself, and strode off and down the stairs, returning Eochaid to solitude. He struggled to grasp the meaning of the captain's words. *Did he just apologize?*

Eochaid, his head buzzing, looked for Amra but couldn't find her. He encountered Jadestone in Balak's workshop, chatting with Belasius and Mattock over their tools and sawdust.

"Hi, little man," Mattock called. "Looking for work to do? We'd love your company."

"I was actually hunting for Jade," Eochaid said.

"We were talking through some improvements we want made to our traps and defenses on the peninsula, but it's just spinning ideas," Mattock replied. "We can get into it properly with Balak later," she said, elbowing the elf, "with his chalkboard and a good bottle!"

Jadestone made an exaggerated face at Mattock. "Sure, Lenahr. I can leave this one to her woodcarving. Belasius, I'm sure it will work out."

Belasius waved over her shoulder as Eochaid and Jadestone left the room.

Eochaid tramped quickly down the hall to a storeroom and pulled Jadestone inside.

"What's this about?" the elf asked. "You look really confused."

"Skywarder spoke to me today."

Jadestone raised an eyebrow.

"He...well, it was really...good?" he said. "He said the squad was doing really well, and that he was glad Holtz and I aren't trying to kill each other, and...and then he...sort of apologized."

Jade shook her head. "He what? What for?"

"I don't really know," Eochaid said. "Maybe for the shit missions, I guess. He seemed kind of embarrassed."

Jade stared into the rafters as if she might find a hidden meaning there. "That doesn't sound like a man who's betraying his troops."

"It didn't, no."

She sighed. "Thanks, Lenahr." She took his hand and squeezed it. "I'm not sure what that means, but it...that was definitely important. Tell the others."

• • •

Eochaid went back to the wall, his head even fuller and more muddled than before. On the one hand, Skywarder did not act like a criminal or a traitor. *On the other*, he thought, *in all my time in the vigil I've never seen an officer look guilty about something.*

That was where Amra found him: looking at the marsh and wrestling with problems far bigger than himself.

"Hey, Lenahr." She leaned on the wall next to him, facing out towards the marsh. She laid her hand on the back of his, stroking it. "What's going on? I don't think I've ever seen you think that hard. Smoke's practically coming out of your ears."

He looked at her, then down at their hands. He took her hand between his. She tugged gently as if to pull away, then saw his face and squeezed instead. Her hand was warm and strong.

"Skywarder caught me up here on the wall, and I...feel like I shouldn't be talking to him," Eochaid admitted.

"Why not?"

Eochaid's face worked as he thought. "Well, he was acting really friendly, and I'm worried I'll give away what we're doing."

Amra laughed. She yanked her hand away and smacked him on the head. "Shit-brains, it's *great* if he's taking you into his confidence. I mean, yes, you might blurt something out, but if you keep your head straight and your mouth shut, there's nothing wrong with listening to him. Let *him* give away what he's up to."

She tented her fingers and walked a little circle on the battlements. "No, this could really help us. What exactly did he say?"

Eochaid recounted the conversation in full: Skywarder's earnestness, his compliments for Amra, his almost apologetic encouragement. Amra walked to and fro, listening, asking questions about the captain's demeanor, his phrasing. When Eochaid finished, she sat for a minute in a crenellation on the battlements, lost in thought.

• • •

Amra called a meeting that evening. The squad gathered outside the bunkroom, and Amra forced her way inside over Cooper's objections. "This is important," she announced. They piled inside and closed the door, taking chairs or sitting on their bunks.

Amra remained standing. "Today, Lenahr got us a vital piece of information," she said. Jadestone sat forward a little further on her bunk and smiled at Eochaid.

"Skywarder approached him today, acting very friendly," Amra continued. "He thinks we're a great team, that we're 'pulling together under tough circumstances.' I think he's right."

Holtz and Cooper laughed. Jadestone grimaced in annoyance, and Eochaid felt a moment of sympathy.

“No, he *is* right,” Amra declared confidently. “You’ve all worked at this like any combat mission, and it hasn’t been comfortable or easy for any of us.” She tapped the table for emphasis, her hardened nails clunking loudly against the wood. “But it’s what he said next that matters.”

Jadestone nodded.

“He told Lenahr that pretty soon, his *loyalty* would be rewarded,” Amra said. She scanned the room.

“Wait, so...it *is* a mission, then?” Koneru asked. “Something official?”

Amra shook her head. “We can’t be sure,” she said. “It’s equally possible he knows we’re smart and we’ve noticed, and he’s feeling us out to see if he can buy us off.”

Most of the room nodded. Jadestone’s face fell, but she said nothing.

Amra continued. “But this is still good news! We know three things now that we didn’t before. One, whether Skywarder is corrupt or not, he knows we’re a force to be reckoned with. Two, he wants us on his side. And three, whatever they’ve been preparing will happen *soon*.”

“That’s important,” she said, tapping the table for emphasis. “If it’s coming soon, whoever’s involved will be busier, and that gives Cooper a *much* better chance of catching them out. Then, one way or the other, we’ll know.”

• • •

They returned to the marsh, Cooper to spy and the rest to patrol and guard. Again, there were no sightings of slitherin, only regular marsh hazards — a pair of nesting spine lizards and an angler ooze. And again, Cooper saw nothing unusual in Skywarder’s behavior.

“His patrol is shadowing some slitherin hunters,” he reported when the squad rejoined him after their patrols. In the warming weather, the little shelter was hot and uncomfortably steamy due to Cooper’s magical exertions.

“So why don’t they attack?” asked Holtz.

“Civilians,” Cooper explained, sweat dripping from his nose. “They’re just hunters, not raiders or fighters. We can’t go attacking *every* slitherin in the marsh.”

“Well keep checking back,” Amra ordered, “in case he contacts one of those hunters.”

Cooper nodded, mopped his brow, and tidied up his scrying mirror and various spell components.

Jadestone sighed heavily and shook her head.

Amra pivoted towards the sound. “It’s okay, Jade — we’ll catch him soon.”

Jadestone frowned. “No,” she said. “I... Corporal Varith, when are we *done* with this?”

Amra’s hands went to her hips. “When we find the evidence of what Skywarder’s up to.”

“That’s not how this started,” the elf replied. “We were afraid he was a turncoat or a criminal, and though it looked unlikely, we *all* decided to look for proof.”

“We’ve found proof, Jade,” Amra replied.

“No!” Jadestone insisted. “We haven’t. It’s been *weeks*. We know he’s up to something, but you haven’t uncovered *anything* that says he’s violating orders or endangering the vigil.”

“We haven’t proven he’s innocent, either!” Amra shouted.

The sound echoed off the trees. The other vigilants stopped, faces turned instinctively towards the noise, then glanced outward, scanning the marsh for movement.

Jadestone’s face went flat. “I’ll go scout our boundaries,” she said. She grabbed her weapons and strode off.

Jadestone stayed out of Amra’s way for the rest of the mission. Amra spent most of that night talking to the others, encouraging them to be patient, reminding them of all the evidence against Skywarder.

They marched home in uncomfortable silence.

• • •

The morning after their return, Jadestone emptied her bunk and packed her gear.

“What in Chardun’s Hell is this?” Amra asked.

“I’m leaving,” Jadestone said. “Joining Balak’s squad for now. I know they’re planning to give you Belasius anyhow, so it won’t endanger the squad — I wouldn’t do that. And I won’t say a word about...about what we’ve been up to. But you’re wrong about Skywarder, and I’m done with it.”

She grabbed her trunk and left.

Belasius moved into the bunk at lunchtime, and the squad celebrated her arrival in the great hall that night. Eochaid had the barracks to himself, reading on his bunk alone, the room completely quiet.

• • •

“Should have warned you first, Lenahr,” Jadestone said. “Sorry.”

She dug into a clump of brush and drove a small enchanted spike in among the roots. Balak’s squad was repairing and strengthening the defensive network of traps and barricades that guarded the spur of land below the fort. With Skywarder gone on patrol, Amra’s squad had no mission beyond the regular business of keeping up the fort. Eochaid had drawn guard duty for the day, and Balak didn’t object when he offered to walk the area with Jadestone as she placed and checked on traps and alarms.

“No, I get it,” Eochaid said. “You haven’t been happy in a while. Probably hard reporting to someone so young.”

Jadestone laughed as she straightened and grabbed her bag of tools. “I’m an *elf*, Lenahr,” she chuckled. “You’re *all* young. Even Koneru’s younger than me by a good decade or so.”

The sun warmed what it touched, and though the mud smelled worse the brightness was welcome. Still, Eochaid felt a weight in his chest.

“Amra’s past it,” he said. “Belasius is a good fit with the rest of the squad. I wish you hadn’t had to leave, though. I feel like the only one who reads now — for fun, anyhow.”

“Borrow my books any time you like, Lenahr.”

“Thanks. Have you finished *The Purple Meadow* yet?”

Jadestone nodded. “It’s by my old bunk. Just grab it.”

Eochaid smiled wryly. “Thanks.” He took a deep breath and searched for a way to explain his frustration. “Amra’s still hunting for evidence, and I can’t really help her. So when I’m not on duty it’s just me in the barracks. And Cooper, usually, but he only talks to himself.”

Jadestone hesitated. Concern clouded her face. “You know, Lenahr, you don’t *have* to stay on her squad,” she said. “If you joined one of the fighting platoons you’d see more action, and things with Amra might even get easier, since you wouldn’t be under her command.”

“No,” Eochaid replied. “Amra needs me. I’m really glad she’s taken to command so well, but...she needs me at her back.”

They chatted and walked. Jadestone cleaned and reset several old snares and placed a few more new alarms. Eochaid watched around them for movement or threats, the bow in his hands both familiar and uncomfortable.

A loud, metallic *snap* cut through the air. Eochaid raised his bow. Jadestone pointed towards the riverbank. “Snare, I think,” she muttered. “Probably animals, but good to be careful.”

She drew her dagger and they crept towards the water. A gnarled, fallen trunk dangled over the edge, and the sunken stones of a jetty or dock churned the greasy water below it. Jadestone craned her neck and pointed. Down in the shadows where the tree trunk gave cover from watchers on the fortress walls, a muddy, furry creature lay still, the gleam of metal at its throat.

Jadestone leaned down and lifted the head with her dagger: a rat the size of a cat, eyes bulging.

She laughed. “Told them these traps were a good idea,” she said. “These vermin steal eggs from the chicken coops, and they also carry disease.”

Jadestone studied the creature for a moment more, then pushed her dagger through the wire loop and levered it open. “The slitherin can even use spells to spy through—”

Snap.

“Aah! Oh, Tanil’s *tits* that hurts. Owwww!” A metal spike the size of a thick nail had speared the elf’s hand, its point protruding through the back of her heavy leather glove. Blood trickled down her wrist.

“Fuck!” Eochaid leaned in and grabbed the spike at its base, holding it down. “I’ll steady it. You pull loose.”

Jadestone pulled her hand off the spike with an agonized grunt and a scrape of bone on metal. “Filth-eating, dung-sucking rats!”

“Can you stand?” Eochaid asked. “Let’s get you to a medic.”

Jadestone nodded. She cradled her wounded hand against her chest and put a shaking hand on the tree, levering herself upright. But as she rose, her legs convulsed and she fell again.

“Jade!” Eochaid yelled. He dropped his bow and grabbed her, sitting her up.

A look of profound fear came over Jadestone’s features. Her whole body shook, and her mouth twisted in agony. “Lenahr, gods, I don’t...”

“*Healer!*” Eochaid screamed. He threw Jadestone’s arm across his shoulder, stood up and ran towards Balak and the others, hauling the elf with him. “*Balak! I need a healer right fucking now!*”

As Eochaid tore through the brush, fending away branches, he heard shouts from the squad ahead and answering calls from the fort. Jadestone croaked out a wordless cry of agony. Tremors continued to run down her body.

Balak reached him at a run. His face went ashen. “Fondra! Tell them it’s poison, boy!” he shouted behind him. “Tell them to hurry!” He grabbed Jadestone’s other arm and the trio ran towards the fort, heedless of the briars that tore at them and held them back.

Jadestone groaned, nearly dead weight between them.

“Gonna be right as rain, darlin’,” Balak panted. “Clerics are coming. You hold together, now.”

Eochaid glanced at the twitching elf. She’d lost her glove in the mad dash, and vicious purple welts had broken out all around the wound in her hand. The blood clotted even as it fell, dropping in clumps down Balak’s chest.

They reached the clear land between the traps and the fort. Small figures ran toward them from the gate, but Jadestone had begun to scream in unholy agony. She fumbled at her armor, trying vainly to pull it off.

“Lay her down,” Balak ordered. “The pain might kill her otherwise.”

They lay her on the ground. Eochaid ripped loose the straps of her cuirass. Her arm and shoulders were covered in green-purple bruises, as if she’d been beaten by giant fists. More welts were appearing, as if her skin itself was shedding.

Jadestone convulsed again. Her lips were dark and swollen, and her eyes wide.

“Jade!” Eochaid shouted. “They’re almost here!” He could hear shouts and pounding footsteps now coming down the slope.

Tears mingled with the sweat on Jadestone’s face. Her eyes locked on Eochaid’s. “Yes, Jade! Look at me! They’ll be here in—”

She choked out an agonized gurgling noise. A vessel ruptured in one of her eyes, a viscid purple-red filling the whites.

She lay still.

“Jade?”

Jadestone’s chest slowly sank, the air leaving quietly like a whisper.

A cleric bowled Eochaid out of the way and yelled an incantation, slamming his hand down on Jadestone’s chest. The body shook. That was all.

• • •

Eochaid sat in the infirmary, his hands shaking. They cleaned his cuts, especially any that might have touched blood or poison. His hands stung where thorns and brambles had stuck, then been ripped out in the run or cleaned out by the clerics afterward.

A cleric stayed in constant attendance while he and Balak were cleaned and bandaged, lest the poison strike again unexpectedly. Now Balak sat on his cot, eyes downcast, tears falling, looking truly old in a way Eochaid had never seen before. Jadestone’s corpse, under its sheet, lay on another cot. The marshal and several captains spoke quietly to the chief healer. Eochaid vaguely heard their conversation.

Punicius mortis, they’d called it. That was the poison. The deadliest poison known to the vigil. The work of slitherin. Inside the animal corpse in the snare was an intricate mechanism designed to trigger when the snare was released. Scouts had found slitherin footprints on the banks. The ratmen had known the traps would be emptied, had waited in hiding. Sprung one trap to set another.

It would be easy to take a sword and walk into the marsh. To find someone on whom to avenge her. But it wouldn’t serve. A corpse for a corpse? Not nearly enough. Payment for that final stare, those agonized cries? That would take far, far more. And he would exact it.

Amra had come, he thought. It was early on, when they’d been cleaning his wounds. He’d been screaming then. She was not here now.

The chief healer spoke to him. He turned and nodded as she did so. She gestured, said things, smiled sadly. He nodded some more. She touched his hands with her holy symbol. The stinging and aches there ceased. His hands felt numb and weak instead. She looked deeply into his eyes and said “Sleep.” He nodded again. Then he left and walked to his bunk room.

Nobody touched him as he walked, and very few even met his eyes. He pushed open the barracks door. Cooper called out to him. He didn’t answer. He fell into his bunk.

His eyes wouldn't close.

Cooper approached him, looked down, asked a question.

Eochaid tried to close his eyes again, but they stayed open and staring like—

Fine, he thought. *I can still sleep anyway*. And inside his head, he turned out the lights and slept.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Fingers snapped. A hand waved in front of Eochaid's face. Eochaid's hand whipped out and grabbed it, twisting the wrist.

"Ow! Hey, let go! It's just me," yelped a male voice.

"I warned you to be careful waking him," said Amra, from far away.

"He looked like he was already awake."

Eochaid blinked and shook his head. Koneru was leaning over him. The air in the room was stifling, the unearthly heat of a spellcaster laboring in an enclosed space for long hours. He let go of the archer's hand. "What?" he snarled.

Koneru massaged his wrist. "Cooper's found something."

Eochaid got up and followed Koneru across the room.

The rest of the squad was clustered around the table. Cooper's scrying mirror sat in the center. Figures moved in the glass and soft voices arose from it. Many times Eochaid had looked over Cooper's shoulder into the mirror to watch Skywarder, but this time was different. This time Skywarder was talking to a slitherin.

Belasius was carving a gouge into the end of the table with her knife. "Traitor," she hissed.

"Shush and listen," Amra whispered.

Eochaid squeezed in around the table between Holtz and Amra. Darl wedged a chair under the door latch and then joined Koneru at the other side. Cooper sat at the side opposite from Belasius, his hands resting on the edge of the mirror, concentrating. They all leaned in close to listen.

"You have cleared the route?" the slitherin was saying.

"We think so," Skywarder replied. "No hunters should find you. They're all off elsewhere."

"Good," hissed the slitherin. "We believe all who will come have now gathered. We march in the morning."

"Will there be more later?" Skywarder asked.

"Likely," the slitherin replied, "if things continue as they have been. There is too much unrest. The old ways are *kagbemeh*. We must do what we need to, to survive."

"I understand," Skywarder said, nodding. "Here, this may help."

The captain unslung a large pack from across his shoulders and handed it to the slitherin. The slitherin opened it to look inside, but the contents couldn't be seen through the scrying dish.

"Sorry," Cooper whispered. "I can't change the angle of the scrying sensor."

The slitherin finished pawing through the bag and then nodded. "Yes, this will do nicely. This will help very much. Thank you, captain."

"Certainly. If there's anything more that..."

The scrying mirror flickered and faded out to smoke, then returned to reflecting the barracks. Cooper gasped and then leaned back. "Sorry. The spell ran out."

"Then cast it again!" Holtz demanded.

Cooper sighed. Lines creased his face and heavy shadows darkened his eyes. "No good," he explained. "It takes an hour to cast — he'll certainly be done with the slitherin by then."

"I couldn't see much, but I think I recognize the location," said Darl. "The ruined wall they were standing beside, and those tree roots — I've been there before several times. It would make a good rendezvous location."

"How long would it take us to get there?" asked Amra.

"Six, maybe eight hours." Darl guessed.

"Good. We leave in ten minutes," Amra said.

"But what about our orders?" asked Koneru.

"Fuck orders," Eochaid growled, as he strapped on his swords.

"What is *kagbemeh*?" Belasius asked a few minutes later, as they stood by waiting for Cooper to finish packing up his things.

"Dunno," Darl replied.

Cooper looked up from his packing and shook his head.

"*Best*," Amra answered. "He said the old ways are best."

• • •

They crossed the marsh swiftly and silently. Eochaid marched next to Cooper. The mage panted for breath and stumbled as he tried to keep up.

"Rest on that rise," Amra said, and pointed to a brushy patch of rushes. "We can't have Coop fainting on us, and I need some time to think."

Amra struck off from the group when they reached the rise. When Eochaid followed, she waved him back. "Time to think *alone*, Lenahr. Go water the wizard."

Eochaid found Cooper gasping on a fallen log. Holtz was sitting next to him. "Bet you haven't marched this hard since training, Coop," Holtz said. "Not even time for me to scout ahead. Makes the back of my neck itch, but we gotta get there fast."

Eochaid handed Cooper a waterskin, which the wizard guzzled down. “You hanging in there, Coop?”

Cooper nodded. “I can usually keep up with you warrior types,” he wheezed, “but this last week I’ve been driving myself hard. The Dream Lord’s been calling me, and I’ve been ignoring him.”

“When this is over,” Eochaid said. “We’ll rest when it’s done.”

Cooper nodded. Eochaid turned to go, but the mage’s hand grasped his sleeve. “Listen, I, uh...keep thinking of what I might say about Jade that would, ah, help,” Cooper stammered. “Thinking and talking are what I do. But...I can’t. I...”

Eochaid nodded. “We’re *doing* the thing that will help.”

• • •

They reached their target, a sunken, ruined farm, after seven hours’ hard march. The tumbledown wall looked as it had in Cooper’s scrying pool, and fresh tracks — human and slitherin — crisscrossed the ground.

The sun had set several hours before, and Eochaid was grateful for the darkvision spell that Cooper cast on him, enabling him to see sixty feet ahead in the darkness. It made everything appear in shades of gray rather than color, but at least he didn’t stumble over every rock and root.

“Holtz, figure out which direction the rats took,” Amra ordered. “Darl, see if you can pick up Skywarder’s trail. Cooper, as soon as you can breathe again, I need to see what Skywarder’s up to. The rest of you, guard duty.”

Belasius and Koneru walked the edge of the camp, eyeing the brush. Eochaid helped Cooper set out his mirror and arrange the components for the spell, then watched over the wizard as he performed the ritual. Only a few minutes into the casting, Holtz jogged back into camp.

“Varith! I have news, and you’re not gonna like it,” the scout called.

“What’d you find?” Amra asked.

“I found tracks. More of them than I’ve ever seen. Horse-rat tracks, too, even a wagon or a siege engine, I think. All going in the same direction, and our little friend joined up with all that. Somewhere out there is a fucking *horde* of slitherin.”

Amra whistled under her breath. “Easy to follow, at least?”

“Short of another Blood Monsoon, yeah, easy to follow.”

“Right,” Amra said. “Cooper, not to distract you, but I need you to hurry.”

Ten minutes later, Darl slipped back into camp. “Skywarder’s path straightens out off that way,” the ranger said, gesturing into the darkness. “I followed it far enough to be sure.”

Amra nodded. “Now we need to see what he’s up to.”

• • •

The mirror flared to life in Cooper's hands. Amra stopped her pacing and leaned over the mage's shoulder, and the others gathered from their places around the camp's perimeter.

Skywarder addressed a group of men. Eochaid recognized both Skywarder's remaining platoon sergeants and several corporals from his other two platoons. They stood in a clearing, and Eochaid could hear the quiet voices and movement of a camp full of people.

"...standard camp discipline. We've got numbers," Skywarder said. "Any slitherin that enter the area will see that. It's possible they can mass enough warriors to attack us, but I doubt it."

"Gods," Eochaid murmured, "I think he has the whole company out there."

"Other than *us*," Amra replied.

They watched Skywarder walk among his troops, speaking friendly words to soldiers who worked at various camp chores.

"He's led them all out here," Holtz growled. "It's fucking Dark Motak all over again! We have to warn them!"

"They won't believe us," Amra said. "And he might have some way to warn that army of slitherin. No, we...there's only one sure way that we can protect them. We're going to trigger the trap."

"But we have to warn—" Koneru began.

"We *will* warn them," Amra interrupted. "But Skywarder's got them eating out of his hand. They need to *see* it. We'll send Lenahr to them — he's close to the captain. But the rest of us are going where the slitherin are. We have to hit them, and *hard*. Cooper, you still have a fireball ready, yes?"

Cooper nodded. "I do."

"That's our signal. You drop it in the middle of the slitherin troops. Skywarder's camp must be nearby. They'll hear it go off and see the flash. That's when Lenahr—"

"No," Eochaid said.

"—warns them of the attack. They'll know there's a fight on, and even if Skywarder tries to—"

"*No!*" Eochaid snapped. "I'm not your errand boy for this."

"Lenahr—"

"I agree with Lenahr," Darl said, "though I think he just wants in on the fight. This is about the company's trust, not the Captain's. We should send Koneru — *he's* the most convincing."

Holtz nodded. “Yeah, people actually *like* Koneru. Face it, ‘Corporal’ — you aren’t in a good position to order the rest of us *deserters* around right now. Lenahr wants to get his blades wet? He has every right.”

Amra narrowed her eyes towards Darl and Holtz, then spun to glare darkly at Eochaid. “Lenahr, with me,” she snarled. She dragged Eochaid away from the group.

Once they were out of earshot, she exploded at him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I’m staying with the squad,” Eochaid insisted.

“Don’t you get it?” she said, grabbing him by his collar. “This is probably a suicide mission, you oaf.” She stabbed her arm in the direction of Skywarder’s camp. “I’m sending you *away* to keep you *alive*!”

Eochaid nodded as he crossed his arms. “And I’m *staying* to keep *you* alive.”

“I don’t *need*—” Amra shouted, then clamped her mouth shut, glancing back at the squad.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. He watched her expression twist and change, her thoughts almost visible as she considered. Eventually she shook her head and smiled a bleak little smile.

“Fine,” she said, letting go of him. “Do what you want.”

Eochaid nodded quietly, and Amra led them back to the group.

“Koneru delivers the message,” she told the squad.

Koneru nodded. “I can convince them. And I’d like to see Skywarder’s face when it happens, I think.”

• • •

The squad split up, Koneru heading for the vigilant encampment. The rest waited for thirty minutes to give him time, and then headed out along the broad trail of the slitherin.

The slitherin camp was only ten minutes’ careful walking away, out in a broad stretch of flat, grassy marsh on the largest of several dry spots where the land rose just enough to clear the water. The vigilants crept close, Holtz probing ahead. They found a secure hiding spot in the grasses on a smaller hummock nearby, where they settled to plan. “There,” the scout said, and pointed into the scrub.

The marsh was quiet, and both moons were high and bright in the sky. Eochaid followed the scout’s finger. In the brush, a large, furry head rose. Big eyes flashed red in the moonlight. The creature *chuffed* once, its breath clouding the air.

“Horse-rat,” Holtz whispered.

As Eochaid studied, other details took shape through the tall grass. Scattered around the edge of the camp were guards stationed in the scrub. Over near the horse-rats were carts. Tents circled the dim glow of a carefully banked fire. And all over the area, clumps of furred figures with large ears dotted the marsh.

"Must be a hundred of them," Darl murmured.

"About seventy-five," Holtz replied.

"Twelve or so to one then, if your numbers are right," Cooper said.

Amra slid her blades silently out of their scabbards. "All right. Cooper turns Holtz and Lenahr invisible. He stays here, throwing ranged spells. Belasius, hide nearby with your bow. Darl, guard Cooper and have Belasius' back. Holtz goes up the left flank. I'll take the front. Eochaid, you're on the right flank. Cooper, give us two minutes and then burn the tents — that's where their leaders will be. When the fireball explodes, we all carve a swath through them."

A mad glint lit Amra's eyes in the moonglow. "These are bad odds," she said. "But if *we* do this, the rest have a chance. Sow as much confusion as you can to buy time for the company to reach us."

The others nodded grimly. "Fight smart, vigilants," Darl said.

"Make sure you kill your dozen before they bring you down," Belasius replied, with an icy smile.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eochaid, invisible, stood within arm's reach of the two slitherin guards, his blades drawn. It had been difficult to edge in so close, but worthwhile. He could see the gleam of their eyes, the twitching lines of their whiskers. He could *smell* them.

Unseen, his naked swords ready in his hands, he waited like death.

A hissing dot of bright light streaked in low over the trees and burst in the center of the camp with a *pfwoomph*. A concussive wave of air rattled Eochaid's ribs.

The slitherin turned to look at the bright light and explosion. Eochaid struck, driving one blade through the spine of the slitherin on his right, hamstringing the one on his left with a slash. Both dropped — the right one dead, the left one clutching its crippled leg and screaming. The scream mingled with the other cries and shouts rising amid the fire and chaos of the camp. Eochaid's invisibility had dissipated as soon as he swung his blades, and the survivor lashed at him from the ground with its scimitar. Eochaid dodged and attacked back, easily dispatching the creature on the ground. Blood pooled at his feet.

He ran towards the new fires blazing around the center of the camp, weaving through the brush. A slitherin with a spear in its hands ran past him, heading towards shouts and the clash of blades from the front of the camp. Eochaid turned, sprinted close behind, and jabbed it in the back. It fell and writhed.

More flares of magical battle-light flickered in the corner of his vision, but he ignored them. He turned and dashed into cover alongside a small tent. Someone fumbled with the tent flap, and Eochaid drove both swords through the canvas. A slitherin cried out and the fumbling ceased.

He slipped between two larger tents. Ahead, ratmen ran by, some holding weapons and others hauling pots of water. Another burning bead of light shot by, very close overhead. Then it burst directly in front of Eochaid.

His ears rang with the force of it. The tents he'd been sneaking between rippled, and the one on his right collapsed on its occupants, burning. He could see the center of the camp clearly through the gap: blasted bodies, a few still moving. A dog-sized dire rat shrieked and ran back and forth, lost and terrified.

He sprinted clear of the tangle of burning canvas, beating out a spark on his sleeve. From the other side of the remaining tent a muscular, hairy figure appeared. The ratman roared, raised its scimitar, and charged.

Eochaid parried and dodged. The creature was powerful, and each stroke rang through his blades and up his fingers. It attacked furiously, heedlessly, driving him back. Eochaid barely deflected the blows, turning clear hits into misses, and a killing strike into a graze across his ribs. Stroke after furious stroke, the creature bore down on him. “Filthy, lying, tailless *demons!*” it shrieked, in strangely-accented Veshian. “I knew, I *knew* you would come! Oath-breaking, poison-tongued—”

Eochaid saw the gap in the attacks. One sword deftly turned the falling scimitar aside enough for him to step inside the stroke. The other sword went into the creature’s ribs to the hilt.

It grunted, staggered around, and swung one more time. Eochaid opened its belly. “You shouldn’t have trusted a Traitor,” he said. He stepped over the body to the entrance of the tent.

With his left sword, he flipped back the door flap, stepping in with the same motion, his right sword outstretched. A spear thrust at him, and he beat it aside.

A scrawny, half-grown ratman held the spear in its hands, grunting and hissing and shaking the point at him. More red eyes glinted behind it in the shadows at the back of the tent. Eochaid chopped with his left blade, knocking the spear down and then outward. He stepped in along the haft and chopped the wielder across its shoulder and neck. It fell and lay still.

He recovered quickly, readying against the next attack, as his eyes adjusted again to the dim.

An older slitherin, a female, blocked his path. It was thin and sickly, its fur patchy in places. It held its arms wide, protecting four youngsters. One of them was screaming. The others hid their eyes and sobbed in tiny, piping voices.

The screaming youngster’s eyes locked on the fallen ratman on the floor. The body looked smaller at second glance, shorter than the spear itself. The pup shrieked the same word again and again at the bloody, torn corpse that lay across its spear. *A name.*

Eochaid turned, keeping a blade on the old slitherin and its children, and ducked out again into the fray and the noise.

Eochaid stood amid the fire and the bodies. The cold rage he had ridden all this way, the calm that steadied his sword hand and eased his decisions, had melted away. *That wasn’t a command tent.*

“Belasius, pull *back!* Belasius!” Darl’s voice cut through the fog in Eochaid’s head. He bolted toward the call, out of the tents and through the brush.

Down the slope toward the edge of the muck, Belasius hacked away at a fistful of slitherin and several dire rats. They snapped and slashed at her, encircling her as she pressed her attack. Darl was coming through the marsh toward her, shouting and firing arrows into the press.

Cooper stood a little behind Darl on a boulder. His darts of blue energy unerringly speared out and dropped one of Belasius' attackers.

Eochaid scanned the field, but Amra wasn't there. He scrambled his way down the slope towards Belasius.

She screamed and drove her longsword through the chest of the slitherin in front of her, but a dire rat caught her by the leg while she was overbalanced from the thrust and she went down.

Darl roared, threw his bow aside and charged. As he did, something huge lifted its bulging, distorted body from the muck, out of Darl's sight on his right-hand side.

"Mauler! Darl, *mauler!*" Eochaid shouted. The ranger glanced over his shoulder but kept hacking his way towards Belasius' fallen form, a desperate grimace on his face. The dripping mauler loped forward and bowled over several hairy figures in its path. The others scattered, shrieking. Darl turned, hauling at Belasius with one hand and threatening the mauler with his sword.

It raised a club-like fist as big as Darl's torso high in the moonlight and brought it down like a hammer. The big ranger dropped to his knees with a grunt, and the mauler seized him by the head.

Cooper launched a blazing arc of flame from his outstretched hands at the mauler's back. Eochaid circled in Cooper's direction, yelling incoherent abuse at the mauler as it raised the squirming Darl into the air.

Cooper was aiming a wand when the second mauler took him. His eyes caught Eochaid's for a split second, and then a massive hand snagged him by the pack and tossed him, spinning, high into the air. The mage shrieked as he rose, and continued as he fell somewhere out in the darkness beyond the firelight.

Eochaid turned and ran from the collapsing front line, back toward the left edge of the doomed camp. *Holtz! Please, Madriel, let Amra be safe with Holtz.* Behind him, bones splintered.

Eochaid ran. Ratmen crossed his path, but they ignored one another. The battle had lost all direction. The blaze of the tents lit the night sky. A horse-rat, free of its harness, scurried past him into the swamp, mewling pitifully deep in its throat. His lungs burned, and his breath came in ragged gasps, but he ran on.

"Varith!" *Holtz' voice!* Eochaid ducked around and over fallen tents, gasping for breath.

"Holtz," Amra called. "Why aren't you at the center of the camp?"

Eochaid came up against an overturned cart tangled in torn canvas and broken fencework. The voices were almost in front of him. Gasping, he fumbled for a way around.

"Varith, something here is fucked! Most of these guys aren't warriors! They have *kids* with them. Where are Coop and the others? We have to get out of here, figure out what—"

Eochaid scrambled breathlessly up the wreckage, on top of the ruined cart. Amra and Holtz glowed in the light of the spreading fires, only a dozen yards away. Holtz was

covered in blood and muck, both his blades red to the hilt. Amra's blades were sheathed. Eochaid leapt to the ground, staggering, desperate to catch his breath.

Amra raised a bare hand and slapped Holtz across the face.

The vigilant barked in pain and raised a shaking hand to his cheek. Deep gouges welled with fresh red droplets. "What in the blood-mired *fuck* was *that*?" Holtz snarled. He raised a fist. "We're gonna get somewhere safe, and then I'm gonna..." Holtz swayed, his fist dancing drunkenly. "Gonna..."

Amra flicked out her leg, the toe of her boot catching Holtz in the kneecap. He yelped, spun, and pitched over on the ground.

"Amra," Eochaid croaked, stumbling towards her.

"Safe? *Safe*?" Amra shrieked. She kicked Holtz in the ribs with each word. "You greedy, stupid prick! There's *no* 'safe!' The vigil's as rotten as Chern! It does *nothing* to protect people, just feeds us into this hellhole that the gods have *shit on* and lets the rats and wyrms and pestilence chew us up!"

Holtz twitched violently. He rolled on his back, arms raised against Amra as she danced around him, striking out with hard kicks wherever he let his guard down.

"*Amra!*" Eochaid grabbed at Amra, but she dodged back, aiming a slap at him.

"*No,*" she screamed. "Nobody lives, not him, not the rats, not *anyone*! I'll pile the corpses and shove them down Skywarder's throat, I'll make him shit bones! Show them how they ruined everything!"

"Amra! Maulers—"

A gurgling growl. Amra glanced up over Eochaid's shoulder. She smiled. "Yes," she said. "Yes! I want to see it!"

"*No!*" Eochaid gasped. He charged Amra, ducking her fists, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her along.

As they twisted around each other, he saw the mauler. A broken spear dangled from its back, and it dragged the haunch of a dead horse-rat in one gory paw. It sniffed the air as it advanced, raising the haunch like a club.

"*No,* I want to *see* it!" she snarled, thumping him on the back.

"*Lenahr!*" Holtz wheezed. The vigilant reached out weakly, red spittle on his lips.

"Amra, run!" Eochaid begged. "Holtz can't—"

"I have to see it. I *need* to see it!" Amra fought his grip. It took all his strength to drag her away.

Holtz's eyes grew desperate. "Lenahr! Gods and *goddesses*, Lenahr!" Weakly and clumsily he crawled away from the advancing horror, arms outstretched.

Heat filled Eochaid. His skin burned with it. If I let her go? *No, that thing will kill her. I can grab Holtz. She'll die — no, she'd stop me. We'd all die.*

His face was wet. He tasted salt on his lips. He shook his head, set his feet and dragged Amra back. Holtz howled, digging nerveless fingers into the slippery bank, rolling himself foot by foot away from the mauler.

The mauler shook its distended shoulders, dropped the bloody haunch, and grabbed Holtz by the leg, dragging him close.

Amra laughed. Eochaid kicked Amra's leg out from under her and dragged her behind him by her pack.

Holtz snarled. "Fuck—"

Wham.

Eochaid fought back a wave of bile. Amra was no longer fighting, which made her easier to drag. He slogged ahead over the hummocks of grass and through reeking pools. Behind him, the mauler growled and pounded something, but Holtz did not cry out again.

He could think of no way to gauge where would be safe, so when he could no longer smell the burning camp, Eochaid slung Amra down in a trench among the reeds. "Stay... down," he sobbed.

She smiled at him. "You've always been the only one I could rely on, Lenahr."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Eochaid could not tell how long they waited for Skywarder's forces to arrive. He lay still, listening for footsteps, for the heavy tread or snarls of a maunder. He could hear them stalking the camp: a roar, then slitherin screams, quickly cut off. He wondered how many of the ratmen lay as he did, in their own hiding places in the marsh.

Amra hadn't spoken since he found their hiding spot. She fidgeted quietly, washing the blood off her hands and nails in a pool of stagnant water.

He heard the arrows first, a barrage of them. He listened to the sounds of battle, vigilants shouting orders and maulers roaring and dying. He heard booted feet as men searched the camp, the voices of men and slitherin. He didn't move for several minutes, until he was certain the battle was truly over.

Then he stood up and reached out his hand to Amra. "Come on."

She grasped his hand, pulled herself up to stand next to him, and licked her lips. He tugged on her hand and she followed him obediently. Eochaid walked her back to the slitherin camp, not sure what to expect.

"Halt!" A vigilant, swords raised, advanced on him. Another aimed his bow at them over her shoulder. "Blades on the ground! Right now!" Eochaid unbuckled his belt and let it fall. Amra looked blankly at the nervous scout, then at Eochaid.

"I said blades on the ground!" the scout shouted.

"It's okay!" Eochaid called. "She's just... she's hurt." He reached out, pulled her swords from their scabbards and tossed them in the mud.

More vigilants swept in. They surrounded Eochaid and Amra. Powerful hands locked onto Eochaid's arms and marched them into the camp. Still Amra grasped his hand, and he squeezed hers in reassurance.

Slitherin and vigilants parted as they approached. Skywarder stood with a powerfully built slitherin. Much of the ratman's fur was singed, and his shoulders and back were red and raw. When they turned toward Eochaid and Amra, the slitherin's eyes burned red as well.

"That's him," the slitherin growled, pointing at Eochaid. "That's the monster that slaughtered Thex."

Another slitherin hissed and chirped, then fell to its knees on the torn earth. Eochaid recognized it — her — from the tent. The burned slitherin looked from her to Eochaid, shoulders shaking. “Nix says he also killed her son in cold blood.”

“Tie them up,” Skywarder ordered.

Eochaid let go of Amra’s hand. He made no objections as the scouts bound his arms behind him. Amra snarled at them as they bound her but didn’t fight back. Then their guards hauled them toward a campfire and pushed them down on their knees. Koneru already knelt there, his hands also tied.

Another vigilant, his clothes grimy and bloody, approached Skywarder and saluted. “We found the wizard’s body, sir,” the man said wearily. “It seems he was also killed by one of the maulers.”

Skywarder sighed, and his shoulders sagged. “That’s all of them,” he declared to the slitherin speaker.

“They were under *your* command,” the slitherin muttered, teeth clenched. “You said the vigilants would let us gather in peace. That you’d give us safe passage, so we could escape persecution. That your soldiers would protect us.”

“Yes.” Skywarder admitted. “They disobeyed orders. They will be punished.”

“My people *kill* those who disobey,” snapped the ratman.

“I remind you that those are the same people whom you are fleeing, whose ways you have disowned.”

The slitherin growled. It clenched and unclenched its fists, and its tail lashed back and forth.

“I take full responsibility for this,” Skywarder said, “and I will do whatever I must to make amends to you.”

“Sir!” Eochaid cried.

Skywarder glared down at him.

“Shut it, vigilant,” Skywarder snarled. “You will only speak when spoken to!”

Eochaid swallowed and nodded.

Skywarder strode over. His normal, cheerful demeanor was entirely gone. He was hard. His eyes squinted, his jaw rigid. His gaze flickered between Eochaid and Amra. “Where did the maulers come from? Tell me.”

Amra said nothing. Eochaid bit back his shame and met Skywarder’s eyes. “I’m not sure, sir. But we were careless. We traveled fast and didn’t hide our trail. They may have followed us.”

The slitherin speaker pounced towards Eochaid, snapping its teeth in his face, a sound in its throat escalating from a growl to a whine. Eochaid leaned back.

“Full responsibility,” Skywarder reminded the slitherin. “We will escort your people past the skeins’ territory, to the Sorporatra Swamp.”

“No.” The slitherin whirled to face Skywarder, its tail whipping behind it. “The Veshian Vigil has done *enough* this day. We will make our own way to the Walled Warren.”

“Please take our gear, food, and medical supplies, then.”

The ratman raised its head. It gazed out over the ruins of the camp. “Yes,” it agreed. “We will take your supplies.”

Eochaid, Amra, and Koneru knelt by the small, smoky fire pit until dawn. Skywarder worked out details with the slitherin. Their fellow vigilants righted overturned carts, collected food and medicine, and gathered bodies. The ratmen packed what remained of their encampment, bundling up the extra weapons, food, and healing potions provided by Skywarder.

At dawn, the slitherin headed south. Skywarder’s company headed back north.

Eochaid, Amra, and Koneru spent the entire journey bound like prisoners and forbidden to speak.

• • •

After the company arrived back at Riverrock, the guards escorted Eochaid down into the belly of the fortress. He saw them guide Amra into the infirmary. He didn’t see where Koneru’s guards led him. They brought Eochaid to an isolated cell, handed him a blanket, and locked the door. *Arcernoth Delta Standing Order Seven*, he heard Balak say in his head, *keep prisoners separate to prevent collusion and escapes, and to break spirits*.

Some time later, one of the clerics came and treated his injuries. Neither she nor the guards spoke a word. He sat alone again afterward, listening to the dull growl of the river through the stone.

He was too far down in the rock to hear the watch officers call out the hours. He watched the candles that lit the room burn down and listened to the shuffling in the hall as the guards changed shifts. Then the hallway door creaked open, and three vigilants bound his wrists and escorted him to the marshal’s office. Silverblade sat behind his heavy table with Skywarder and the other vigil officers. A single stool sat in the center of the vigil shield symbol carved into the floor.

Eochaid turned and looked for Amra or Koneru, but he was alone. The guards stood him by the stool and unbound him. He straightened himself and saluted. A steely-eyed older woman rose from her chair. Major Andel, Eochaid remembered. Among other duties, he knew she was responsible for discipline and courts martial for the vigil.

“Vigilant Lenahr,” Major Andel said, “recount for us the events, as you saw them, that led to your attack on the slitherin encampment.” She gestured to the carved symbol on the floor. “You cannot lie in this forum, so do not try.”

Once he began speaking, Eochaid found it hard to stop. He explained how he'd seen Skywarder collect the cache in the ruins in the marsh, and how they started scrying on him after they determined he'd been intentionally sending them to patrol dead zones. He explained how they saw Skywarder talking to a slitherin in the scrying mirror, how they had reached the conclusion that the captain was a traitor.

He explained how — not being sure who to trust, and believing they had little time — they took matters into their own hands and attacked the encampment to protect the rest of the company. He described their plan for the attack, and his part in things. He spoke with difficulty of his discovery in the tent, the rat-pups and the slitherin woman where there should have been officers, soldiers.

He described Belasius in her last stand, and Darl and Cooper. He talked about finding Amra, and rescuing her from the mauler, that in her madness he couldn't rescue her and Holtz both. That he'd made his choice, and Holtz had died.

Though he didn't spare himself, he found it impossible to do the same with Amra. He did not mention their physical relationship, did not name her specifically in the search of Skywarder's office. And particularly, he didn't tell them about Holtz' blood on her hand, about her kicking the man as he lay in the mud. He didn't repeat the treasonous words she'd screamed out, nor describe the hungry, lunatic joy in her eyes as he'd dragged her away. He could have spared her the madness if he hadn't deserted her in the marsh. At least now he would spare her the shame.

The officers listened intently. Major Andel asked clarifying questions, mostly about specific dates leading up to the strike on the encampment, and who in the squad was responsible for what. The marshal shook his head or growled under his breath. Skywarder grimaced several times, particularly when Eochaid talked about feeling useless on his patrols, and about the scryed conversation that convinced Eochaid he was a traitor. Every word seemed to carve a little piece off the man's soul.

Once he was finished, his guards brought him to a small empty office to wait. He stayed there for several hours, alone and silent except when the guard at the door offered some water. *Surprised they haven't taken my sustenance ring.*

While he waited, he thought about his deposition. It didn't look good for any of them, but even accounting for the things he skipped, it looked especially bad for Amra.

A guard opened the door and jerked his head for Eochaid to rise.

• • •

The lights in the marshal's office were lower, and the officers had gone about whatever other business they had. Only the marshal, Major Andel, and Skywarder sat at the table, faces blank and serious. Skywarder fiddled with something in his fingers and didn't meet Eochaid's eyes.

"Vigilant Lenahr," Major Andel began, "you are accused of disobeying a superior officer, spying on said officer, absenting yourself from the fort without leave from your commanding officer, and attacking an unlawful target."

Eochaid nodded.

“We understand these were special circumstances, and believe that, at least initially, your squad had the best intentions in mind. But the attack on the encampment went too far.”

“May I speak?” Eochaid asked.

The marshal looked at Marshal Silverblade, who nodded.

Eochaid drew himself to his full height and looked the marshal in the eyes. “I should have stopped her, sir.”

The marshal scowled, but Eochaid pressed on. “I knew Corporal Varith wasn’t acting right, wasn’t herself, even just after she made it here. Whatever the slitherin did when she was their prisoner broke her. I knew she was unstable and I should have told someone. The responsibility, the combat...it was all too much for her. She’s irrational, and...and vengeful. And I knew that. It was my fault, sir.”

“Lieutenant Skywarder disagrees,” said the marshal.

“Lieu-lieutenant?” Eochaid stammered. Skywarder nodded. Eochaid looked closer at the object in Skywarder’s fingers: his captain’s badge.

They took his command away! A pang struck Eochaid’s heart. Their mistake had been serious enough to cost Skywarder command of his troops. As a lieutenant, he might still have rank, but he’d oversee no soldiers of his own.

The marshal continued to speak. Eochaid steadied himself, blinked to clear the rushing of his blood from his ears.

“He expected you’d react this way, try to take the blame for Corporal Varith’s actions. Good-hearted, but foolish. I agree with you — Varith is unfit for combat. A shame, since she’s a clever tactician. We hope to find some desk duty for her in Vesh to harness her skills.

“As for you, Lenahr, you need discipline and common sense. You need a commanding officer who can focus and temper you. Normally I’d just assign you to a different platoon, but under the circumstances, we must appease this supposedly peaceful faction among the slitherin, who call themselves the Redeemed. We’re sending you back to home command to join a new vigil.”

“What?” Eochaid burst out.

The marshal glared at him. Eochaid snapped his mouth shut.

“You, Varith, and Koneru can no longer serve Arcernoth Delta,” the marshal explained. “Against...other allies, you’d spend several years in prison. If the Redeemed had their way, you’d be executed for what you did. Reassignment is the best I can offer you. As we see it, since you didn’t know about our alliance, your attack was a legitimate error of war. For that you’ll pay part of the cost of the supplies we provided the slitherin as a blood price. For willingly leaving your posts, you’ll be put on probation and retrain with your new vigil.”

The marshal leaned toward Andel, who was scribbling notes on parchment as he spoke, and laid his hand on hers. She set her quill aside.

Marshal Silverblade looked up and studied Eochaid sadly. “I see your passion for the marshes, son. We’re a rare breed who can tough it out here. You’re a good ranger, a good stalker. You’re just a bit reckless. So was I when I first swore my oath.

“I can’t fault you one whit for going after the slitherin. If I’d seen what you saw, I’d have thought the same. This alliance with the rats sticks in my craw, but it’s the wisest choice for the vigil and Vesh. There’s just too many of them. If some of them turn to Tanil, or Denev, or even Vangal the Reaver, we’ll take them.

“Concealing the alliance was *my* mistake. I chose to direct your strike squad elsewhere so you would not engage the Redeemed, rather than tell you the plan. I worried that I’d have a vigilant uprising on my hands, and... seems I was right to worry. But it was still a grave error. The secret is out now, and all of Arcernoth’s faith is shaken besides. That’s my mess to clean up, and... I hate, truly *hate* making you all the scapegoats. A commander should pay for his own errors.”

Andel and Skywarder sat silently, but their faces were pale.

“No, sir,” said Eochaid. “You and Skywarder trusted us and we failed you. We should have gone to the command staff once we’d scryed the evidence.”

Marshal Silverblade smiled humorlessly. “Indeed. And *that’s* why you’re paying a fine and going on probation.”

Silverblade nodded to Andel, who picked up her pen. “Vigilant Lenahr, you are dismissed on your own recognizance, but you are *not* to step one inch outside of this fort.”

“Yes sir!” Eochaid said. He saluted and left the office unsure if he should be grateful his punishment was so minor, or ashamed he was getting off so easily. The shame was winning out.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

He returned to the barracks to find Koneru tidying up. There was no sign of Amra.

“You’ve heard we’re out of Arcernoth?” the elf asked.

Eochaid’s shoulders sagged. “Yes.”

“It’s all just a big performance for our new slitherin ‘allies,’” Koneru grumbled. “I’m guessing they have worse things planned for you, eh?”

“I killed a *pup*! In front of its *mother*!” Eochaid exclaimed. “They’re right to punish me.”

Koneru looked away. Eochaid took a deep breath to calm himself.

Koneru shrugged and scratched his ear. “Balak’s been here. Left something for you.”

Eochaid turned to his bunk. A crate full of books sat on it, with a note:

These were Jade’s. Thought you’d appreciate them.

—Balak

Eochaid felt like he’d been punched in the chest. *Jade...*

The name echoed inside him. He sat on the bunk and lifted a book. Jadestone’s cloth bookmark showed where she’d left the story unfinished. He put it down and examined the others. His eyes burned as his fingers brushed against the titles, too blurry to read.

“Where do you think they’ll send us?” Eochaid asked.

“I’m hoping for the Ganjus for myself,” Koneru said. “It would be nice to see my family again.”

Eochaid nodded. *Family*. He hadn’t written home in months. Not since shortly after Amra came back, to tell his family that she was alive. Things had been too busy, and he was never sure what to say.

“No idea where they’ll send you, though,” the elf continued. “Semanye maybe, to help with the war in Durrover? Or Lolharden, and tangle with the orcs. But you can count Hornswythe out — too close to Arcernoth Delta.”

Eochaid counted at least a dozen books in the crate, too many to fit in his footlocker even if he emptied it. “I won’t be able to bring many of these with me, will I?”

“Probably not,” Koneru answered, softly.

Eochaid started sorting through the books.

The elf put aside the parchments he'd been neatening on Cooper's shelf of oddments and cocked his head at Eochaid. "Wherever they send you, I hope your new commander knows better than to hop in a bunk with you."

Eochaid glared at Koneru, who raised his hands in protest.

"Hey, I only state what I saw. Even with rank set aside, she was a *lousy* bedmate for you. Ordered you around like a golem."

Eochaid paused his sorting. "*Was?* Where is she?"

"The infirmary. I think they gave her a sleeping draught. No point going over before tomorrow."

Eochaid sat hard on his bunk, hands clenching in frustration.

Koneru leaned down to look him in the eye. "Lenahr, you know whatever relationship you had with Varith is *over*, yes? She'll probably be stationed in Bride Lake. You'll be off on the Plains of Lede fighting orcs or something. A one-sided love affair like yours won't survive if she isn't with you physically."

"It isn't one-sided!" Eochaid snapped.

Koneru snorted. "Look at yourself, Lenahr. I don't know if you can see it, but your connection to Varith is *not* healthy. Gods, you would have been better off with Holtz. He was a satyr and a bit of an ass, but at least he *liked* you."

"Holtz?"

Koneru waved his hand. "Sorry. Forget I said anything about Holtz. Just...think about the rest of it."

Eochaid didn't meet his eyes. He got up, opened Belasius' trunk, and began putting away her personal things.

The elf turned back to the chaos of Cooper's belongings. "Idiotic Veshian language," he muttered to himself. "They do so much *seliafren*, but they're ashamed of the words to *describe* it."

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An hour or so later, Koneru and Eochaid had finished. All seven bunks were bare. Except for Jadestone's books and Cooper's bulky magical tomes and equipment, everything fit in the seven rucksacks arranged by Darl's bunk. All Eochaid would have left to do the next morning would be to fold his bedroll.

He stood by his bunk with one of Jadestone's books in his hands. His gaze fell on the small, rough shrine to Tanil by the door. None of his squadmates had left even that much of a mark on the room.

Someone knocked on the door frame. “Vigilants? May I come in?” Skywarder leaned into the barracks. Eochaid snapped the best salute he could, as if a steely military posture would solidify the wreckage inside him.

“At ease,” Skywarder insisted. “Both of you, sit. I’m just a messenger, not your commander.”

The three of them sat at the small table.

“Given Varith’s mental state and the uproar among the slitherin, the marshal would rather teleport you out than send you on foot through the marsh,” Skywarder explained. “The three of you ship out tomorrow, late morning. A quartermaster wizard will take you to Lave on his weekly supply run.”

“How is she, sir?” Eochaid asked.

Skywarder grimaced. “During her deposition, she just screamed insults at me — in Slitherin, no less. It appears she still believes I’m a traitor who’ll betray the vigil. The medics gave her calming herbs. They say that she’s still not talking.”

“Can I see her?” Eochaid asked.

“That’s up to the medics. They don’t want anyone there who might upset her.” He chuckled grimly. “I’m staying as far away from the infirmary as possible.”

Skywarder leaned back and heaved a tired breath. He scrubbed his face with his hands before speaking again. “I just wanted to tell you both...I’m sorry. I should have pressed the marshal to tell the vigil. What was happening, about the Redeemed. Especially you, Lenahr — I nearly did, but I had doubts about how you’d react.”

“Slitherin killed my father,” Eochaid muttered. “‘Redeemed’ or not, I’ll never trust them.”

Skywarder’s gaze fell to his hands on the table. “Just so,” he said.

He cleared his throat and continued. “There will be a wake tonight in the great hall for Jadestone and the others we lost. It’s up to you if you go or not. Given the circumstances, I’ll find somewhere else to be.”

The lieutenant stood up. Eochaid and Koneru got to their feet as well. “Good luck to both of you in your new assignments,” Skywarder said.

Eochaid and Koneru saluted, and then Eochaid stuck out his hand. Skywarder hesitated, and then took it. Eochaid grasped his hand firmly. “Sir, despite everything, you were a good commander. A good *leader*. I’ll...I’ll miss working with you, sir.”

Skywarder gave a short laugh. “Thank you, but I think I’ll be happier as a lieutenant. Less worry, and more of what I do best.” He smiled, and a little of the old Skywarder dimpled his cheeks. “I can scout the marsh, gather intelligence, and not have anyone to order around. I never liked that part of the job.”

Eochaid and Koneru went to the wake, which was well underway when they arrived at the great hall. Not five feet into the room a stocky, powerful figure charged drunkenly through the crowd at Eochaid. "Thank Goran they sprung you in time!"

Mattock grasped him around the middle and lifted him up off the ground. He gasped for air as her head pressed his sternum. She set Eochaid back on the ground. "So, what's your punishment?"

Eochaid's face flushed. Koneru spoke. "They're shipping us out in the morning."

Mattock looked up into Eochaid's eyes. She opened and closed her mouth, then gave Eochaid another bone-crunching squeeze. "I'll miss you, little man."

"I'll miss you, too," Eochaid murmured.

"Let's get you drinks!"

Mattock dragged Eochaid and Koneru across the room to a table in the corner. Although the wake was raucous, the celebration came in fits and starts. And as Eochaid and Koneru crossed the hall, a circle of silence seemed to follow them. Tables quieted as they passed, then conversation picked up again in their wake. Eochaid felt their eyes on him and heard snatches of conversation.

"...said the squad went out against orders..."

"...knew where to find Skywarder..."

"...nothing left of Holtz..."

At the table, Mattock poured them all glasses of "the good stuff." Koneru slugged his drink back, but Eochaid sipped slowly. The strong liquor burned on its way down.

"Been wild rumors going around all day," said Mattock, offering Eochaid the bottle.

"We just spent half the day talking about it," Eochaid said. "I'm done talking."

"I understand," she said, and gently tapped his shoulder with her fist.

A head lifted from the table. Balak, red-eyed and trembling, looked at Eochaid and croaked, "Belasius. What happened to her? I shouldn't-a let her go."

Eochaid shook his head. The old man's bleary gaze followed him, entreating. He gathered himself, cleared his protesting throat. "She..."

She followed Brook to Tanil, like she wanted. She charged a group of slitherin and got killed by a mauler. She was reckless and stupid, and it probably got Darl and Coop killed. But they were dead anyway. We were all dead. We were all stupid. It was a pointless, pointless suicide mission.

Eochaid stood up. "I'm sorry, Mattock. I can't do this."

"Lenahr, wait!"

Eochaid fled from their pleas and headed toward the doors. Someone jeered as he passed and threw a bottle that just missed his face. He stepped out into the night air, wishing

for a cold breeze to calm him down. But it was warm, and the air was still, mid-spring weather hinting at the unbearable muggy heat of a marshland summer.

He wanted someone to blame. A focus. A target. But he couldn't blame the marshal or Skywarder — they were the ones wronged. And he couldn't blame Amra; she was broken. He could only blame himself.

Amra. I need to know she'll be okay.

He strode towards the infirmary.

• • •

The medic on duty stopped him at the infirmary doorway.

"Sorry, but your friend isn't seeing visitors. We don't want her provoked."

"I know how to keep her calm. Do you remember me from when she first escaped? I took care of her. I'm probably the last person who'd rile her up."

The medic considered. Her face softened, and she stepped aside. "Yes, I remember you, Vigilant Lenahr. I'll make an exception for you. But do be calm and quiet."

Eochaid nodded and followed the medic into the infirmary.

Amra sat on a cot in an otherwise-empty room, a tablet across her lap. She was drawing something on paper with a lead pencil.

"Drawing seems to keep her calm," whispered the medic.

Amra looked up at the sound of the medic's voice. "Hey, Lenahr!" she chirped.

"She spoke!" the medic whispered.

Eochaid took a deep breath, smiled, and walked over to Amra. "Hello, Amra." He sat down in a chair next to her cot. "What are you drawing?"

"A dress pattern," she replied.

Eochaid fought to keep confusion and surprise from his face. *Dresses? What did they feed her?*

"I'm getting reassigned to Lave. It's all fancy dress there," Amra confided. "Diplomats. Nobles. I'm going to need something nice to wear. I can't go around in leather armor."

Eochaid glanced at the medic. "May we have a little privacy, please? Just a few minutes?" he asked politely.

"A few minutes, yes. Ring the bell over there if you need anything."

"Thanks."

Amra watched the medic leave. Once the door closed, she shoved the tablet and writing things to the foot of the bed. "Gods! Thought she'd never leave. Thanks."

Eochaid stroked her hand. "Amra, are you okay? They said you were catatonic."

Amra snorted. “Yeah, I’m fine. I still want to stab Skywarder in the eye with a rusty pike. He is such a smarmy, lying fuck...oh, don’t look at me like that. I just want to punch him in the head. But, other than that, yep! Cool as ice.”

Amra’s speech tipped back and forth between a drugged slur and an angry muttering, but Eochaid could hear some of her usual cool disdain coming back into it, and very little of the explosive rage he’d heard as he dragged her from the battle. He continued, “And you’re okay with getting reassigned? To Lave? And no more combat?”

She smiled airily. “It’s fine. For the best, I think. I’ll relax. Recharge. Find my ‘feminine side.’ Make tea for the home commander. Eventually, if things go well, become a trusted advisor. Assist with the big decisions. Dabble in politics.” She snickered. “Whatever it is they do there. And I’m sure there’ll be *some* fighting — at least a barroom brawl or two I can get tangled up in.”

Eochaid tried to picture Amra sitting patiently at the long table in the sunlit room in Lave. Amra in a green silk dress, charming a diplomat. He tried to picture himself in a blue cloak, a doublet, and hose, holding her hand at a merchant’s ball. But the more he tried to see himself at her side, the uglier and bloodier the thoughts intruding from the edges of his mind.

“They’re sending me somewhere else,” he blurted out. “I won’t be there to help you.”

She laughed. “I’ll be fine. I won’t need your help.”

“But what about...us?” he asked.

“Us? What do you mean *us*?”

He gestured between them. “You know, you and me. Us.”

She snorted. Chuckled. “You were a good fuck, Lenahr. I mean, a *really* good fuck — don’t get me wrong there. But beyond that, there *is* no ‘us.’ Did...did you *really* think there was?”

Eochaid sat back, stunned. *Koneru was right. She doesn’t care.*

Amra’s lips parted. She studied his face. “I never led you on, Lenahr. Your pretty blue eyes might have caught my attention when we met, but you’re not Aronis. And you never will be. Now run along back to your vigil and go back to saving the world from the big, bad titanspawn. And don’t worry about me. *I’ll* be fine.”

He stood up, reeling. “I...”

She tilted her head and gave him a little smile.

“I...I’m sorry Amra. Good luck.”

“Yeah, you too,” she said, waving him along. Then she turned, stretched, and reached for the tablet and paper.

He turned and walked quickly out of the room, empty inside.

“That was good of you, getting her to speak,” said the medic as Eochaid crossed the front room of the infirmary.

“Sure, yeah,” he replied as he strode past her. “She should be fine now.”

He returned to the barracks. Koneru was... Eochaid didn't care, as long as he wasn't there. A liquor bottle sat on the table with a note tucked under it. Eochaid opened the note. Mattock had scrawled “Saved you the good stuff.” Grateful, he drank himself into oblivion.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Eochaid woke when a pillow bounced across his chest.

“Time to get up, Lenahr,” said Koneru. “Wizard’s getting ready to take us to Lave.”

Eochaid gently raised himself to an elbow. His head pulsed out a wave of pain as he did so, and he desperately needed water. He blinked carefully.

“Sorry about the pillow, but I value my hands,” Koneru explained. “I’ll meet you in the courtyard.” He picked up his pack and left, closing the barracks door behind him.

Eochaid looked around the room. Though he wanted silence for his headache, the bare room’s quiet oppressed him. He felt at once up to his neck in ghosts and utterly alone.

Eochaid performed his morning tasks as quickly as he could, though exerting himself worsened the pain of his hangover. He let the ache in his forehead drive out the one in his chest. When he’d finished getting ready, he combed his hair roughly back with his fingers, shouldered his gear, and left.

Koneru and the wizard waited in the drizzle of the courtyard by a small stack of crates. Amra stood with Major Andel and one of the medics by the door from the infirmary. As Eochaid approached, the wizard waved to Andel, and she and Amra crossed the courtyard to join them.

Major Andel and the wizard stepped away to speak. Amra dropped her pack at the pile of crates by Eochaid and Koneru.

Amra wore a clean cloak. She’d freshly washed her hair and lacquered her nails again in a jaunty purple color. She cocked her head at him and chuckled. “Lenahr, how much did you drink last night? You look half dead!”

Koneru averted his gaze. Eochaid looked her in the eyes, face empty. He felt little beyond the pounding above his eyes. He studied her. Still no heat, no resentment, not even the chill of anger. Just a hollowness.

Amra frowned. “Not going to talk to me, then? That’s a little petty for you, isn’t it?”

Eochaid felt a pang, but it died quickly. He took a breath. “No,” he said. “I just have nothing to say.”

Amra opened her mouth, but Eochaid interrupted. “You were right, Varith. We don’t know each other,” he said. “We never have. What would we have to say?”

She stared at him, mouth gaping.

The vigilant wizard coughed. He and the major had finished their conversation. Amra picked up her pack.

"If each of you would please take a crate, we can get on our way," the wizard instructed. He slung a large bag across his back. "Luckily there's only four of you, so we can do this in one trip."

Eochaid hefted one of the small crates. Papers and scrolls rustled against one another inside.

The wizard spread his hands. "I need everyone to gather close and either hold onto my arm or touch someone else who already is."

Eochaid adjusted his pack on his shoulders, then shifted the crate onto his hip to free up a hand. He grabbed Koneru's shoulder, while Koneru grasped the wizard's hand. Amra and Major Andel arranged themselves similarly on the wizard's other side.

"I must warn you," said the wizard, "there is a slim chance this could go...a little awry. Stick with me until I confirm that we've reached our destination, in case I have to move us again."

"Awry?" Eochaid asked, but before he could finish, the wizard uttered a word. Eochaid's vision swam. The world made a nauseating jump as the courtyard of Riverrock rolled away and a wall of granite blocks in bright sunlight swung in to replace it.

Eochaid took an involuntary breath. The air tasted wildly different. Tilled earth, trees, and manure. Bread in an oven. Ham or bacon on a stove. The new scents chased away the odors of Riverrock, though he could still faintly smell rot and rain on his cloak.

"All right," the mage said. "We're here." Eochaid glanced over his shoulder. They'd appeared in a small pavilion on the vigil's grounds. Eochaid recognized the stairs behind the Hall of Command.

"Follow me," Major Andel said. "We'll deliver Riverrock's reports and sign you all in." She marched off towards the hall's back doors. Eochaid and the others followed her. At the stairway to the barracks, the wizard saluted Andel and separated from the group. He jogged down the stairs with his single large bag.

Amra sniffed. "Guess mages don't have to tote crates."

"His bag's magic," the major said. "It holds more than you'd think. He has his own delivery to make." Eochaid heard an edge of frost in her voice.

• • •

A clerk signed for their cargo, and a sergeant signed transfer papers for Eochaid, Koneru, and Amra. "Welcome to Lave," the sergeant said. "I assume you know where the barracks are. Go take a bunk there until you get your assignment."

Eochaid saluted Major Andel. Koneru and Amra joined him.

“Goodbye, vigilants,” Andel said. Then she turned back to her paperwork.

• • •

They descended the stairs to the barracks in silence. Koneru led the way. Eochaid barely remembered the route from his first day in the vigil and was happy to follow him.

As they rounded the final corner, Eochaid heard a keening voice coming from the wagon-house, a rising note of pain. The Riverrock mage, his sack folded over his arm, bowed at the doorway to someone inside, then turned and strode briskly towards the Hall of Command.

Eochaid found himself moving towards the doorway, his feet acting on their own. *I don't need to see. I don't need to see! Don't—*

There was a wagon parked inside. A plain wood coffin sat behind it, two vigilants in uniform attending it. An old woman lay draped on it. A weather-beaten man with a farmer's build knelt beside her, arm over her shaking shoulders.

Stacked against the wall, Eochaid saw two more coffins.

“My son,” the crumpled woman wailed. “My boy! I want to see him! Why won't you open it?” She grabbed at the coffin lid, but the farmer beside her caught her hands. “No, Doralee, don't. You shouldn't see that.”

Bile rose in Eochaid's throat, and lights danced in his eyes to the beating of his heart. He staggered, then turned and ran to the barracks, dodging through the courtyard without a word to anyone.

Koneru was stowing his pack on an empty bunk. Eochaid leaned on the bunk, his stomach roiling.

“Lenahr? What — oh, Denev. Yes, the civilians,” Koneru said. “Give me a minute. I can go speak to them. You sit before you fall down.”

Amra tossed her pack down on the bunk next to Koneru's. “Darl's mother, if you were wondering,” she muttered. “At least *she* has something to bury.”

Koneru's jaw dropped and his eyes went wide. He leapt to his feet. “Kadum's *blood*, Varith! Did you...?” He glared at Amra. Then he strode out of the barracks, muttering in Elvish.

Amra shrugged and plopped down on her bunk. Eochaid swallowed hard. Then he stood and walked to the furthest open bunk he could find, threw down his pack, and left.

He leaned against the wall of the wagon-house, out of sight but close enough to hear Koneru. “Your son was a smart, brave man,” the elf murmured. “He knew the marsh, and he protected his friends fiercely. He gave his life for them — for his vigil, and for Vesh.”

Eochaid expected to cry — wanted to. But nothing came. He listened to Koneru's kind words, his tender tone, and felt gratitude that the elf was there to speak for Darl. But if he felt sorrow, it was too pervasive to see.

Someone moved by the entrance to the yard. Amra looked around her, then walked confidently off into the town.

Eochaid's jaw clenched so hard it ached. He strode back over to the practice yard. A few men and women practiced or did chores. Eochaid selected a dummy in a corner, unsheathed his swords, and unleashed his rage.

Chapter Thirty

"You keep that up, there's not even going to be a stump left. Didn't know you'd gotten so good with the swords, Lenahr."

The voice was familiar. Eochaid stopped hacking at what was left of the dummy, breathing heavily. He turned around. A man in cleric's vestments stood before him.

Eochaid blinked in confusion, wiping the sweat from his eyes. He recognized the smiling figure.

"Hutch?"

Hutchling's smile started to fade as he looked Eochaid up and down. "Madriel's mercy, you're a mess!"

Eochaid felt his anger drain away. His swords slid from his fingers and thunked into the ground. His legs felt weak and shaky, and he wobbled where he stood.

Hutchling stepped forward and hugged him. He stepped back again, concern filling his eyes, thinking. "Okay," he said, "here's what we'll do. You sit there and rest for a minute." He pointed to a bale of hay. "I'll be right back, and then we're getting out of here."

The cleric pushed Eochaid toward the hay bale and jogged off to the sergeant's office. Eochaid sat down. His head pounded, and his throat was dry. He went to the water barrel, grabbed the ladle that hung beside it and took several long drinks.

The pain behind his eyes receded, but his thoughts still raced. Eochaid gripped the edges of the barrel. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply for a few minutes. *I can't have him seeing me like this*, he thought. *Gotta calm down, or he's going to be trying to help. Can't drag him into this.*

He retrieved his swords and collapsed again on the hay, cleaning the blades on his pant-leg and sheathing them. *I'll tell him I'm fine. Just need time to get myself together first. A day or two. Then maybe I can handle being around him without...*

Hutchling reappeared at the office door. He smiled and said something to someone inside, then jogged easily back to Eochaid, nodding to the other vigilants in the practice area as he passed.

"Okay, that's settled, then!" he said, and grabbed Eochaid's hand. "C'mon. Too nice a day to stay here on the drill field."

Eochaid shook his head. “Hutch, I’m on disciplinary—”

“No, you’re not,” Hutchling said, pulling him across the courtyard. “I just cleared things with Sergeant Carral. You’re on detached duty, not disciplinary. So long as they know where to find you, it doesn’t matter where you stay.”

“Stay?”

“Yes, *stay*. Carral will send a recruit by this evening with your pack and your bedroll. I won’t have you stewing in a bunk when you can stay with us.”

“Us?”

Hutchling stopped in his tracks on the street. “That’s *right*, I forgot!” He grinned giddily at Eochaid. “His name’s Paul, and he’s...well, he’s remarkable.” The cleric took Eochaid by the arm again and walked on more slowly. He chattered on brightly as they wound their way into the city. Common dress replaced uniforms. For the first time in months, Eochaid saw shops and children, horses, carts, and people wearing stylish, colorful clothes. The city felt as strange to him as it had the first day he’d arrived as a dirty hunter from New Venir.

Eochaid realized that Hutchling had stopped talking some time back. The slightly-built cleric still held his arm, but he was matching Eochaid’s pace now, not the other way around. Hutchling smiled gently at him.

“Hutch, I’m fine in the barracks,” Eochaid said.

“Are you, Lenahr?” Hutchling replied. “Because I’ve never seen you look so...lonesome.”

The concern in the gentle man’s voice cut like a blade, and it was all Eochaid could do not to cry out. “Trust me, you don’t need any part of this.”

Hutchling put a hand on Eochaid’s chest and brought him to a stop. “Lenahr, I’m here because Sergeant Carral sent word about a vigilante in the practice yard aiming to die of exhaustion. This man had just gone through something awful at Arcernoth Delta, and the sergeant could see he sorely needed help and advice. Carral asked for a cleric to come and give counsel.”

Hutchling’s hazel eyes looked deeply into Eochaid with a warmth and gentleness that nearly made him blush. “Brother, I’m that cleric. When I heard your name, I demanded it. The Vigil sent me — *Madriel* sent me — to help you with your load.”

Eochaid’s heart thundered in his chest. He shook his head. “You don’t...I can’t...”

Like an earthen dam saturated by water, Eochaid’s resolve broke. The black swamp of shame and sorrow inside him poured through. He fell onto Hutchling’s shoulder, into kind arms ready to receive him.

Hutchling guided him through a gateway into a shaded private garden off the street and sat him on a bench. Words spilled out of Eochaid: the marsh, the storm, Amra’s return, all the things he’d done to stand by and to protect her, and all the many, many deaths. All the moments he could have saved Amra, saved his friends, if he’d only been smart enough to see them. If he’d only been strong enough to accept her inevitable scorn for standing up to her.

In some tiny part of his mind that hovered above his inner turmoil, Eochaid marveled at his friend. Hutchling listened and barely said a word, only encouraging when Eochaid became ashamed to speak. Hutchling brought more divinity into that small garden than Eochaid could ever remember feeling, even in the massive temple at Bride Lake.

When Eochaid ran out of words, they sat in the quiet. Hutchling produced some candied nuts and a flask of water from his robe. Eochaid found he was hungry, or at least relished the idea of food. They ate.

Eochaid felt empty. His feelings were still there, but their meaning had changed. Not hollow — not anymore. Lightened. Loosened.

“So,” Hutchling said, “tonight you can sleep by the hearth. And I’ll be here for you to talk to, whenever. But for right now, let’s go do something happier — a soak at a bathhouse I know near here.” He rose and wrinkled his nose. “See, I didn’t want to say anything, but...well, you smell like a marsh fart.”

Eochaid grabbed a clod of dirt and threw it at Hutchling as hard as he could.

• • •

After the bathhouse, they strolled the streets to Hutchling’s home. Eochaid wore civilian clothes that Hutchling had given him, as his uniform and leathers were off to be cleaned. The temperate evening air tingled on his skin, truly clean for the first time in months.

They turned at a three-story stone building with an herbalist’s shop on the first floor. Hutchling led Eochaid around the back, up an external flight of stairs to a door on the second floor.

“The shop owners used to live here, but they moved somewhere larger. Paul and I rented it a few months ago. I never thought I’d have a home with so many windows!”

Eochaid followed Hutchling inside. Sunlight filled a tiny kitchen, and there was a pile of fresh vegetables on the counter. Pots and pans hung above the stove beside the door. Straight ahead, though, Eochaid saw the reason for Hutchling’s delight: The front of the building was all panes of glass in leaded wooden frames, with mortared stone pillars between to carry the weight. The windows went up two stories, and Eochaid imagined that sunbeams must fill the house all day. The open space gave the place unexpected grandeur for its cozy size.

A scribe’s desk stood against the windows in one corner with parchment, paper, books, and quills piled on it. A few papers spilled over onto a large table next to it. Eochaid’s pack and bow leaned against the table, and several stools had been shoved haphazardly against the wall. A clay pitcher of cheerful white swan lilies in sat at its center. Hutchling sat Eochaid on one of the stools.

“Paul? Are you home?” Hutchling called.

A large fireplace decorated the opposite wall, with a roomy couch and overstuffed chair next to it. Neither were as elegant or fine as the ones Eochaid remembered from

the home command offices, but they looked welcoming and comfortable. A ladder on the wall by the kitchen led up to a loft. Sconces and bookshelves cluttered the walls, and knickknacks filled many of the other nooks and crannies.

A door off the kitchen creaked open and a tall man stepped out. His skin was dark, almost ebony, and he wore his hair in long, black-and-gray braids. He wore the comfortable clothing typical of the style in the city, if well cut and of fine materials. He leaned down to Hutchling and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“Just putting away flour and tea in the pantry, Tarol. I got your note.”

“Tarol?” Eochaid asked.

Hutchling laughed. “Did we never—? We were such nitwits back in training! I don’t *mind* ‘Hutch,’ but I much prefer my given name at home. Just not ‘Brother Tarol,’ or I’ll feel like I’m at Temple.”

He put his arm around the taller man and smiled at Eochaid. “This is Paul, my very clever, charming boyfriend. Paul, this is the friend who got me through vigilant training, whose name is...”

“Eochaid.” Eochaid prompted.

“Ee-oh-kade,” Hutchling said, slowly sounding the name out. Eochaid nodded.

Paul gave Hutchling a quick squeeze around the shoulders, and then reached out to shake Eochaid’s hand. “It’s good to meet you, Eochaid Lenahr. You’re in many of Tarol’s stories!”

“The good ones, I hope,” Eochaid replied.

Paul snorted a laugh. “A *lesser* man would be jealous. You left Tarol quite hung up on you!”

Hutchling turned abruptly and walked to the pile of papers on the table. Eochaid caught a glimpse of brightly blushing cheeks as the cleric turned away. *You shit-for-brains*, Eochaid thought to himself. *So busy chasing Amra you stepped on the heart of a dear friend.*

He felt Paul’s eyes appraising him. Then the big man smiled ruefully and shrugged. He put his arms around Hutchling. “The papers on the table are from the vigil. The flowers are from me. Your friend and I will leave you to it,” he said.

He kissed Hutchling gently on the head and escorted Eochaid to the kitchen. “A messenger brought your pack by earlier today. With this weather, the couch should be quite a comfortable bed tonight, though I’m sure a vigilant can sleep anywhere. How does a roast meat pie sound for dinner?”

“You don’t have to feed me,” Eochaid said.

Paul feigned a look of horror. “What kind of host do you take me for, sir?”

“No, I mean, I don’t need to eat.” Eochaid held up his hand. “Magic ring. Don’t need food. Don’t need much sleep either.”

“Gah!” Hutchling exclaimed from the other room. “Real food is good for you, Lenahr. Live normally for a couple of days before the vigil ships you off to another shithole!”

Eochaid hung his head. "Yes, I get it. I'll behave, Brother Tarol."

"Madriel save me from my friends," Hutchling muttered.

Paul snickered. He pulled a stool out and offered it to Eochaid. "While I make the meal, if you have any stories about Tarol from training together, I'd love to hear them!" He grabbed a knife and began peeling a parsnip.

Eochaid reached for his own knife and grabbed a vegetable as well.

"You're our guest," Paul said. "You don't need to work."

"Simple work would help me relax. I've had lots of practice cutting up vegetables."

Paul chuckled. "I see. Well, have at it, then!" He handed Eochaid a crockery bowl for peelings.

The two men worked and chatted. The big man was easy to talk to, warm and cheerful with a rich laugh.

"Is it true that you dropped Tarol in a creek in survival training?" Paul asked.

"That's not how I remember it," Eochaid said.

"It's how he tells it. He was laughing so hard at some raunchy joke of yours that he fell down, and you just let him go."

"Not intentionally! He was so small when he started training he couldn't carry his own pack. And he was as graceful as a stone. *And* it was wet that day." Eochaid replied.

Paul smirked. "I note you didn't deny the raunchy joke, though!" They laughed together.

"Where did you meet him?" Eochaid asked. "I don't even know what he's been doing the last year. Are you a cleric, too?"

"Me? Pretty far from," Paul replied. "I... well, I was an adventurer until I got old enough to know better. Now I sing and tell stories at a tavern near here. Tarol started coming in when they assigned him to Lave. He got to be a regular. He was kind and friendly and warmed the bar just by being there, but I often felt a little loneliness from him. One night I took a chance and stole a kiss. Very glad I did."

The big man's face glowed with pleasure at the memory. Eochaid smiled. *Hutch found someone who understands him the way he does other people, he thought. I think that's the best thing I could wish for him.*

They traded more stories while the pie browned and bubbled in the oven. Paul produced a bottle of smoky liquor from Hollowfaust and poured two tiny glasses. "Strong stuff," he said. "Sip it carefully. Got a taste for it when I stayed there a while back."

"Hollowfaust?" Eochaid asked. "Where's that?"

"Far, far to the west. Beyond the Ganjus, past the Haggard Hills, on the far side of the Hornsaw Forest. A fortress-city of necromancers on the edge of the Ukrudan Desert, built in the shadow of a volcano."

Eochaid sat spellbound. The big bard warmed quickly to his subject, his brown eyes flashing in the sunset light. Paul's adventures as a young man had taken him across the continent of Ghelspad, from Bridged City in the north to Fangsfall in the west. Before Eochaid knew it, the three of them were eating, both he and Hutchling raptly listening to the adventures of Paul, the Bard of Rika.

Stories, and more stories. Eochaid and Hutchling relived their adventures at Bride Lake. Paul proudly told a story about a drunken Hutchling putting an arrogant merchant from the mighty House Asuras in his place, dragging the man from his horse and making him beg forgiveness at the temple in tears. Eochaid roared with laughter and applauded him. Hutchling blushed desperately, only the second time Eochaid had ever seen him do it — twice in a single day.

Eochaid felt at ease enough that he told them a little about Mattock: her enthusiasm in the great hall, her infectious good cheer, and her hilarious fall on the icy steps. Before he could sink into melancholy, Hutchling picked up the thread and told them about actually meeting Goran's avatar in the halls of Burok Torn. "I only hope someday I can stand so close to Madriel," he said reverently.

They sat by the fireplace. The tale-telling wound down, and Paul began to yawn. "I won't say I'm old, but I'm well worn," he sighed. "Time for me to sleep." Paul pulled a blanket from a trunk by the hearth and handed it to Eochaid. Then he kissed Hutchling on the forehead, waved, and climbed the ladder to the loft.

"You're happy," Eochaid said to Hutchling.

"Of course," the cleric replied, gesturing around the house.

"No, I mean *really* happy," Eochaid elaborated. "You...you're so decent and thoughtful. You have such a kind heart. It's *right* that you get to be happy, and I'm...glad."

Hutchling snorted at the compliment, but then thought a moment. He smiled. "You're right. I *am* happy." They sat together a little, the small log in the fireplace crackling.

Hutchling took a breath, looked pensive, then spoke.

"I read the report from Arcernoth."

Eochaid felt a chill. His muscles stiffened a little against his will. "And...?"

"Eochaid...I saw how upset you were. It was horrible. But...let go of the blame. It wasn't your *fault*. It was very poor judgement to put a twenty-year-old fresh out of training in command of a squad. You and Varith were the most junior members there! Darl and Jadestone both had well over ten years each in Arcernoth. They should have noticed when Varith went off the track. Everyone else in your squad should have known better."

"Jade *did*. She left the squad because of it," Eochaid said.

"But she didn't complain to your commander," Hutchling pointed out. "She didn't speak up."

“But *I* knew she was worried,” Eochaid interrupted. “She warned me. If I’d said something, if I’d gone with her...? But then...” His hands shook. Eochaid took a deep breath. “The way they...*murdered*...her, it drove me out there. To track them down. To...”

Hutchling stood up out of his chair, sat down beside Eochaid, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. Anyone would feel pain and rage. You wanted to ease the pain. You wanted justice. Vengeance, even. Madriel understands that in moments of weakness like that, we’re swept away and make mistakes. And she forgives us when that happens.”

Eochaid’s knees hurt. He realized he’d dug his fingernails into them. He could smell charred flesh and marsh water, hear screams and sword blows.

Hutchling’s hand, so light, slid along his back, between his shoulder blades and squeezed. Whether it was a spell the cleric cast or just his presence and attentiveness Eochaid wasn’t sure, but the images faded. He grabbed Hutchling’s arm and held it there. They sat in silence. The pain, anger, and shame drained away again.

After a minute, Hutchling spoke. “It’s all right to be sad that you’re alive when others aren’t. I’ve seen it...more than I wish to. But it’s also a kind of lie that the worst parts of us tell ourselves. The parts of us that Belsameth or Vangal appeal to. The truth of what happened to you in the marsh is that many people made those mistakes, and many souls bear that burden.”

Hutchling rose and turned to the ladder up to the loft. “You’re safe here, brother. Rest tonight. Those wounds heal in time.”

• • •

Eochaid slept soundly and dreamlessly (for half the night, longer than he was used to), but awoke feeling restless well before dawn. He pulled on his boots, grabbed a cloak from his pack, and left the apartment.

Even at that bleak hour, there were still people. A cluster of well-dressed folks argued philosophy at tables outside a tavern. A baker’s boy ran by him on an errand. Watchmen saw his vigilant cloak and saluted him, even without the uniform. But most of the city slept.

It felt uncomfortable to have no duties, no tasks, no plans for the next day beyond Paul’s promised performance at the tavern. His mind buzzed, looking for something to do, expecting work and finding none. “Live normally,” Hutchling had said. *I don’t really like living normally.*

A thought struck him. A wistful smile. He looked up and down the street — alone, for the moment at least.

Eochaid padded to the nearest building, three sturdy stories of granite and wood beams. He slipped his fingers between the stone blocks and climbed. He went from shadow to shadow, beam to ledge, up to the roof. At the crest of the roof he found a thick stone chimney and climbed that, too. He sat, warm drafts and a little smoke from the embers below wreathing him, and looked up.

The city lights and smoke dimmed the stars, but they were still there. Around him, building shadows made a sort of forest of square and orderly trees, and in one or two places his dark-adjusted eyes caught movement: other creatures prowling the same wilderness, as the rest of the world slept beneath.

• • •

“You never collected your pay?” Hutchling asked.

The two friends climbed the hill to the home command.

“In Arcernoth?” Eochaid said, “I bought some books on credit, but there’s nothing *there*. No towns, no traders...and I didn’t much like gambling.”

Hutchling shrugged in agreement.

“Besides,” Eochaid continued, “I’m saving to move my family up here.” He frowned. “I owe them a letter. I haven’t written in weeks.”

“You can write your letter while I do my business,” Hutchling said. “I doubt there’ll be much yet, but they’ve hinted my next assignment is coming. Best to check.”

Eochaid found the paymaster’s office and checked his account. It was lighter than he’d hoped, but that was to be expected given how much the vigil had fined him. It was still far more than he’d have made as a hunter in Trela, but enough to setup his family Vesh? Not for another year, at least, likely much longer.

A door closed behind him.

“Vigilant Lenahr? Well, this saves me a messenger.”

Eochaid turned. Kelemis Durn, Lord Home Commander of the Veshian Vigil, stood there with his majordomo. Eochaid saluted snappily.

“At ease. This won’t take long. I’m assigning you to Pelpernoi, your grandfather’s vigil. Boring work compared to what you’ve been doing, but that’s for good reason.”

Pelpernoi, in the Haggard Hills? What does that vigil even do?

Kelemis Durn looked Eochaid in the eye. “You got off to a poor start, vigilant. We need to put you on the right path. Pelpernoi’s not glorious, but it’s vital. Learn to serve your vigil, and your fellow vigilants.”

Eochaid opened his mouth to speak. *I’ll do my best. I’ll honor my family. I’ll make it worth the cost.*

Before he could say anything, the home commander continued. “You’ll have formal orders in the next day or so. Carry on, soldier!” Then the leader of the Veshian Vigil walked away without a backward glance.

“Thank you, sir!” Eochaid stammered to the man’s retreating back. Eochaid stood in stunned silence for a long moment.

• • •

Eochaid emptied his pack onto Hutchling's floor and sorted his belongings. Pelpernoi, the paymaster warned him, traveled *very* light. The vigil didn't have a home fortress, so all his gear would go on his back. Of the rest, the paymasters could store a single trunk for him until he returned.

Most of his belongings were simple: bedroll, clothing, whetstones, and other practical gear would come with him. Anything bulky or useless for Pelpernoi would stay. But his personal things were harder.

He put the hardwood box with his mother's letters in the trunk to store. He laid his quill set and paper aside. *Hutch can help me write a letter home. I'll have to find paper out there when I can.*

Of Jadestone's crate of books, he took only one slim volume, *The Poems of Krainin Pum*. He sat and held it for a while before putting it in his pack. He packed the others carefully in the trunk.

All that was left was his father's bow. Big. Awkward. A ranged weapon, where he preferred close quarters. Too stiff for him to draw, even after the hard work of Arcernoth. Still, he stared at it on his lap, and his hands would not let it go.

He held the bow to his nose. Even after years, the smell called his father to mind.

But this Lenahr doesn't use a bow. It should go to Kane. When I finally move them north.

Reverently, he laid the bow in the trunk, on top of the books and box of letters, and closed the lid.

• • •

Hutchling and Eochaid navigated the streets of Lave in silence. Eochaid eyed the crowds as if someone might step out with a drawn blade.

Hutchling shook himself. He studied Eochaid. "What in the name of mercy are you doing?"

Eochaid's footsteps faltered. He looked around in confusion. "Um...I...don't want to run into Amra."

"Ah!" Hutchling exclaimed. "She's visiting her family in Moor, *days* away. You have the city to yourself. Good?"

Eochaid's nervousness eased. He nodded. They continued on.

Hutchling remained quiet. With his mind clear again, Eochaid noticed the silence. "Hutch, is something bothering *you*?"

Hutchling squinted. "Did...did you actually *notice* something?"

"I'm serious," Eochaid replied. "You're never this quiet."

Hutchling opened his mouth for another quip. “No. No, don’t do that,” Eochaid growled. “Don’t bullshit me. Why are you upset?”

Hutchling closed his mouth. He stepped out of the flow of traffic and leaned against a nearby wall, arms crossed, deep in thought. Eochaid watched him. The people of Lave moved on around them.

Hutchling took a deep breath. He stared into the sky. “The vigil’s sending me to Termana. It’s exactly why I chose Beltanian Vigil, and...it means Paul will leave me.”

Termana, continent of jungles, of dark Charduni dwarves, and the kingdom of the Forsaken Elves, half a world away from Ghelspad. Eochaid’s mind reeled a little thinking of the distance. He thought of kind words to say: ‘He might wait for you,’ or ‘Ask him to come,’ or ‘Maybe magic can...’

He’s already thought of all that, Eochaid realized. He’s smart about these things. And that’s why he’s so sure.

A lump sat in his belly as he saw the pain on Hutchling’s face. He fought the urge to speak words he knew would mean nothing. Hutchling would go. Paul would stay with the man or not, however fate decided. Eochaid would go to Pelpernoi and become the vigilant he was meant to be or not, however fate decided.

He heard Corporal Sennet’s voice in his head again: *The day will come, Lenahr, when the vigil needs your all.*

He pulled Hutchling upright and put an arm around his shoulder. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not. You’re the best negotiator I know. If you don’t figure it out, it’s because nobody could. But it’s not over tonight, is it? So live normally until the vigil ships you off to some mysterious shithole on the far side of the world.”

Hutchling snorted with laughter.

“See?” Eochaid said. “I *do* listen.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Eochaid's backside ached from hours of horseback riding. His horse obediently followed Hutchling's, and he was happy to let it lead itself. It was many days' journey across Vesh to reach the western border, and he was already tired of riding after only two. The clopping of hooves, his own mount's mixing in and out of rhythm with Hutchling's and the packhorse's, made him drowsy, but the pain in his lower back nudged him constantly awake. *I'll never enjoy riding*, he thought.

Hutchling had insisted on coming. He wasn't leaving for Termana for another month — plenty of time to escort Eochaid to the border and return. Eochaid was grateful. He'd only crossed this part of Vesh once before over a year ago, on foot and going the opposite way.

Paul had stayed in Lave to prepare things for the long trip. Eochaid shook his head, remembering the conversation between the big bard and the cleric.

Eochaid had been sitting by the hearth, picking through a book about the Divine War in the morning light that drenched the apartment. He was reading about the fall of the titan Mesos when quiet voices in the loft above caught his attention.

"...a very long diplomatic mission," Hutchling said. "I'll probably be gone a year or more."

Covers rustled. An uncomfortable moment of silence passed.

Eochaid heard the covers shift again, and then Hutchling spoke, in a choked, nervous tone. "We knew I'd be sent off eventually. I expected another two-month mission, like Burok Torn. But...even if I could say no, I can't pass this up!"

The floorboards creaked, and Eochaid saw a shadow as someone crossed the loft. "I understand, sweet one," Paul said. "I do, but..."

Hutchling interrupted, words coming in a nervous rush. "Vesh needs envoys to the elves, and I'd be supporting other missions that I can't even talk about, and there's a whole island of Madrielites out there that—"

"A year, Tarol," Paul said. "That's a very long time. How often will you visit home?"

Another pause. Eochaid suffered for his friend's suffering, but he could only stay silent.

"I...I don't think I can. We have to go by ship. They can't teleport so far over the Blood Sea, so..."

“Over the...” Paul murmured. “Tarol, are you going to *Termana*?” The floorboards creaked again, someone walking back to the bed. “Could they use a storyteller? Or a scribe?”

“You want to go?” Hutchling stammered. “I thought you’d retired. That you were done with travel.”

“Around Ghelspad, sure. I’ve already been from sea to sea. But *Termana*...the continent’s three times larger than Ghelspad, and there’s so much there to see! Magnificent elven cities, ancient ruins built of crystal, forests that dwarf the Ganjus....and that’s just what we *know*.”

“But it’s months to cross the Blood Sea by ship, even with a sea witch driving the winds,” Hutchling said. “You *hate* ships. You’ll be seasick the entire trip.”

Stop trying to talk him out of it, shit-brains!

“I’ll have *you* there to keep me well.”

The bedclothes rustled again. Eochaid grinned at the sound, picked up his boots and cloak, stole to the door as silently as a ghost, and left.

When he’d returned, Paul and Hutchling were arguing again, about whether it was permissible for Paul to pay the rent to keep their apartment during their time away.

Thinking back on it, Eochaid chuckled to himself. The pain in his low back felt more distant, and the ride ahead a little shorter.

• • •

A week later, they dismounted at the shores of Mountain Tear Loch — *Denev’s Aquifer, in Veshian*, Eochaid corrected himself. There was a trading village there with a small dock that reminded Eochaid a little of Trela. A few fishing boats plied their trade in the distance out on the lake.

“Your new sergeant should arrive in a few hours,” Hutchling said. They watered, fed, and brushed their horses and then tied them to a hitching rail at the end of the dock.

“Watch the supplies,” Hutchling said. “I’ll get us food.”

Eochaid waited and fiddled with his new medallion, wondering when he’d have the need to use it. The little moth carved in amber warded off harmful magic and could even turn aside a spell entirely if he concentrated on it. *I thought the Haggard Hills was just a wasteland. What kind of magic’s out there that every vigilant in Pelpernoi needs this?*

Hutchling brought fresh bread and cheese and they sat on the edge of the dock to wait, dipping their feet in the lake’s clear, icy water. “Purest water in the region,” Hutchling said. “You can see the bottom of the lake even way out towards the middle! I came through here on the way to Burok Torn.” He flopped back on the sun-warmed wood and watched the clouds.

“I remember,” Eochaid said. “I came up the Eni River on my way to join the vigil.”

Eochaid rechecked his equipment. The vigil had given him enchanted swords, which he still marveled at. Even after a week they were razor sharp and did not need honing or oil. He pricked his finger against the edge, and the thin white cut quickly filled with red.

“Huh. Think you could use a whetstone? Apparently, I won’t need it.”

Hutchling nibbled his hunk of bread. “Nice of the vigil to give you magic swords.”

“Yeah. Nice. But why will I need them? What’s out in those hills that you need magic and charmed weapons to fight? Before I went to the Mourning Marshes, I did *weeks* of research on the region. I know next to nothing about the Haggard Hills. I could barely find six pages, even going through Paul’s library.”

“Well, nobody *knows* much. Whatever the gods did there killed everything, even the soil, and it left a lot of residual magic behind. I understand that weird shit wanders those hills. Twisted creatures. Undead things.”

“So these things just live — or unlive — there? What kind of threat do they pose to Vesh?”

Hutchling shrugged. “No idea. Less than the slitherin or the orcs, given Pelpernoi’s a small vigil.”

“And mostly spellcasters. What do they need with a stalker?”

Hutchling shook his head. “Not a clue. Might just be getting stuck with you. But the sergeant is coming all this way for you and the supplies we brought.”

Hutchling paused and shuffled awkwardly.

“Uh, listen,” he said, “I guess command was serious about giving you discipline. I saw your papers, and...she’s a real hard-ass. She’s probably going to be in a pissy mood.”

Eochaid frowned. “What do you know about her?”

“Just what I read in the report. Sergeant Eltheriabath Gandariotharias.”

Eochaid wrinkled his nose and silently sounded out the name a few times. “That’s a mouthful. Elvish?”

“Probably.”

“Maybe she’ll be like Arborneath. She was hard, but at least she was fair.”

Hutchling shook his head. “Arborneath? She was *easy*. This one’s evidently a nutcase. Wants you on your toes at all times. No leeway on anything. It *has* to be her way, or she’ll kick you in the ass. Or so the, uh, report said.”

Eochaid felt the lump of bread in his stomach slowly turn over. “That doesn’t sound very...Veshian.” *Really, it sounds Calastian.*

“She’s not, apparently. Or at least her parents aren’t.”

“Forsaken elf?”

Hutchling shrugged. “That would make sense.”

Eochaid gritted his teeth. “I’ll manage,” he said, but inside his head the words echoed hollowly.

Hutchling looked away and gazed across the lake. “Mmhm,” he mumbled, finishing off the last of his bread.

They sat for another hour or so, cooling their feet in the lake. Eochaid worried that this might be his last time to relax for a while and tried to make the best of it. They chatted about little, unimportant things as they waited.

Then Hutchling pointed out a small boat coming towards them — not one of the fishing boats. They dried off their feet and put their socks and boots back on. Eochaid checked the supplies. He straightened his uniform and beat the dust from his cloak and boots. Then he dunked his hands and straightened his hair. “I should’ve bathed,” he muttered.

The boat scudded over the water, closing the distance quickly. Several figures stood on the deck. The boat captain and a couple of sailors worked the ropes and rudder. Eochaid also picked out three vigilants in uniform, each wearing a scarf in the Pelpernoi colors.

One was a human woman. She wore no armor and directed a short rod at the sail, which seemed to propel the little craft. The second was an elf in hide armor with a wooden staff, leaning on the stern rail of the boat.

The last, a female elf or half-elf, was talking to the boat captain. She wore leather armor much like Eochaid’s and carried a rapier and longbow. Her scarf covered her face, the ends twirling in the wind. Eochaid found it slightly odd, though he’d done the same on occasion to keep insects away.

The woman with the rod, who Eochaid guessed to be a spellcaster of some kind, lowered it and stood back. The boat slowed with only ordinary wind to fill its sails, and the sailors tacked it toward the dock. They shouted and threw ropes for Eochaid and Hutchling to pull the little vessel against the dock. One of the sailors leapt off to tie it up.

Eochaid and Hutchling stepped back and saluted as the vigilants disembarked. The newcomers saluted in return, and two of them went to check the supplies.

“Lieutenant,” the woman in the scarf said. Hutchling nodded back to her. The cleric was grinning like a fool. *You’re smiling because she used your new rank*, Eochaid thought, *but she’s about to make my life miserable.*

“Vigilant Lenahr,” She continued, rounding on Eochaid. “I’ve read your file. I’m sure you feel like Pelpernoi is beneath you, coming from Arcernoth Delta. Let me remind you that you serve at the pleasure of the Veshian people, and *serve* you will. I’m going to teach you to be humble, vigilant! I will have you digging ditches. You will haul water. You’ll polish my boots. I’ll have you scrubbing *pots* if it’s what the vigil needs from you!”

The sergeant marched up and down the dock, eyes burning into him the whole time. Eochaid’s ears reddened under the withering tirade. And yet even with her face hidden by the scarf, there was something familiar about her.

Eochaid glanced between Hutchling and the sergeant. “*Gandy?*”

Hutchling burst out laughing. The sergeant pulled down the cloth from her face. It *was* Gandy, and she was smirking. “How long did you wind him up for me, Hutch?” she asked.

Hutchling bent over, trying to catch his breath. “Hours...” he finally stammered. “Had him convinced you were some traditional Elven hardass. Thought he was going to puke!”

Gandy crossed her arms and tapped her foot. “I’m hardly a pushover.”

Hutchling wiped tears from his eyes. “No, but you’re still *Gandy*.”

Gandy rolled her eyes at Hutchling, and then opened her arms. “C’m’ere,” she said, pulling them both into a big hug. “Missed you two idiots.”

Eochaid blinked in confusion. “Is this serious? You’re really my new platoon leader?”

“Yep. Don’t think I’ll go easy on you, though.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to...ma’am.”

Gandy snorted. Then she looked him level in the eyes. “I heard you got in trouble in Arcernoth.”

Eochaid nodded.

“You can tell me the details later,” she said. “For now, I want some time with my old friends before we split up again.”

Gandy turned to the vigilants who’d accompanied her. “We’re spending the night here. Henmeth, after you check the supplies, see if this village has an inn. If not, can you do your shelter spell somewhere around here?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the female spellcaster replied, “and yes, I can.”

• • •

The village, a frequent stop for traders coming up the Eni River, had two inns. Gandy booked their rooms in the one nearest the docks and took over a large table in the common room next to the hearth. Over a platter of mutton and vegetables and a pitcher of cheap ale, Eochaid met his fellow vigilants.

Henmeth was a wizard, specifically a conjuror and weather mage. The male elf, Rahalphion, was a druid who, as soon as they’d settled in at the table, transformed into a large dog and curled up on the floor.

“Rah’s not much for conversation,” Henmeth explained nervously.

The dog snorted at her comment. Henmeth handed him a leg of meat, which he happily gnawed on.

Eochaid glanced at Hutchling, who shrugged and poured himself an ale.

Over food, Gandy worked out logistics with Henmeth. Rather than interrupt, Eochaid turned to his supper. Hutchling, meanwhile, demolished a mug of ale and started a fresh one, pouring some for Eochaid as well.

Eochaid took the offered cup and asked, “So how’d you two plan your little trick on me?”

“Magic,” Hutchling explained. “I saw Gandy’s name on your transfer paperwork. I contacted her with a sending spell and we worked out the prank.”

Gandy raised her mug and saluted Hutchling with it.

Eochaid just shook his head. Gandy had grown since he’d last seen her. She sat taller in her seat and had a seriousness about her that both impressed and saddened him.

“A sergeant already!” Eochaid marveled. “Last I knew they shipped you to the Ganjus. How’d you become a sergeant in *Pelpernoi*?”

“Busy year,” Gandy growled. “I busted my ass for it, I wanted out of the Ganjus so badly. Too many elves. No offense, Rah.”

The dog huffed in reply.

“Pelpernoi was close enough to the Ganjus that it wasn’t much of a leap. Plenty of joint work between the vigils, so transferring was trivial. The promotion from corporal to sergeant was a little unexpected, but Pelpernoi’s unusual.”

The innkeeper came by with a fresh pitcher of ale. Henmeth poured some into a bowl and set it down for Rahalphion, who lapped it up.

“May I speak freely, ma’am?” Henmeth asked.

“Of course,” Gandy replied. “Always.”

“Why didn’t you want to work with elves, ma’am? After all, you’re half—”

“*Human*. I’m half human,” Gandy snarled.

“But *one* of your parents was an elf,” Henmeth replied.

“Wrong,” Gandy corrected. “Both of my parents were half human, half elf. Refugees from Termana, children of human parents enslaved by the elves. Elven culture is fucked up, and I want nothing to do with it!”

Eochaid looked across the table at Gandy. She’d gone almost red in the face and risen partway out of her seat. He remembered Amra’s jab about her ancestry back in training, and how it had driven her off in tears. *I had no idea where it all came from...*

“But Ganjus elves are nothing like Termanan elves,” Henmeth stammered. “They don’t—”

“Permission revoked!” Gandy barked.

Henmeth paled and looked down at her food.

Eochaid frowned. “Gandy, I don’t think — ow!”

Hutchling was glaring at him. The cleric had just kicked him in the shin.

“Ma’am,” Henmeth murmured, “it’s been a long day, and I’m not feeling hungry. May I be dismissed, ma’am?”

Gandy deflated. “You don’t need to...” she began, then stopped and sighed. “Yes, dismissed.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Henmeth collected her things and fled towards the stairs. Rahalphion gave a gruff bark. Gandy waved him toward the stairs. The druid snapped up his bone and trotted off after Henmeth with it in his mouth.

Gandy dropped her head in her hands. “Really fucked that up, didn’t I? One conversation, over ale, and everyone’s all...twitchy.”

Hutchling laid his hand on Gandy’s shoulder and gave her a squeeze. “It seems their commander is rather twitchy herself.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Their old sergeant died less than a month ago. Some undead horror sucked the bones right out of him. I got promoted to platoon leader. And I’m still trying to figure it all out.”

“Well, you’ve got Lenahr at your back now.”

“Yeah.” She opened her eyes and gave a little smile. “Glad you’re here, Lenahr. And I swear to you that I’ll get you back on track.”

“Not pulling him into your bed would be a great start,” Hutchling muttered.

“What? Eugh! Why would you even suggest...” She stared at Eochaid. “Did you sleep with your *last* commander?”

Eochaid looked down into his drink, feeling his face burn.

“Varith,” Hutchling said.

“Varith?” Gandy was flabbergasted. “Fuck, I bet she was the cause of *all* your trouble.”

Eochaid raised his hands in protest. “She wasn’t—”

“She was,” Hutchling interrupted.

Eochaid turned on the cleric. “I thought I told you that in confidence, *Brother* Tarol!”

Hutchling grimaced. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry, Lenahr. I won’t tell anyone,” Gandy continued. She smiled sympathetically. “I’ll help you find your feet again. But that said...” She pointed a stern finger at him. “If you try any shit, or disobey orders, I *will* kick your ass so hard you won’t be able to shit for a month.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Eochaid acknowledged with a salute. “I’d expect nothing else.”

Gandy groaned. “I hate all this ‘ma’am’ shit!”

Hutchling threw his arms out and draped himself over their shoulders. “I love you guys!”

The three of them chatted late into the night. Gandy, like Eochaid, seemed reticent to talk about her recent past, and he was grateful that she didn’t press him about his own. Instead, they celebrated Hutchling’s upcoming trip to Termana and retold old tales from training.

Hutchling dozed off. Gandy, whose elven heritage reduced her need to sleep, helped Eochaid wrestle their friend upstairs and into bed. They talked quietly until Gandy’s head began to nod. She went to her room and Eochaid was alone with the snoring cleric. He sat by the window and watched the light of the stars on the lake until sleep finally claimed him, too.

• • •

Eochaid woke to the sound of scolding.

“Well, they wouldn’t have *made* you a sergeant if you weren’t ready, so that’s no excuse!”

Is that Hutch? Eochaid thought. *How’s he even awake?* He cracked an eye. Gandy sat on Hutchling’s bed, her head hanging.

“You’ve always stood up for your friends,” Hutchling said. “Stand up for your men, too. You don’t have to be Sergeant Gandariotharias — just be Sergeant Gandy. They don’t *have* to like you, but don’t make it impossible, either.”

Gandy nodded.

“Now, go build Henmeth up the way you built me up in training.”

Gandy sniffled. “I...Hutch, thank you for—”

“Go!” Hutchling pointed imperiously to the door. Gandy rose and left, wiping her eyes.

“Wow,” Eochaid said, after the door closed.

Hutchling smiled and flopped back onto his bed. “*That* is what they pay me for,” he said.

“Miracles?” Eochaid asked.

“Finding Madriel’s grace in people.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Eochaid squinted into the west. A tan haze colored the horizon.

“That’s the Hills,” Gandy said. “With so little vegetation, the wind kicks up a lot of dust.” She handed him a scarf like her own. “You’ll want this.”

Their boat left them on a rocky jetty just above the waterfall that formed the head of the Eni River. It was on the far side from the traders’ rest stop where Eochaid had slept once on his way to Lave. The vigilants unloaded their gear and supplies. There was little here but a few tumbledown sheds and lean-tos. Henmeth and Rahalphion pulled a battered wagon from one of the buildings. Then Rahalphion transformed himself into a horse and backed between the traces for Henmeth to harness him.

“Not enough forage in the Hills for us to keep many horses,” Gandy said, bucking a crate into the wagon.

Eochaid nodded appreciatively. “Never got to work with a druid in Arcernoth. Don’t know why — we could have used someone like Rah.”

“Pelpernoi’s magic-rich,” Gandy said. “With all the corrupt, twisted-up magic buried in the land around here, we need casters. You and I are there to watch their backs while they’re concentrating on lofty thoughts and rituals.”

They loaded the wagon and Rahalphion pulled. Since he didn’t need reins, Henmeth and Gandy used the driver’s seat to watch the surrounding lands. Eochaid leaned against the supplies in back to watch to the rear.

The boundary of the Hills was starker than Eochaid expected. The land near the lake was green, new spring growth pushing out everywhere. Elderly trees produced patches of shade, and birds sang. But later that day as they climbed the first real hill, the land changed utterly over the space of a single mile of riding.

Flowers dwindled away, as did the songs of the birds. The grass became patchier and patchier until it grew only in clumps. Moss clotted the sides of dead trees, many of which had fallen and exposed straggly, dry roots. Soon fine, stinging dust swirled in the wind, and the vigilants tied up their scarves. Even Rahalphion stopped so that Gandy could put a bandana over his nose. *The Blood Steppes were brown*, Eochaid remembered, *and the plants were tough and sickly or twisted, but this is eerie.*

The wagon's creaking scattered a herd of goats. They fled outward, but arced back towards the green behind him rather than flee ahead into the barren brown lands. Eochaid shivered. "They don't like it out here," he muttered.

Gandy nodded. "The war killed everything. The soil itself, even. People fell where they stood, and animals died in their nests or burrows. Even the bugs and worms in the earth. You can dig down to the clay, and there's just...nothing."

"So, what's out here? Hutch said there were magical creatures, undead things...?"

Gandy shrugged equivocally. "That's a lot of it. But there are animals and plants here and there. Little patches that try to grow back, and hardy beasts that claw out a living. And people, too, though I'm sure you can imagine the sort of person who'd come out here. Mostly hiding from something, and *all* some flavor of crazy or another. Even us!"

"Except for the Healing Circle," Henmeth interjected.

"The Healing Circle's green and healthy, yes," Gandy replied, "but those druids are definitely crazy." She smiled at Henmeth. "Oh, and I transferred to Pelpernoi on purpose, unlike the rest of you, so I'm crazy, too."

Gandy spread her arms as if inviting anyone to disagree, and Henmeth laughed, first a nervous giggle and then a real laugh.

They rode until the sun was high in the sky. Gandy and Henmeth explained more about the vigil and its work with the Healing Circle, protecting the druids whose rituals powered the Circle as they carefully cultivated the new life it made possible.

"Mostly you'll be walking either the borders of the Circle or out in the Hills, looking for any kind of trouble," Gandy said. "Raiders, uprisings among the manticora, or wandering creatures. Lave's worried about an invasion either from the Blood Steppes or the Hornsaw, but I think they're both more of a threat to the Ganjus than to Vesh. To reach Vesh, war parties have to go through the mountains, cross the lake, or traverse the Canyon of Souls. The elves are easier targets."

"The land itself's a problem, too," Henmeth added. "A lot of erosion due to the lack of plants. Dust storms. Flash flooding when it rains. And really ugly thunderstorms." The weather mage shuddered.

They stopped to rest in the shadow of a tumbled watchtower. The hill it stood on had subsided and slid, knocking over the tower and burying whatever it once protected.

Gandy found a small creek and they filled a large bucket with the cool water. She warned Eochaid not to drink from it until Rahalphion had purified it. "A lot of the water out here will make you sick, even if it's running," she said. "The only water that's usually safe is fresh rainwater."

They hauled the bucket back to the wagon together. "You must be used to this," Gandy said.

Eochaid grunted and showed his ring hand. "I guess they're too expensive to give to everyone. Useful, though. Second place I've served where there wasn't anything safe to eat."

Rahalphion didn't take his elven form again to cast the purification spell. The druid brushed his broad horse's nose against the bucket and whickered softly, then stepped back. Henmeth and Gandy filled their water bags, and then the druid leaned down again and drank his fill. Eochaid had only sipped from his own water and wasn't hungry, so he climbed the broken stones of the tower and stood watch while the others ate and rested.

The lack of color surprised him. Even in the Mourning Marshes there'd been more than a single shade: the vivid, poisonous hues of deadly plants, the many rusty shades of the mud, the patterned backs of serpents and spiders. Here, the hills spread out, brown and gray and simply dull. The few dimly green patches on the landscape stuck out like stars.

Movement. He squinted: a dust devil with a blooming cloud above it, perhaps two miles distant. He watched it catch loose soil and gray branches, throwing them about. Then an arc of purple struck from the cloud down into the soil. The cloud dissipated almost instantly, and the dust devil grew shorter, seemingly compressing itself down to the ground. It spun faster and faster, no longer moving away from the spot the lightning had struck.

"Uh...Gandy?"

The half-elf looked up at him.

He pointed. "I think I see some of Henmeth's weird weather."

Gandy and Henmeth followed the line of his finger.

"Oh, crumbs," Henmeth said, and packed away her kit.

"Rah, get over here and hitch up," Gandy grumbled. "We have a manifestation." The druid whinnied and clopped over to the cart. Eochaid scrambled down the wall and collected the empty pail.

They rattled over the dusty hills towards the dust devil's stopping point. Gandy sat Eochaid in her spot beside Henmeth and stood in the wagon where she could see the best, bow strung and in her free hand. Henmeth craned her own neck to track the swirls of dust as they subsided. Eochaid checked his blades, then wondered if they'd be of any use.

The wagon bounced over the final hill. The dust devil was gone. Small fires smoldered in the dead, scorched grass by an abandoned cottage with a collapsed roof. A plough stuck out of furrowed but lifeless earth, and standing next to it was...Eochaid wasn't sure.

He glanced at Henmeth. The wizard's mixture of delight and concern reminded Eochaid of Cooper.

Well, I can guess what that means. He drew his swords.

The thing was inexplicable. Twists of cloth tangled around scraps of wood and bone. A bony ribcage was at the center, with a milking stool for hips and barrel-staves for legs. It had one skeletal arm, but the other was a broken hay rake. In place of a skull, a broken wagon wheel spun lazily on dry neck bones. The bizarre beast grubbed around in the dust near the plough, making a pile of ox bones.

"Henmeth and Rah, put that thing down," Gandy called from her perch. "Lenahr and I will draw it off."

The wagon clattered to a stop and Rahalphion shifted from horse to elf, dropping out of the harness. He and Henmeth jogged to the cover of a low stone wall. Gandy jumped off the wagon, Eochaid following. She nodded towards the cottage and clapped him on the shoulder. Then they were off.

“Keep it busy,” she panted as they ran, “and be ready for surprises!” Eochaid grunted agreement and peeled off towards the junkman. It was waving its ‘hands’ over the pile of ox bones, which were quivering and shifting, coming into some kind of order.

“Hey!” he yelled, and struck at its knee. The new sword connected cleanly. It scattered some splinters and scraps of cloth but didn’t stagger the creature as he’d hoped. He ducked and circled as the thing turned on him. Its wheel-head whirled, and it waved its hands furiously over its head at him.

He jabbed at it again, with both blades this time. Though they hit, they did little damage. The junkman swept a rake arm at him, driving him back. It turned and stretched its other hand out to the pile of bones, which lurched onto hooved feet, a horned head grinding into position.

Eochaid lunged again, stabbing into the small of the thing’s back. He twisted his swords and ripped out a hunk of straw and cotton. The junkman lashed out, its wooden elbow clipping Eochaid’s head and nearly bowling him over.

Hells, he thought. *I can’t hurt this thing.*

Arrows thudded into the creature’s shoulder from the cottage. It pivoted towards Gandy and took two long steps in her direction. A green arrow from Henmeth’s direction hit the thing in the back, dissolving into a spray of liquid, but it didn’t seem to notice. Eochaid shook off his dizziness and took a swipe at it, nicking one leg. It flailed an arm behind it and turned around again.

Henmeth called out an incantation and pointed at the thing, launching a pair of fiery bolts at it. Where they struck, the junkman’s body charred and smoked. It threw its head back in a soundless roar and looked around to see what had hurt it. Henmeth squeaked and dropped out of sight behind the wall. *Fire. Wish I could conjure up flames on my swords.* The junkman, head lowered, took a step away from Eochaid and toward the wall. “No!” Eochaid yelled. “Over here, you trash heap!” The creature spun back to face him again.

I just have to keep it busy, Eochaid reminded himself, *keep its eyes on me.* He shifted one sword to an underhand grip and danced back, guarding with the underhand blade, stabbing and feinting with the other. Gandy peppered the creature with arrows, but then the ox-thing lumbered in her direction.

Eochaid circled, drawing the junk-man’s attention away from the cottage and especially the low wall. The beast staggered after him, sweeping its arms, but Eochaid blocked its blows.

“Rahalphion,” Henmeth shouted. “Use fire!” Rahalphion popped out of hiding and gestured at the creature.

A pillar of golden-red flame erupted from midair, blasting the junkman. The junkman staggered, head turning this way and that, but did not fall. It stretched out its hand towards Eochaid, skeletal fingers beckoning.

A wind whipped his clothing. *No — not a wind.* His clothing rippled and moved on its own, even his armor. They fought his movements as if walking and acting according to some other will. His right boot lifted, and he staggered a step toward the two casters.

The smoking junkman ambled towards the plough. The ox-thing, having chased Gandy inside the cottage, cantered over to meet him.

Eochaid took another jerky step towards the spellcasters. He used his strength to trip himself as his boots tried to take another. Henmeth glanced anxiously at him.

“Forget me!” Eochaid shouted. “Do the fire thing again! Hit them again!”

Henmeth looked away and concentrated her attention on the junkman again. Rahalphion transformed into a bear and clambered over the wall, watching the two magical creatures warily.

The junkman stepped behind the plough and pointed ahead. The ox-thing began to pull, and the plough moved, cutting a dusty furrow in the earth.

Eochaid’s mind swam. *Are...are they ploughing?*

He set the thought aside. Instead, he concentrated on the amulet at his breast. *Break the spell*, he thought. He focused his will on the bit of amber. *Break the spell. Break the spell!*

His clothing rippled, and he felt his hair stand up. Then something popped around him and his limbs were his own.

Henmeth shouted. Eochaid saw a brilliant red bead of destruction launch from her finger and strike the junkman in the chest, exploding and engulfing both the oddities and their plough and raining burning junk on the field and the cottage.

“Haha!” Gandy shouted, crouched in the doorway of the cottage. “Entirely to *bits!* Well done, Henmeth!”

The wizard did a little skip and clasped her hands to her chest. Rahalphion roared victoriously. Eochaid tried to keep his grin within reason as he got to his feet. *Sergeant Gandy*, he thought, shaking his head.

• • •

“So, can someone tell me now...what *was* that thing?” he asked, as they beat out the last patches of burning scrub.

“No idea,” Gandy said.

Henmeth frowned and squeezed her chin with her fingers, serious and thoughtful. “Well, I guess I’d call it a spontaneous golem if I had to name it, but I’ve never heard of one manifesting like this,” she said. “Less likely, it could have been an elemental, a spirit,

an extraplanar chaos creature, or a curse of some kind triggered by loose magic..." Her eyes widened. "Samples!" she shouted. She ran back to the wagon and dug out a small box with sigils on its sides and its hinged top, then picked through the fragments of junk and ox-bones, putting bits of each into the box.

Gandy shrugged. "We'll leave when she's done."

"Did you see them at the end?" Eochaid asked.

"What do you mean?" Gandy replied.

"Well, it looked like they were...ploughing."

Gandy shrugged.

"Well, was that...I mean, is...is that really dangerous? We could have just left them alone."

Gandy shook her head. "The things out here are unpredictable. What if mister 'gonna-lay-in-the-crops-for-winter' there had kept ploughing that row all the way to the Kelder Mountains? What if it hit a boulder, flew into a rage, and went looking for people to kill? What if it kept raising bones until this place looked like Hollowfaust?"

Eochaid recalled his rebellious clothing. "Ahh."

"We don't know enough," Gandy continued. "So for now, what we can, we destroy. What we can't, we contain. And anything else...well, we note where it is, we watch it, and we warn everyone away. There are a lot of things in the world right now that *nobody* should touch."

• • •

Gandy's group traveled on over the dusty, empty hills. Each night when they rested, Henmeth used a spell to conjure a comfortable, secure cottage of packed sod and stone. Each little shelter assembled itself miraculously out of the ground and dissolved into a heap of rubble the next day.

The cottages guarded their occupants, as well: A bell would ring loudly if anyone tampered with the windows and door or approached too close. The spell even created bunks and tables inside.

Eochaid shook his head in wonder on first stepping inside. "All this from dead dirt and stones?"

Henmeth shrugged. "It's not all that inviting..."

"Inviting?" Eochaid interrupted. "In Arcernoth we slept in the fork of a tree in the rain when we were lucky enough to *find* trees. This? I've stayed in *inns* that were worse than this."

Henmeth blushed and stammered a thank you.

Each night, Eochaid would stand watch as the others slept. Gandy or Rahalphion stayed up with him in shifts, and then he would sleep in the wagon in the early hours of their journey the next day. Only once did something trigger the cottage's alarm, and the alarm bell itself drove whatever had approached back into the night.

The dangers they faced appeared during the day.

Once, Gandy halted them to hunt down a shambling trio of emaciated, leathery undead whose trail they'd crossed. There was something pitiful about them, Eochaid thought. They straggled along like three lost, thirsty travelers. Their nature wasn't obvious until the vigilants drew close enough to see their sagging skin and empty eye sockets. Rahalphion and Henmeth easily dispatched the creatures. Eochaid hung back and found better ways to guard the two casters, but it still took a conscious effort to do that rather than going in for the kill. Still, he felt a grudging pleasure when Gandy complimented him on his improved technique.

Then two days later they approached a waterhole to discover a grove of ghostly vegetation had sprung up around it. Rahalphion shied away as they approached and pulled them to a stop. He transformed into his elven self and waved the others back. Carefully, he approached the edge of the effect, sniffing the air. Then he produced a berry from one of his pockets and tossed it among the translucent fronds. The instant it touched them, it crumbled and dried out, hitting the ground with a *tick*. Rahalphion came back, shaking his head. "Don't touch those," he said. "Mark it."

Henmeth nodded and pulled a map out of her scrolls and papers, and they made notes on it before continuing to the next source of water.

They reached the village of Hope a week later.

He smelled the Healing Circle before he saw it: a faint but definite scent of living soil, something he hadn't thought would have an odor of its own. They followed a clear path towards the valley of the Circle, winding between the hills towards the sheltered area the druids had chosen. The line around the Circle was even clearer than the margin of the Hills had been. The green formed a clear edge that curved away to the horizon in both directions.

Emerald grass clung to the hillsides, but the dry ground eroded out from under it, tumbling rafts of grass into the valleys. Many of those fallen mats browned and died, but not all. Some of them carried enough living soil to sustain themselves, making patches of hungry green. The Circle fed life, strengthening it enough to seed its own regrowth.

As they crossed into the green, a hawk riding the wind above them changed its path to pass overhead. Gandy raised her hand and waved at it. It called out once, long and piercing, and then returned to its hunt. "They're our eyes," Gandy said. "The druids prefer we not build watchtowers, so they've just...asked the animals to alert them all when something new comes toward the valley."

Rahalphion stopped them at a pond to drink and rest a little. It was the first water they hadn't had to purify on the whole journey. Eochaid let Henmeth spend some of her enthusiasm, explaining to him at length how the magic of the Circle worked in conjunction

with the land's own properties to encourage and invigorate life. Even Gandy showed a little pride in the work.

Hope itself sat around a large pond fed from natural springs near the southern end of the valley. Coming down from the valley's lip, fields were visible. The elves working the crops raised their heads in greeting as the wagon rolled by.

The druids made few buildings. Those that they did, they mostly shaped out of sod or stone, rough and unfinished. It wasn't until near the center of Hope that Eochaid saw his first permanent-looking structure: a long, two-story compound made of cob with a thatched roof. Elven workers climbed a scaffold of vines and trees at one corner, adding a squat silo there, and various large animals hauled tarps of freshly mixed, wet cob to the site.

Rahalphion pulled the wagon around the corner of the town center and toward a low building with the sun symbol of Vesh carved into its wide double doors. He stopped by the doors and transformed back into his normal elven form. Gandy jumped out of the wagon and Eochaid followed suit. Henmeth climbed into the wagon bed and untied the ropes holding down their cargo.

Gandy elbowed Eochaid and pointed at the sod-sided structure. "You're looking at Pelpernoi's one permanent building. As a concession for the protection of our patrols in the neighboring hills, the druids allow us *one* for storage — supplies, files, that sort of thing. Command had to fight to get it, too. The druids don't want *anyone* who doesn't follow Denev putting down roots here. We call it the Veshian Embassy sometimes to annoy them."

Gandy whistled loudly. One of the doors opened, and two elves in vigil garb stepped out and saluted. She greeted them in Elvish, and they joined the group at the wagon.

Eochaid became aware, quite suddenly, that he was one of only two humans in the valley. He'd never even thought of it before. Like the scent of living earth, the presence of other humans was something he was just accustomed to. This was a kind of isolation he was unfamiliar with. He and Henmeth were outsiders in a way he hadn't been in Lave. Even Rahalphion, who avoided his elven shape whenever he could, fit better in this place than they did.

He looked at Gandy and caught himself in the middle of opening his mouth to speak. He saw, as if for the first time, the sturdiness of Gandy's fine features, the breadth of her jaw, and the powerful set of her nose compared to these elves. And yet Gandy seemed unbothered by this place. *Because she's always an outsider*, he thought. Gandy fit in places because she carved a space for herself.

Eochaid took a crate from Henmeth and carried it into the building. There were long rows of marked crates in the dimly lit warehouse containing various supplies — arrows, clothing, armor, blankets, cold-weather gear, and other equipment.

"That's soap," one of the two elves said, gesturing to Eochaid's crate. "Goes over in that corner." Eochaid found space on a shelf and stowed his burden.

He unloaded more crates and bags full of bandages, vials, scrolls, paper, ink, and finally a metal chest that Henmeth said contained “spell components.” As each container came through the door one of the elven vigilants — the quartermaster, Eochaid figured — noted down the contents and the amount in a small ledger.

Gandy and the quartermaster chatted for a bit. Then she signed the ledger and called her soldiers. “Rah! Henmeth! Collect whatever you’re low on. We won’t be back here for a couple of months. Lenahr, c’mere and let me check over your pack before we go.”

Gandy dug through his bag, nodding appreciatively. “Wow, Lenahr! You pack a tight kit. Here, let’s trade in your bedroll for a heavier one — it gets real cold out in the Hills at night with nothing to stop the wind, even in summer.” They grabbed a new roll with a heavy gray blanket off the shelves.

“And one more thing,” Gandy said. “How many potions of healing d’you have? One? Two?”

“We didn’t carry many unless the platoon was headed for combat,” Eochaid said.

“Huh. Well, you never know when you’ll be the last one still standing and have to revive one of the healers, or yourself. We’re alone out there, and we don’t come back here often. Take two.” Gandy scabbled about in a nearby crate and handed him two small, durable vials of red liquid with thick wax sealing their stoppers.

Eochaid glanced up. The other vigilants were near the front of the building. “Gandy,” he said, “Do, um...do they not want humans hanging around here?”

Gandy laughed hollowly. “They’d never say that. But they...they *tolerate* anyone who’s not an elf in obvious ways. They put up with me because I make it clear I’d rather be out on the Hills.” She sighed. “Well, that’s not totally fair. This place is a symbol of Denev’s power, a gift from her. It’s sacred — that’s why so many incarnates have come here.”

“Incarnates?”

“Druids who turn into...*not* animals. Past lives, or something. Ask me later. Anyhow, they worry that people who don’t worship Denev will disrupt the work they’re doing. Everyone here’s helping the Circle to spread. And since it’s strongly in Vesh’s interest for the Hills to be healthy again, we’re patient with them.”

They finished unloading and joined Henmeth outside. The wagon had been moved out of the way against the building, and only two large burlap bags remained.

“Do we return the wagon to Adurn’s Tear?” Eochaid asked.

“Eventually,” Henmeth explained. “But not on foot. I, or another wizard, will shrink it and teleport back to the lake when our next large supply run is due to arrive.”

Eochaid nodded. “We teleported in a lot of the supplies for Arcernoth. Too difficult and dangerous to cross the marsh with a supply train.”

“We teleport some supplies, but we go fetch large loads like this one,” Gandy said. “We need to patrol that route anyway, so it’s just as well.”

Rahalphion returned, in his horse form. Gandy handed Eochaid his pack and shouldered her own.

“What now?” Eochaid asked.

“Now we politely greet the druids, give them these bags, and then make camp outside of town,” Gandy replied. “The rest of the platoon will meet up with us tomorrow.” She jerked her head towards the large building at the town’s center.

Eochaid took one bag and Rahalphion carried the other, with Henmeth to keep it balanced on his back. They followed Gandy towards the silo construction project.

The builders had finished sealing the second story of their silo. Now they were lifting roughly-shaped stones into place to form the structure of the third. As Eochaid approached, a lumbering gray-skinned giant twice his height heaved a bow-shaped rock the size of a dining bench up and gently set it on the scaffold. The elves on the platform said something to the giant, who laughed and replied in Elvish and took a surprisingly graceful bow, then squatted to grab another stone.

Druids who turn into ‘not animals,’ Eochaid thought. So that’s really an elf?

“Rahalphion, you daffy old beast, welcome home!” A smiling centaur trotted out of the crowd at the grain silo, waving a welcome at the vigilants. He reached out and scratched Rahalphion behind his ear. “Oh, I hope those sacks are what I think they are!”

Gandy threw a lazy salute to the creature. “Cuttings, seeds, and bulbs, all carefully cultivated and preserved for the trip,” she said. “All of what Wysemmesine asked for and a few other things the Veshian horticulturists thought you could use.”

Since nobody was looking at Eochaid, he took a moment to goggle at the centaur. He was larger than Eochaid had imagined centaurs to be, his plough-horse body broader and longer-legged than Rahalphion’s, with a hairy human torso. Cords of muscle bulged in his arms, and his eyes glinted, feral under thick brows.

The centaur plucked the heavy sack from Rahalphion’s back and reached his hand out to Eochaid. “I’ll take them,” he said. Eochaid held out his own sack. The centaur lifted it easily. He glanced over his shoulder at Gandy. “Sergeant Gandariotharias, you’ll meet us up by Wysemmesine’s?” Without waiting for an answer, he rumbled away at a canter towards a hillside farm.

Gandy glowered after him and sighed heavily. “You heard him. We’re stuck here a while longer.” She waved toward the farm. “Let’s get it over with.” Henmeth smiled and strode ahead. Rahalphion shifted into his dog form and hurried after her, barking cheerfully. Eochaid settled his pack and followed after, and Gandy walked at his elbow.

“Fucking Thorngrove. I *swear* to you, he does it on purpose,” she muttered.

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The terraced fields of the farm on the hillside were different. Rather than single crops, a variety of plants occupied each terrace. Here, a trellis dripped vines. There, a cluster of shrubs. Saplings, flowers, and ground-cover plants of all sorts formed patches, rows, and clumps. Druids walked the terraces, watering or fussing over the plants.

Like Mom's garden on our farm, Eochaid thought, only wilder.

There was a long barn with feed troughs near it. A good-sized boar fed at one, and three deer picked through another. There seemed to be more birds in the air here than Eochaid expected as well, flitting in and out of the barn's eaves or soaring on the late-afternoon currents.

Gandy led them towards one of the larger sod houses. "Thorngrove, we're here!" she shouted. "What did you need from us?"

"We don't need more than you've already brought us, Sergeant," said a nut-brown male elf in a simple tunic, scrubbing dirt from a basket of parsnips in a stone basin by a covered well between the buildings. "Wysemmesine planned a small feast tonight. We've made room for you and your soldiers as thanks for your delivery today and your efforts protecting our work from interruption!"

Thorngrove rinsed his hands and shook them dry. "I realized I wasn't especially clear in my invitation. When I'm in Curran's shape, I acquire his gruffness as well. Few from the Epoch of Hrinruuk had much use for long conversations, and the centaurs of that era were especially bestial."

The centaur, Eochaid realized. This is him. His real form.

He bowed. "I'm glad you all chose to come anyway. Wysemmesine and the others will join us at sunset. They're seeing to the new plants. I'm preparing for the meal. You may all rest here or wander the fields, so long as you don't disturb the plants or animals."

Rahalphion bounded away into the tall grass. Henmeth went looking for Wysemmesine. Gandy found a shady spot to nap in.

Eochaid found himself cleaning roots and tubers with the incarnate druid.

"Your...other form...has its own name?" he asked, after they'd settled into a good rhythm.

"Curran? Yes," Thorngrove said. "He was his own person, you see. Incarnates have an unusual connection to the world. Most druids assume animal shapes, creatures they've seen in the world. I and my fellows take on shapes that we've *been*."

"Our souls are old," he continued. "Yours, mine — the titan Golthain created the first of them eons ago, when Scarn was new. Bodies die, but our spark continues, finding a new shape and seeing through new eyes. Until the gods were born, that's how it was for everyone."

The elf smiled. His eyes carried the weight of years.

Eochaid felt a sense of awe growing in him. "So, you *were* a centaur once? That specific one?"

“Yes,” Thorngrove replied.

“And you remember being him?”

“Yes,” Thorngrove said. “I remember his life, his two mates, their children. I remember dying in a flash flood in the Ganjus. If I concentrate, his thoughts and desires are as vivid as my own.”

Eochaid squinted. “I thought when we die that our souls go to the lands of the gods.”

Thorngrove frowned equivocally. “The Door of Wood calls any soul that is not devoted to the gods, like those of us who follow Mother Denev. Only those who *follow* the gods, who are true to their teachings, go on to live in their god’s home. But before the time of the gods, *all* souls traveled through the Door of Wood to come back in new flesh. That has been true since the first souls were created. It is only recently that some souls forego the Door and dwell on the Divine Planes, as they call them.”

“Recently?”

“If you consider all history. It was several epochs ago, but there have been at least twelve epochs.”

“Epochs? How long is an epoch?”

Thorngrove considered. “Even we incarnates aren’t certain. We know they varied widely. Anywhere from many hundred to several thousand years. Millions maybe.”

Eochaid’s head swam.

Thorngrove laughed. “Humbling, isn’t it, vigilant?”

“All those lives,” Eochaid said. “You remember all of them?”

“Some of them. We mostly concern ourselves with the here and now. If I spent all my time dwelling in the past, I’d miss all the wonders of the present.” The incarnate opened a basket full of large, sturdy leaves and began wrapping the vegetables in them.

Eochaid scrubbed another tuber and contemplated his grimy hands. He considered what he might have been in a past life. *Was I once a giant or a centaur? A deer or a wolf?*

When they finished, he and Thorngrove carried their baskets of food into the building. The room was dominated by an oblong stone table, at least ten feet wide. At its center, a depression held a smoldering bed of coals and ash. The incarnate used metal tongs to bury the leaf-wrapped vegetables one by one in the ashes. Eochaid could smell other food already roasting there.

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After all the packets of vegetables were in the fire pit, Eochaid excused himself and found Gandy under a solitary tree. She had found a wildflower and was picking it apart. Eochaid squatted beside her.

“Dinner’s in an hour,” he said.

Gandy grunted and continued to tease fibers from the plant's stem.

"What now?" Eochaid asked.

Gandy glanced up at him. "What d'you mean, 'what now?'"

"What do we do until dinner?"

"We relax." Gandy gave him a stare halfway between amusement and disbelief. "Gods, Lenahr, *please* don't tell me I have to call you to attention and then *dismiss* you to get you to take the stick out."

Eochaid stood. "I..." he started, and then stopped.

Gandy shook her head. "Lenahr, what's this about? You were never this tightly strung in training, even when you were killing yourself to get into Arcernoth. Just sit your ass down and stare at the clouds for an hour, or whatever you do for fun."

Eochaid felt the tension in his shoulders, the clench in his jaw. "I'm supposed to be on my best behavior," he muttered. "You're supposed to be training the 'stupid' out of me so I stop being a fuckup and become a decent vigilant!"

Gandy's jaw dropped. "You shit-brained Venirian goat-fucker, I'd *never* call you stupid! You're one of the smartest men I've *met*!" She kicked him in the shin. "I took you on because I *know* you're a fantastic soldier. Vesh doesn't know you the way I do. They have to guess whether your screw ups were because you have the brains of a boot-heel or because your blood-mad, hag-hearted gorgon of a bedmate dragged you into them by your ass because you were trying to be decent to her."

Gandy paused. Eochaid felt chills. Her face had gone red and her voice had almost risen to a shout. She took a deep breath to calm herself and shook her head. "I picked you for my platoon, my *squad*. I *want* you with me, and in the vigil. You don't have to be perfect to be decent."

Gandy jerked her head toward the horizon. "Now sit down and watch the gods-damned sunset until these snooty dirt-huggers finish flouncing about with their vegetables."

Chapter Thirty-Three

A steaming boar's carcass lay on a wooden platter at one end of the table. Other platters, heaped high with leaf-packets full of roasted vegetables, sat at various places around the fire pit at its center. Eochaid's mouth watered at the succulent smells, and he'd piled his plate high even though he wasn't hungry.

"To the last of the Ganjus wine!" said Wysemmesine. "Perhaps not until next year, but now we *will* have our own grapes to press!" She raised her goblet to her lips and drank.

"Don't you think your toast is a bit premature?" Thorngrove said. "We won't have our own wine to pour for at least two years, so it's barrels from the Ganjus until then."

"Yes," the female elf replied, swaying a little drunkenly in her seat, "But every sip I have of this reminds me how much we depend on the charity of those back home. And at last, I think I can see the bottom of *that* barrel."

Eochaid drank little of the wine. Even after his conversation with Gandy, he still felt the need to make a good impression on the druids. While he'd studied diplomatic etiquette in training at Bride Lake, he'd found no use for it in Arcernoth. And the one thing Arcernoth *had* taught him was that he did poorly when alcohol was involved.

Instead, his thoughts returned to the concept of souls. Thorngrove's words were a revelation. Growing up, his world allowed only two paths through the afterlife: The good went to Madriel, and the evil went to Belsameth. It'd been only a year or so that he'd lived with the idea of eight afterlives, each a paradise or a prison depending on the nature of the person sent there.

And now, here was another path, and its ramifications were tremendous. Instead of an eternity among friends and relatives at the feet of a god, an eternity of new lives and new forms.

A hand plucked his sleeve.

"Such a look of concentration," Wysemmesine said, "suggests a depth of thought worthy of an incarnate! I must know what has you so enraptured."

Eochaid's cheeks burned. He glanced down at his plate. The elf's placid eyes followed his gaze, then flitted back to watch Eochaid expectantly. He shot a desperate look to Gandy. She grimaced and shook her head uncertainly, then jerked it towards Wysemmesine. *You're on your own.*

“Uh, well...” Eochaid took a slow sip of the wine. “Thorngrove and I were talking earlier, and he told me about the Door of Wood. I’d never heard about that in New Venir, where I’m from.”

The elf flexed an eyebrow. “No, I imagine your prince preferred his subjects to focus on the rewards of the gods, didn’t he? Well, even in the Ganjus incarnates are rare. I’ve met more of them here in a year than I did in my whole life before. I admit, it’s one thing to know that the Door awaits me, but very much another to hear and *see* the truth of it standing beside me at breakfast!”

Thorngrove laughed gruffly and spread his arms, accepting Wysemmesine’s imagined admiration. She smiled an easy smile and poured Eochaid a little more wine.

The knot in Eochaid’s stomach eased. Impulsively, he opened his mouth and let out the question he’d been turning over. “If, uh, Golthain made all our souls...if he was destroyed, and souls are going off to the divine planes now, um...won’t we run out of souls?”

“Run out of...!” Thorngrove said. He snorted. Then he chuckled. Then he pounded the table and buried his head in his arm, caught in a paroxysm of laughter.

Wysemmesine frowned at the incarnate and said a particularly poisonous-sounding Elven word. Then she reassembled her smile and turned back to Eochaid.

“That’s a point of debate among Denev’s chosen. Nobody knows! Many millions died in the Divine War, and even a century afterward those souls are still finding their way home. It will be a very long time before there are enough new beings to absorb them. We can hope that, as the titan who rules this epoch, Denev has found a way to do what Golthain did, but you’re right. It’s not a comfortable thought.”

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly. Wysemmesine and Thorngrove debated one another on points ranging from the future ecology of the Hills to the best cure for a hangover, with Eochaid caught in the middle, arbitrating as best he could. When Gandy pried him loose, the two elves were teaching him how to dance an elven moonlight reel.

Henmeth and Rahalphion had long since left to set up camp. Eochaid and Gandy navigated the dark hills in the starlight together. “Not even going to ask how you did that, Lenahr. It looked like you were having one of your awkward streaks, but you won those two over!” She pounded his back. “And...listen, I’m serious about this — I owe you a favor for keeping their attention. I *hate* talking to those two, answering their smug questions.”

Gandy put on a drunken, sleazy smile and said “So, Sergeant *Gandahhhriothahhhhrias*, what *do* you think of our little community here?”

Eochaid and his sergeant chuckled together as they walked.

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The small camp on the edge of the Healing Circle sat in the green grass on a bluff overlooking the dead brown hills. Henmeth conjured her magical shelter, which took the

shape of a sod house not unlike those of the druids. The vigilants had little more to do the next day than wait for the remainder of Gandy's platoon to arrive.

"They'll trickle in later today or tomorrow," Gandy said. She sat in the shade of the shelter watching the barren landscape beyond. Henmeth sat inside studying the samples she'd retrieved from the bizarre junkman and his skeletal ox.

Gandy let Rahalphion spend his time in Hope with the other druids while they waited, so Eochaid and Gandy had little to do but sit and stare.

"I...I feel like I'm letting down sergeants everywhere by not busting your ass with some aggravating exercise," Gandy said.

"We could spar," Eochaid suggested.

"No...when was the last time you picked up a bow, Lenahr?"

"And actually shot something with it?" Eochaid thought for a moment. "Probably taking a potshot at something out in the marsh when I was on wall watch at Riverrock. I put a couple of arrows in a mire wyrm, but it didn't seem to notice."

"I heard those things are the size of a wagon. That doesn't count." She got up and fetched her longbow and led Eochaid down the slippery dry clay slope of the hillside. At the bottom, they found a loose piece of turf that had failed to put down roots deep enough to survive outside the Circle.

"Okay vigilant," Gandy declared. "I want you to haul that back up to the top of the hill for me."

He snapped her a sharp salute. "Yes ma'am!" He scooped up the mat of grass and scrambled back up the slope. They propped the turf against the chimney of the shelter as a makeshift target.

"Henmeth, we're practicing archery against the side of the house," Gandy called.

"That's fine, the alarm is off." Henmeth replied from inside. "I trust my magic, but please close the shutters first."

"Okay, Lenahr," Gandy said, as she closed the shutters over the window. "Show me what you can do."

Eochaid walked about eighty feet away from the little house, took aim, and fired at the makeshift target. The arrow sank deep into the center of the turf. Eochaid smiled and looked at Gandy.

Gandy looked back, nonplussed. "And?"

"And what?"

"And you've landed your first shot. Unless that was a rabbit, you're going to need to hit it more than once."

"Hey, if I hit it in the right spot, it's going *down*."

Gandy sighed. “First, you took too long to aim. In a fight, you need to get your arrow off, and ready another one. Second, don’t assume that your shot is going to damage. Rabbits don’t wear armor. Third, shooting an arrow at them is going to piss them off, and they’re going to strike back if they can reach you, so you can’t just stand there.”

Gandy drew three arrows from the quiver. She stuck the first in the ground at Eochaid’s feet. The second she jammed into the earth forty feet to his left, and the third a little beyond that and twenty feet closer to the target.

“I want you to run between these three arrows. Each time you pass an arrow, I want you to take a shot. Let’s see how fast you can do it.”

Eochaid checked his grip on the bow and took a deep breath. He ran to the first mark, skidding to a stop and drawing an arrow.

“Keep moving!” Gandy barked. “A single archer standing still is a target!”

Eochaid gritted his teeth, aimed and fired. The shot *chanked* off the stone of the chimney above his target. He loped toward the next mark, drawing an arrow and fitting it as he ran. He slid around the turn, loosing the shaft as he went. It hit the target, barely. He charged back towards his starting point, fingers fumbling for another arrow. As he passed the start, he let his arrow fly and pounded to a stop. The arrow lodged in the wall, just to one side of the target.

“Well, that’s above the level of a raw recruit, but you still shoot like a farmer,” Gandy said. “You see what I was getting at?”

Eochaid shook his head. He tried to imagine running after a buck in the woods outside Trela, firing on the move, filling its flanks with arrows instead of drawing a careful bead on its heart. The thought made him ill.

“Let’s try it again,” Gandy said, “but this time, draw and fire while you’re running, not while you’re turning. And hold your next arrow in your hand rather than reaching all the way back to the quiver.”

Eochaid ran the course several more times. Though he applied Gandy’s techniques, his shots still felt rushed and sloppy. Again and again in his head he imagined a staggering buck gasping and bleeding.

“Sarge, what are you doing to our new recruit?” A halfling in vigil colors and a dusty cloak climbed the grassy slope toward them.

“Training him,” Gandy said.

The halfling snorted. “Training him to what? The home command’s given that kid two very shiny swords and you’re drilling him with your bow? You’re making him eat his soup with a fork!”

“Where’s the rest of your team, Drask?” Gandy asked.

“In town, resupplying,” the halfling said. “Why? You going to give them all dancing lessons too?”

Gandy raised her hands. “I give, I give! It was mostly to pass the time anyhow.” She reached out and took back her bow. “Good attempt, Lenahr. Though I’d still prefer if you don’t get mauled in melee against something you can’t kill.”

“I *could* suggest some techniques,” Drask grumbled.

Gandy’s eyes gleamed, and she smiled humorlessly. “Great! Saves me the trouble of volunteering you.”

The halfling squinted up at her.

“Specialist Drask, meet our newest *stalker* — Lenahr. As a fellow stalker, I expect you to take him under your wing.”

The halfling puffed up his chest. “As the *only* stalker in the *entire* battalion, you mean.”

Eochaid saluted. “Good to meet you, Specialist.”

The halfling looked Eochaid up and down, considering.

“Well, he looks the part, anyway,” Drask said. “Okay kid, buy me a drink, and you can tell me all about yourself.”

There’s a tavern? Eochaid looked to Gandy. She gave him half a nod and jerked her thumb back towards the village. “Sure, why not? The platoon is trickling in, and I bet they’d appreciate it. Wysemmesine’s probably willing to part with a cask of something — but nothing too strong!”

Eochaid and Drask headed down through the tall grass toward the smoke of the farm a few low hills away.

“Slow down a bit, tall fella,” Drask said. “This is a supply run, not a mission. Neither of us need to stretch our legs for it.” Though Drask’s pace was fast for his three-foot frame, it was clear that keeping up with Eochaid’s purposeful stride required a bit of effort.

“Sorry,” said Eochaid, “My father was tall. I got my pace from him.”

“Mmm,” Drask said. “Okay, kid, have you ever worked under another stalker in the field before?”

Kid? Eochaid bristled.

He studied the intense little man who looked back up at him. Despite the halfling’s beardless face and youthful figure, his black hair was thin and gray at the sides, and there were deep lines in the tanned skin around his slightly almond-shaped eyes. *He might be as old as Balak.*

“Yes, sir,” Eochaid replied. “Corporal Sennet and Specialist Jadestone. I trained with them in Arcernoth, although I trained with the rangers too.”

“Good stalkers, are they?”

“Were. They both died. Killed by slitherin. I’m...” He thought for a moment. “I’m not sure if there are any vigil stalkers left in Arcernoth Delta now.”

“Sorry to hear it,” Drask said. The halfling patted Eochaid on his hip. Eochaid flinched at the unexpected gesture, but the sincerity in Drask’s eyes conveyed the sympathy he intended.

They walked without speaking for a few minutes, listening to the birds calling each other from nests hidden in the grass.

“Stalkers train to infiltrate the enemy,” Drask said. “Much more suited to urban environments — where most of us end up — than out here in the wilds. Lot less call for us in a place like the Marsh Vigil.”

“Or Pelpernoi, sir?”

“Aye, or Pelpernoi. And drop the ‘sir,’ for Hwyrdd’s sake.”

Eochaid nodded. “I did infiltration training at Bride Lake, but I only used it once in Arcernoth, and then out of desperation.”

Drask raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t think there was anyone in those marshes *to* infiltrate.”

“Disguised ourselves as slitherin.” Eochaid shuddered. “I don’t recommend it. The filth on the robes nearly killed us.”

Drask shook his head and uttered a short, humorless laugh. “Aye, I can teach you more, kid. Whether or not you use it all here in the Hills, I’ll make you a good stalker.”

• • •

Smoked puffed from the shelter’s chimney as Eochaid and Drask carried a small cask of mead back up the bluff. More vigilants crowded around Gandy, chatting and sorting through their packs. The whole group followed the cask inside after hastily digging out earthen cups or mugs. Eochaid filled his cup and followed the others back outside.

They were all weather-beaten and tough looking, even the youngest. One human woman was dressed as a ranger, an amulet with Tanil’s arrows hanging just below her vigilant medallion. She chatted to another ranger who’d set down his mug to feed raw meat to a pet falcon. A graceful woman tootled quietly on a pair of pipes while a young elf with a wizard’s staff tried to gain her attention. And finally, an older woman with a wild, otherworldly look about her sat alone, staring out into the wastes.

He joined Gandy, sipping her drink on the hillside. Henmeth was climbing the hill, Rahalphion darting around her in the grass and scattering birds. “I sent her to fetch him,” Gandy said. “That just leaves Mareka and Moreri and we have the full platoon.”

“Should be here before sunset,” Drask replied, clambering onto a rock on the slope to peer out over the hills. “Moreri wanted to check some disturbed earth. Sent me on ahead. Shoulda mentioned it earlier.”

Gandy frowned at Drask, and her shoulders tensed.

Drask grimaced. “Sorry, ma’am. Meeting Lenahr, it slipped my mind.”

Gandy's lips tightened. Then she seemed to see Eochaid from the corner of her eye. She blinked and shook her head faintly. A tiny smile loosened the lines of her face. "It's fine, Drask. Just so long as he's careful."

"Mareka'll pull 'em through if there's trouble."

"I believe it." She drained her mead. "Someone should tell Henmeth about the drinks, and I can use another mug tonight," she said, and jogged off to meet the mage and druid.

"Huh," Drask grunted. "Who loosened *her* lute strings? You have something to do with that, kid?"

Eochaid shrugged. "A little. Probably it was Hutch. But she was always the most easygoing of us — *she* thinks *I'm* too wound up."

"You and the sarge have history?"

"We trained together a Bride Lake. We were squadmates."

"So that archery work I saw you doing earlier wasn't some kind of beat down?"

Eochaid laughed. "Not really. We were just bored. She's seen me fight in melee and wanted to see what I could do with a bow. But archery's just how she sees things."

Drask nodded, swirling his mug thoughtfully. "Aye. That she does, I think...that she does."

Eochaid sat down, leaning against Drask's boulder. "She has a motley bunch of soldiers," Eochaid remarked.

"Aye." The halfling scratched his head a moment. "Got two clerics, two mages, two rangers, two stalkers now...a bard, a druid, a sorceress, and a savage."

Wow. He went over the list in his head, matching up those roles to the vigilants in front of him. "That's...impressive." Eochaid considered the list again. "A...savage?"

"Mareka. Although don't call her that. She'll probably tear your face off."

Eochaid drew a sharp breath. "Got it."

Gandy came back with a full mug and sat down on the grass.

"So, we spend the night here?" Eochaid asked.

"Yep," Gandy said. "And then we go and walk our territory. South of here along the border with the Blood Steppes, where the *really* weird stuff comes crawling. We cover the busiest part of the Hills, and that makes it the most dangerous. We'll break up and fan out as we patrol — groups of four each, now. We'll come back together each night to camp for safety in numbers."

Eochaid nodded. "Those are Pelpernoi standing orders?"

Gandy shrugged. "Something like that. You'll put Arborneath's survival training to good use."



For the next few hours, Eochaid tried to relax. He chatted with Gandy and Henmeth. Some of his new platoon-mates introduced themselves. But through all of it, restlessness and excitement nipped at him. The thought of a quiet night in the comfortable shelter had no appeal. He caught himself studying the maps and charts that Gandy left out on the shelter's writing desk, but without books and notes, they meant next to nothing. He made himself go back outside and chat.

Cray, the ranger with the falcon, proved easy enough to talk to that Eochaid could force his restlessness back into its cage. Vila the falcon was a fierce and beautiful creature who warily accepted Eochaid's company once he proved willing to give her gobbets of meat. She watched with deeply probing eyes as Cray spoke about her care and training.

Gandy called "About time!" Vila popped her head up and cried out shrilly, and Eochaid glanced up.

Moreri and Mareka were humanoid, but clearly not human. They both had long, tufted tails, short, stiff fur, and golden eyes with long narrow pupils. Their catlike broad noses and short muzzles blended elegantly onto typically human heads. Their legs ended in the powerful paws of hunting cats.

He wouldn't have guessed they were vigilants except for the medallions they wore around their necks, and their scarves in Pelpernoi colors.

Moreri stood only a little taller than Eochaid, but for an abundance of bushy golden hair on his head. Calling it a mane seemed fitting. Over his right eye, a tattoo of the three arrows of Tanil peeked out from under his hair. A simple breastplate protected his torso, but he wore little other armor, exposing limbs covered in tawny fur. He carried a longbow and mace.

Mareka was taller than her companion and broader at the shoulder. Her long, dark ginger hair was pulled back in braids, with small ornaments woven throughout. At least a few of the ornaments were teeth. Her fur was reddish gold, and her armor was unlike any Eochaid had ever seen on a vigilant: woven hide and bits of metal that favored mobility over rigidity and protection. She carried a longbow, and strange, oversized gauntlets with wicked claws hung at her waist.

Gandy waved them to her. The other vigilants nodded their greetings, and other conversations quieted as everyone bent an ear to their report.

"So, what was it?" Gandy asked.

"A vengaurak. At least one. The trail definitely heads toward the Circle," Moreri said.

"Vangal's balls," Gandy grumbled. "Well, platoon, now we know what we're doing tomorrow! Can't take a chance on them getting a foothold."

Eochaid shuddered. *Let's hope it's only one*, he thought. He remembered waking up as a teenager on a hunting trip to the sound of battle, seeing half the camp surrounding a horse-sized armored grub that had clawed its way out of the ground to feast on the meat

they'd butchered that day, threshing the hunters with enormous claws. It had taken eight men to put it down, and not all of them survived.

"Lenahr, c'mere!" Gandy waved him over.

"Mareka, Moreri, this is Lenahr," Gandy said. "Our newest member. He's a stalker, formerly of Arcernoth Delta Vigil."

Eochaid was uncertain of their ranks, so he saluted. "It's good to meet you. I've never served with any...um...Redeemed before."

Mareka growled, a startling rumble from deep in her chest, and the fur on her shoulders twitched. The familiar coolness bloomed in Eochaid's chest. He felt his weight shift to the balls of his feet and his fingers open into a loose curve, ready to fly in a heartbeat to the hilts of his swords.

"Shush, sister," Moreri said, patting Mareka on the arm. "Do not be angered by this ignorant human. We've talked about this!"

Mareka glared at Moreri. Then, ignoring Eochaid, she whirled around and stalked away. She snatched a drink from Henmeth, who was holding two freshly filled mugs of mead, and joined the other vigilants.

Moreri stepped up to Eochaid, smiling toothily. His eyes flicked down to Eochaid's waiting hands, but the smile didn't waver. He blinked once, slowly, then deliberately raised his own hand and put it on Eochaid's shoulder. "You must understand," Moreri sighed, "the term 'Redeemed' describes titanspawn who have turned from the titans to worship the gods. But unlike you *humans*..." Moreri prodded Eochaid's chest with a clawed finger. "...and the elves and halflings, we manticora are *not* the spawn of titans. Father Vangal raised us to awareness during the War."

He squeezed Eochaid's shoulder. "Later, after she's had a cup or two, you shall apologize to my sister. And then we will be the greatest of friends, yes?"

Eochaid nodded. Looking into Moreri's golden eyes, his chill calmness faded.

"Good! Good!" Moreri said, clapping Eochaid's back. He then joined his sister for his cup of mead.

Gandy stepped up beside Eochaid. She gently tweaked his hand, still hanging ready at his side.

"Sorry," Eochaid said, flexing his fingers.

"Hah," said Gandy. "They're on our side. You raised their hackles a little, but trust me, you're fine. This isn't the first time someone's mistaken manticora for titanspawn, and not even close to the worst. The first time *I* saw Mareka I almost shot her."

Eochaid nodded. "I can work with cats. They hunt and eat rats."

Gandy smiled. "There you go."

Even this close to Hope the vigilants still set watches, as a matter of course and in case of a creature like the vengaurak wandering the hills at night.

The shelter could comfortably sleep eight people at a time, leaving four members of the platoon to watch. The vigilants rotated watches: about two hours each, with the elves and Eochaid watching longer to fill out the night.

Mareka came on watch at the first changeover. Eochaid was sitting with his back to the campfire, looking out across the hills. Her soft, padding footfalls approached, and then to his surprise she sat beside him.

Eochaid's heart sped up a hair. *Is she confronting me, or...?*

In the chill breezes from the wasteland, Eochaid had put up his hood. He pulled it back. The manticora nodded to him but made no other gesture.

Eochaid swallowed. "I'm sorry I insulted you earlier. It was...not intentional."

She wrinkled her nose, baring a sharp fang. "You stood your ground. That was good. Humans have pissed themselves on meeting me."

The image caught Eochaid off guard, and he chuckled out loud. Mareka's toothy smirk widened into a full smile.

They sat together. Mareka said nothing more, but Eochaid felt her watching him from the corner of her eye. He shifted his posture and focused his attention out into the dimness, but the feeling continued, and his thoughts kept returning to the manticora sitting beside him.

"Your brother said Vangal made your people," Eochaid queried.

Mareka blinked once, eyelids slowly closing and opening again. "He needed an army during the Divine War, so he raised the great cats of the Steppes to fight for him. Made our ancestors stand on two feet. Made us smart. Gave us new weapons and armor, and magic, and a purpose. We hunted the armies of the titans — killed them and ate their hearts."

"Then your people worship Vangal?" Eochaid asked, a little concerned.

"A few still do. But after the War, he left my people without direction. Vangal all but ignores us, aside from a chosen few like his herald. Over time we found our own way. Spread out beyond the steppes. Many of us found new patrons — hunters mostly — who would respect our talents. Some, like my brother, serve Tanil. Others made an alliance with the proud race, and chose to follow the ways of the titan Hrinruuk."

"The proud. I read about them. They're like centaurs, only...lions?" Eochaid asked.

"Not exactly. They're...well, yes, but with the *head* of a lion as well," Mareka clarified. "Much more bestial than us. Primitive. Savage."

"Drask called *you* a..." Eochaid stopped himself, the bitter word sticking on his tongue.

"Savage?" she purred.

The halfling had said it in confidence, and Eochaid had blurted it out. *No*, he thought. *No secrets.*

Eochaid nodded slowly. "It sounded rather...judgmental to me."

A laugh rumbled deep in her chest. "I'm not surprised he thinks so. He's seen me fight too many times. 'Savage' is an appropriate description. When I cut loose in battle, frenzy overtakes me. Our creator's temperament is in my blood."

"Are *you* a follower of Vangal?"

Mareka snorted. "I am not a *follower*. Not of the gods, or the titans. They are too complicated and demanding. But the Reaver gains power from me anyway — from everyone who battles or makes war. Vangal feeds on combat, not worship. Intended or not, I serve his needs."

They sat quiet for a time. While Belsameth's Moon was high and full, the sky was overcast, and Eochaid could see very little. Instead, he relied on his ears to warn him of anything approaching their camp.

Beside him, Mareka's eyes swept the night. Her pupils were so large her eyes were almost black. He asked, "Can you see in the dark, Mareka?"

She smiled smugly, baring a fang. "Better than a *human*, anyhow. But perhaps not as well as an elf."

She considered him, her brow crinkling. "You do not sleep much for a human."

"No," he replied with a small snort. "I don't."

"You are a night creature."

Eochaid stroked the ring on his hand. He leaned back and looked up at the sky just as the clouds parted around Belsameth's Moon. It was hauntingly beautiful.

"I suppose I am."

Chapter Thirty-Four

The platoon broke camp before dawn. They marched as soon as the spellcasters prepared their spells, even before Henmeth's shelter melted back into the earth. Moreri and Mareka led the group and Cray's falcon Vila drifted overhead. Rahalphion, in the shape of a wolf, padded along beside the group.

They hiked southeast for an hour, stirring up dust with their boots, to pick up the trail: a zigzagging pattern of freshly turned earthen mounds. The rangers consulted and led them north. Over time, the course of the tracks straightened out and pointed toward the edge of the Circle.

The vigilants hastened their march. Vila flew on ahead, pointing the way. The green rim came back into view, and they climbed up and over. Vila circled over a point not far inside. Gandy spread the group into a line. Watching for movement, they advanced.

They found more disturbed earth, focused in an area perhaps fifty feet across: furrows and mounds of dirt, and several spatters of blood.

"Cray, Rah — let's check it out," Gandy called. "The rest of you, pair up and watch the perimeter. Stay off the fresh spots!"

The group spread out, encircling the find. Cray, Gandy, and Rahalphion crept carefully in, scouring the earth for clues.

"Deer," Cray said. "A herd of them, I think — at least five."

Gandy nodded. "None of them left here, though. Not above ground, anyhow."

Rahalphion growled deep in his throat and sniffed along the border.

The other vigilants watched the grass warily. Eochaid stayed near Henmeth, ready to draw attention away from her if one of the beasts broke ground.

"Here!" Rahalphion stood up in the brush in his elven form, pointing to a tall furrow. Gandy and Cray conferred with him, gesturing to the marks on the ground and then off toward the wasteland. Henmeth glanced eagerly towards the conversation but stayed where she was.

Gandy's conference reached a conclusion. Rahalphion shifted back to wolf form and padded in the direction they'd been gesturing, nose to the ground and fur bristling.

"Form up," Gandy called. "We have its trail!"

Gandy and Cray marched off behind Rahalphion. The rest of the platoon jogged after, forming into a loose wedge around them. “Definitely a vengaurak, and quite likely more than one,” Gandy said. “The scent’s strong, and Rah has it. We’re not leaving the area until we clear ‘em out.”

“These the kind that ambush from below?” asked another vigilant.

“*One* of the kinds, yeah,” Gandy said. “Another fun day in the Haggard Hills!”

They hiked from grass back onto dusty dirt again. Rahalphion led the way but stayed within view and bowshot.

They didn’t have far to go. Around a rocky cliff, they found a flat field enclosed by hills on three sides. Rahalphion slowed and stopped, fangs silently bared. The platoon, already moving softly, halted and watched for Gandy’s signal. *Wait*, she motioned. She crept up to Rahalphion and knelt beside him, following his gaze. Then she rose and returned. *Silence*, she gestured, *and circle in on me*.

They huddled around her. “There’s a deer carcass in the open out there,” Gandy whispered. “Probably bait, but if it’s mating season they may be feeding their grubs. We *cannot* let these things get a toehold here.”

Many of the vigilants nodded grimly.

“We need to draw them out,” Gandy continued. “Thoughts?”

“Well, they can sense movement through the ground,” Cray said, “so they may’ve noticed us even though we can’t see them.”

Gandy nodded.

“Something I read once,” Kallen, the bard, recalled, “in...I think it was Droughshott’s ‘Treatise on Corruption.’ Vengauraks inherit Gaurak’s fury at the gods. It seems they find members of the divine races especially tasty. Droughshott conjectured that they’re drawn to those of faith.” She inclined her head towards Moreri. “Given we have clerics with us and they haven’t attacked, I doubt they know we’re here yet.”

“Anyone else?” Gandy asked. Eochaid knew only what he’d learned about the creatures from hunting in Trela. He shook his head.

“I’ll go draw them out, then,” Moreri said. “My people are the gods’ newest children, and my faith is strong. And besides, I’m the fastest on open ground.”

Zane, the enthusiastic elven enchanter (who felt younger to Eochaid than any elf should be) raised his hands as if to cast a spell on Moreri.

“Whoa, whoa,” Gandy said, grabbing Zane’s hands. “Moreri, you’re not going. You don’t have anything to prove.”

“What proof?” the manticora replied. “I’m the tastiest, and also the safest to send.”

“What about a fox?” Eochaid said. “Tanil has those divine foxes she uses to guide the faithful sometimes, right?”

“She doesn’t send them just for the asking,” Moreri replied blandly.

“Actually, she does,” Henmeth stammered. “Well, not *specifically*, but... I’m a conjuror. I have a spell that can do something like that.”

“You have a spell that calls *foxes*?” Gandy asked.

“I’m not sure it’d be a fox, but I can call an animal from a divine plane, yes,” Henmeth said.

Gandy pursed her lips and nodded. “Henmeth, you spend so much time studying samples and taking notes that sometimes I forget you’re a wizard. That’s our plan, vigilants! We encircle the area at range, and when Henmeth’s divine rabbit or whatever it is draws them in, we wipe them out.”

Eochaid and Henmeth worked their way to the top of the cliff. The rest of the rangers fanned out into the hills, keeping their distance from the dead deer but surrounding the dale and closing off escape.

Gandy signaled from her spot. “Gandy says ‘go,’” Eochaid said, and signaled back.

“Okay,” Henmeth answered. She pulled a small candle out of a cloth bag, gestured and said an incantation, then blew on the candle. At the foot of the cliff, a lion with silvery fur shimmered into being and looked up at Henmeth with gleaming eyes. She spoke to it in a soft, melodious language Eochaid had never heard before and pointed to the carcass on the open ground.

The lion lowered its head and padded into the open, ears swiveling cautiously. Eochaid saw Moreri poke his golden head out from behind a rock partway around the ring of hills. *I guess we’re sending a lion anyway.*

The silver cat paused a hundred feet from the carcass and sniffed the air. Then it stalked slowly onward, lowering its body. Eochaid squinted. Had the dead deer moved? The lion burst into motion, streaking at its target.

A dozen feet from the carcass the ground crumbled under the cat, dropping it into a pit. It slammed into the pit’s far edge, front paws clawing the surface, kicking and scrabbling its way up the side.

Black, chitinous hooks scythed out of the pit, latching onto the big cat. It roared and turned, clawing its opponent as they both slid into the hole.

Mareka, howling a battle cry, sprang from cover and raced down the hillside. Several other vigilants stood as well, bows raised and ready. Eochaid realized he was on his feet, too, blades in hands.

As Mareka reached level ground, the earth to her right heaved and opened and a vengaurak exploded into view. It was ten feet long, black, horned plates of armor covering a soft, undulating body. It had four hook-like arms as long as Eochaid was tall, and pincers on either side of a craggy maw.

And it was fast. It closed the distance to Mareka in two breaths. Arrows hit the carapace from two sides, but the vengaurak ignored them. Mareka turned as it reached her, but its long arms slammed down on her before she could roll clear.

Vigilants were scrambling down from the hills on all sides now. Skylash, the wild-eyed sorceress, launched a volley of sliver bolts that arced down into the hole where the lion had fallen. Moreri shouted an incantation to his sister, who laughed and sank her claws into the vengaurak.

“Damn,” Henmeth muttered. “Sorry about this, lion.” She raised her arm and hurled a brilliant bead of red down into the pit after Skylash’s bolts. Eochaid felt the concussion of the blast even on the cliff a hundred feet back, and the explosion tossed dirt and dark chunks high into the air.

As he watched Cray, Drask, and Rahalphion join the battle with Mareka, Eochaid fought the urge to scramble down the cliff himself. *Don’t know how many of them there are*, he thought. Cooper’s last desperate glance flashed by in his mind. *I’m here in case one of them breaks through*. Still, watching the halfling dance in and out of the vengaurak’s reach thrilled him, and he imagined the feel of landing a blow on the writhing black body.

The vigilants tightened the noose. Half of them clustered around Mareka where she clawed and tore at her foe. The others, including the sorceress Skylash, closed in on the smoking pit Henmeth had blasted. The deer carcass was gone, spread across the ground in chunks. Something large was digging itself out of the collapsed pit.

Skylash shouted and flung a spell at one of the dark chunks on the ground, bursting it open and spilling gray fluid.

Several of what Eochaid had taken for gobbets of deer meat scattered, some slithering along the surface and a few burrowing into the dirt. Skylash called out again. The vigilants turned their attention from the wounded vengaurak in the pit to the scattering grubs.

Henmeth pointed her hand and fired a hissing green arrow at the wounded beast as it surfaced, spattering it with caustic liquid. It arched its back, scraping ineffectually at the burning sludge.

Something caught Eochaid’s attention. Far beyond the battle, near the foot of the cliff, a tiny black form wriggled between the rocks.

“Henmeth!” Eochaid shouted, pointing. The vengaurak grub slithered in and out of view, directly north, towards the Circle.

Henmeth spared a glance and turned back to the fight in front of her. “I don’t see it!” she snapped. “Go! I’ll be fine!”

The battle disappeared behind the cliff as Eochaid descended. The shouts, roars, and explosions receded. He searched the ground intently. *Where’d you go?*

The vengaurak grub was tiny, and there were plenty of boulders and stones to hide behind. Eochaid slowed his pace deliberately. *Pick up its trail. Outsmart it.*

A damp patch on a boulder, something milky. Eochaid leaned down. Faint marks in the dust where the creature had slithered into the stone’s shadow and past it. He jogged on, following the trail until he came to a bank of dry clay where the tracks vanished.

Hells. Could it climb that? The sandy soil above looked undisturbed. He doubled back, circled the end of the trail. *Vangal's balls! How well can they burrow?*

There were no trails leading away from the clay, no loose, mounded earth. *They stayed on the surface*, he thought, *under the dead buck.*

He studied the area. *If they can't burrow on their own....*

In the shadow of an overhang, there was a crevice where water had cut a gap into the clay. Eochaid approached it, but checked himself before leaning in to look, remembering how fast the adult vengaurak had been as it sprung at Mareka.

He raised a short sword and jammed it into the hole. Something shrieked and the blade twisted in his hand. A thin trickle of milky ooze dripped from the sword's crossguard. Holding it firmly in place, he raised the other blade as something pushed at the clay around the first.

A claw covered in mottled chitin scabbled through the clay, and a tiny carapaced head emerged. It squealed angrily at Eochaid, grabbing at him with its little claw and snapping its jaws. Beady black eyes tracked his hand as he drove the second blade into its face.

• • •

Eochaid returned to find the battle was over. His platoon was dragging one dead vengaurak towards its mate's corpse. Kabria, the human cleric, was tending to a nasty cut on Skylash's leg, but the rest of the squad had either been healed already or had avoided harm somehow.

"Did you kill it?" Henmeth asked as he jogged back to the group. Eochaid nodded.

Gandy, who'd been helping Mareka climb out of the blasted pit, looked up. "You killed a grub, Lenahr? Good. Bring the body back here. We'll burn it with the others. We can't risk the remains contaminating the Circle, even the grubs. Mareka, go with him. Collect any brush you find on the way back—we'll need firewood."

Eochaid led Mareka to the clay embankment where he'd killed the grub. He carefully reached into the hole and they pulled out the dead creature. Mareka found a slab of rock to set it down on while they gathered wood.

"Is that all of it?" she asked. "The druids are very skittish about titanspawn poisoning their magic."

Eochaid carefully felt his way into the hole in the clay up to his elbow, but there was nothing solid. "Yeah, I think so."

Mareka grimaced as she looked around. "Not much brush." She pointed to a clump of small thorny bushes. "Guess this will have to do."

They hacked away at the bushes with Eochaid's swords, pulling out small, twisted branches. "I thought we were supposed to keep the plants alive," Eochaid said.

Mareka grabbed another tangle of thorns and tore them loose. “I wouldn’t worry. The Circle hasn’t reached this far yet. Sarge wants branches — this is branches.”

Eochaid grunted an affirmative and continued hacking away.

Mareka loosely bound together the branches they’d collected, and Eochaid stabbed one through the vengaurak grub to make a handle. Mareka tossed his sword back to him, and he sheathed it. She put on her own clawed gauntlets and hooked them into the bundle of brush.

“You’re an impressive fighter,” he said.

Mareka heaved the bundle onto her shoulders. “Thanks.”

“You just rushed down there without a care, right into the claws of the thing. It was so...”

She flashed sharp teeth. “Reckless?”

“Fearsome!”

Mareka laughed. “Works best for me to lead the charge into battle. Moreri is there to patch me up, and he can pull me back if things get too serious.”

Her fierce, golden eyes scanned his armor, his swords, his face. “Why didn’t you join in the melee?” she asked. “They *did* teach you how to fight in Arcernoth Delta?”

Eochaid’s insides twisted. *Why didn’t I join in?* A flash of feelings too quick for him to follow washed over him. Shame lingered.

“I wanted to,” he said. “But Gandy — the sergeant, I mean — had me guard Henmeth during the trip to Hope. She didn’t give me new orders. I...figured I should stick to that. And...I’m not as tough as you.”

Eochaid felt his face heat up. *But that’s not it*, he thought. *Not all of it. Why...?*

Mareka snorted and settled the bundle more evenly on her muscular back. “With the full platoon there, the casters can take care of themselves.” She turned towards the camp. “Drask isn’t even half your size, and he holds his own in the thick of things. Learn from him.”

Eochaid bit back angry words. His head buzzing, he snatched the dead grub by its handle and stalked after Mareka, letting some distance open between them.

She thinks I’m a fucking coward, he thought. His clenched jaw ached.

Well, wasn’t I? His face flushed again. I could have joined the main fight. I wanted to.

He recalled the thrill of watching the battle, the itch of his sword hand, and the flash of remembered terror and despair and shame and loss. Eochaid shook his head. *I am not a coward.*

• • •

Eochaid and Mareka returned to the group. Mareka added what wood they’d gathered to the pile for burning. Eochaid slung the body of the grub down beside its parents.

“We found some eggs,” Drask’s voice called up from the pit out of which the vengaurak had crawled.

Gandy and Cray knelt at the pit’s edge. Eochaid drew a sword and joined them. “Okay. Any other hidey holes down there?” Gandy asked.

A loud series of wolfish sneezes erupted from the hole. Rahalphion was down in the pit, still in wolf form. He was covered in dirt and struggling to climb the shifting soil to get out. Gandy and Cray grabbed his outstretched paws and pulled. Drask crawled from a side tunnel and pushed the wolf up from below.

“There’s a maze of tunnels,” Drask said, grunting as he shoved Rahalphion, “but Rah was pretty sure those eggs were the last of them.”

“Sounds right,” Cray said. “They keep their offspring close. And lucky for us, vengauraks are loners when they’re not mating. There shouldn’t be any more adults around.”

Once Rahalphion was scrabbling his way over the lip, Eochaid reached down and helped Drask climb up. Cray dropped down in the halfling’s place to pass up the gathered vengaurak eggs.

Eochaid and Drask collected the oversized, translucent eggs and carried them to the bonfire site.

“It was amazing to see you fight,” Eochaid said. “That thing was way stronger than you, and it had reach.”

Drask gave a tiny bow with his head. “Just need to keep moving, kid.”

“So you just take one shot and then dodge back?” Eochaid asked, gesturing to his two blades. “Why did I waste all that time mastering two-handed fighting?”

“Nah, it’s not a waste. Just gotta make the smart choice in each fight, is all. Think you can take your opponent down in two hits? Stand your ground. If not, especially if he hits harder’n you, spring out of the way before he hits back.” Drask tossed his eggs onto the pile. “Gimme a few minutes to clean the dirt and vengaurak shit off me and I’ll show you a few tricks.”

• • •

The vigilants set their camp atop one of the hills overlooking the bonfire site. Even with help from the platoon’s magic users, it would take the rest of the day and well into the night to burn the remains down to ash, as the branches they gathered burned away quickly.

Drask spent the afternoon coaching Eochaid on fighting techniques. Eochaid’s clothes grew dusty from rolling across the dry ground and his back and elbows ached from many falls. *I thought I was fast*, he grumbled inwardly as he rinsed the grit out of his mouth and swallowed some water to cool his parched throat.

“You’re a quick study, Lenahr,” Drask said, massaging a bruise on his arm.

I have the reach, Eochaid thought. *I have two blades. But whenever he hits me, he's gone before I can strike back, and when I go on the attack, he's out of reach.* He shook his head. "This is a crazy way to fight."

"How come you didn't learn this from the stalkers in Arcernoth?" Drask asked, gesturing Eochaid back to his feet.

"You try a somersault when you're up to your waist in marsh water," Eochaid said, dodging away from Drask's rapier.

"I'd drown!" Drask laughed and slapped Eochaid's right sword with his blade. "How could you stand it?"

"You get used to it." Eochaid paused to catch his breath. "Okay, not really. How can you stand staring at dead hills year after year?"

"Point made," Drask said. They sparred for a little while longer, and then Drask plunked down in the dirt. He pulled out a water flask and took a long drink.

"Nice of the vigil to give you that impressive rapier," said Eochaid, sitting down beside the halfling.

"This?" Drask asked, handing Eochaid his weapon. It was beautifully designed, with gold and silver filigree etched into the basket. A large garnet was set in the end of the hilt. It was shorter than Eochaid's swords, less than half the length of a standard rapier. Eochaid also noticed markings carved into the hilt, either elaborate runes or more design work.

"It's beautiful," Eochaid said, and handed it back to Drask.

"Aye. It's extra special, too." Drask extended the rapier and said "*Ixen*." Red flames rippled along the blade. Eochaid could feel their heat from where he sat.

"Whoa. That's even handier than the blades they gave me! Not that I'm complaining."

"*Pok*," Drask said, and the flame went out. "Nay, the vigil didn't give this to me." He pointed at Eochaid with the rapier. "I didn't steal it, mind you."

Eochaid raised his hands in protest. "I would never suggest that you had!"

Drask snorted. "Why not? Everyone *else* does. I *earned* this little meat skewer on the Cordrada Corridor, protecting a caravan with my squad when we were ambushed by undead ice creatures. We needed magic to fight them, so the rich merchant in charge gave this to me to use. He'd been using it as a letter opener until it set one of his messages on fire. Afterwards, told me I could keep it — can you believe it?"

"As a reward for protecting him? Amazing luck, but it's certainly plausible. I've gotten some free drinks from thankful Veshians who recognized my uniform."

Drask flashed an acid smile. "Well, my captain didn't think so. He figured I either stole it or swindled it out of the merchant somehow. Demanded I return it. So I went back to the merchant with a Hedradan *priest* in tow as witness and got a registered letter from him, all signed and legal, *explicitly* stating that it was a gift. Coulda got me in trouble, but the merchant got a laugh out of it and I got to keep the blade."

“That’s awful. Did you complain to Command about your captain?”

Drask rolled his eyes. “I’m a halfling, kid. Who’re they going to believe? We’re *all* thieves, con artists, slaves, and whores.”

Eochaid frowned. “I heard things like that sometimes where I grew up, but I never understood it.” He shook his head. “The Fishers were halflings. They owned our village bakery. Their kids had all left home before I was born, so it was just the two of them. Mister Fisher used to give my brother and me the broken cookies when we were kids — said they didn’t look good enough to sell. But they tasted just as good.”

Eochaid looked over at Drask. “Growing up with them, I couldn’t imagine halflings were anything like what people would say.”

Drask looked stonily back at Eochaid. “Problem is, kid, most halflings don’t grow *up* in towns like yours. Most halflings live where all the halflings really *are* thieves, beggars, and whores. The better ones can aspire to be con artists, servants, and clowns. And the best of us — only a handful — manage something more. My father was a hustler and drifter who left town when I was nine. My mother was a whore, and now she’s a seamstress living off half my wages. And I’m a vigil stalker, which is basically a thief who’s a soldier.”

The halfling looked intently at his rapier. Eochaid sat quietly, turning over what he’d heard about Vesh, the country he’d fled to in hope of freedom.

After a moment, Drask set the sword aside and lifted a chain from around his neck that had been tucked with his vigil medallion.

“I’ve worked hard, y’know. Tried to make my ancestors proud. Make up for my family...my people’s failings.” He let the item that hung from the chain slide and drop down and held it out to Eochaid.

Eochaid leaned down to look more closely. It was a copper coin unlike any he’d seen before. It was small and round, with a square hole in the center that the chain looped through. Unusual writing decorated one side, while on the other a dragon wound around the hole.

“Where’s this from?” Eochaid asked.

“A land very far away. Further than Termana, on the other side of the world. A place where halflings are treated with respect, equal to the other humanoid races. It’s ruled by dragons. My ancestors came from there hundreds of years ago, before the dragons left Ghelspad.”

“There are *definitely* dragons in Ghelspad,” Eochaid interrupted. “I grew up less than a hundred miles from a huge firewrack dragon. The Blood Steppes—”

“Those are *wrack* dragons, not *true* dragons! Wrack dragons were made by the titans for the Divine War. They’re mockeries of what *true* dragons are. Hells, your ‘huge firewrack dragon’ can’t even *fly*! There hasn’t been a true dragon on Ghelspad for hundreds of years, believe me.”

Drask slipped the chain back around his neck. Then he sat up and leaned forward towards Eochaid, folding his hands under his chin.

“Alright kid, next lesson. Part of what I just told you was a lie, and part was true. Which was which?”

Eochaid was dumbstruck for a moment. “What?”

“Weren’t you paying attention? I *know* you were — fascinating story, right? But some of it? Total bullshit.” The halfling smiled slyly. “So...which parts?”

“The part about the true dragons?” Eochaid asked.

Drask rolled his eyes. “Come *on* kid. Just ask Kallen. Or Henmeth. Hwyrdd’s hands, half the platoon knows this shit. They can all tell you the differences between wrack dragons and true dragons. Kallen probably knows thirty legends about them. Nope, try again.”

Eochaid’s head spun. *What’s happening?*

He thought back over the conversation. *What does he expect me to do?* “The part about your ancestors coming from the dragon country, then.”

Drask’s eyes narrowed. “Why that part?”

“You mention Hwyrdd a lot. He’s the halfling god, right? So...if your family was from a dragon country, wouldn’t they worship a dragon god?”

Drask shrugged. “You’re reaching kid. There *is* no dragon god. As far as I know, all that’s true. My dad certainly never stops talking about it. ‘Drask is a proud, ancient family, blessed by fortune, blah blah blah, and we have the lucky coins to prove it.’ Try again.”

Ah, Eochaid thought.

“Your parents! Not a drifter, not a whore.”

Drask’s head fell back as he laughed. “Shit. Gave that one away. Nah, Dad’s a lawyer. Mom’s a bureaucrat. Good catch. Anything else?”

Eochaid thought again, turning over the halfling’s story, lining up each part carefully in his mind. “The bit about the rapier. Not that you got it from the merchant, but that your captain made a stink about it.”

Drask’s eyebrows rose, and he smiled broadly. “Better. And *why?*”

It was Eochaid’s turn to smile. “If your parents really are who you say they are you wouldn’t have needed to go through all that trouble.”

Drask waved dismissively. “Or *they* could have suggested getting the registered letter. Vesh has plenty of racists.”

Eochaid cocked his head. “But biased against halflings or not, why would he expect a child of two *officials* to commit thievery?”

Drask leapt to his feet, lecturing as he walked. “Because he didn’t know my parents? Because lawyers and bureaucrats are basically *fancier* con artists and servants? Because he’s an *asshole*?”

Eochaid shrugged. “I was wrong, then.”

“You were close. I *did* get the sword, and I *didn't* steal it, and my oaf of a captain did make a stink. But there was another part there that doesn't fit, if you look close.”

Eochaid's heart quickened. He wracked his memory. Drask watched him good-naturedly, shaking his head. Finally, Eochaid looked up. “I don't...”

“*Mullis Town Vigil*? Seriously? I'm a *stalker*. That would be a waste!”

Drask flopped down next to Eochaid again and picked up his sword, smiling fondly at the gem in its hilt. “The rapier was a gift from King Jeddrad's youngest daughter, Isobel. Led to me getting transferred out of Semanye and sent to this dark hole for vigilants that the home commander doesn't know what to do with. I saved her during an embarrassing incident involving a silver comb, a guard dog, and one too many suitors. But I understand that she *was* using it as a letter opener.”

Eochaid shook his head. “Now I don't know what to believe. But...” He paused and smiled. “I did notice your accent has changed. No more ‘ayes’ and ‘nays’ and heavy ‘R’s, like a strange cross between Hegemony and ‘drunken dwarf.’ Now you sound more like you're from Lave.”

“*Aye*.” Drask smirked. “Twenty miles east of Lave, in the little hamlet of Eastgreen. Learned my Ledean accent in Durrover. Very good. Now, next lesson. How do you *tell* when someone is lying?”

Eochaid's smile faded. He thought back to what Sennet had tried to teach him. “You trust your gut. Your instincts. Your...heart?”

Drask snorted. “I'm sure that's how *some* people do it. But what did *you* do?”

“I listened. Paid attention. Thought through what you said, and how you said it. The inconsistencies. The tone of your voice.”

Drask smiled wide. “Exactly. That's how a *stalker* does it. Let bards and clerics have their fucking instincts. We use our heads!” The halfling leapt to his feet and grabbed Eochaid's shoulders, staring intently into his eyes. “And there's more than just words. Body language. Where they look. How they fidget. I can already see you're a good listener, kid. Now I'm going to teach you how to *watch*. And how to lie your *own* ass off without giving it away. Use that same body language and tone to misdirect. *That's* how we infiltrate. Tell a story, make 'em believe it, and then squeeze them for every secret they have.”

Eochaid's heart beat faster. *There's another way?* He laughed. “Okay. And I'll teach *you* how to speak Ledean with a *proper* Hegemony accent.”

• • •

They set standard watches, but took turns that night tending the fire. Even the thickest plates of carapace were cracked and glowing. Eochaid sat nearby, rising to stir the coals with his sword. The blade never picked up soot or tarnish, he discovered.

Somewhere beyond the firelight, Rahalphion and Skylash walked the hillside, eyes adapted to the dark and on alert for movement. Henmeth stayed high on the hill by the shelter, ready to wake the others. Eochaid had only to keep the flames alive.

As he watched the glow of the firelight twist and glint on the enchanted metal, quiet footsteps approached from the platoon's shelter and someone sat beside him. Eochaid felt the hairs on his neck rise. *Mareka*.

Eochaid's eyes stayed on his blade.

Go away.

"The smell of cooking meat is sweet here in the dead hills," Mareka said. "It may draw predators and scavengers. Stay alert."

Eochaid nodded. He sat uncomfortably, feeling her eyes on him.

Mareka shifted, her tail twitching in the dust.

"I'm not a *coward*," Eochaid spat.

"I did not say you were," Mareka replied. "I knew you were brave on the first night we met. I did not know you'd seen battle, but I should have. As you were sparring with Drask, I could see how much practice you'd had."

The fire hissed quietly to itself.

Mareka spoke again, stiffly and awkwardly, as if hunting for unfamiliar words. "But I realize I implied it. I thought you were...a new recruit. Then I saw you with Drask, and I thought again of how I spoke to you. If our positions were reversed, I might have gutted you and left you for the birds. You master your emotions better than I ever have."

Mareka's tail flicked back and forth. They watched the flames together.

"I am not used to apologizing," she said, after a long moment of quiet passed. "Words are Moreri's skill more than mine. I hope that I've been clear."

Eochaid nodded. "No, I heard you. I'm not much of a 'talking' person either. And I almost gutted someone over an insult once, too."

Mareka chuckled. "We're more alike than I gave you credit for," she said. "I'm even sorrier now that I shamed you."

"No," Eochaid said. "I...I think you're right. It *was* strange that I held myself back." He shook his head. "I'm competent in a fight. I've faced my share of them. But then..." The dull ache inside Eochaid forced its way to the surface.

Mareka shifted close, studied his face. "Something terrible happened to you."

Eochaid nodded.

Mareka frowned. "I trust that you're no coward," she said. "Did you make a mistake on the field?"

"Yes," Eochaid said. "Well, no. I did kill something — someone — that I wasn't supposed to. A slitherin child. I regret it because doing it was wrong. But that I did it doesn't bother me."

Words failed him again. Too many thoughts, all tangled together: blood and marsh water, the killing cold seizing his mind, screaming rat-children, dying vigilants, Amra laughing. . . . His pulse raced, and it took concentration to stay in the here and now. He shuddered.

Mareka's eyes carried an anxious gleam. "Lenahr?" she said.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I...I can't talk about it."

"I can see the struggle on your face," Mareka said, "as if you're still on the battlefield even now. It's happened to me, too. Sometimes the battle fever won't break on its own."

Mareka flexed her hand, and the claws extended. Then, tentatively, she retracted them.

"I can...may I try something?" Mareka asked. "Something my people do for comfort."

He blinked. "Uh, okay."

She reached up for his head and slowly, gently ran her fingers through his hair. As she drew her fingertips back down his head, the very tips of her claws furrowed his scalp.

He held very still. "What are you doing?"

"Grooming you," Mareka said. "Is it uncomfortable? My brother often does it for me when I am angry or troubled." Her fingertips lifted slightly.

Eochaid considered it. "No, but...I don't..." Mareka's touch felt strange and intimate, and a part of him recoiled almost prudishly. *But she's not human. Don't assume you know what's happening*, he thought. He turned to look at her. "I don't know what you mean by it."

Mareka blinked slowly, calmly. "To relax you, and share your burden. Quiet your busy thoughts. Clear your mind. It's a gesture of kinship. Of sympathy. It's a reminder that you are not alone here."

Eochaid felt his shoulders stiffen. "No, we have to be alert. In case something comes sniffing."

"I will be alert for both of us. Let me take this watch. You will have your time to be alert again, and with a clearer head."

Mareka's fingers entwined very gently in his hair again, stroking down, lifting out, stroking down.

To his surprise, the churn in his mind slowed. Mareka shifted to sit behind him, leaning against his back, powerful hands surprisingly soothing. The fire hissed and snapped, and Eochaid's mind wandered.

After a while he felt a rumbling vibration at his back. *Is she purring?*

He hadn't quite fallen asleep by the time Mareka stopped, but he was certainly more at ease. She touched her head against his back. "Thank you, Lenahr. I think you make a strong ally, and I hope I can be worthy of your trust, and maybe your friendship." She rose and padded off to the shelter on the hill.

The rest of his long watch went by quietly, with no disturbance as the fire burned down to ash.

Chapter Thirty-Five

In the morning shortly after Eochaid woke, Gandy pulled him aside. She brought him to a cluster of stones a little way from their shelter and sat on a boulder. The sky was just turning light, but the sun had not yet risen.

Gandy fiddled with the leather ties of her boot.

"I like that you've started training with Drask."

"Me too," Eochaid said. "He's interesting. I can already tell I'll learn a lot from him."

"Good. Good." Her eyes scanned the hills. "You and Mareka seem to have worked things out, too."

"Um...yeah. She's...I guess we understand each other."

"Good."

They sat in silence again. Gandy looked down at her hands, curling her fingers one at a time.

Is she counting? "Gandy, what's going on?"

Gandy's hands fell still. She took a deep breath. "We usually split into three squads when we patrol the hills to cover more ground, then meet back up each night. I want balanced squads — healers, casters, trackers, and so on. To put you in the same squad with Drask, that gets tough. He normally runs in Moreri's squad with Mareka and Zane. If I move him to my squad, that leaves Moreri with only three. If I trade someone else for him, then I lose either my caster or my healer."

"You three were fine without me..."

Gandy sighed impatiently. "Fine, yes, but under strength. And besides, the entire point..." she poked him. "The entire point, Lenahr, is to keep you *in* my squad!"

"Oh."

"Yes. Oh."

Eochaid wrestled with the numbers in his head.

"And even without the swap," Gandy continued, "We're *already* unbalanced. Mareka's not as strong a tracker as me or Cray."

"I'm a tracker," Eochaid said.

Gandy growled and swatted his arm. “You’re not helping!”

Eochaid chuckled. He closed his eyes and worked through his memory. “Why three squads? My last squad in Arcernoth was seven people.”

Gandy chewed her lip. “Huh. Yeah. Yes...keeps us a little safer too. Thanks, Lenahr.”

They returned to the shelter and Gandy, Kallen, and Moreri spent a few minutes at the table with a slate. Then Gandy called the platoon together to assign squads. In her new plan, she and Eochaid would join Moreri’s squad. Moreri would become her second in command, and Henmeth and Rahalphion would join Kallen’s squad. Nobody seemed displeased with the idea of larger squads, so Gandy set them all to breaking camp.

Eochaid packed quickly, then helped to break down the ash pile and mix it with dirt. Nothing remained of the two titanspawn or their offspring. Then Gandy’s squad headed east, while Kallen’s squad marched towards its own patrol route, parallel and to the south.

As Eochaid fell in line, he noticed Henmeth was with them.

“I thought you were on Kallen’s squad now,” he said, pulling alongside her as they walked down the hill.

“I switched with Zane,” she said, watching her feet carefully on the loose soil of the hill. “We spoke to the sergeant when you were handling the ashes.”

“Why the switch?”

She took a deep breath and didn’t meet his eyes.

Eochaid shrugged. “It’s fine if you don’t want to tell me—”

“Zane doesn’t know evocation magic, but I do, even though I focus mostly on conjuration,” she said in a rush. “Skylash knows evocation, and as a sorceress she can cast it at any time, so despite Zane’s inexperience Kallen’s squad will be fine. I just *couldn’t* leave the sergeant’s squad without offensive spells. And the sergeant chooses our camp location, so it’s best I’m with her to share my weather knowledge and cast our shelter spell. There was also an imbalance in, um, gender...which I know isn’t *important*, but there’s evidence the gods favor—”

“Sparkles, we get it!” Drask interrupted with a grumble. “You had good reasons!”

Eochaid glared at Drask, who rolled his eyes, then turned his attention back to the rough ground.

“Seems reasonable to me,” Eochaid said. He nudged her shoulder supportively.

“The sergeant thought so,” said Henmeth, smiling back.

• • •

They built a routine over the next few weeks. The two squads traveled within a mile or two of each other on parallel courses across the hills throughout the day, to meet again shortly before nightfall and make camp. They scouted the hills, on the lookout for

dangers to travelers and threats to Vesh. Some, like a nest of giant spiders in an isolated valley, they noted down on their maps as a hazard. Others they engaged and eliminated.

A goblin tribe was the first intelligent threat the platoon encountered. One morning as they were breaking camp, Cray called the others over. "Somebody was watching us last night," he said, pointing out the small footprints and marks on a dusty hummock with a good view of their shelter.

"I see two sets of tracks there," Eochaid said. "One stayed to watch us while the other went off to tell someone."

Gandy squinted at the little foot- and handprints. "Goblins."

"Or halflings," Mareka replied.

Drask growled. "Don't toy with me, Whiskers."

"Well, with luck, they're smart enough to keep their distance," Gandy said. "If not, we'll have to discourage them."

The platoon stayed together and hiked fast that day, scouting ahead enough to prevent an ambush but not slowing or taking detours. Still, Eochaid felt eyes on his back throughout the march. Cray flew Vila several times, and each time she gave him the circle-and-dive signal that indicated movement behind them.

"Greedy little halfwits don't give up, do they?" Drask muttered.

"My grandmother used to say, 'too smart to ignore, too stupid to scare.'" Mareka chuckled. "They would stalk the tribe for days until we killed a few."

Gandy growled. "Okay, tonight we'll bloody their noses."

That evening they rigged triplines. Gandy sent out a group to walk the edge of the camp at sundown, then pulled the vigilants in close for the night. Around midnight, the watchers around the campfire closed their eyes one by one, pretending to doze on duty. First Drask lay back on his pack. Then Mareka allowed her golden lids to fall. Then Skylash's head lolled back, leaving only Eochaid seemingly alert.

He couldn't see past the firelight's edge, but he could sense blades and spears waiting for him in the darkness. Carefully he calmed himself and stretched out with his hearing, gathering in the sounds of the night: the rustle of insects, the hiss of the low breeze, the infrequent calls of unfamiliar animals.

A quiet creak, the sound of a tripline being gently disarmed. *From the west*, he thought. He strained his ears and heard the scrape of leather or hide on pebbles from the north as well. *They're encircling us and moving in.*

Barely moving, he prodded Drask with his toe. The halfling coughed and rolled over, a signal to the others to get ready.

The creeping sounds in the dark paused for a long moment, then resumed. Eochaid covered his mouth casually with one hand as if yawning. "North and west," he whispered. Skylash raised her thumb in acknowledgement.

“Three,” Eochaid counted, “two, one...now!”

Mareka leapt to her feet and roared, and Skylash’s head popped up at the same moment. Eochaid and Drask got their blades in hand and their feet under them. Skylash shouted an incantation and a blazing bolt of lightning arced north from her hand into the night.

As if echoing her, Henmeth threw a fireball from the window of the shelter at the invaders from the west, where it exploded with a second thunderclap. Eochaid saw a flash of running forms scattering in the blast, the afterimage dancing in his eyes. Faint cries of terror came from both directions.

Eochaid, Drask, and Mareka prepared to give chase but as they turned, a deep, gurgling growl rolled out of the night to the northeast. There was a moment of silence, then a resounding roar. Then the screams of goblins, fleeing back towards the camp.

“Fall back to the shelter!” Gandy shouted. “Cover the door and be ready to pull inside!”

They backed towards the little earthen building, surrounding the door. Henmeth and Rahalphion appeared at the window. From the northeast, shrieks of panic and the rustle of something large in the grass that snarled and snapped. A hoarse cry and the wet crunch of bones, closer than before.

The shelter’s alarm began to chime. “*Karut*,” Henmeth whispered, and it ceased. The vigilants waited, blades and bows ready.

Three goblins, one badly singed, blundered out of the dark and ran through the firelight, past the shelter without a second look. Drask danced out and caught the singed one in the ribs with his rapier, tumbling back to his place by the door even as the body fell kicking to the dirt.

Then two huge shapes surged out of the night. Firelight gleamed dully red and gold against scaly, armored bodies. Wing-like frills taller than a man ran in parallel lines down their mighty backs. Gold eyes and sharp teeth flashed. *Dragons*, Eochaid thought, his heart pounding.

The smaller of the two (Eochaid’s mind reeled a bit thinking of something the size of a mire wyrm as ‘smaller’) darted off after the fleeing goblins. The larger one glowered at the vigilants, a trickle of poisonous-looking vapor curling from its nostrils.

“*Hold!*” Rahalphion shouted from the window. “They’re animals! Hold still.”

Eochaid stared in stunned amazement as the druid opened the door and stepped out towards the hulking beast with his hands open, making a clucking noise as if calling a yard full of hens. Eochaid readied his stance to tackle the lunatic druid, but Mareka grabbed his wrist.

The towering dragon cocked its head and watched Rahalphion walk to the fallen goblin. Rahalphion picked up the twisted corpse and carried it to the beast, which leaned down and gingerly took the morsel in its teeth, lifted it eleven feet into the air, and bit it in two, swallowing noisily.

The dragon leaned down to snuffle at the other half of its prize. As it did so, Rahalphion reached up to scratch under the blunt, hand-sized scales that protected the beast's fuming nostrils and smiled. "Good fellow," he said. The dragon blinked slowly and nuzzled the druid, knocking him back a step. Then it slurped up the ragged goblin torso and trundled off after its mate.

Rahalphion turned and sighed. "See? Just hungry."

"That was a dragon," Eochaid stammered.

Rahalphion chuckled.

"That was a *dragon!*" Eochaid searched the faces of his fellow vigilants. One by one, they burst into guffaws of laughter.

"Lenahr, you romantic...!" Gandy choked the words out. "You...you read more books at Bride Lake than *anyone!* Do you *really* not know what a mock-dragon is?"

Drask leaned against Eochaid's leg, sobbing. "Your face!" he cried. "I will *never* forget that face!"

Eochaid's ears burned, hemmed in by mockery on all sides. The only places he could go were inside the cramped shelter, where they'd surely follow, or out into the darkness where either one of two massive 'false dragon' animals could find and tear him to pieces. He shook off Drask's hold and stood stiffly, teeth clenched and hands in fists.

"I thought you grew *up* near a dragon, Lenahr!" someone said.

"It's not funny!" he yelled.

"Enough," Moreri growled. The manticora's tail flicked back and forth sharply against the doorframe where he stood. The group sobered up and the laughter quieted.

Gandy looked at her feet and took a thoughtful breath. "Alright everyone," she said, "back inside. Rah, help me walk the perimeter. We'll make sure none of our friends are lurking out there." She exchanged a look with Moreri and then left with Rahalphion as the others filed into the shelter.

Eochaid moved to follow, but Moreri held up a hand. "Stand watch with me, Lenahr," he said, and closed the shelter door.

Eochaid drove his swords into their sheaths and stalked to the far side of the campfire. Staring out into the darkness, he tried to take back control from the seething knot of rage in his belly.

Moreri padded quietly around the fire and sat on the stones at Eochaid's feet.

"All of us here were scared," Moreri said. "Even knowing the beast for what it was, Rahalphion took a serious risk. He admires those animals that can survive in this place, enough to gamble his life on his druidic bond with them. If that had failed him, he would be dead and we would be fighting to recover his corpse. It would have snapped him in two just as readily as it did the goblin."

As Moreri spoke, Eochaid turned over the words in his mind. *A stupid risk. We could have backed into the shelter and avoided the battle.* But even as he thought the words, they lost their potency. *And if it hadn't been satisfied with goblin, what then? We'd all be squeezed inside with too little room to fight and the building coming down around our ears.* The odds no longer felt so clear.

"Fear begets tension that begs to be eased. Laughter was only the easiest release."

Eochaid took a slow breath of dry air through his nostrils and let it go. "Yeah, I get that. I overreacted."

Moreri lifted his hands, palms up. "To the laughter, perhaps. But they taunted you. Your anger was perfectly fair. I would likely have felt much the same. Mareka certainly would. I am disappointed that she laughed at it."

Eochaid snorted. "I don't think they could help themselves. I imagine I'd have laughed, if it wasn't at my expense."

Moreri sighed. "Given all that you share in common with my sister, it does not surprise me."

"Share what? Tempers?"

"You're both raw," Moreri replied.

• • •

The next day, Eochaid told Gandy that he would take the scout position ahead of the squad. He walked alone and kept to himself during rest breaks.

In the afternoon, Gandy joined him in the lead. They walked for several more hours, saying nothing to one another. At a narrow gulch, Gandy signaled a halt. "Wait here. We'll check that the valley's clear," she called back to the rest of the squad. Then she and Eochaid hiked down the stony path.

The other vigilants disappeared from view as the rocky canyon twisted. Gandy stopped. Eochaid halted too. Gandy didn't look back at him, didn't speak. Eochaid stayed silent as well, waiting.

"You're like the younger brother I never had," Gandy muttered. "If I give you the slightest shit, I feel awful afterward. But I'm your sergeant! I'm *supposed* to give you shit." She thumped her head against the canyon wall.

"I shouldn't have let it keep going," she said. "It really was funny — you're so smart, so studied up on all the lore, and this seemed so *basic*..." She thumped her head again.

"Listen," she said, turning around to face him, "I fucked up. As a sergeant, I fucked it up. I can joke with my friends. I *can't* joke with my men. Not that way. I have to stand back from that, and with you...it's hard. You're *Lenahr*!" She waved her arms in exasperation. "The brat I trained with, who hugged me when that hag Varith made me cry in front of the whole Behjurian Vigil. I thought I knew how to do it, but I didn't."

“Eochaid,” Eochaid said.

“What?”

“When you’re my sergeant, I’m Lenahr. When you’re my friend, I’m Eochaid.” He sighed. “And out here, I have to be Lenahr.”

“Well, I never want *you* to call me anything besides Gandy. You can *always* be my friend, whether I’m kicking your vigilant ass or not. If you ever call me Sergeant Gandariotharias, I’ll know I’ve grievously screwed things up.”

“And if I call you...what was it? Elethio...Ethero—”

“Finish that sentence and I will have you carry *all* the squad’s packs for the rest of the day!”

• • •

The patrols returned to their usual steady pace. Eochaid observed the system, which was quite different for Pelpernoi’s very long missions than Arcernoth had used on their short stints in the marshes. Cray’s bird, Vila, carried messages back and forth between the two squads during the daily patrols. Cray began training Eochaid to handle the bird, and Gandy soon put him in charge of her squad’s messages. Before long Vila would fly to him when the squads met at night, peeping and nuzzling until he gave her a treat or a scratch.

In the evening, Gandy would compose messages for the company commander, Captain Allard, coordinating troop movements, relaying information, and receiving her instructions on where to patrol. To cover the longer distances between platoons, the vigil used magic instead of animals. Allard’s own platoon and the other two in his company covered a quarter of the land bordering the Blood Steppes, and no animal could cover those distances in a night. More magic, Eochaid assumed, connected Allard with the three other companies that made up the full Blood Steppes Battalion.

Vigilant-Marshall Talissa Pelpern oversaw all three battalions in the vigil. Two patrolled the hills where they bordered forests to the west: the Stricken and Hornsaw Battalions, respectively. But the marshal personally directed the Blood Steppes Battalion. Talissa was the descendent of Hadrass Pelpern, the original founder of Pelpernoi Vigil two hundred years before. Together, the three hundred vigil soldiers covered hundreds of miles of territory and did it well.

They encountered the other company platoons only a handful of times, either to trade supplies or to bring strength to bear against powerful threats. And once, Captain Allard called in his full company to assist when a pack of carrion hounds expanded into territory close to a mantichora village.

The term “monster” did not do the hounds justice; the beasts were among the most disturbing things Eochaid had ever beheld. Their mangy, horse-sized, wolfish bodies were covered in sores and rotting abscesses. Some of them were missing whole sections of skin, either wounds or the creature’s normal, gruesome anatomy with protruding muscle

and bone. Instead of a head, each hound's neck split apart into a dozen huge, writhing maggots that groped hungrily towards anything that came nearby.

The combat was vile and grisly: Once a hound latched on it would cling to its opponent, the greasy, gray maggot heads digging their way into flesh. When one of the hounds sprang at Gandy, it pinned her to the ground and its heads chewed through her armor to burrow into her arm and abdomen.

Eochaid leapt onto the monster's back as Gandy struggled and screamed in agony. He plunged both of his blades into the creature's neck while Drask attacked its flanks and Henmeth fired magical blasts. He held on while the dying creature struggled to buck him off and continued to stab at it until it fell down, dead. They pulled Gandy out from under the corpse, and Eochaid was relieved that Moreri could close Gandy's horrifying wounds and heal her.

Thankfully, the monsters were not very smart. With the might of the full company the vigilants quickly cornered and defeated the pack. Zane was even able to magically repair Gandy's mangled armor, mending the fissures the beast had gnawed through it. After the battle, Captain Allard commended Gandy on her squad's good combat tactics. While the rest of the company searched for the creatures' burrow, the captain sent Gandy's squad to the manticora village to inform them of the victory.

The village was located at the bottom of a deep valley: small caves and a cluster of rough stone houses. Only a few dozen manticora, nearly half of them children, lived there. A company of vigilants, or even a platoon, might have been interpreted as a threat. Their squad of six with two manticora among them was a welcome curiosity. Eochaid was surprised a village could survive in the wasteland of the Haggard Hills, but he could see why the little tribe had claimed the place. There was life in the valley — a few green plants and small animals and a small but deep pool of water, fed by a very rare clean spring.

It was bleak, but the villagers appeared hardy and greeted the vigilants warmly. Moreri spoke to their elders, introducing the rest of the squad and translating. Gandy assured them the vigil had annihilated the pack of carrion hounds, but warned them to watch for stragglers in the region. A young warrior from the tribe promised to find the vigilants if more appeared. "He doesn't want to be left out of the next fight," Moreri said. Before they left, Moreri healed a sick child and blessed the village shrine to Tanil.

Then a few days later they stumbled into a pair of trolls heading north toward the Ganjus. The squad had stopped for their noon rest in the shade of an abandoned village's tumbledown walls, moving in quietly and checking the buildings before choosing a place. Evidently they weren't the only ones who'd decided the town would make good shelter.

They'd cleared all the buildings except a dilapidated barn. As Gandy pulled the handle, the weathered old door dropped off its hinges and fell into the barn with a crash and a cloud of grit. The two trolls who'd been sleeping inside scrambled out into the daylight, each roaring and blearily waving a tree-sized club. Gandy barely tumbled clear, and there was a moment's confusion on both sides. Then Eochaid and Mareka leapt to the front to hold the hulking humanoids back so the squad's casters could get clear of their long arms and heavy clubs.

Between Drask's training and Mareka's wild, carefree presence on the battlefield, Eochaid began to feel some of his old thrill at combat. When the second troll hit Mareka, knocking her off her feet, Eochaid charged the beast from behind. His blades didn't kill, but they caught and held the monster's attention while Mareka scrambled to her feet. As he harried the troll, slipping in and away before its tree-trunk club could catch him, he felt a feral smile tug his lips. And that night around the campfire, the platoon made them reenact the scene with Moreri playing the troll.

• • •

The four holidays of the seasons are old, set by ancient druids in the days of the titans to mark time for their followers. There are the two equinoxes — the Carnival of Flowers to celebrate new growth after winter, and the Feast of Wheat to honor the dead and celebrate what we gain by reaping them, and there are the two solstices — the Festival of the Sun to be grateful for mercy and good fortune, and Grim Day to wallow in shame and pity.

Over centuries, the gods usurped these holidays for their own benefit. They changed the celebrations to direct mortal love and attention away from the titans, who do not care one way or another about them, to the gods, to whom love and attention are strength and sustenance. Through it all, though idols rise and fall, though words and even languages change, the cycle goes on: renewal, joy, death, sorrow, renewal, joy, death, sorrow...

• • •

Toward midsummer the platoon headed back to the Circle and Hope. They were due to resupply, and the druids had specifically invited Rahalphion's platoon to celebrate the Festival of the Sun in Hope as a courtesy, since they intended to use Rahalphion in the ceremony.

Eochaid remembered the summer solstice celebrations as a child: one of the only times of the year his family could worship Madriel openly without fear from Belsamite priests, since even worshippers of the dark goddess could not avoid thanking her life-giving sister on Madriel's holiest of holy days. The previous summer was Eochaid's first experience of how others celebrated the Festival. In training at Bride Lake, Hutchling and the other clerics of Madriel had led the community in songs and prayers. How would it be this year, alone at a celebration hosted by followers of Denev, among the few Tanilites in his platoon?

Nonetheless, it made him happy to see green growth and other people again. The granary in Hope was finished, and long tables awaited the feast outside the hall it rose from. The druids had grown patches of wildflowers, and a vine arbor hung heavy with Veshian grapes. Eochaid smiled. *That's a lot like home.*

Everyone in Hope contributed in some way, including the vigilants. They gathered wood, hauled wagons and casks, peeled vegetables, and prepared meat. The day of the festival, they rose before dawn and gathered on a hilltop overlooking the village where a circle of druids welcomed the sun and lit a torch, which they carried to town to light the bonfire.

This feels strange, Eochaid thought. Everything was familiar, but a shade off from what he expected. There were no prayers, no songs. There was no temple, because Denev didn't notice such things. Yet there was the feast, the Torch of Life, the day-long bonfire, the arbor of grapes. The symbols he remembered, but without the veneration that had always surrounded them. *It feels like a ritual, not a celebration.*

And in fact, he found, there was some truth to that. Gandy's platoon accompanied Rahalphion and four other druids to the edge of the Circle to find a large, unworked stone with a single sigil carved into its top. There the laconic druid took his elven form. He bowed and spoke to the stone in a primal, earthy tongue. Eochaid couldn't understand the words, but he *felt* the truth of them deep in his bones. Rahalphion said more to the stone than Eochaid could remember him saying for the rest of the time he'd known the man.

Then the druids gathered around the stone. "No interference," Rahalphion said to the vigilants. He gestured to the other druids. They grabbed the stone from all sides, finding the firmest holds they could. Then, following Rahalphion's directions, they lifted it. The stone was clearly heavy, and not all the druids seemed strong enough to handle the load, but they eased it up and walked it out to the very edge of the circle's grass and life. It was only a short distance but took many minutes to cover. The stone sank into the ground with an impressive permanence, and the sweating, gasping druids smiled to one another and returned to town.

"Did you just...does that expand the circle?" Eochaid asked.

Rahalphion nodded. "Not the only stone," he said. "There are dozens, and people moving all of them today. Slow, but that's how Denev works."

Back in town, the smell of roasting meat and vegetables filled the air. The vigilants passed the time helping wherever they could, but even Eochaid was distracted by the delicious odors.

Finally, the coals were raked back on cooking pits. The residents of Hope filled platter after platter with steaming food and laid them out on the tables, and elves from the farm set out wine, mead, and other spirits. The feast began.

It was a rowdy, chaotic celebration with no speeches or ceremonies. Hungry people ate, and thirsty people drank. Eochaid saw trays of some sort of fungus and flowers passing between tables. "Careful," Mareka said. "Those will do more to you than the mead!" As the sun set, more and more druids rose and circled the fire as if entranced by its flames.

Music began, first faintly from just a few instruments and not in unison. Then Kallen pulled her flute and rose. "If you'll excuse me, vigilants, I have a revel to lead!" she said, and disappeared into the crowd. The music began to coalesce into a single melody, with more instruments joining and voices picking it up, coming from all over at once. Kallen surfaced near the fire, leading the song and dancing on a table with a pair of elves and an orc (an incarnate, Eochaid assumed).

The tables began to empty, and a circle formed around the fire. Eochaid clapped and stomped along with the rest of his platoon. Then a line of elves danced into the crowd, naked except for markings drawn on their skins in clay. With un-elf-like abandon, the crowd began to shed their clothes.

Rahalphion, who'd eaten from the tray of flowers earlier, stood. "Fire dances," he said, and shape-shifted, his body dissolving into flame. An elemental being of fire, he strode toward the tower of flaming logs. The crowd parted and he climbed on top of the burning pile, disappearing into the flames.

Drask closed his open mouth. "Known a few druids," he said. "Didn't know they could do *that*."

Skylash whooped and shucked off her cloak. By the time she'd finished removing her clothes, Moreri and Mareka were removing their own.

Eochaid laughed.

"Oh," scoffed Gandy, rolling her eyes, "don't tell me — *this* part reminds you of your last birthday back in New Venir?"

"Of course it does," Eochaid replied, "only it was for Tax Day! Prince Urlis insisted."

Henmeth choked on her ale. The others laughed.

"But," Eochaid said, "I don't think this *is* an orgy. They're celebrating Madr— uh, I mean Denev's gifts to us, and part of that is *us*!" Eochaid felt strange. These words belonged much more to his mother than to him, but they were true and he felt an urge to honor them. "We're here, and we're whole," he said. "They've worked hard to nurture the land, and we've fought out there in the dust to protect them."

"Lenahr, I think you must've swallowed an elf," Gandy said.

"So we take off all of this," he continued, pulling his shirt off, "and celebrate that — for all the world's bleeding and poisoned — there's life in all of us yet."

He kicked off his boots and pulled down his trousers, placing them on the bench. Gandy shook her head in exaggerated disgust. Eochaid shrugged and walked off toward the dancers.

The gold and red of firelight swirled and flashed on backs, on shoulders, on raised and clapping hands. The smoke smelled of leaves and moss, and of something sweet that intoxicated. The fire elemental emerged at the top of the bonfire, wavering in and out of existence as the flames submerged and revealed it like waves. Eochaid found Skylash, Moreri, and Mareka and they formed a smaller circle in the larger turmoil, clapping and dancing. It wasn't much like the ceremonies of home, really. But it fit.

Mareka danced with a bold, predatory grace. Her muscles stood out clearly through her thin fur. He danced his way faster around the circle to catch up to her. *She's beautiful*, he thought. He reached out toward her, but his hand faltered in midair as his heart pulled it back. The temptation to catch her, to draw her close, was strong. But jagged shards of memory threatened him and drove him back.

He circled off into the grass away from the dance and sat down to rest, clutching his knees. Away from the fire, the night air left his skin clammy as the heat of the dance boiled off. The music and the battle in his mind made him numb and dizzy.

He shook his head hard. He felt a kinship with Mareka. He felt desire for her. She was breathtaking. A part of him was hungry for her, but such pain arose at the thought that he felt ill. *No*, he thought. *That's just a tiny part of it.* She *was* beautiful, but that wasn't why he'd wanted to reach out and catch her.

"Where did you go?" Mareka asked.

Eochaid's head jerked up. The pupils of Mareka's catlike eyes widened. "I interrupted," she said. "You are fighting some battle inside. I can leave you to it."

"No," he said. "Don't." He took her hand, feeling the ridges over her claws, and pulled her down next to him. She inclined her head, watching closely. He lifted a hand and ran it along her tight braids, fingernails digging down to scratch along the scalp. Her eyelids closed slowly, and she smiled. She leaned back against him. "For friendship," he said, and stroked her scalp again.

She glanced over her shoulder at the obvious erection in his lap. "Friendship?" she asked. "Nothing more?"

"No, ignore that," he said. "That *is* because of you, but it's...not what I *want*. Not right now. Right now, I want to do *this*." Firmly but gently, he stirred the bristly hair at the back of her neck with his fingers and scratched the sensitive skin.

"I trust you," he said.

Mareka's golden eyes looked deeply into his. Her flirtatious grin faded, and a quiet understanding took its place. She smiled broadly and contentedly.

"Thank you," she replied.

• • •

For some time Eochaid sat with Mareka. Calmness washed through him, relaxing both his mind and body. The burnt sweetness that he'd smelled earlier was heavy in the air. The texture of Mareka's hair and fur under his fingertips enthralled him, as did the feel of the grass under his legs. He watched the firelight reflected in her eyes, transfixed by the changing colors.

She pulled on his hand. "Come."

He was standing beside her. She pulled him back towards the bonfire. Gandy was dancing now, wildly, along with the other members of their platoon, their bare skin glistening in the firelight. Mareka joined them.

He saw Henmeth swaying quietly by herself with her hands clasped in front of her bare chest. He approached and smiled. She blinked dizzily at him, confusion on her face.

"We're with you," Eochaid said, and then smiled widely. "It's safe." She melted into a smile of her own. He took one of her hands and led her into the dance. Gandy took the other, and they spun her around in a wide circle.

Later he found himself sitting with Henmeth, Drask, and Moreri, deep in conversation. Someone had given them blankets, and he was curled up under one for warmth. Later he couldn't recall what they discussed: only that the debate was intense, the conclusions insightful, and the whole thing hilarious.

The celebration burned on, a bridge of music and light across that shortest of nights to the dawn the next morning. Most of his platoon fell asleep, but Eochaid stayed awake to see the sunrise. Rahalphion, once again in the shape of a wolf, curled up around Henmeth where she slept and put his head on Eochaid's lap. Together they watched the sky brighten until eventually Eochaid drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The next day, well past noon, Captain Allard summoned Gandy's platoon to meet him at the supply building. The cleric Kabria wove among them as they slouched across town, touching each person's forehead to cast a small charm that relieved their aches. Eochaid wasn't in pain, having drunk little, but his memories of the night before were fuzzy and strange.

"I don't think everything that happened last night was *me*," he said.

Drask laughed. "They put something in the bonfire that gets in the smoke. It makes you happy and relaxed. Opens the mind or something — some more than others. At least you didn't *eat* anything special." He gestured over at Rahalphion, who was still in wolf form and chasing a butterfly through the grass and flowers, his tongue lolling out over his teeth.

Kabria reached out as the druid romped past and gently ran her fingers down his flank. The wolf looked reproachfully at the cleric, sat down, and changed back into his elf form. "It's ceremonial, Kabria," he said.

Eochaid grinned. *Elf or wolf, the look's nearly the same.*

"We're meeting with the Captain, Rah," Kabria countered. "Vigil business."

Rahalphion sighed, stood up, and dusted the grass off his clothes. Then the two of them jogged to catch the rest of the platoon.

Captain Allard was waiting outside the supply building. His platoon moved about, sorting and putting away supplies.

Captain Allard noticed them and waved them up. "Sergeant Gandariotharias—"

"Sergeant Gandy, if you please, sir," Gandy interjected. The rest of her platoon lined up behind her at attention.

The captain pursed his lips and nodded. "Alright, as you wish." He scanned the gathered vigilants for a moment, and then he turned back to Gandy. "I have new orders for your platoon. Your team has bonded well over the last few months, and we think you're ready for tougher missions."

"Thank you, sir," Gandy answered.

Captain Allard's eyes fell on Rahalphion. "Specialist, will there be any problems if we have you away from the Circle for an extended time?"

Rahalphion shook his head. “No sir. They won’t need me again until midwinter. And besides, my first loyalty is to Vesh.”

“Glad to hear it.” Allard smiled. “Sergeant, you have some of the most powerful spellcasters in the battalion, so yours is one of our most combat-capable platoons.”

Skylash straightened her spine and held her head higher. Henmeth blushed. *Stronger casters than I’ve worked with anywhere else*, Eochaid thought.

“We haven’t sent a group to assess the Blood Steppes for over a year. I’m assigning your platoon that duty. I’ll meet with you and your corporals to discuss the details. The rest of you should resupply for a combat mission. Dismissed.”

Gandy, Moreri, and Kallen followed the captain to the small office inside the storehouse. The rest of the platoon went to see to their equipment.

Eochaid tapped Drask’s shoulder as they went inside. “A long combat mission that far from Hope? That’s a lot of gear if we want to be ready for surprises.”

“Quartermaster’ll assign us a magic sack. You can put a wagonload in it and it’ll only ever weigh as much as your regular pack. We’ll only carry food and water enough for an emergency, since Rah and the clerics can make those. It’ll mostly be potions and equipment.”

“But still...”

“...and Henmeth can teleport stuff in if we need something specific. It’ll be fine as long as we’re thrifty and don’t fall afoul of anything too dangerous.”

Eochaid remembered his hunting trips on the edge of the Blood Steppes. *There’s a lot out there that’s too dangerous*. He was somewhat reassured to see the quartermaster pack their magic sack with bundle after bundle of arrows.

• • •

The battles of gods and titans are of such violence that they make nonsense of landscapes, permanently disrupting what went before. The old name for a place — the Flourishing Flats, say — becomes meaningless when that region is ruined and poisoned in a titan’s death throes and then drenched in wave after wave of brackish water and corrupted blood. Such places need new names: the Mourning Marshes, in this case.

Often, no sentient beings remain alive in such places to give new names, and their surviving neighbors, out of a lack of creativity, of free time away from the base tasks of survival, or of simple despair, give up. Hence the number of places on Ghelspad with the prefix “Blood.”

So it was with the Blood Steppes. Not steppes any longer, and indeed not truly any one sort of land, but named thus out of lack of need for a better name. If any region of Ghelspad truly deserves the name ‘the Scarred Lands,’ it is these. The further in one wanders, the more the land itself is in tumult: hills and crevasses and sinkholes and boiled expanses

of rock and geysers and chasms, so that a traveler might think they'd crossed a whole continent in the space of days.

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Eochaid couldn't say there was an exact point when they'd crossed from the hills to the steppes. The terrain of the Blood Steppes became truly bizarre and dangerous, but not until much further in than they planned to go. Instead, it was a very gradual shift. The tallest hills were closest to the Ganjus. The slope of the terrain gradually lessened the further south they went. Eventually the hills were long and rolling: still high enough to cut off the horizon, but rarely so steep that the march became a climb.

These lower hills were also livelier. The patches of grass were broader and thorny thickets of hardy gray-green briars stood out against the bare earth. Small creatures sometimes scattered at their approach.

But at the same time, the more fertile terrain was more unsettling. A reddish tinge appeared in the green of both grass and leaves. He began to catch movement in the grass that didn't conform to the anatomy he would expect of field mice, rabbits, or even snakes. Little beasts skittered away on too many legs, or bent in places they shouldn't have joints, or eyed the passing vigilants hungrily.

Watches at night grew tense. It was no longer enough to find a high position and look for large creatures or war parties. The grass and thickets concealed threats closer to camp. Small animals called to each other. Dog-sized beasts crept close enough to throw a stone at. More than once the alarm on Henmeth's shelter sounded and those on watch had to chase off mangy, snapping predators. They began setting snares on the camp's outskirts to deter the more ambitious ones.

Gandy changed their usual patrol spacing, keeping the squads within a half mile of one another. Then she moved them within bowshot. Then she brought them together as a platoon, no member beyond view of at least two others.

One day, Eochaid saw a rabbit flush from cover as they passed near and dart into a patch of thorns. The thorns rippled and folded in on it. The animal screamed, briefly and high.

That was the day he was sure they'd fully crossed into the Blood Steppes.

The honest threats of this landscape reassured some tiny part of him, even as it put the rest on edge. Instincts he'd built in Arcernoth manifested themselves. Even at rest breaks, he positioned himself for cover. He talked less and listened much more. He realized he was unconsciously mapping the positions of his fellows relative to himself as he walked, ready to move in any direction in case of an ambush.

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“Whatever got them was recent,” Cray called. The wagon in the ravine was smashed, and the traces and leads were soaked in blood and chewed through. There were no bodies, though — not even the horses.

The vigilants were dispersed around the site, either on guard or studying the evidence. They’d been in the Steppes for weeks, fighting large and small battles and charting the landscape. This was different.

“More wagon tracks up here,” Kallen shouted. “That wasn’t the only one. Lots of foot tracks, too. And drag marks.”

They’d stumbled on the scene when Rahalphion smelled blood in the creek they stopped at to collect water. Following the flow uphill, they’d found the remains of a cobbled road with recent signs of use. Where the road crossed the ravine, they found evidence of a battle.

Eochaid climbed onto the wrecked wagon in the ravine to look more closely at the harnesses. *These tooth marks look like—*

“Huh,” Cray said. Eochaid craned his head to see over the wreckage. The ranger knelt on the gravel by the edge of the creek.

“What’d you find?”

Cray held up a silver coin. “Looks like a cash box or chest broke open, and nobody bothered to pick up what spilled loose.” He pawed through the pebbles and picked up two more coins. “Sergeant, I don’t think this was a robbery!”

“Hells. I like crazy raiders even less than greedy ones,” Gandy shouted. “Finish and get back up here. We’re going to find these guys.”

Cray and Eochaid scrambled up the rocks to the top. The rest of the platoon was already gathering. “Okay,” Gandy said. “We’re dealing with a large band, here, and at least somewhat organized if they’re ambushing travelers. We don’t know what they want, so we don’t know if there’ll be survivors. We follow the tracks. We find out more.”

The platoon formed up and marched into the brush. Eochaid and Cray took the scout position in front of the group. Eochaid studied the tangle of tracks that followed the wagon ruts as he walked. *Just boot prints. Just people. So why...?* Something had chewed through the harness on the wagon. Something not human, with sharp, long incisors.

It took him twenty minutes to find his answer. There was only one print that hadn’t been trodden under among the mass of boots and hooves: a tight cluster of toe pads and deep grooves where the foot’s claws had bitten into a muddy slope. *A slitherin.*

He glanced back. Gandy led the others, scanning the brush. *Do I tell her? It’s just one, though.* The print was small — not from a burly Foamer or Mauler, thankfully. But if this was an ordinary slitherin, it could well be one of the ‘Redeemed.’ His gorge rose to imagine ratmen around him in the brush, and he felt a flare of shame at how little control he had over his hatred. *For all I know, the attackers are farmers defending their land.*

Eochaid wrestled with the two urges: speak up and reveal his disgust, or save his feelings and put fellow soldiers at risk. He sighed and muttered, "Lies are poison in the bloodstream of the vigil."

"You say something?" Cray whispered.

"Yeah. I'm dropping back to the sergeant. Keep an eye out."

Cray nodded. Eochaid slowed his pace until Gandy drew even with him.

"Something to report?" she asked.

"I saw a familiar track on the path. Definitely a slitherin. Too small for a Mauler or even a Foamer."

Gandy stopped. "A — there's more than one *kind*?"

"Yeah. There were some chew marks back at the wagon, so I'm pretty sure it was part of the attack. The small ones are dangerous too, but it could also be one of the Redeemed. I didn't see enough to know."

She stared at Eochaid. "You got this all from tooth marks and one footprint."

Eochaid shrugged.

"*That* is the Lenahr I remember," Gandy said.

Eochaid returned to his position and the platoon marched on.

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They found their quarry late that afternoon. A jumble of broken stone walls covered in vines and clumps of grass stuck out above the land like broken teeth. As soon as they saw it, Cray and Eochaid signaled the halt. The vigilants crouched and faded into the brush, regrouping in the cover of a thicket of sickly trees.

Gandy drew them into a circle. "That's gotta be it. Cray, send Vila up there. Have her stay high. I just want to know if they have any sentries up on the ruins where they could see us from far away. Rah and I will study it from here and plan the best approach. The rest of you, sit and eat. If there's a fight coming, this is your best chance to get ready for it."

Eochaid sipped some water and closed his eyes against the slanting sun. Someone sat beside him, and a hand settled onto his head. *Mareka*, he thought, as claw-tips combed through his hair. He reached up with his right hand to scratch her neck.

"You're fighting inside yourself again," she said.

His eyes flicked open. She was watching him, a serious look on her face.

He nodded. His free hand fell on the pommel of his sword, and he traced the designs in its hilt with his thumbnail. "There's something there that...I need to know if it's an enemy. I can't *fight* properly if I don't know."

Mareka nodded seriously. “That same struggle, the one I’ve watched in you.” She lifted her hand from his head and held it in front of her, extending her claws and studying them. “I never walk into a battle knowing the outcome. Things shift. But when I fight, I find clarity. My enemies, my allies...it never takes long for me to see who is who.”

She stood, stretching herself again. “Set the struggle aside and go to the battle empty, like you did that day with the trolls. The battle will tell you who is who.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

They moved in silently under cover, approaching in twos and threes. The platoon reassembled in the shade of the furthest wall, its three-foot stone blocks mossy and pitted. On the far side they could hear shouts and someone speaking loudly as if preaching to a crowd.

“Lenahr, Drask, you’re my scouts — get close. Figure out who these people are. Zane — you’re my relay. Watch over them from back here. When Drask signals, use that ‘whisper’ spell of yours to find out what they see. Then I’ll form the plan and Zane will tell the scouts what it is.”

Zane nodded enthusiastically, a bright smile on his face. *Green enough to still be excited about it*, Eochaid thought.

“Lenahr, just a sec,” Zane said. Eochaid waited while the young elf mumbled a few words and then touched him on the arm. “That should help your stealth, among other things, so you can keep up with Drask.”

“Thanks!” As the spell took effect, Eochaid’s sense of his own body sharpened. He could feel the slightest breeze ruffle the hair on his neck and felt certain that he could command the finest of movements and have his body follow through. He looked at Zane in surprise. “Wow!”

Zane chuckled. “Cat’s grace. I find it useful on the dance floor myself.”

Eochaid and Drask slipped through the rubble and scrub like ghosts until they were close enough to see into the center of the ruins. Belly-down in the grass, they peered out from behind a broken column of ancient stone. A cluster of huts and lean-tos surrounded a leaning, ruined temple building, its roof partially caved in. Smoke rose from cooking fires in the fading sunlight. A few guards walked the edge of the makeshift settlement, all scruffy-looking humans or elves in piecemeal armor of the sort used by highwaymen the world over.

“I didn’t expect a simple bunch of bandits,” Eochaid whispered.

“Great gods. They’re not!” Drask said, and pointed across the settlement. On the far side near the temple, several men and women were preparing and cooking meat. On the spit, Eochaid recognized the haunch of a horse. One of the women rolled over the carcass she was butchering and began sawing at the shoulder-joint of a clearly human arm.

Eochaid felt at once queasy and calm. *These are enemies.*

The deep, gurgling voice coming from the temple rose, asking a question he could not make out. A crowd answered. A man screamed horribly, the sound ending in a wet bubbling and a cheer from the crowd. The gurgling voice continued, singsong. A moment later, an elf in bloodstained robes led two men in armor from the temple. The two men dragged a corpse between them, fresh blood running from its torn throat. They tossed the body on the ground by the butchers' table and went back inside.

"Hwyrdd's fucking grace," Drask muttered. "Best we hurry." He ducked back and signaled into the brush towards where Zane waited. Drask whispered a description of the scene in front of them and waited.

Eochaid counted guards and considered possible paths through the campsite. The butchers hung the fresh body by its ankles and let it drain into a basin.

"Yes, ready," Drask whispered. "Uh-huh. About eight — eleven if you count the ones handling the bodies. Okay." He paused. "Understood. Give us a few minutes."

Drask patted Eochaid on the leg. "Okay, Lenahr — time to be stalkers the way you did it in Arcernoeth. We're the platoon's knife. Going to cut a hole through those guards so the others can get in among those huts and rush the temple. No alarms, got it?"

Eochaid reached down and silently drew a sword.

They crept in, Drask about thirty feet from Eochaid, watching their respective targets. The two guards spent more time glancing back at the temple than watching the wilderness, but their paths rarely took them out of view of the others in the settlement. Eochaid hunched in the shadows around a thorn bush. Drask was ready in his patch of grass.

The guards ambled along their routes. Eochaid tensed his legs as the elven woman in front of him entered striking distance. *Once they're both behind cover, we can take them down together.*

Drask's guard stopped and turned toward the cooking fires, sniffing the greasy smoke and smiling. Eochaid's target kept walking, nearly around the hut that blocked off the view from the temple.

Hells. She'll be back in view before I can—

Drask's guard returned to his patrol, turning his back on Eochaid's quarry. Eochaid sprang out of his hiding place and dashed in behind his target. He rammed his blade in between her shoulders and clamped his hand over her mouth. He hauled her up off her feet and back out of view. Laying her body down, he looked over his shoulder.

Drask rolled his guard's corpse against the wall of a hut out of view. He signaled the go-ahead. Eochaid nodded, and they split up. *The others will be on their way. Gotta check these buildings before they get here.*

He risked a peek around the corner, then tumbled across the gap to the next building. In the safety of its shadow, he put his ear against the thatch wall. *Nothing.* He circled around the far side of the hut. There was one more guard on this side of the camp near the temple, but he was more interested in whatever ceremony was happening there than in his assigned task. Staying low, Eochaid crept to the doorway of the hut and peered inside.

Nothing moved. There were three rough straw beds, and a couple of poorly made bows hung from a rack. On a low table, flies buzzed over some gnawed bones on a platter. *They must all be in the temple*, he thought, *with whoever's giving that sermon.*

He slipped into the adjacent hut, a twin to the first, again with nobody inside. In the dirt outside its door he made a mark with his sword, innocuous unless you were a vigilant. Then he crouched in the shadows inside the door and waited again. Not too long after, quiet footfalls approached the hut. A finger scratched twice at the thatched wall, and Eochaid tapped his blade against it once in response.

Cray and Rahalphion slipped inside. The druid had taken his wolf form again, strong and shaggy. "Gandy's taken our casters to climb on top of the temple," Cray whispered. "When they attack the butchers, those of us on the ground charge the door. Won't be long."

The three vigilants stood poised around the door. The deep, preaching voice rolled on, the crowd answering or chanting responses. Then the *thwup* of Skylash's magic projectiles and the *thud* of their impact on flesh.

Eochaid was out the door before the screams began, rounding the corner and sprinting at the guard. The man had turned toward the butchers and had his spear out and ready. Eochaid's blades hit him low in his back. The man dropped his spear and clutched his belly as Eochaid kicked him away and sped on toward the temple doors.

Most of the butchers had fallen. The last one, the woman with the boning knife that he'd seen earlier, dived behind her table and shouted in the guttural language of Titan Speech. Eochaid could not understand it, but her tone was quite clear.

The temple's wide stone double doors were closing. Eochaid couldn't see into the gloom, so he just jammed his blades through the gap before throwing his shoulder against the right-hand door. He noted with some satisfaction that the blades came away bloody and leaned hard, digging his heels into the rough flagstones.

Cray thudded against the other door, and Rahalphion snarled and tore at anything that came near the gap. Still, the doors edged closed. Then, with a roar, Mareka thudded into the door beside Eochaid. "I have it!" she snarled. "Get the gap!"

The doorway was crowded now. Moreri and Drask were pushing on Cray's door, and Rahalphion still covered the middle. Eochaid slid in next to Rahalphion at the gap. A crowd of men and women pushed at the doors from inside, some bloody where Rahalphion had bitten them. Behind them, a large shape waved and shouted in a booming voice.

There are a lot of them in there. He chopped at a hand on the door's edge, then stabbed a leg. Someone threw a spear from inside which rattled by his ear. Mareka roared, and her door inched back the other way. Drask seemed to be driving a spike into the cobbles to wedge their side. Rahalphion had grabbed a woman by the leg and was dragging her through. Eochaid drove his sword through her and she went limp. Then he stabbed two elfen men who tried to grab the body and pull it back inside.

The doors groaned on their hinges, swinging wider. The crowd on the far side seemed a little thinner. *Where did they go?* He made a threatening sweep with his sword, then

tumbled backward away from the fight and the doorway to where he could see the building's façade.

The woman under the butcher's table behind him was shouting and pointing at the doors, gesturing to someone around the corner of the building to his right. Eochaid poked his head past the side of the building and saw a crowd of people advancing on him along the temple's outside wall. *A side door somewhere that we didn't—*

In the crowd, a woman in dirty robes raised her hand and hurled a fistful of flames at him that caught him full in the face.

Eochaid yelled and staggered back. "Right flank! Right flank!" He shouted as loudly as he could and readied his blades for the charge that would be coming, straining to keep his puffy eyelids open and see through the fog.

Someone thudded to the ground next to him. He risked a glance. Skylash was beside him, grinning, hands raised. She stepped out in front of the attacking cultists and a thunderbolt leapt from her hands, rattling Eochaid's teeth and blasting along the side of the temple.

The butcher woman struggled to her feet and raised her knife. A pair of arrows from the roof transixed and dropped her. Eochaid stepped up next to Skylash. The crowd of cultists was nearly on top of her but fallen, smoking bodies slowed their advance.

Skylash raised her arms above her head and sucked in a powerful breath. Then, slamming her arms down, she emitted a shriek so intense Eochaid could see it move through the air. The sound hit the cultists like a hammer, knocking down the first several rows. She clapped Eochaid's shoulder.

He charged into the crowd. Most of the downed cultists were still. The robed woman who'd burned his face was leaning against the wall, raising her hands to make a gesture. His swing took her in the jaw and she fell. Under Eochaid's sword strikes and Skylash's magical blasts the remaining cultists fell like wheat, and they soon found an open side door into the temple.

It was difficult to see much inside; most of the building was lit only by smoking torches, but a hole in the ceiling let in enough light from above to dazzle the eye. From ahead of him in the black, the deep and liquid voice of the preacher called out. "Ye hunters who come, ye shall feed me and mine soon enough!" Something laughed, and there was a rattle of chains.

Eochaid blinked, willing his eyes to adjust faster. There was something enormous in the darkness: something that glistened greasily. Skylash snarled and hurled a bolt of lightning. In the flash, Eochaid saw the creature fully.

The speaker in the darkness may once have been a human or an elf, but its frame was swollen beyond all reason. Rolls of tumescent flesh gleamed under a coating of oil, and even its face sagged like melted wax, as if everything the creature had ever eaten was still trapped inside its skin. *How is it even alive?* Its eyes gleamed with an unearthly fury. Its mouth was open in a defiant roar, and it had rows of tiny teeth in a jaw far wider than should be possible. Its bloated arms were wide, as if welcoming the attack.

Eochaid had only a split second to take in the scene, but before the flash was gone he caught sight of two other figures: smaller, crouched at the feet of the enormous one,

with chains that ran from their necks to its swollen hands. Hairy, sharp-faced figures with long, pink tails. *Slitherin!*

“Thy sorcery is weak,” the fleshy monster said. “And I am *strong!*” Light flared around the creature again. It appeared unharmed by Skylash’s lightning. It grinned toothily. The light was coming from its hands. It clapped them to the flesh of its belly, raised its bulk, and slammed it down with enormous force. The floor beneath Eochaid hammered him as hard as if the monster had struck him itself.

Eochaid’s feet lost all purchase, and he slammed down on the stones, dizzy and battered. Skylash lay against the wall, clutching a torchiere as if she might fall. He tried to tumble to one side and find his footing, but the floor was covered with an odorous coating of oil. It took most of his effort just to rise.

“And,” the hulk of a creature gurgled, “Gaurak’s pets are hunnnnnngry!” It dropped the chains it held, and the two slitherin screamed.

The temple doors burst open, Mareka at the center of a raging melee. Eochaid couldn’t be sure who else was with her, though he heard the bard Kallen shouting encouragement.

One of the ratmen skittered toward the front doors of the temple. The other, keeping low to the ground, grabbed its chain and began whirling it over its head. Eochaid lifted his blades and backed carefully away toward where the ground looked less greasy and slippery.

A cluster of arrows and magical bolts shot through the hole in the roof and sank into the mountain of flesh on the altar, which didn’t even seem to notice.

Eochaid’s attention turned back to the ratman in front of him as it lashed out with its chain, trying to trip him again. He sidestepped and found himself on firmer ground. He circled the slitherin. When it whipped the chain down again he ducked just under it, closed with the ratman, and struck for its heart.

His blade grated off metal, tearing open the rags the creature wore. Underneath was a mail shirt, links and scales gleaming. He ducked back just in time to avoid the beast’s yellow fangs as they snapped shut.

The chain lashed out again, catching his arm painfully. He was already spinning under it, chopping down on a hairy leg. The ratman shrieked and danced back, limping slightly. Eochaid felt a smile arch his lips. He pressed in again. The rat’s chain hit Eochaid in the chest, but he made two quick upward thrusts with his sword. One caught the creature’s mail and delivered a bruising blow that knocked it off balance.

The chain whipped by his head, driving him back. The slitherin growled something in its own tongue and whirled the chain out again. Bruised and punished, Eochaid dodged slightly too late. The links wrapped around his ankle. Howling triumphantly, the creature yanked hard, but Eochaid kept his feet under him.

Before the ratman could react, Eochaid planted his tangled leg firmly and then kicked the chain as hard as he could.

The ratman let go to avoid being tripped, but Eochaid's kick took up too much slack. The chain, still bound to the slitherin's collar, yanked the creature off its feet. Eochaid pounced on it and got his arm around its neck. It clawed and scrabbled at him, but his boiled leather armor held the creature off as he drove his sword into its armpit. The beast shrieked and sank its fangs into his arm, crushing and punishing even through the leather.

Eochaid twisted the blade hard and the ratman coughed. He shoved it deeper. The slitherin shuddered and dropped.

A despairing cry drew his attention back to the battle around him. The huge man on the altar had changed. He'd shot a great, ropy tongue covered in sticky slime from his mouth, catching Skylash and trapping her arms at her sides. She lay on her back, and her attacker was easing his heaving flesh towards her. All her struggles only served to slide her closer to him.

The others were still busy with the second ratman and the remaining cultists by the door. *I have to cut her loose.* Eochaid advanced carefully on the slippery stones.

Above and behind him, he heard Henmeth call out an incantation. To his right, a vortex of energy formed. Sparks flared forth and a man-like figure made of flame appeared. Around its feet the oil sputtered, boiled, smoked...and caught.

Oh Madriel, no!

"*Henmeth! Don't!*" he screamed, and charged across the oily stones, sliding wildly. He could feel the flames following him. The mountainous enemy glimpsed him and struck at him with startling speed. Its arm hit him like a charging bull and threw him skidding sideways, barely upright.

Fire caught the bottom of the creature's mound-like body and began to climb. In only a few seconds the whole floor was alight, filling the room with choking smoke. Somewhere Henmeth was screaming. "No! No!" Skylash shrieked in pain. Eochaid gritted his teeth and charged into the flames.

Everything was burning. The man-mountain and Henmeth's fire elemental were wrestling, slamming into each other. Eochaid squinted through the smoke, caught the path of the sticky tongue, and followed it to a writhing figure lying in the burning pool. Ignoring the pain in his lungs and the growing agony consuming his legs, he flung himself forward, bringing his swords down in a massive overarm strike and parting the disgusting appendage from its owner.

Others were screaming now. Maybe he was, too. There wasn't time to worry about it. He dropped his swords and wrapped his arms around Skylash. He heaved her towards the door they'd both entered through, remembering dimly where it was. Each step hurt more than the last. Skylash had stopped screaming, and he felt sure that was bad. He tripped over the broken stone of the doorstep and fell forward into open air.

Heavy drops of something cold fell on him, stinging terribly where they hit. People were still screaming. Some of them were calling his name, but he didn't have the strength to answer.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Eochaid's chest felt tight, as if he was tangled in something. He struggled to free himself and found rough cloth under his fingers. He picked at an edge to peel it off but touched raw, weeping skin underneath which stung badly. Forcing open heavy, sticky lids, he could see his bare chest was covered in bandages.

He was lying on a bed, a blanket tucked in around him. He could feel more bandages on his legs. Henmeth sat hunched on a wooden stool at his head. At his movement, she glanced up. Her own eyes were red and puffy. "Lenahr's awake!" she shouted. A small lantern on the table illuminated one of the shacks he'd searched earlier.

"What happened?" Eochaid asked, his voice rasping. "Skylash? Is she..."

"She's alive. Thanks to you." She pointed, and Eochaid saw another bandaged figure across the room, chest rising and falling steadily.

"I couldn't put out the fire," Henmeth babbled. "Anything I tried would have killed you. Moreri, he reached you and summoned water to quench the flames on you and stabilized you both. But he—well, everyone, actually — ran out of healing spells during the battle, and saving the prisoners after since they...well, they were in very poor shape." Henmeth's smile flickered on and off, as if appearing only when she consciously thought to hold it on her lips.

"Kabria still has some minor healing in reserve," she stammered, "in case something happens. In case the fire attracts anything tonight. The fatling, I mean, in the temple. It'll probably burn through the night. I didn't know they did that. I've made a note of it, though, so nobody will make that mistake again!" She held up one of her notebooks and waved it earnestly at Eochaid.

"We have some potions left, but Gandy's saving them for the trip home. I was surprised you didn't use *your* potions, actually, although now that I think about it you were probably distracted at the time, though if you're ever in a spot like that again, that's probably what you should do." She nodded earnestly. *She watched us burn*, Eochaid thought. *I'm surprised she's handling it this well.*

"Oh!" Henmeth chirped. "I was able to recover one of your swords!" She reached under the bed and produced the blade, surprisingly intact. "I could only see one of them through the flames, and I had to use a *mage hand* to reach it. It's too hot in there, and

the, um, the smell is...well, anyhow, we can...can poke through once the fire's out and... find the other one."

Eochaid sat up slowly. Where his skin wasn't numb, it stung when he moved. "I'm sure we can get it back."

The doorway creaked open, and Drask and Kabria came inside. "Good work, kid," said Drask as he walked over. "If you hadn't dragged Skylash clear, she'd have been done for."

Kabria nodded to Eochaid. "If you're able to sit up, you'll be all right until morning," she said. She turned her attention to Skylash.

"Is everyone else okay?" Eochaid asked.

Drask grunted. "You two took the worst of it. Well, you two and the prisoners. I've... *whoo*, I've seen a lot in my day, but nothing like *that*." The halfling ranger grimaced. "They're healed, but Moreri can't make 'em whole. They need a big-city high priest, I think. Or Wysemmesine, maybe — she might know a spell powerful enough."

"What's wrong with them?"

A queasy look crossed Drask's face. "They're missing...bits. Only a few got their throats cut. Those Gaurak cannibals were butchering the rest while they were still *alive*."

Eochaid shivered.

Drask turned to Henmeth. "Sparkles, could you give the kid and me some space?"

"Of course!" Henmeth answered. "I...I have more ideas to write down." She touched Eochaid's arm as lightly as a butterfly and left the hut, clutching her notebook tightly.

Drask hopped up onto her stool and leaned in towards Eochaid. "Worried about the sarge, kid," he said quietly. "And Henmeth too, quite frankly. Both blaming themselves for the plan going to shit. Sarge is tearing stripes off anyone who talks to her, and Hen's been sitting here with you both for hours, doin' what you just saw.

"Now, I know Hen. Worked with her out in the Hills for two years. She'll figure this out — think it all through and come up with a better strategy for next time. Probably have it before our next fight. But the sarge...she's still new at being this kind of 'in charge.' I doubt she's ever seen something go this wrong, let alone something she led, and it shook her up."

Drask poked a finger at Eochaid. "You've got her ear, kid. An' I think you've *seen* things go wrong. You talk to her and get her head fixed back on straight, 'kay?"

Eochaid nodded and untucked his blanket. He pulled it around him like a robe and stood up on shaky legs.

"Hey, don't have to go *right* now," Drask said.

Eochaid shook his head. "Better now than later, and I want to see what's happening. Although I...need a little help walking."

Drask squinted up at him and smiled. "You can lean on me, kid."

Eochaid hobbled outside, Drask supporting and steadying him. The late-night air was sharply cold. The grounds outside the temple had been cleaned up. The butchery and tables were gone, and the bodies moved away. The temple doors were closed, but flames flickered through the crack between them and glowed against the smoke still coiling out through its roof.

The vigilants had made a campfire and rounded up benches to sit on. Gandy warmed her hands there beside a human in torn, filthy clothes. A small figure bundled up under a dirty blanket slept close beside the warm stones. Henmeth paced by the fire, talking quietly but energetically to Gandy, who was developing the beginnings of a glare.

“Lenahr?” Gandy snapped, bouncing to her feet. “You look like crap. Get back to your bed!”

“Can’t sleep,” Eochaid said. “You know that.”

“Go back to bed!” she growled.

“No. The fire’s warm,” he said, and sat on the bench with his feet on the stones of the fire ring, warming his toes.

The dirty man got to his feet. “Sergeant, if you’ll excuse me...”

“Of course, Trakas,” Gandy replied. “My troops will watch the camp.”

Trakas nodded respectfully and walked off toward another of the huts.

Drask took Henmeth’s hand gently in his own. “Come on, Sparkles. Sack time. Let’s go.” He led her away to a lean-to.

The wood crackled, and sparks whirled up into the clouds. Though an odor of burnt meat and grease still clung to everything, Eochaid had smelled worse.

“So, we saved some of them,” Eochaid said.

Gandy choked out a half-dead laugh. “A handful.”

“Who were they?” he asked.

“Gold miners. Can you believe it? They’re reluctant to say where from, which probably means the Calastian Hegemony.”

Eochaid shuddered. “Pretty desperate to come all the way out here.” He jerked his chin at the little sleeping figure. “This one of them?”

Gandy nodded. “Ardleigh, or something. He dropped there as soon as we got the fire lit and has barely stirred since.”

In the fire, a log slumped and stirred fresh embers. A puff of wood smoke washed over him, and for a moment their campfire could have been anywhere, not on poisoned ground beside a crematorium for dead cultists.

The firelight heightened the strain on Gandy’s face. It weighed on Eochaid’s heart. *I’ve got to do this*, he thought, *whether I have the words for it or not*. He drew in the cool air, savored it for a moment.

"Have I told you about Captain Skywarder?"

Gandy's eyes flicked up from the flames. "You haven't said much about Arcernoth Delta at all."

"Skywarder...he loves being a vigilant. He loves working in the marshes. He's a smart soldier and a great commander. From the first day I met him, I wanted to make him proud. I wanted to serve with him. He listened to us and I trusted him."

He paused. A hard lump stuck in his throat. "No, that's not true. I didn't trust him enough. I...I lied to him. Kept things from him. You read the reports. You know how it ended. If I hadn't done that, my squad might still be alive."

Eochaid's face flushed. He was breathing harder, walking the edge of a dark place in his heart. *Gandy needs this.* "But that's not all. He didn't trust *us* enough. He lied to *us*, too — kept things from us. It seemed like a good decision, I think, but there were things he didn't know. The situation just...got away from him. From all of us.

"We're soldiers. And that means we fight. Vigilants, which means we're smart and well trained. And it means we take risks for what's right. When I went to Arcernoth, I thought the worst that could happen was that I'd die. I was wrong. It's way, way worse when other people die."

Gandy's eyes glistened, but Eochaid pushed on. "But I'm still here. I know how bad it can get and I'm still here. Where else can I do what we did today?"

"I followed your plan," he continued, "because it was better than any I could've come up with, and because I couldn't stand by and watch that happen. There was no way for Henmeth to know about the oil in there. Skylash and I pushed too far ahead of the platoon. It was one mistake and bad luck. That's usually what kills people."

"I almost got us *all* killed," Gandy muttered.

"Bullshit. You'd have lived. The rest of the platoon would have. Those idiot miners would have. Even if Skylash and I had died, you and the rest had that fight sewn up. You'd have saved, what, five? Six? And lost two."

"Lost *you*, Eochaid," she snapped.

At the name, Eochaid felt a flash of warmth in his heart so strong it frightened him. Eochaid had had lovers, but never a sister. It was that love he saw in her eyes, that fear he heard in her voice: You are my family. *And I feel the same*, he thought, a lump forming in his throat, *but that's not the point*.

He shook his head. "Lost *Lenahr*," he countered. "Risk is the job. Fighting's the job. If your orders aren't for *Lenahr*, I should transfer to a different platoon."

"No," Gandy murmured, the word coming painfully. "You're smart. I need you here to help me. To talk to."

"I'm smart?" He looked her in the eyes and saw she was struggling not to cry. "Fine. As a smart guy, I'll say that it was a solid plan. You're a *decent* officer."

Gandy looked away, shaking her head. “Decent, huh?” she said, her voice sounding a little brighter.

Eochaid made an exaggerated study of her. “Well...not as good as Skywarder. He’s better with people. But he’s had a *lot* more practice.”

She punched him lightly on the arm. “Go to bed, shit-brains,” she said, with a small smile.

Eochaid squeezed her shoulder, hobbled off to his bed, and slept.

• • •

The platoon remained in the Gaurak cultists’ settlement the next day. The miners were too exhausted, and the vigilant healers expended too much of their magic to safely travel. Moreri saw to Eochaid and Skylash in the morning, healing them both without so much as a scar. Henmeth didn’t come to breakfast because she was using her magic to restore Eochaid’s charred armor and boots.

The pyre of flesh in the temple had extinguished itself at last, but the stones stayed hot well into the day. In the end, Mareka flipped one of the butcher tables to stand on while Eochaid and Skylash fished through the char and grime for his sword with a pitchfork. Skylash had a knack of seeing magic, but the sword was too much for her spells to lift it out until he cleared some of the muck away.

They put the sword in the campfire to remove the worst of the grime, and then Eochaid spent an hour picking off the flakes and ash. The sword itself was not harmed in the least.

While cleaning his sword, Eochaid met Ardleigh. He was the halfling who’d been sleeping beside the fire the previous night. The man was the friendliest of the miners, cheerful and curious, with plain brown hair, a deep suntan, and a bold smile. Eochaid found him easy to talk with, and under other circumstances it might have been pleasant to chat with the well-traveled halfling. As it was, the conversation they shared while Eochaid polished his blade was the longest, he thought, that any of the vigilants had with one of the miners.

Trakas talked with Gandy and was polite to the other vigilants, but spoke only to answer questions. He worked with Zane and Gandy to repair the miners’ one intact wagon to carry their wounded for the march. The other miners avoided the vigilants and kept to themselves.

Eochaid felt on edge all afternoon. The day should have been restful, and chatting with Ardleigh had been enjoyable. The rest of the platoon repaired equipment or stood watch on the stone walls, but Eochaid struggled to keep his concentration. Was it the miners?

He spoke to Drask about it. “Oh, they’re damn well shifty,” Drask said. “Miscreants from somewhere south of here, no doubt. We’re taking them *north* to safety, so not only have they lost most of what they sunk into the operation, they’re gonna have to pay to go south again with whoever’ll take ‘em.”

It makes sense, Eochaid thought, but it did nothing to calm his nerves.

Moreri cast his usual spell to create food, and Gandy sent Cray and Kabria on a hunt to supplement the bland meal. They brought home a couple of geese — no one had the stomach for larger game. Everyone, even the miners, collected around the campfire.

“Tomorrow after dawn, we’ll march north,” Gandy said. “We have one working wagon, so those who can’t easily walk will ride. We’ll get you into the Haggard Hills, and then another vigil patrol will escort you to one of the towns on the Eni, or wherever else you ask. We’ll see you safe.”

Trakas nodded. “You have our gratitude, Sergeant.”

“Hear, hear!” Ardleigh cheered. “Denev’s blessing on you, vigilants! We owe you our lives. I don’t see how we could make it safely home without you escorting us!”

Trakas exchanged glances with Ardleigh. Eochaid couldn’t understand their body language, but it drew his attention to Trakas. *He’s nervous. Why would he be nervous now?*

Gandy continued her instructions for the coming day. Eochaid barely heard her. He scanned the other miners. *They’re all nervous.*

The miners were spread among their rescuers but all of them sat stiffly, hands at sides or on laps. One of them, a heavyset man now missing an arm, had his hand on something under a cloak. Ardleigh was the only exception. *He’s tense, but also ...resigned?*

Trakas wandered to a seat closer to the campfire. He was on the far side from Eochaid, visible through the flames. The miner watched Gandy, still handing out orders. He unobtrusively glanced over Mareka and Kabria, who sat on either side of him. As he did so, his demeanor changed.

The tension on his face dissipated. His shoulders slackened, and his weight shifted. Eochaid recognized it even before the man’s hand casually dropped to the knife on his belt: the cool abstraction of a man about to kill.

No. He felt a chill calm come over his own mind, realized his own hands were on his swords. *I must be wrong. This is insane.* Even as he thought it, his legs were bunching beneath him, ready to spring.

The miner’s other hand slipped into his shirt.

All thought left Eochaid’s mind. He exploded off the bench, hurling himself over the fire and drawing a blade in the same motion, raising it overhand to strike. Trakas barely registered movement before Eochaid caught him, plunging his blade deep into the miner’s shoulder.

Eochaid’s weight carried Trakas back over the bench, knocking him down. Their heads collided with a *crack* and Eochaid spilled onto the ground on his side. Dizzily he scrambled to his feet. His sword was gone, torn from his hand and lost in the landing.

People shouted. Eochaid grabbed his second blade and turned just in time to see Trakas roar, rear back his head, and change his shape. Even as Trakas’ body became fluid, Eochaid was closing the distance. As Eochaid charged, Trakas stretched upwards. Scales covered his skin. His face flattened. His jaw opened wider and wider as fangs unfolded themselves from the roof of his mouth. His neck flared into a broad hood.

Eochaid's blade was aimed for a midriff that was no longer there. Trakas' flat head punched out at him. Eochaid shifted from a precise stab to a broad slash and threw his weight in the same direction. His sword nicked the muscular coils and he felt them slide over his shoulder as he rolled away.

He came to his feet. He felt the warmth of magical fire to his back, but all his attention was on the mighty serpent rearing back its hooded head again. The snake snapped forward almost too fast for Eochaid to see and he sidestepped more by luck than skill.

There was no getting clear of the serpent's tremendous speed and reach, so he stopped trying. He pulled his worn hunting knife from his belt and waited.

The long, coiling body shifted. The head lanced out, and Eochaid struck. The hood landed a punishing blow on his ribs, but both his blades bit in. Eochaid circled, but did not run. The head followed, coiling back on the body. The pink, lipless mouth grabbed his waist and both Eochaid and the serpent sunk in their fangs at the same time.

Eochaid felt a pulse of pressure as the snake pumped in its venom and then a wave of dizzying nausea convulsed him. He held onto his blades as Trakas' weight slammed him to his knees.

A roar. Mareka landed on the hood, metal claws catching and tearing. She rolled off and stood. Trakas bucked and whipped his head around toward the new threat. As he tensed to strike again, Eochaid drove first his sword and then his hunting knife deep into the muscle near the base of the hood.

The enormous serpent's body convulsed and dropped, coiling and shifting until it was just a man again—a man with a hole in his heart.

"Lenahr's been bit!" Mareka shouted. She caught Eochaid as he sagged. He gripped her arm to stand, but then Kabria was at their side casting a spell. She touched Eochaid's arm with a glowing hand. The pain and dizziness persisted, but he was no longer getting worse.

He forced himself to stand up straighter and looked around. There were no threats in his immediate reach. Several of the miners lay still on the ground, bleeding from sword wounds or smoldering from fire or magic bolts. Moreri was leaning over Zane, who was prone and covered in blood. A gash on Skylash's forehead dripped blood into her eyes, which she wiped away as she turned around, searching. Gandy took aim at something high overhead with her bow. She fired into the darkness at something beyond Eochaid's sight. A bird shrieked, the sound warbling and twisting into a human cry that ended in the thump of something solid and man-sized hitting the ground.

Cray stood next to Ardleigh, his longsword drawn and aimed at the halfling's throat. Ardleigh had not moved from where he was initially sitting, and his hands were raised high, fingers wide. He stared back at Cray.

"How did you know?" Mareka asked Eochaid, still holding him upright.

"Anyone besides Zane and Lenahr seriously wounded?" Gandy called, and nodded at the chorus of *nos*. "Good. Henmeth! Rah! Find the shapechanger I shot down and bring the body back here."

Kabria cast another spell on Eochaid. The burning in his joints eased, and he got his legs under him again. He released himself from Mareka's grip. "I'm not sure," he said. "I...he was preparing to attack. Reaching for something."

Kallen knelt over Trakas' corpse and rifled through his pockets.

Someone nudged Eochaid's knee. Drask was there, his rapier still wreathed in flames, a surprising intensity in his stare. "Were you reading his mind, kid?" he whispered.

Eochaid shook his head. "No, I — I was just reading body language, like you taught me. Can you...?"

Drask moved his head from side to side just once. "Later," he mouthed to Eochaid.

Gandy slung her bow on her shoulder and picked her way through the carnage. "So what exactly was Trakas doing before all this started?"

"Ah," Kallen said. She pulled a pouch from inside Trakas' shirt and carefully opened it. Eochaid and Gandy knelt next to her. The pouch was full of a luminous white powder that sparkled in the firelight.

"Sweltering mist," Eochaid hissed. "Don't touch it!" *He was going to try to kill us.*

"*What* mist?" Gandy asked.

Kallen's face lost its color. Very cautiously she closed the pouch. "*Sweltering*. A deadly poison," she explained. "If Trakas had thrown it, particularly into the fire, it would have exploded and spread. The touch of it is like a hot iron."

Eochaid scowled in disgust. "If it's inhaled it burns you up from the inside out, and magical healing can't always undo the damage," he growled. "The apothecary at Arcernoth was permanently scarred by the stuff. It's made by the slitherin of the Mourning Marshes, and I've seen the agony it inflicts more than once."

Gandy sprang to her feet and whirled to face the one surviving miner. "Ardleigh," she snarled as she marched over to the halfling, "what the fuck *was* that?"

The halfling stayed perfectly still except to look up at Gandy, his face calm. "*That* was a bunch of desperate, half-dead fools who thought they could get the best of a platoon of well-armed, experienced vigilants. *I* had nothing to do with it, Sergeant."

"But you knew they were going to attack," Drask muttered. As he approached Ardleigh, the flames of his rapier flickering across his face gave it a wicked cast. "Don't trust him, Sarge."

"Who were they — really?" Gandy growled.

Ardleigh slowly lowered his hands. "The Dar al Annot."

"Servitors of Mormo, the Mother of Snakes," said Kallen.

Ardleigh nodded. "The bit about the *gold* was based in truth. About twenty miles east of here is a small river. Some dwarves had set up there panning for gold, quite successfully too. At least they *were* successful. Now they're all dead, of course."

“Mormites crossed the Blood Steppes to rob gold miners?” Gandy asked.

“No. That was happenstance. Rather like our running into the Gaurak cultists. And you running into us. No, the Dar al Annot are looking for something out here. I never found out what.”

“So you’re not one of them? Why were you with them? Who do you work for?”

“That I cannot say.”

“We’ll *make* you say,” Drask snarled. He raised his rapier until its flames danced uncomfortably close to Ardleigh’s cheek, singeing his hair. Ardleigh flinched away from the red-hot blade.

“No, I literally *cannot* say,” Ardleigh insisted. “Take me back to Vesh. Torture me all you want. My lips and tongue themselves are bound against the name. And they have a knack of protecting their identity — even in Vesh, they’d find and silence me.”

He looked imploringly to Gandy. “I don’t particularly want to die. I can, and will, answer any other questions that you have. I won’t claim to be on your side, Sergeant, but neither am I against you.”

Gandy chewed her lip. She motioned to Drask to lower his blade. “Was Trakas their leader?” she asked.

Ardleigh’s lips turned upward in a grim smile. “No. That was the hag Illdra. The fatling ate *her* first. Trakas was a self-important stooge who believed he was fit to replace his master. And he probably *was*, but the Dar al Annot doesn’t abide male leaders.”

“How were you able to infiltrate them?”

Ardleigh sighed. “Sorry, sergeant, I can’t answer that one. It would come too close to revealing my...” The halfling’s mouth stiffened oddly, as if strings were drawing his lips closed.

“Your what?” Drask growled.

“Drask, at ease!” Gandy barked.

“Who I work for,” Ardleigh finished.

Drask grumbled, but turned away from Ardleigh and quenched his blade.

Gandy rubbed her forehead. “Enough — we’re just going around in circles. Cray, take Ardleigh away. Tie him up and keep him under guard. We’ll deal with this in the morning.”

Cray and Rahalphion hauled Ardleigh to one of the huts. Gandy climbed the broken masonry to pace along one of the walls.

“Moreri,” Kabria said, “when you finish with Zane, Lenahr needs your help.” As she said it, Eochaid became aware of a subtle discomfort: dizziness, and a slight patter to his pulse. *Am I still poisoned?*

“Sit, Lenahr,” Kabria said, and eased him down onto a bench. “Your wounds are fine, and I’ve halted the poison. I need Moreri’s strength to clean it from you, though, before my magic wears off.”

“I’m here,” Moreri said, and gently placed his hand on Eochaid’s shoulder. He chanted a short prayer, and Eochaid felt the magic seep in, restoring his body.

“I keep having to heal you,” Moreri said. “You remind me more of my sister every day.”

“Sorry,” Eochaid said.

Moreri shook his head. “No need to apologize. Your quick thinking saved us just now.”

Worn out by fire and battle, the vigilants dragged the Dar al Annot corpses away from their camp, then left them to the elements. The healthy stood watch and the wounded slept for one last night in the ruins.

• • •

Eochaid spent much of the night guarding over Ardleigh. There was little to do, as the halfling slept soundly and made no move to escape.

In the morning Gandy had Ardleigh brought to her. As she and Kallen questioned him in one of the huts, the rest of the vigilants broke camp.

“Sergeant’s not going at him hard enough,” Drask grumbled. “Not even a raised voice!” He threw a bedroll on the wagon.

“Why do you hate him so much?” Eochaid asked, stacking other rolls beside it.

“He could be anything — don’t like it. At *best*, he’s a Calastian spy. At worst, he’s part of another cult himself. But no matter what, he’s bad news and most definitely not on our side. That kind gives halflings a bad name.”

They trudged in silence back to the hut full of cultist equipment. Inside, Eochaid tapped Drask on the shoulder. Quietly, he asked, “Last night you asked me if I’d read Trakas’ mind. Were you serious?”

Drask looked around outside the hut’s door before answering. “Aye,” he said. “It’s a secret among the stalkers, not something you’d hear of at Bride Lake. Only comes with a great deal of practice. ‘S why I was so surprised.”

“Can *you* read thoughts, Drask?”

Drask shifted uncomfortably and nodded. “A bit.”

“So then read Ardleigh’s mind!”

“Tried already, last night. Fucker’s too shrewd — he’s warded himself somehow. Wish I’d done it earlier on the ‘miners’ but...it’s not very predictable. Takes too much effort to do often. Hear things from anyone around me. Learn stuff I don’t always *want* to know. As a rule, only use it among enemies.”

“And you thought I’d learned how?”

“Still think you might. Keep practicing, you’ll get it eventually. And you’ll be better at it than me if you do.”

“Have you ever...read my mind?”

Drask snorted. “Not intentionally, but yeah. Couple times now. Your face’s hard to read, but your *mind* is an open book in daylight, kid. And...” he paused, smirking, “you think some of the lewdest thoughts about Mareka.”

Eochaid closed his eyes. “I don’t—”

“It’s fine, kid. People *think* lewd thoughts all the time. *Most* of what I read from people is about sex, hunger, anger, pain, and the pressing need to take a piss.”

Damn, I don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea about me and Mareka. Especially Mareka. “Does she think...”

“Uh-uh. You do *not* share what others are thinking unless it’s vigil business. But my advice, stay away from her, kid. She’s trouble. Find someone civilized.”

Outside, voices became audible. Drask fell silent. Gandy’s voice, and Ardleigh’s. Drask ducked out, and Eochaid followed close on his heels.

Gandy, Kallen, and Ardleigh were walking to the center of the camp. Ardleigh was no longer tied, and was walking with a casual, comfortable stride.

“I owe you, Sergeant,” Ardleigh said, “and I *will* pay that debt back to you some day.”

“Wait!” Drask shouted, storming towards them, “you’re just letting him go?”

“Shut it, Drask!” Gandy said, glaring at the halfling vigilant. “Yes, we’re letting him go.”

“But he—”

“*But* he did nothing *wrong*. He did not help the Dar al Annot against us. He surrendered. We don’t pick fights with neutral parties — you know that. Plus, he provided useful information. What do you *expect* me to do with him?”

Drask deflated. Despite the sour look on his face, he held his tongue.

Gandy opened the platoon’s supply bag and pulled out a cloak, a knife, and a bundle of rations. “We’re leaving as soon as we’re packed. I assume you want to go sooner. Take these, and good luck.” She handed the little bundle to Ardleigh.

Ardleigh bowed his head gratefully. “You’re a smart woman, Sergeant Gandy. I’m glad we part on good terms, and I hope we never meet as enemies.” With that, the halfling turned on his heel and walked west, out of the camp and into the wilderness.

Gandy watched him go. Then, when he was out of sight, she hooked Rahalphion’s sleeve. “Rah, I want you to keep an eye on him for a bit,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Unobtrusively. To be sure that he...that he’s safely on his way. Just for the first few miles, and then double back and meet us on the road.”

Rahalphion nodded. He hopped lightly into the air, shrinking and darkening into a crow, and flapped away into the west.

The rest of the platoon collected the last of their gear and headed east to investigate the slaughtered dwarven mining camp. Rahalphion caught up to them on their first rest break, flapping down and transforming next to Gandy.

"I lost him after about a mile," the druid reported. "He stepped into a thicket and disappeared."

"Magic?" Gandy asked.

Rahalphion nodded. "Moderate strength. Illusion."

"See?" Drask grumbled. "Said you couldn't trust him."

"Just because he's a spellcaster doesn't mean he's a villain, Drask," Gandy said.

"Unless he charmed you," Drask pointed out.

Gandy rolled her eyes and tapped her medallion. "I had protection, and Kallen was there to back me up." She gestured to the platoon's spellcasters. "Okay, so what did he cast, and should we be worried?"

"He probably just turned invisible," Henmeth replied. "Although he had to know Rah was following him first, if he did it to evade us."

Rahalphion shook his head. "No, he didn't notice me. And there was no scent beyond the thicket. The animals I spoke with found nothing. He left."

"Or he's just that good," Drask growled.

"*Shadow walk*," Zane said.

Gandy blinked and raised her eyebrows. "Say again?"

"He stepped into dim light to cast an illusion, and afterwards he wasn't there. He needed to travel on his own, likely to report back to his employer," the elven wizard reasoned. "Shadow walk fits. He shifted into the shadow plane to travel faster and further. Safer, too, when you're alone."

"I wanted a smart platoon for a reason," Gandy said, grinning. "What else does this tell us? How powerful is he?"

"More than me," admitted Zane, "but I'm only a journeyman."

"I'm sure I could cast the spell," said Henmeth, "but I've never studied illusion magic."

Eochaid sat by silently as the others debated the meaning of Ardleigh's abilities. *Magic again*, he thought ruefully. *Cooper knew illusion magic*. His eyes stung, but for a change, the memory did not overwhelm him. *He'd have fit in well with us here*.

The others continued their debate. "Or a shadow priest," Kabria said. "Like a follower of Drendari, the shadow goddess."

"Unlikely," Gandy said.

“A Penumbra Lord!” Drask interjected. “Little troll-turd’s evil!”

Gandy waved her hands. “Enough! We’re not narrowing it down. I’ll include it all in our report. Maybe Command can do something with it. In the meantime, rest break’s over. Let’s find that mining camp.”

• • •

They traveled the rest of the day and searched partway into the next to find the dwarven encampment tucked by a small river where it ran through a deep ravine. It was as Ardleigh had described: several dead dwarves, ruined tents, and flat wooden pans abandoned by a sluice built along the river. Wagon tracks and footprints showed where the Dar al Annot had marched out, taking the dwarves’ own wagons and supplies with them.

The vigilants marked the camp’s location on their map, then collected detailed descriptions of each dwarf before burying them nearby in carefully marked graves. They gathered the few personal effects and bundled them together in oilcloth.

Rahalphion, who’d been sniffing around after any corpses they might have missed, found a buried cache of nuggets behind a stone up the riverbank.

Gandy looked over the little trove, buried in haste, Eochaid thought. “Good for you,” she muttered, smiling wryly towards the little graveyard.

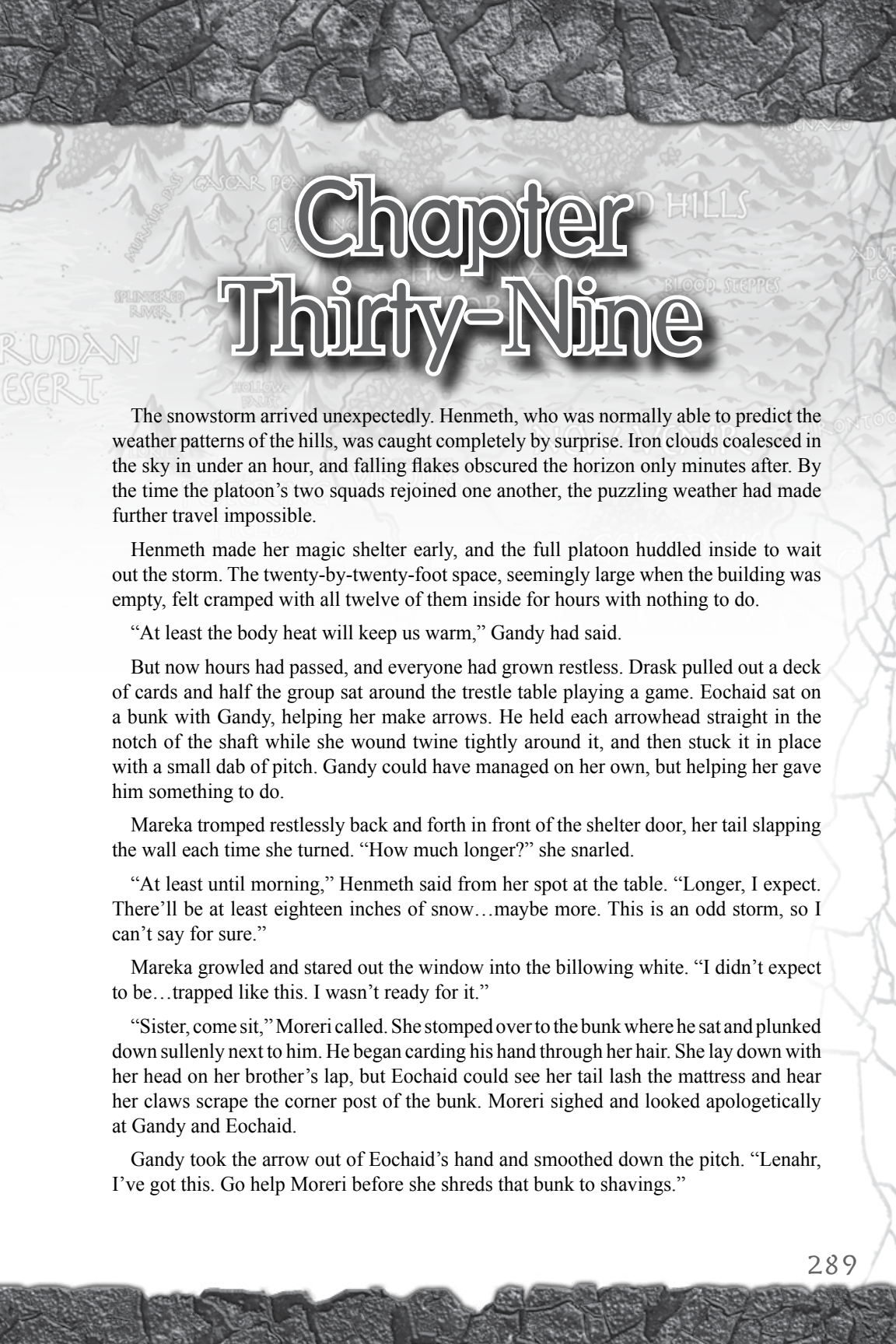
Gandy collected the nuggets. She hefted the pouch in her hand. Then she opened the oilcloth package of personal effects and added the pouch to it. “The type of folks who’d march a month into the Steppes hunting gold probably didn’t leave families back home, but their find belongs to Burok Torn.” She closed the oilcloth. “On the other hand...” Gandy fiddled with her bowstring, lost in thought. Then she opened the bundle with the cultists’ belongings.

On the back gate of the wagon, she counted out the gold they’d recovered from both groups of cultists. She whistled, and the other vigilants gathered around her.

She divided the money into twelve equal piles. “Hazard pay,” she said. “You all fought hard and well. Add it to your retirement fund.” Each vigilant collected a pile.

Eochaid counted the money and did a little math. He was now far closer to moving his family and getting them settled. *This more than makes up for what I was fined*, he thought. *I should have enough saved up by early next summer.*

They made their way north, back to the Haggard Hills, joining up with the rest of Captain Allard’s company after a few weeks. Allard accepted the information they’d gathered, including the maps. He packaged it all with the recovered personal items and sent them with a letter of explanation to Burok Torn, the city of the dwarves, in hopes that it would all eventually reach the families of the fallen. Nothing would make up for what had happened to the miners, but it might bring some comfort to their families to know what had befallen their loved ones.



Chapter Thirty-Nine

The snowstorm arrived unexpectedly. Henmeth, who was normally able to predict the weather patterns of the hills, was caught completely by surprise. Iron clouds coalesced in the sky in under an hour, and falling flakes obscured the horizon only minutes after. By the time the platoon's two squads rejoined one another, the puzzling weather had made further travel impossible.

Henmeth made her magic shelter early, and the full platoon huddled inside to wait out the storm. The twenty-by-twenty-foot space, seemingly large when the building was empty, felt cramped with all twelve of them inside for hours with nothing to do.

"At least the body heat will keep us warm," Gandy had said.

But now hours had passed, and everyone had grown restless. Drask pulled out a deck of cards and half the group sat around the trestle table playing a game. Eochaid sat on a bunk with Gandy, helping her make arrows. He held each arrowhead straight in the notch of the shaft while she wound twine tightly around it, and then stuck it in place with a small dab of pitch. Gandy could have managed on her own, but helping her gave him something to do.

Mareka tromped restlessly back and forth in front of the shelter door, her tail slapping the wall each time she turned. "How much longer?" she snarled.

"At least until morning," Henmeth said from her spot at the table. "Longer, I expect. There'll be at least eighteen inches of snow...maybe more. This is an odd storm, so I can't say for sure."

Mareka growled and stared out the window into the billowing white. "I didn't expect to be...trapped like this. I wasn't ready for it."

"Sister, come sit," Moreri called. She stomped over to the bunk where he sat and plunked down sullenly next to him. He began carding his hand through her hair. She lay down with her head on her brother's lap, but Eochaid could see her tail lash the mattress and hear her claws scrape the corner post of the bunk. Moreri sighed and looked apologetically at Gandy and Eochaid.

Gandy took the arrow out of Eochaid's hand and smoothed down the pitch. "Lenahr, I've got this. Go help Moreri before she shreds that bunk to shavings."

Moreri shifted along the bed to make space as Eochaid crossed the room and ducked under the top bunk to slide in next to him, pulling Mareka's legs onto his lap — a tight fit, but not uncomfortable. Eochaid stroked the fur along her calf, and after a few moments Mareka's tail stopped twitching. She began to make the rumbling purr he'd grown familiar with. She ceased digging a hole in the bedpost, though she still lazily scratched off flecks of wood.

"You've developed a touch for this Lenahr," Moreri said softly. "Better than me, I think."

Henmeth's little cottage had an invisible magic helper to keep it clean; Eochaid watched in fascination as Mareka's wood shavings swept themselves into a small pile and floated into the fireplace. Mareka chuckled quietly. She dropped fresh chips of wood one by one to watch the servant tidy them away.

"Stop teasing it, Mareka, or it'll tie your boot laces together," Eochaid scolded her.

"I don't wear boots," Mareka replied, wiggling her clawed feet in his lap.

"You'll need to in the snow," Moreri countered.

"Mmph," Mareka grumbled, and slumped bonelessly.

As the snowfall continued, the cottage air went from warm to uncomfortably close. Eochaid quickly grew overwarm, squeezed into the tight space with two fur-covered manticora. He leaned down to tug off his socks. As he dropped them beside the bunk, Mareka started snickering.

"What?" Eochaid asked.

"They're ridiculous," Mareka replied. She shifted around, and Moreri and Eochaid ducked and dodged her arms and legs. She ended up with her head in Eochaid's lap and legs in Moreri's. She poked at Eochaid's toes. "They're so soft and wiggly!"

"They're just...toes."

"But look at them!" Mareka flexed each of the toes on Eochaid's right foot. "They're all different sizes. This one is huge, and these others are tiny. And *this* one is a baby — almost no claw at all. And there's *five* of them."

She flexed her own feet, extending the sturdy claws from their sheaths. "My toes are all the same length. And I only have four per foot. And their claws are long and sharp. No wonder you wear boots. You have to protect your defenseless little toes." Eochaid chuckled and squirmed as she continued to poke, fascinated, at his feet.

"I don't think you need me for this," Moreri mouthed silently. He wiggled free and started to climb into the top bunk.

Mareka paused and looked thoughtful. "Moreri?"

"Hum?" he said, pausing in his climb.

"Does Tanil have toes like this?"

He shrugged. "Tanil's a goddess. She can have whatever toes she wants."

“But she usually looks human. So, does she have toes like this?”

“Actually, she usually appears elven.” Moreri frowned thoughtfully. “Hey,” he asked the room, “do elven and human toes look the same?”

Smiles broke out among the game-players at the table. Zane hid his face and Skylash snickered. “Yes,” Gandy said. “I can assure you that humans and elves have the same kind of toes.”

“Actually,” Henmeth interjected, “*basic* human and elven anatomy’s the same, but the human subraces *do* have some interesting differences. Lenahr’s mostly Elzan, so his toes are stubbier and hairier than Albadians — or wood elves, their anatomy’s pretty close. But he’s got Ledean blood, so maybe he has their short-hallux-long-index combination, too. But um...yes, human and elven toes look mostly the same.”

“See, Lenahr?” Mareka said, her eyes sparkling up at him in the candlelight. “You have toes like a goddess!”

Eochaid chuckled. “I suppose I do,” he said, running his fingers through her braids. “But we shouldn’t say that too loud — it might be sacrilegious.”

Eochaid spent the rest of the evening entertaining Mareka with his feet. She was particularly thrilled to discover he could pick things up with them, if clumsily, and found various objects to experiment with. She even borrowed one of Henmeth’s quills and made Eochaid attempt to write with his feet. Though Eochaid pointed out that he wasn’t alone in having flexible toes, no one else was willing to take their socks off and demonstrate.

By nighttime Mareka had fallen asleep, her arms wrapped protectively around Eochaid’s feet. He quietly dozed beside her, occasionally stroking her fur.

Before settling in by the fireplace, Gandy leaned in to their little alcove. “Good job keeping her calm tonight. Who’d’a guessed that your *feet* were your most enthralling feature?”

• • •

By the morning, the snow had piled high in front of the shelter door and was still falling heavily. Fine flakes carried by the wind hissed and rattled against the windows, obscuring even the nearest hills.

The platoon shivered in the pre-dawn light. They ate the remains of the previous day’s bland magical rations.

“Beginning to think we need a way out of here,” Cray grumbled, scooping up another spoonful of cold gruel.

“Thinking you’re right,” Gandy replied. “Casters, none of you’ve prepared your spells yet today?”

The various casters nodded or grunted in assent.

“Good,” Gandy said. “Those who can, hold off for now. Moreri, you do your morning prayers and then notify Captain Allard of our situation. This storm may change our orders, and I want to know what he recommends. Everyone else, pick travel and survival spells over combat.”

The vigilants hurried through their usual morning routines and packed their gear to be ready for whatever came. Moreri sent his magical message to Allard and scribbled down the reply.

“The brigade is gathering at Hampstead Tower to shelter through the winter storms. We’re to join them there if we can. I have another sending spell ready if you wish to reply.”

“I’ve been to the tower before,” Henmeth said. “I can teleport there, but I can only take three people at a time.”

“So it’s going to take several trips, then?” Gandy asked.

Henmeth smiled wryly. “It’s one of my most powerful spells. I can cast it three times a day, but I have to use one casting to get back here. That means several days to transport everyone.”

Gandy laughed a bleak laugh. “Okay, so four of you will stay here with me another day.”

An animated debate developed around who should stay. In the end, Gandy chose Cray, Rahalphion, and Skylash to stay. For practical reasons, Moreri volunteered to remain.

“Well, then I should stay instead of Cray,” Mareka said.

“Sister, for both our sakes, you need to be somewhere larger,” Moreri purred. “Lenahr can keep you company.”

“I don’t need a *minder*,” she grumbled.

Henmeth spent an hour with her grimoire readying her day’s spells. The first spell she cast left a distinctive glowing symbol on the packed dirt floor of the hut which faded as she finished the incantation. “An arcane mark,” she said, “to help me find my way back here.”

“You’d think a whole day here would be long enough to learn the place,” Drask muttered.

“Teleporting always involves a chance of mishap,” Henmeth explained. “I want to be absolutely sure.”

Henmeth refreshed the spell keeping the shelter in place, then grabbed her pack.

“Kallen,” Gandy said, “report in, get yourselves settled, and then send Henmeth back for the next group.”

“On my way, Sergeant,” the bard answered. She took Henmeth’s hand. Mareka grabbed the other hand, then held her own hand out to Eochaid, who gripped it tightly.

The world shifted. The walls of the shelter vanished. An unsettling jolt, as of a cart hitting a rut, ran through his body.

They reappeared. Cold bit into his bare skin. No walls, no buildings. Just hills and patches of snow. He pulled his cloak in tight.

“Oh, dear,” Henmeth said.

“Where are we?” asked Kallen.

“I...the Hampstead guard tower should be...we should be on the hill above the town, but it’s not here!” Henmeth stammered.

“Could something have happened to it?” Eochaid asked, disorientation fuzzing his thoughts. He rubbed his hands together and then shoved them under his armpits to try and warm them up.

“No,” Henmeth said. “I went off course. There was definitely something arcane in that storm. It doesn’t seem to have hit here yet — wherever here is. I can try again.” She sighed. “It’s frustrating — it will take all the longer to transport everyone. Just let me collect myself a bit first.” She leaned against a frozen stone.

The vigilants formed a circle, each taking a guard position automatically. Light snow fell, and the wind created icy eddies, obscuring the distant hills. Eochaid squinted at the horizon and watched for movement. Far off atop a hill stood a shape darker than the surrounding clouds. “Henmeth, there’s something over there,” he said, pointing up at the shape. “Could that be the tower?”

“Where?” Kallen asked. She pulled a spyglass out of her pack and handed it to Eochaid.

He knelt, aimed the device, and focused it. There *was* a tower up on the hill, nearly blended into the rocks that surrounded it and blurred by the snow and cloud. “There’s definitely a tower there. I think I can make out some movement. A flag?”

He handed the spyglass back to Kallen, and she looked where he directed. “Yes, I think that’s our tower. It’s a few miles away. Good eyes, Lenahr!”

“Lots of practice,” he replied.

“So we’re walking the rest of the way,” said Mareka.

Kallen nodded. “No sense standing here,” she said, shivering and pulling her hood lower over her head.

“Wait!” Henmeth called. She spoke an incantation and reached out to touch each of them on the forehead. Eochaid felt the cold recede as a familiar magic warmed his body to a comfortable temperature.

“I forget sometimes how warm my magic keeps me,” Henmeth apologized, “but I did prepare spells to protect us from the elements. Just in case.”

Boots crunching and creaking in the powdery drifts, the vigilants marched for the distant tower.

• • •

The tower was only a few miles distant, but hiking through the rocky terrain and shallow snow drifts took them several hours.

A Veshian flag flapped atop the tower's stone ramparts. Fresh stone showed where its crumbling walls had been patched, reinforced, and expanded. Kallen led them along a path tramped in the snow up the hill and past the ruins below.

The little town of Hampstead had lain dormant after the cataclysm that struck the Haggard Hills until Pelpernoi Vigil claimed its watchtower, as they had others across the Hills, to guard the land and cache supplies. The cold and winds of winter in the barren hills demanded permanent shelter, though, even for hardy travelers like the Pelpernoi vigilants. The people of Hope would never tolerate a battalion of winter guests, so Marshal Pelpern had devised a strategy. Each winter, the vigil broke into parts about two companies in size. Each would settle in an abandoned town and spend the winter refurbishing what they could. This way the vigil had shelter, the vigilants had work to pass the time, and the Haggard Hills grew a tiny bit readier for the day when people would live on them again.

An unusual odor wafted up the hillside from a newly-roofed building below. Eochaid paused. "Is that...horses I smell?"

Mareka stopped walking and sniffed the air. "Yup. That's definitely horse shit."

"I didn't think Pelpernoi Vigil had horses," Eochaid said. "How do we feed them?"

"Spell- and druidcraft," Kallen answered. "It's expensive, but the marshal's company needs them. When she's called, she travels in a hurry. I guess we're wintering with her this year!"

"Do you ride, Lenahr?" Kallen asked.

"Not if I can avoid it," Eochaid muttered.

Mareka laughed. "I've *trained* to ride, but I don't enjoy it. Neither do the horses. Though it's probably safer than teleporting."

"It was the storm," Henmeth stammered. "Normally, I never—"

Mareka put her arm around Henmeth's shoulder. "No blame, Henmeth. It's not you, it's magic. Moreri heals my wounds, gives us water...and I've eaten *buckets* of that holy gruel of his. But it's hard to trust something I can't understand. I don't like the thought that it can go wrong for no reason. If it can bring us all the way here, it *could* drop us in the center of the Hornsaw Forest."

Henmeth shrugged glumly.

"I've wondered, too," Eochaid said. "Trying to be precise with all that power seems like trying to shave with an axe. All those gestures and words...what happens if you get them just slightly wrong?"

Kallen guffawed. "Nothing, lackwits! *Nothing* happens! Otherwise any drunkard who talks with his hands might incinerate a tavern! One *joggle*'s enough to ruin a spell—why d'you think we casters step back from the fight when we're brewing something big?"

Henmeth giggled to herself. "Shaving with an axe! Although, actually..."

• • •

They reported in to Captain Allard at the tower, where Marshal Pelpern's large staff of officers had set up headquarters. One of the captain's wizards had marked the tower magically for safer transport, so Henmeth left with him to complete her day's teleportations. Kallen delivered the platoon's reports and answered the captain's questions. Then she, Mareka, and Eochaid found a quartermaster sergeant to get the platoon's housing assignment.

"There's a windmill down there," he said. "Looks to be attached to a water pump. The house is sturdy enough, but the mill proper's a shambles. Secure the house for your quarters and later I'll send one of our engineers down to help you assess the mill. If it can be salvaged, that's your project."

They followed the winding path into the village. Vigilants bustled about various buildings, weatherproofing them and hauling away refuse. The mill stood deeper in the valley on a small hillock where the winds coursed through from one direction or another throughout the day.

The structure groaned whenever the wind strained the one remaining blade. The same catastrophe that had broken the other three blades had torn off its roof. The wreckage lay in a heap over the mill door, a few scraps of rope and sailcloth still flapping on one broken mast. Though the house attached to the mill still had its roof, it was missing many of its shingles. Its doorways and windows gaped empty, and snow brightened the drifted dirt that filled the corners.

"It looks like there's a lot of work ahead of us if we want to make this at all habitable," Eochaid said.

With shovels from the supply depot they began clearing the house of snow, dirt, and debris. A few bits of furniture — a long, low table and benches — had survived mostly intact. They hauled them into the common room.

"I'm surprised this is in such good shape after a hundred and fifty years," Mareka remarked, sitting on one of the sturdy benches.

"Not much here to damage it," Eochaid said. "No termites to eat the wood and no rats or birds making nests. Just wind and weather, and the house took the brunt of all that."

Booted feet tramped up the path. "Hello, the house!" Cray called. The rest of the platoon, less Gandy, Rahalphion, Moreri, and Henmeth, hiked up the hill carrying their gear.

"Henmeth came with some mage from the marshal's staff," Cray said. "They brought all of us back except for the sergeant, Rah, and Moreri."

"So Henmeth's...going back for them?" Eochaid asked.

"No, the marshal borrowed her for other work," Skylash said. "But they're fine for another night there. The storm finally stopped. Rahalphion was romping in the drifts as some kind of giant snow bear when we left."

“There’s a man who knows how to enjoy himself,” laughed Kallen. “Well, drop your packs and grab a tarp or a broom. We can have this place livable by the time the sergeant arrives!”

The platoon spent the next few hours clearing out any rooms on the first floor that the leaky roof hadn’t flooded, boarding up broken windows, tying tarpaulins across the roof, and hanging a makeshift front door. After inspecting the building’s chimney, Skylash built a comfortable fire in the hearth. The dingy house began to seem livable.

After a rest, the vigilants turned to the tougher work: the soggy, weathered top floor and the moldering back rooms on the first. “If it’s dry, we can burn it,” Kallen instructed. “If it’s wet, toss it out the window.”

Eochaid was bundling a chest full of disintegrating blankets into the main room when he heard a crash and a cry from the room next door. He dropped his burden and went to help.

The floor of this room sagged and had given way to the rain. Skylash stood in the hole, freshly splintered wood around her knees. She rubbed her head where a hutch of shelves had fallen on her. “Whole room fell in on me when I stepped—” She froze.

Eochaid followed her gaze. Scattered among parts of broken parlor chairs, bones gleamed. Skylash gingerly picked a femur from the wreckage. “Kallen!” she called, “Found some remains in here the scouts must have missed. Looks like a child.”

“Not a child,” Drask said from the doorway. “A halfling. Lots of us lived around here before the Divine War. Explains the low furniture and windows upstairs. High ceilings down here, though — mixed community. Maybe even a mixed household.”

They gathered the bones carefully and put them in the blanket chest, then searched the rest of the house. Skylash and Drask carried the chest, and Kabria guided them to the burial ground for the town’s remains to lay them to rest.

Eochaid recalled the strange skeletal junkman they’d encountered when he first arrived in the hills. *This whole land is a tomb.* He wondered at the cruelty of the gods, to allow so many people to die in an instant when the cataclysm struck during the Divine War.

Chapter Forty

By evening they'd cleared the house enough for the platoon to bed down, and gathered sufficient dry refuse to keep a warm fire through the night. Henmeth returned early the next morning with Gandy, Moreri, and Rahalphion, and Gandy was indeed pleased by their progress.

Over the next week they continued the repairs. Magic sped the work along much faster than Eochaid expected. Magic let them fix the cracked foundation of the mill without excavating it. It let them fly ropes to the top of the mill and safely descend into the well to replace a cracked pump piston. It mended broken windows and patched holes in the walls. Henmeth even summoned a whole troop of unseen servants to sweep, tidy, and polish virtually everything in the house and mill.

But many things magic could *not* do, or at least do well and efficiently. Most of all, it could not create the big timbers and yards of cloth to make the windmill turn. They scavenged what they could from other abandoned or unsalvageable buildings, but then the work slowed down while they waited for supplies.

In that extra free time, Eochaid returned to his training with Drask. The halfling invented exercises in agility and dexterity, and in understanding or deceiving others. They'd watch other vigilants at work or in the dining hall, and Drask would challenge Eochaid to discern relationships and subtleties of mood.

“Wouldn’t magic be more certain?” Eochaid asked.

Drask shook his head. “Magic’s all or nothing. Get better at readin’ people and you’ll *always* see something useful. Besides which, the really dangerous folks can *see* when you use magic and block it or lie to you.

“Lot harder to lie with your whole body. Which is how I know, *despite* all I’ve taught you, that you wanna knock off for the day!” He thwacked Eochaid’s knee. “Stop noddin’ at everything I say, kid — ’s an obvious tell.”

As his training progressed, the unspoken voices of those around him became louder, their gestures more meaningful, and Eochaid's power to suppress or manipulate his own body language (both for courtesy and deception) grew more reliable.

Between Drask's many lessons, standing watch at the tower, and laboring to reclaim other buildings in the town, Eochaid found himself quite busy.

His platoon-mates found whatever work or rest they could, some more easily than others. Rahalphion went north to Hope to prepare for the midwinter solstice. With the marshal's leave, Henmeth ferried soldiers back to Vesh to visit family, including Cray, Skylash, and Kabria. Many who stayed turned to study or reading for pleasure. Mareka sought every chance for a patrol or hunting party. When there were none, she became sullen and irritable.

"How can you stand it?" she asked Eochaid one day when they were sharing watchtower duty.

"Stand what?"

"This!" she gestured around the little tower room. "This tiny room and parapet to walk around. How can you stand it?" She slumped against the wall and kicked listlessly at the brazier in the center of the room.

He shrugged. "It's not hard. I've seen you do it plenty of times. You put the fire to your back and scan the horizon. You look for threats, for anything—"

"For what? The white hills that go as far as you can see? That are *all* we ever see? Nothing happens here!" Mareka threw a chip of stone over the battlement and into the snow.

Eochaid glanced down at his blades. He hadn't drawn them in weeks, and while sparring with practice swords kept him in form, it didn't satisfy. "I understand. We had dry spells like this in Arcernoth too. I knew people who liked the quiet. But others...I agree, it would be nice to see some action."

Mareka grumbled to herself and marched out to do a circuit of the parapet. Eochaid thought of the thaw in Arcernoth, and all that happened after. As the gray clouds smothered the sunset, neither of them felt much in the mood to talk.

• • •

Grim Day arrived, marking midwinter and the shortest night of the year. Eochaid observed a change in the rhythm of the winter camp. People laughed less. Many kept to themselves, preparing for the acts of penance and atonement meant to cleanse their souls for the coming year. Eochaid's own mind labored on the events of the last year, and what he could do to show proper reverence for the holiday.

"You're brooding, Lenahr."

Gandy had found him sitting in the mill, watching the shaft slowly turn as it pumped the water up from the well below.

"I'm not brooding, I'm thinking," he said. "Last year I prayed that Amra's soul would find peace. I wished her to be happy with Aronis in the afterlife. Then it turned out she wasn't dead. This year...this year is harder. So many dead...you can't ask for forgiveness from the dead."

Gandy snorted. "A powerful enough necromancer probably can."

Eochaid looked at her, appalled. “That doesn’t help!”

Gandy climbed up on the platform and sat beside him. “Isn’t forgiveness and atonement supposed to be between you and the gods?”

Eochaid sighed. “I guess so. But I don’t know what to say. ‘Hey Madriel, sorry all those people in my platoon died needlessly this year?’ Is it really that simple?”

Gandy shrugged. “Probably. Madriel’s supposed to be really forgiving. Hutch would know for sure, though.”

“It doesn’t feel right. And Hutch isn’t here to ask.”

“So ask one of the other clerics that *are* here.”

Eochaid shook his head. “They’re all Tanilites. Or followers of Denev.”

“So ask for atonement from Tanil. It’s what I do.”

“I can’t just switch *gods*, Gandy. I’ve been a Madrielite my whole life.”

Gandy raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Huh. I didn’t realize that you were that religious.”

“I’m religious enough to mean it when I’m supposed to on a holy day.”

“Madriel isn’t going to smite you if you say a prayer to a different goddess once in a while. Here, let me show you.”

She pulled up and crossed her legs on the platform, pulled an arrow out of her ever-present quiver, and laid it across her lap. Then she closed her eyes and said, “Huntress Tanil, please forgive Eochaid ‘shit-for-brains’ Lenahr—”

“My middle name is actually Loren.”

Gandy cracked an eye and peered at him. “Are you sure?”

He rolled his eyes and nodded.

She closed her eyes again and continued. “Please forgive Eochaid *Loren* Lenahr for his *minor* part in the loss of his platoon at Arcernoth Delta earlier this year. It was tragic and terrible, and he continues to feel really shitty about it. He seeks your guidance and absolution and appreciates your assistance in this matter. Thank you.”

Then she opened her eyes and picked up the arrow, returning it to her quiver.

“That’s it?” Eochaid asked.

“Yep. At least, that’s what works for me. It’s enough for her to grant me spells every day. She likes things direct and to the point.”

“Then why does it take a whole *hour* each day for you to pray to her?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. The prayer itself usually only takes a minute or two. The rest is... how did Arborneath put it? Energy transfer. You meditate, and she takes some of your spiritual energy, or something. It gives Tanil her power. In return, she grants you spells. We naturally recharge our energy throughout the day, enough to do it each morning. That’s

also part of why we usually need to be well-rested first. Damn Lenahr, you'd know all this if you were a *true* ranger and hadn't gotten distracted learning to be a stalker, too."

"Prayers to Madriel are a lot longer and very formal, at least the ones I know. Lots of chanting. Singing sometimes."

"Yeah, I remember. Hutch'd drone on all morning if you let him. I think it just helps people get into the right mental state for the energy transfer. It's tough for some people to sit quietly focusing for a whole hour. Can you imagine Hutch being quiet that long? But I think *you* could manage." She snorted. "Hell, you have a better temperament for Tanil than Madriel anyway. Or maybe Enkili."

"Enkili? The storm goddess?"

"Also the trickster god. He's certainly more suited to a stalker."

"I'm not a pickpocket or gambler."

"You're not a...?" she laughed. "With the tricks Drask has taught you in the last few months you certainly could be." She stretched and started to scoot off the platform, then paused. "Did that help? Are you feeling more properly 'grim?' Because I'm all out of advice."

"Yeah. I think so."

"Good, because Drask is looking for you. More training."

Eochaid groaned and followed Gandy off the platform. *I'll come up with a proper prayer to Madriel later; after everyone else goes to bed.*

• • •

Midwinter passed. Though the days grew slowly lighter, the mood in the winter camp did not. The vigilants of Pelpernoi were used to having space to themselves, and Mareka was far from the only one who felt confined in the little village. The house Eochaid's platoon had refurbished slowly went from 'cozy' to 'close.'

Drask's exercises for Eochaid had moved on to sleight of hand and rope work and grown more and more elaborate. Drask was setting up a new escape challenge for Eochaid in the back room of the ground floor when a crash and a thump echoed through the house, shaking Eochaid's concentration.

"Vangal's dripping axes! Drask, keep your gods-damned shit out of the middle of the room! I almost broke my neck!" Mareka roared in the main room of the house.

Drask tightened the final knot on the rope around Eochaid's wrists, and then walked to the doorway. "You're a cat," he shouted. "And a vigilant. You should be ready for a tumble or two."

Eochaid relaxed his arms, flexed his fingers, and began wiggling his way out of the rope.

"Well you're a tiny runt and don't have as far to fall," Mareka growled.

"Average height for my race!" Drask sputtered. He stalked out into the main room.

Eochaid tugged on the knot with his teeth, loosening the rope enough to get his hands free. Mareka and Drask had already had five fights that week, and he worried what would happen if he, Moreri, or Gandy wasn't there to intercede. He rushed after Drask.

Mareka was down on one knee, rubbing her shin. Drask's juggling and balancing gear lay strewn across the floor, along with some broken crockery and a heap of blankets. Drask was grabbing the spilled clubs, poles, and ropes.

"Are you all slobs, too?" she said.

"Cleaning up!" Drask grunted. He handed the equipment to Eochaid, and then started collecting the pieces of the broken dish.

Mareka got stiffly to her feet and gathered the blankets. "Put these away while you're at it!" she said, and ignominiously dropped them on Drask's head. Then she stamped out the front door and slammed it behind her.

"Mmph!" Drask's indignant shouts were muffled under the blanket pile. Eochaid set the equipment down on the table and helped Drask dig out.

"Oh..." Drask grumbled. "This is war!"

• • •

"I thought you were supposed to be practicing," Mareka asked from the doorway to the small back room where Eochaid was relaxing on his cot, reading.

Eochaid looked up from his book and sat up on the cot. "I'm taking a break. I'm tired of crawling after juggling balls that rolled under the furniture."

She sidled up to him, squinting curiously at the well-thumbed volume. "What are you reading?"

"*The Poems of Krainin Pum*. Although I've pretty much memorized them. It's the only book I have."

She sat down on the cot, curled up, and looked at him expectantly.

"Do you want me to read one to you?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm bored."

Eochaid suppressed a laugh. *You've been bored for weeks*. "Okay. Let's see...it's in Shelzari so I'll have to translate. Forgive me if it doesn't properly rhyme." He flipped through the book to an appropriate short poem and began to recite.

"My love is like the rose that blossoms in the night. The moisture on her...petals? Ah! I spray my lily pollen upon her dewy petals."

Mareka smirked.

"What?" he asked her.

“It’s about sex.”

“No! It’s romantic. I mean...” He scanned over the words again. “I’m translating this all wrong. He’s comparing his love to a rare flower that...there’s a nuance here...and multiple meanings. Gah — Veshian is not a romantic language!”

She batted him on the knee. “Finish reading it. I want to hear the rest.”

“Okay. I’ll try.” He turned back to the page. “Though we tangle together beautifully, I cannot bring her to fruit...”

Mareka chortled out loud. Eochaid’s face burned as he skimmed ahead, reading the rest of the poem to himself. “Wow. Translated, this is very...explicit.”

“About sex?”

“Um. I guess so. I mean, it *could* be interpreted that way. Let me find a different one... not a romantic one.” He flipped the pages and found one of his favorites. “Here. This one is about a battle.

“Two kings battled, two men covered in honest sweat. While now they opposed each other with blades of steel, once they’d wrestled as one, with rods of wood...” He slapped the book closed. He looked back down at the rough leather cover. *This was Jade’s favorite book? I wonder if she knew? Of course she knew.*

Mareka was clutching her stomach, shaking with silent laughter. “Are they...all...” she gasped.

“About sex?” He rubbed his hand across his face. “Yeah. Probably.” He set the book down.

He watched her fondly as her laughter subsided. “Or,” she said, grinning wickedly, “maybe it’s from the mind of the translator?”

Eochaid’s heart jumped and he leaned away. “Mareka, I didn’t think—”

“Think what?” She blinked slowly at him, but her tail thrashed back and forth. “You feel an attraction?”

Eochaid’s mouth had gone dry. “Yeah. Yes. Of course. You know I do.”

Mareka’s shoulders stiffened and she did not meet his gaze. “Would you *want* me?”

He reached out to take her hand, but she pulled away before he could grasp it and stood up. She looked down at her own hands for a moment and then turned back to face him.

“I cannot *pair* with you, you know,” she said. “You aren’t manticora.”

“I wasn’t asking you to.”

“In a few years, after I have finished my service to Vesh, I will travel to Leoni, or some other manticora community, find a mate, and have a litter or two of babies. It is my duty to our people.”

Eochaid felt dizzy. “So...what *would* there be?”

Mareka shuffled, her tail still bouncing nervously. “We could...just be together. For now. For pleasure.”

“I...” Eochaid’s pulse raced. He considered the unique nature of their friendship, of the ways he’d opened himself to her, of the kinship he felt. Even touching on the idea that he might drive her away brought a stab of icy fear. *She expects an answer*, he thought. “I’m not sure I could keep things so...” *Amra’s face, laughing viciously* — he choked back the image brutally. “...casual. For you, I’d try.”

Mareka’s posture shifted. Her tail still moved, but it beat out a slower rhythm. She blinked and flashed a smile that did not carry her normal confidence. “It...there’s no need to do anything now,” she said. “Go back to your book. We have time.” She turned and strode out of the room.

Eochaid leaned back and willed his body to calm down. Then he stowed the book at the bottom of his pack, burying his lustful thoughts along with it.

• • •

The trouble began with a joke, nothing more. They’d gathered in the warmth of the little house’s living room to read, talk, or play games after the day’s assignments. Eochaid sat by the fire with a borrowed copy of *Folktales of Albadia*. Drask, Mareka, and Zane played dice. Gandy, Kallen, and Moreri chatted at the table.

“Does no one else smell that?” Moreri asked.

“Smell what?” Gandy said.

“Meat,” Moreri replied. He sniffed again, flaring his nostrils. “*Raw* meat.”

Gandy shrugged. Kallen raised her nose too.

The dice players continued their game.

Moreri slid off the bench and stood. Kallen followed him. Eochaid watched over the book in his hands as they followed the odor into one of the bunk rooms. None of his fellow vigilants seemed concerned, but Eochaid rolled to a sitting position, book closed and swords at hand.

In the bunk room, a blanket rustled. Kallen chuckled.

“*Mareka!*” Moreri barked. He stalked back into the living room. Kallen followed him, dangling a haunch of chewed, bloody mutton from her fingers. Kallen was smiling. Moreri was not.

“What...” stammered Mareka, “Where—”

“In your *bed*, sister,” the priest growled. “Hiding food like a *cub*?”

“I didn’t!” Mareka insisted.

Moreri stamped back into the bunkroom. Zane and Drask burst out laughing. Kallen laid the meat on the table. "I'll have it cleaned up in a moment," she said, pantomiming a spell with wiggling fingers, and ducked back into the bunk room.

"This is *not* mine," Mareka said, pointing to the bloody haunch. "It isn't!"

"I don't *care* whose it is," Gandy said. "Get it out of the house."

"This was *you*," Mareka growled, pointing a clawed finger at Drask.

He put a hand to his wounded heart, face crestfallen. "Me?"

"I'll take it," Eochaid said, and reached for the offending mutton.

"Lenahr—" Gandy interjected testily. "Fine. You *and* Mareka take that thing back to the kitchen and apologize."

They crunched through the bitter cold across town to the kitchen hall. "I'll have him, Lenahr," Mareka growled. "I'm going to dangle him by his runty balls."

Two days later, as Eochaid marched down the hill from a night's watch on the tower, strange sounds came to him on the wind: the groan of the turning windmill, a stream of Veshian invective, and peals of laughter. Something hung from one of the mill's unfinished arms, and as it circled lower a little figure jumped and grabbed at it while others stood by and watched.

Eochaid pelted through the town, worried and uncertain why. As he neared the house he recognized Drask as the one who was swearing. He rounded the final bend and saw the halfling gather himself, then run and leap at a bulky bundle of blankets hanging from the sail-arm. Even Drask's prodigious acrobatic skill wasn't enough to reach it, though — at its lowest point, it was still nine feet in the air.

Most of his fellow vigilants stood by, laughing and cheering.

"Shall we get you a ladder, Drask?" Zane hooted.

"You rabid, hairy *bitch!*" Drask shouted at Mareka, who raised her eyebrows innocently and laid her hand on her heart.

Eochaid's guts knotted. He scanned the side of the house and mill for handholds and raced to the wall. Just as he heaved himself to a second-story windowsill, two arrows tore through the knot in the blankets, dropping the bundle to the snow.

"*Right!*" Gandy roared from where she stood on the path below, panting heavily.

All who were laughing snapped to silent attention. Drask pounced on the fallen bundle, scooping his fallen belongings from the snow and checking whether they'd been damaged.

"I just left a meeting with the *captain* because of this commotion," Gandy snarled. "This ends *here*. The next prank I hear of will be the *last*." She shouldered her bow, turned on her heel, and marched away.

• • •

Within a day, most of the platoon found new ways to amuse themselves, but not Eochaid. An uneasy quiet settled, an absence of sound (and particularly conversation) that Eochaid could hear all around him. *And I'm not helping*, he thought. Something about the tasteless, petty, cruel chain of pranks had gotten deep under his skin. Mareka and Drask had each approached him with their own versions of "Can you believe the nerve?" and he'd waved them both angrily away.

During the day he nearly seethed with anger, keeping to himself to spare the others his bad temper. During his short hours of sleep each night, anxious dreams hunted him: Gandy was keeping secrets, or Mareka came to him with bloody claws, saying "I had to see!"

Then there was the worst. He stood in a military court. A scowling Marshal Pelpern asked him, "Where are your friends? What happened to your friends?" And Eochaid had no answer, only a sick, bone-deep certainty that it was his fault.

He stumbled through his days and put off rest at night, instead finding solitary places to sit and think. He was angry at his friends, bitter over the anger, sad over the bitterness, and afraid that the poison among them would kill them all in battle. *Is this all there is? Are the other squads sitting in their bunks, picking away at one another? Is this what it means to be soldiers?*

Twice he began letters to Hutchling. Twice he stopped. What could he say? "My platoon-mates are being mean to each other?" And how long would it even take for the letters to reach the cleric beyond the Blood Sea?

On the third night, Eochaid sat by a second-floor window in the old mill watching pre-dawn stars in the sky and thinking about sleep. Downstairs, the door opened. Boards creaked as someone crossed the floor and climbed the stairs. Reflected in the window, Mareka peered into the darkness from the staircase. She studied him and then padded over to sit beside him.

Eochaid did not look.

She stayed silent for a minute. "I know you are angry," she said. "And that you are angry at me."

She let another long silence go by. "I'm not going away," she said.

She reached up and ran her fingers through his hair and he jerked away.

"Fine," she said. She pulled back her braids and lifted her chin. "I yield, Lenahr — here's my throat. I yield. Just *tell* me how to make this better."

Eochaid cringed at the gesture, unnerved by the physical act of submission.

"I'm not a game piece for you or Drask to claim," he growled. "I *hate* it when people play against one another that way."

"I wasn't—"

"You *were*," he said. "Both of you. We have to be able to *trust* one another. We *have* to. Otherwise, when...when you go into battle like that, people die."

Mareka blinked. “Someday I hope you will tell me what happened to you at Arcernoth Delta, Lenahr. I—”

Something rattled and scratched across the stonework at the windmill’s base. The two vigilants halted instinctively, eyes locking together. Eochaid strained his ears. Outside, something rustled. A clawed shadow as thin and gangly as a waving tree-branch crossed the window.

Except there aren’t trees out there, Eochaid thought. He hopped silently to his feet and leaned close to the window. Nothing moved outside.

Tick tick tick. Something tapped the shutters on the window a quarter of the way around the mill. Eochaid drew his swords. He glanced to Mareka.

The manticora was on her feet, fists clenched, tail twitching. Her mouth was open and she was shivering.

Something scraped along the base of the mill again, and a dry, rasping voice said, “Little cubs?”

“Can’t be,” Mareka whispered. “It can’t be — not here.” She looked at Eochaid, her eyes wide and wild. “It’s Claws-and-Bones!”

Tick tick tick. This time, the sound came from the opposite shutters. Mareka quivered visibly at the sound.

“What’s claws and bones?” Eochaid asked. He stepped close to her, swords up, ready to defend.

“She came to the village. Stole children. Killed parents. She was so thin and tall...” Mareka shook herself. “She was a hag — a powerful hag. We never...never tracked her down, and—”

Another scratch at the stonework. “Little cubs, come out!”

Resolve filled her face. “Lenahr, she’s deadly. My tribe couldn’t kill her — she’ll cut a swath through the camp if we don’t warn them.”

There were hags in the marshes, Eochaid recalled. *We never sent less than a platoon after them.*

Eochaid expected the cool touch of battle-readiness, but his racing heart refused to slow. Worry for Mareka kept him wound up. He took a deep breath and focused. “I’m with you. If you hit her from below, I can leap on her from the window. Try to hold her until the others wake up.”

Mareka swallowed and nodded. “When I open the door, then.” She crept to the stairs, placing each foot as carefully as she could, pausing at every squeak.

Eochaid eased loose the window-latch and readied himself. Quiet though she tried to be, he could hear Mareka crossing the rough wooden floor below. The scratching came again, closer to the mill door.

Mareka roared, and the door burst open. Then Eochaid heard pandemonium: cloth tearing, thumps and banging, and a resounding clatter like a woodpile falling over.

He shoved open the window and dove through, turning his downward speed into rolling energy as he landed, and bounced to his feet. Then he stopped.

A loose rope dangled from the mill's wind-shaft, ending a few feet above the front door. On the ground in front of the door a pile of fabric, wood, and bone writhed and rolled like a sack with a very large cat in it.

Beside the door stood Drask. In one hand he held a long pole with three thick, claw-like branches lashed to it. And he was doubled over laughing.

Eochaid briefly seethed at Drask, but then turned to help Mareka. He sheathed one sword and used the other to cut away the rope and cloth that had her pinned down.

Mareka leapt up out of the rubble, scattering the debris around her. She looked around for a moment, and then her eyes caught Drask. A raw growl emerged from her throat. Her body dropped low to pounce.

"No!" Eochaid cried. He threw himself between them. He gripped his sword in both hands and pointed it at Mareka. "No! Don't kill him!"

Mareka paused, confusion wrinkling her brow. She stood up straighter and batted Eochaid's sword away with her left hand while raising her right hand in front of him. "Claws *in*, Lenahr," she said. Eochaid could see just the tips of her nails above her fingers, claws fully retracted.

"I was only going to bloody his nose," she said. "Gods know he deserves it."

"Probably do," Drask gasped, still laughing quietly.

"Do you really think...." Mareka squinted at Eochaid. "Did you really *believe* I would *kill* him?"

Eochaid felt hot, his face blazing against the cold night air. He tried to steady himself, but it felt as if the ground was falling out from under him. He nodded, once.

Mareka's eyes widened in horror. "What do you think I am? Some kind of...of beast? Some blood-crazed *savage*?"

Eochaid shook his head as his sword slipped from his sweaty hands, dropping to the ground. "What? No! No, I didn't think—"

"Shut up!" she snarled. "I don't care what you think."

Mareka turned and stalked off toward the center of town, her tail angrily lashing behind her.

"Wow, kid. Really fucked that one up."

Eochaid spun toward Drask. "You!"

"What? 'S a great prank. Needed revenge after she hung my—"

Eochaid stabbed his finger down at the halfling. “You couldn’t leave it alone after Gandy *said* to end it! *Ordered* it!” He clenched his fists, fuming in anger. Then a queasy suspicion struck him. He turned back to the halfling. “How did you...how did you *know* her childhood fear?”

“Moreri must have mentioned—”

“No! You read her mind! You stole it from her *mind* and used it against her!”

“I don’t *steal*!” Drask sputtered defensively. “But yeah, picked up on it one night while I was scanning for threats, when there was a scraping noise at the window. Got an image clear as glass.”

“You used it against her. When you promised...when you said you’d *never* use what you learned about an ally — a *friend* — against them.”

Drask raised his hands up and took a step back. “Was just a prank.”

Eochaid picked up his sword and aimed it at Drask. “You’re *lucky* it was *her* you pranked.”

Drask’s face went pale. He swallowed and took another step back.

Eochaid sheathed his sword and turned. *And not me*, he thought as he walked away, shame and anger twisting in his gut.

Chapter Forty-One

The two other men in the guard tower were not from Eochaid's company, which was fine. They didn't say much to him beyond a curt greeting, which was also fine. They kept watch together on the far side of the tower and Eochaid kept to his own side. Nobody complained when he signed up for extra guard shifts, carefully choosing times when his platoon-mates were doing other work.

Drask didn't care for tower duty and Mareka was actively avoiding him, so here he could be free of them both. Free of Drask's presence, and free of Mareka's conspicuous absence. His heart stung like an unbandaged cut that wouldn't heal.

He turned the scene over and over in his mind: Mareka's rage, his certainty, her disgust. He thought again about Trakas, the 'miner' at the campfire, about his certainty of the man's intentions.

I knew, he thought. I knew what he was planning before I saw anything.

Mareka had not seen it, even sitting next to the man. Only Eochaid had read his actions. *Claws out*, he thought. And now, reflecting back, he could feel the difference. Mareka had been angry, yes, but the tension in her body had not been the unrestrained violence of the battlefield.

Memory washed over him: the great hall in Riverrock. Holtz with his broken mug of beer, raging at Balak, the two of them on the verge of blows. *But claws in*, he thought. Holtz, nose to nose with Eochaid in that same room, sneering at him, daring him to rise to the challenge. *Claws in*. With horror and shame, he recalled his own hand holding a sharp steel claw, pressing against Holtz's belly, ready to gut him, and the cold, easy certainty that had been in his mind at the time.

It was good to be alone at the top of the tower. Away from Drask, who would make him angry. Away from Mareka, who would make him ashamed. Away from Gandy, who might make him talk. Better to be alone.

• • •

"Huh! Would ya look at that?" One of the other watchmen interrupted Eochaid's thoughts. A rustle of wings. A harsh animal cry split the air.

Eochaid stepped over to where the other two vigilants were standing at the edge of the parapet. One of them was pointing to a black bird circling just below the tower.

“Lenahr, there’s a crow,” the pointing vigilant said.

“Nah. It’s a raven!” said the other. “Crows ‘caw,’ not... whatever sound *that’s* making.”

The bird dove, gaining speed, then climbed above the tower and swooped toward the parapet, flapping to a stop with another deep croak. *Odd. Even out here, birds are still usually shy of humans*, Eochaid thought.

“See?” said the pointing vigilant. “It’s a crow.”

“It’s too big for a crow,” said the other.

“It’s too small to be a raven.”

Eochaid smiled and admired the jet-black plumage as the black bird fluttered its wings and settled its feathers. The bird stared back at him with a surprising intensity and pumped its head. It hopped along the parapet toward him, and for the first time he noticed a leather tube tied to its leg. “Whatever it is, I think it has a message,” he said.

So how do I get it? The only messenger bird Eochaid had worked with was Cray’s falcon Vila. *Well, it’s a place to start.*

Eochaid closed his hand into a fist, held his arm out level in front of him and cautiously approached the bird. “Hey, pretty bird. Do you have a message for us?” he asked, softly.

The bird lifted its head and squinted. “Gaandee!” it croaked. “Gaandee!”

“Never heard a bird say that before,” the first vigilant remarked.

Eochaid slowly reached for the bird’s foot. It hopped backwards. “Gaandee!” it cried, flapping out of reach, then landing a few feet further away from them.

“I think it said ‘Gandy,’” Eochaid said. He turned to his companions. “Can one of you get Sergeant Gandy? Maybe it has a message for her. And we should get it some food.”

The two watchmen nodded. One ran off to fetch Gandy. The other dug in his pack. “I have some dried fruit. And some bread and cold chicken.”

Eochaid set out some small pieces of the bread and chicken on the parapet for the strange bird. It ate the food but pecked at him whenever he attempted to reach for its leg.

After several minutes of trying to coax the bird, all Eochaid had to show for it was a third of the watchman’s lunch gone and several bloody beak-marks on his fingers and hand.

“Learn when to quit, Lenahr,” Gandy remarked as she stepped out onto the walkway.

“It was easier with Vila,” he admitted, dabbing some snow on the freshest gash.

“Leave it to a *real* ranger,” Gandy said, smiling and shaking her head as she approached the bird.

"Hey little guy," she said softly. "I'm Sergeant Gandy. Do you have a message for me?" She slowly reached out her hand.

The bird's croak ended on a questioning note. "Gaandee?"

"Yep. Gandy. That's me," she said. The bird squinted at her, cocking its head to study her face. Then out of the side of her mouth, Gandy hissed, "This is really strange."

Eochaid *mmmed* affirmatively, but otherwise held very still. The bird made a muttering series of happy croaks, hopped to Gandy's hand, and then lifted its leg. She gently untied the message tube from its leg and pulled out a roll of paper from it.

Before Gandy could even look at the roll, the bird screeched loudly and plunged off the tower's edge, diving steeply and then gliding swiftly away. "Didn't even wait for a reply," Gandy said, and opened the roll.

She skimmed the message. Her eyes widened, and then she read it through a second time. "Come on," she barked, striding toward the stairs and waving Eochaid after her.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"The captain. The message is from Ardleigh."

"*Ardleigh*? The halfling we rescued from the cultists?"

"Yep. I think he came through on his promise."

Eochaid followed Gandy down the tower. *What could he have said?*

Gandy asked after the captain and was directed toward the stables. They rushed down from the tower and arrived just as the captain rode in, chatting with an older woman on horseback beside him. As she pulled off her cloak and dismounted, Eochaid recognized her. *Marshal Pelpern!* He suppressed the urge to stand immediately at attention.

Marshal Pelpern was an older woman — Eochaid guessed at least in her fifties. Her gray hair was cut short, her freckled skin was tanned dark, and small lines wrinkled her face when she smiled. Despite her age, she appeared very fit and active. She wore typical leather armor and a vigilante's uniform with the addition of a vest bearing the markings of her rank visible under a long, fur-lined coat. A well-worn crossbow hung across her back and a sturdy longsword swung at her hip.

Eochaid and Gandy saluted as the captain broke off to approach them. The marshal walked the two horses to their grooms.

"Sergeant Gandy."

"Captain, I just received a note via messenger bird. It's from Ardleigh, the halfling that we rescued from the Gaurak cultists."

"The one who was spying on the Dar al Annot?"

"That's him. He claims titanspawn are gathering in the Blood Steppes in large numbers." She handed the note to the Captain.

Captain Allard read it carefully, brow creasing. "Do you trust this halfling?"

“Not particularly — he’s no ally. But he claims not to be our enemy either. All we really know is that he’s a magic user interested in the intentions of Mormo’s followers. This may *really* just be his way of repaying his debt.”

“Or it could be some type of trap. How did he know you were here?”

“It’s not exactly a secret where we’re wintering, Captain,” the marshal said, joining the group. She took the note from Allard, produced a pair of spectacles, and scrutinized Ardleigh’s message closely.

“He contacted *you*, Sergeant, so this is your mission,” Allard said to Gandy. “I want your platoon to return to the Steppes as soon as possible to investigate this and confirm what he says.”

The marshal looked up from the note. “Sergeant, what forces do you have here to march with?”

“Several of my soldiers are on leave, ma’am,” Gandy replied. “There are eight here now.”

“That’ll do for a start,” said the Marshal. “I’m assigning you horses. I want you there fast. This news worries me. If titanspawn are gathering I want to know why. We’ll send the rest of your platoon along with reinforcements when we gather them.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Gandy replied, saluting. She turned to Eochaid, who until now had felt forgotten. “Lenahr, round ‘em up. We leave as soon as everyone’s packed and equipped for battle.”

Eochaid nodded, saluted, and ran off to find his platoon, while Gandy stayed to work out details with the captain.

• • •

The horses’ hooves spattered cold mud in all directions. Though snow gave way to rain as they traveled south, winter was reluctant to release the land to spring, and it made its anger known through a bone-chilling cold in the moist air. Eochaid felt grateful for the magic that protected him from it. He ached from riding, but the steady, fast pace of the horses carried them from the Haggard Hills to the edge of the Blood Steppes in a third of the time it’d taken on foot.

They rode on through cloudy, windy weather and biting drizzle, only slowing as they entered the thicker scrub further into the Steppes. Ardleigh’s directions had been general, so once they reached the proper region the platoon would need to scout carefully. For now, though, they rode hard.

Conversation was difficult. Eochaid was grateful. The dull ache and disjointedness inside him had faded, but not gone away. The exhaustion of the ride also helped at night, both because Eochaid could sleep with less chance his dreams would wake him and because the others were too tired to notice how sullen he’d become. He rode alone and slept alone. Sooner or later Gandy would notice, he was sure. But for now he could suffer in silence.

They picked up tracks three days into the Blood Steppes. They crossed a few random traces of individual humanoids, but Gandy let those go. “The message said ‘massing,’” she said. “We’re looking for groups, not random blood-crazed hermits.”

They found the trail they wanted a bit before midday. As the trackers, Gandy and Eochaid were out in front of the others. They rode parallel, with plenty of space between them to improve their odds of finding something. When Gandy whistled, low and quietly, Eochaid turned his horse and trotted over.

Multiple sets of footprints intertwined, all crossing the same soft patch of ground near a patch of boulders. “Are these what I think they are?” Gandy asked.

Eochaid swung down from his horse to look closely. The tracks varied tremendously in size, but all had a distinct shape: five clutching toes, all clawed, with knobby foot-pads between them, and interleaving among the prints the distinct marks of long, hairless tails.

“Slitherin,” Eochaid muttered. He held his hand over the tracks to better gauge their size. “Small tracks, though. Not the Brown Gorgers, then, which are what I’d expect in the Steppes. Maybe the Diseased? Or, I guess...they could be Red Witches, though I didn’t think they really traveled.”

Gandy’s mouth hung open.

“What?” Eochaid asked.

“You got all that from the tracks! It’s just impressive how well you know the slitherin.”

Eochaid nodded. “They’re the biggest threat to Vesh in the Mourning Marshes. Everyone in Arcernoth knows their rats.”

He turned back to the trail. “These big tracks, the ones far apart, are probably horse-rats they’re using as pack animals. They carry their tails high for balance, so there aren’t... aren’t...”

Amid the other tracks, a different set caught his eye. They were larger and much deeper, as if carrying a heavy weight, and the toes were massive, thick, and misshapen. A shiver brushed his shoulders. He scanned the ground again. Two sets, both much larger than all but the horse-rat tracks.

Eochaid jumped when Gandy laid her hand on his shoulder. “S’okay, Lenahr — just tell me what you found.”

Eochaid felt the blood draining out of his skin. “Maulers,” he said.

• • •

Gandy gathered her vigilants and laid out what they’d learned. “There’s around twenty Red Witches. At least a few will be casters, and they have two pack-rats the size of horses that’ll fight if we attack their handlers. And two...what were they again, Lenahr?”

“Maulers. Massive slitherin, twisted with evil magic into monsters. Their flesh knits itself back together unless you burn it off them. They’re all muscle. I...” He swallowed. “I saw one crush a man’s skull with its fist.”

"They sound pleasant," Moreri said. "How do you suggest we engage them?"

"At range, with magic. Whatever you do, *don't* let them get hold of you," Eochaid murmured.

"So we're taking this one carefully, okay?" Gandy continued. "These are cultists — we're not even going to *try* talking to them first. I want a prisoner. Find someone low risk. But we strike first, and we kill anyone who's a threat.

"Now," she continued, "without Rah and Cray, we have no unobtrusive way to scout ahead. Does anyone have a trick that'll help?"

Zane raised his hand. "Well, I have a spell I copied from an instructor at Bride Lake. It's old, and I've only recently figured out how it works. Didn't figure it would be much use in the Haggard Hills, but I can study it in the morning and try it out."

They followed the trail for the rest of the day. In the rain and mud their horses did not raise a dust cloud to give away their passage, but the group rode carefully anyway. They stopped in the evening and made camp in a hollow away from the slitherin's path. At dawn, they rose and prepared for the day.

Zane studied his obscure spell carefully. Then the young elven wizard broke up an oatcake from his rations, scattered the crumbs in the grass and slush a little way from the camp, and waited. One by one, birds alighted to snatch up the crumbs. Zane cast his spell and the little birds, all one shade of mud color or another, alighted on his head and shoulders, five in all.

He walked back into camp, grinning ear to ear. Drask and Mareka snickered. Gandy smiled and shook her head.

"I know I look foolish, but this makes me feel like a mage from some children's story," Zane said. "Now, what do we want them to do?"

"Find the pack of rats as big as we are, then come back and tell us where they are," Gandy said. "Can they do that?"

"We'll find out," Zane said. He raised his arms and whispered to the little birds, which scattered into the sky.

They rode at a trot slightly faster than a walk, watching ahead to keep from catching up to the slitherin in case Zane's spell failed. After an hour on the trail, a pair of little birds swooped out of the bushes and landed on Zane's saddlebags, chittering busily.

"Hah!" Zane cheered. "It works!" He pulled another nugget of oatcake from his pocket and held it out to the birds.

The others reined in their horses and waited. Zane cooed to the birds as they pecked at their reward.

"So, Bird Wizard," Gandy coughed, "if you wouldn't mind..."

Zane recovered himself with admirable speed and delivered the report from his 'spies.' *He's learning*, Eochaid thought. Zane hadn't quite been fresh from Bride Lake, but he'd only done a handful of missions before being assigned to Gandy.

The slitherin, the birds said, were camped out three hills ahead of them. Consulting the map, Gandy concluded they were about an hour ahead.

“They’ll be sleeping,” Eochaid said, “But they’ll have plenty of guards.”

Gandy chewed her lip. “Right,” she said. “We ride in closer.” She pointed to the map. “If they’re on this hillside, we can take the horses as far as this creek here without them seeing us. Then we scout and attack.”

• • •

Despite the cold and damp, Eochaid sweated in his armor. Henmeth’s dimension door spell had landed them exactly where she’d planned: behind an isolated clump of brush on the far side of the enemy camp, close enough that he could hear the mutter of slitherin voices and the tearing and wet smacking noises of a maunder feeding. His skin prickled, and his pulse raced in his throat. If he closed his eyes he felt sure he’d smell the mud, blood, and burned flesh. He looked down, slowed his breathing, and flexed his fingers, forcing his mind back to the present.

Kallen raised her hand in front of him drawing his gaze to her. “Are you ill?” she mouthed. Mareka glanced at him as well, concern crossing her face.

Eochaid shook his head. Kallen smiled and squeezed his shoulder. “Courage,” she said, silently.

This is not the same, Eochaid thought. *This is not the same fight*. There were only twenty or so slitherin in the encampment, not counting the two maulers and the Red Witch magus in her closed palanquin. Most were sleeping, curled in bedrolls on the ground. A few stood watch on the perimeter. One of the maulers slept as well. The other was distracted, dismembering the deer or elk it was eating. Still, Eochaid couldn’t control his jittering heartbeat.

A sharp *peewit* of birdsong sparkled on the air: Gandy’s signal that her force was in position. Henmeth gestured for her group to wait, and held the sign for several seconds to see if the camp would raise an alarm. Then she closed her hand into a fist.

They sprang as one. Henmeth gestured and spoke her spell as she moved. Eochaid broke into a run, Kallen and Mareka beside him, closing in on the sentry nearest their hiding place. Henmeth’s fireball sizzled as it passed and detonated in the center of the camp with a *whoosh*, swallowing a dozen ratmen in its blast.

The startled sentry, midway through raising its spear against the charging invaders, flinched at the explosion behind it. Mareka knocked its spear aside and gutted it with a stroke, roaring.

With an answering roar the maunder threw aside its meal, lowered its head, and charged. Even before Eochaid could ready himself, Henmeth shouted an arcane word. A beam of venomous green light struck the great beast on one shoulder and swept across it. Where the beam touched, flesh exploded into dust. As the green light crossed the maunder’s head, its legs kicked, throwing the body nervelessly forward. It hit the ground and collapsed in a cloud of ash.

“For Vesh!” Kallen shouted, her voice buoying Eochaid up. A second sentry flung itself at Mareka, and Eochaid caught it in the belly with both blades, dropping it.

A voice, old and angry, called out — the Red Witch archmagus, stepping from her palanquin, her hand curling up, grasping. The ground under Eochaid quivered and roiled and thick, ropy tentacles of a greasy black color burst out, entangling his legs and battering his body.

Mareka cursed and slashed furiously at the wriggling mass around her, but her blades slid off the tentacles without harming them. Eochaid threw himself to the side, wiggling his legs free, and danced clear of them. He reached out to Kallen but instead of grabbing on, the bard touched her vigil medallion. The tentacles jerked, went still, and evaporated. That was when the second mauler grabbed at Eochaid.

Eochaid made no effort to strike. He whirled, dropping his shoulder and rolling off his elbow and knee to come up in a crouch, then sprang back at an angle.

Just tie it up, he thought. Keep its attention until Henmeth can—

Mareka barreled into the mauler, ripped open its back with a metal claw, then tore a strip from its side as it turned. Then it backhanded her with a huge fist, staggering her. Its snapping jaws caught her arm, and its other arm windmilled up, knocking her almost off her feet and tearing her loose. She reeled back, dizzily raising her claws.

Eochaid darted in. Once it turned its attention to him its blows, which had halted Mareka, would surely kill him instantly. *Then I'll only have one chance to hurt it*, he thought, and struck. He drove his blades in and down on either side of the misshapen spine and held on tightly as the mauler thrashed, dropping to its knees. Blood nearly black in color gouted from the wounds, and the thing pitched over onto its face.

In the sudden quiet, a horse-rat shrieked once. Drask, Gandy, and Zane shouted to one another, but Eochaid couldn't hear the words over his own gasping breaths. “Moreri!” Kallen hollered. “Your sister needs more help than I can give her!” Mareka staggered, waving away Kallen's help. She grinned, kicked the dead mauler, and spat a goblet of bloody saliva at it.

Movement caught Eochaid's eye. The edges of the tear Mareka had opened in the mauler's back were ever-so-slowly twining back together. “Henmeth,” he shouted, “we need fire!”

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Eochaid stared around him, incredulous. The leader of the Red Witches was dead, her corpse mangled by one of Henmeth's destructive spells. All her handmaidens had died in the fireball, and almost all the sentries had died in the vigilants' initial attack. Drask and Gandy had captured a lone, desperate survivor as he tried to take a horse-rat to safety. The horse-rat was now dead, and the nervous, staring male cowered against the stubby tree they'd bound him to.

Eochaid hugged himself and paced, watching anxiously as Moreri prayed over Mareka, healing her broken ribs and closing the ugly gash in her shoulder. In past battles he might have

sat with her and compared wounds while they waited for the healer. Now, though, Eochaid stood by himself, nerves jangling, unable to calm himself, and without calm, afraid to speak.

After she was healed, Mareka rinsed the blood off her face and arms and shook herself dry.

Moreri patted Mareka's shoulder. "Lenahr was right," he said. "I'm glad we had warning of its strength. If it had caught someone less resilient than you, sister..." He shuddered.

"Yes," Mareka snarled. "Of course, I wasn't the one who let the big one sneak up on me."

The words hit Eochaid like a slap. He turned back around to face her. "What? I...I..." Anger boiled in his belly. "It was my problem and I was handling it!"

"I was *rescuing* you, you fool!"

"No!" Eochaid shouted. "When you make a dumb mistake, you don't drag everyone else in with you!"

"Enough!" Gandy thundered. "What in Tanil's name is wrong with you two? Both of you go cool your damn heads!"

Mareka opened her mouth, but shut it again when Gandy raised a finger. She stamped off toward the creek and the platoon's horses. Eochaid turned away and sought a place where the platoon's eyes wouldn't be on him. He jogged up the hill until found a level place to stop. He dropped, shaking. He pulled his knees up, rested his forehead against them, and breathed deeply.

Even after the battle, so much adrenaline pumped in his system that it clouded his thoughts and made his skin prickle. *They're dead*, he thought. *The maulers are dead. The rats are all dead, and we made it.* Even so, the thought gave much less comfort than he expected.

He punched the ground, focusing on the wet, pebbly bite against his knuckles. *Something's wrong*, he thought. *Something's wrong with me. Why can't I calm down?*

"Lenahr!" Gandy called. Her boots thrashed through the coarse grass and brush as she came closer up the hillside.

Eochaid ran his wet hand over his face. The coolness against his skin didn't quench the heat beneath it. Shame seized him at the thought of Gandy seeing him here, huddled and trembling.

"Eochaid," Gandy called, much more quietly. Her footsteps halted. "Eochaid?"

He swallowed hard. "Here," he said.

Gandy pushed through the brush. When she saw him, her jaw dropped and her eyes went wide. She put a fist to her mouth. "Oh, *gods*, Lenahr!"

Gandy took a deep breath and knelt, putting her arms around his quivering shoulders.

"Something's wrong with me, Gandy," Eochaid muttered.

"Oh, Tanil," Gandy said, "I wish Hutch was here. This is my fault, Eochaid — it's on *me*, not you. I've read the Arcernoth reports. I should have realized."

"I can't calm down," Eochaid said. "My heart won't slow down, and I can't think."

Gandy squeezed him. "I should *never* have sent you into this," she said. "It's not your fault. I should have. . . fuck, should have done *anything* except send you into *this* at the head of the charge! I should have *realized*." Eochaid felt a hot tear land on his forehead. Then Gandy sniffled violently and slapped her own forehead, growling to herself as she did.

"I'll *fix* this, Eochaid," Gandy said. She squeezed his shoulders again. His shivering continued, but the warmth and firmness of Gandy's grip anchored him despite the thunder of his pulse. He nodded.

"This wasn't your fault. It's that madness you went through in the marsh clawing out at you again — even though you're five hundred miles away. We *won* today, Eochaid. Nobody died. Mareka didn't even get any new scars."

Eochaid choked out a fitful laugh. Gandy sighed.

"Okay, as your sergeant, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to fetch Kallen and tell her you've had a shock, a reminder of a battle that almost killed you once — nothing more than that. Say more to her or don't, I don't care. She's going to come sit with you and get you calm. I'll tell the others. . . uh. . . I don't know, that you were overcome with manly rage and got your fist stuck in a tree or something."

They laughed together for a moment, Eochaid seeing for the first time the fear and sorrow on his friend's face. "Thanks, Gandy. I'll try to—"

"No, Lenahr, you're not trying *anything*," Gandy snapped. "You're to treat this like any wound. Sit and rest. As for me, I'm going to go exercise my temper before I'm tempted to take it out on our prisoner. And *then* I'm going to terrify him into telling me what they're after out here."

"Drask," Eochaid said. "Have Drask help you. He's the one who can get the secrets from it."

Gandy considered and nodded her head. "Would have liked you there, but I think you're right. Now rest. Your fight's over for today."

Chapter Forty-Two

"We can't keep him with us," someone — Drask — said, stirring Eochaid's consciousness. *Where...?* He lay on a bunk in Henmeth's shelter. The voices came through the open door.

He remembered Kallen crooning to him up on the hill, her voice soothing his frayed nerves and settling his mind. She sat with him until the wild beating of his heart had finally slowed, then walked him to the shelter. He remembered her telling him, "You can sleep now, Lenahr. What you feel are portraits of old fears in a gallery in your mind. They're caught on canvas. You can leave the gallery and they cannot. Leave the portraits where they are and sleep." Kallen's voice had held such confidence it was hard to doubt the truth of what she said.

He squinted at the nearby window. Night had fallen, and firelight twinkled on the panes.

"Well, if there's more we can learn from him..." Kallen muttered.

Drask laughed bitterly. "There isn't. And Command doesn't need another slitherin foot soldier to interrogate. Already know how much they love Mormo, and how they dig their privies."

"Well, we can't let him go," Gandy said. "If there's even a chance he'll run back to the titanspawn and tell them we know what they—"

"They'd kill him!" Henmeth said.

"And he'd be *glad* of it," Drask said. "He's a cultist. They're blood-mad idiots."

"I could transport him to Lave," Henmeth said. "They could figure out what to do with him."

Drask laughed.

"Shut up, Drask," Gandy said. "Henmeth, I don't want to risk you getting lost on the way back. We don't have time for that. If we're going after this...amphora thing they were going to see, I need you with us for certain! No, we'll truss him up carefully and take him with us and just make sure he doesn't slow us down."

Several people groaned, and as Eochaid listened they began the same circle of arguments again.

Eochaid rose silently from his bunk and went to the window. Most of his fellow vigilants stood or sat by the fire. Zane leaned against a tree a little way distant, watching

the conversation but glancing regularly at the slitherin, who was still tied to its tree, ears pricked up and listening as the platoon argued its fate.

The debate continued. Eochaid closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. *They're all dancing around it, and none of them will say it*, he thought. A cold determination filled him.

He crept cat-footed back to the bunk and strapped on his swords. Then he slipped out the door. Eochaid walked steadily, his steps silent but his gait natural and unthreatening, hands swinging at his sides. Zane glanced up, and Eochaid nodded as he passed.

"Lenahr?" Zane asked.

Eochaid approached the slitherin. It raised its head and looked him over, then glanced around. Eochaid knelt in front of it where it sat in the dirt, its hands tied behind it. Then, in a flash of motion, he whipped his blades from their scabbards and cut its head from its shoulders.

Zane gasped. The head thumped onto soggy earth. Eochaid stood and shook the blood from his blades.

"Lenahr, what...?" Gandy said. Then an uproar of voices. Everyone surrounded him, shouting, asking questions. Mareka looked from the corpse to Eochaid and back, saying nothing. Eochaid could not read her expression.

"Shut up!" Gandy shouted. "Everyone!" She turned her attention to Eochaid, her face pale and drawn. "Lenahr, are you...? Did...do you have an explanation for this?"

"We're in the field, with no facilities and no support. We have a vital mission, and it demands speed — and stealth, I bet. This slitherin knew its time was up — especially with all of you *talking* about it where it could hear you," Eochaid said, sheathing his swords. "So I made its end as painless as possible."

Gandy blinked. "Kallen," she said, "you told me you'd calmed him down!"

Kallen examined Eochaid. "He *is* calm," she said, and frowned.

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It took another hour to settle things. Gandy dressed him down, and the platoon debated his actions, but in the end the slitherin was still dead and the next day's mission still vital and urgent.

Having already slept as much as he expected to, Eochaid took watch on the hillside above the shelter. He sat and listened to the night sounds, alert for any danger the Blood Steppes might harbor.

"Lenahr." It was Gandy, walking up the little trail to where he sat.

"Sergeant," Eochaid replied.

It was too dark for him to see her face, but he heard Gandy's footsteps stumble to a halt. "We're being formal now?" she grumbled.

"After reprimanding me for killing the slitherin, I think it's best, ma'am."

Gandy let go a long, slow breath, and Eochaid saw her shoulders sink. "Okay, look. There aren't a lot of times when killing a prisoner's the right thing to do. I wasn't expecting it, and you should have..." Gandy's voice trailed off. She shook her head and let it drop back, looking up into the dim night as if for answers.

"If you'd asked first, we would have kept talking it to death — I know that. I don't know what the right thing was to do. I think your answer might have been more right than mine. I don't know how I planned to secure that thing and bring it along, and I shouldn't have put it up for debate either way."

She sat near Eochaid. "I'm *not* sorry I chewed you out. You broke chain of command. I'm going to put you on report for it when we get out of all this, and the captain may have something to say about it. But..." Gandy sighed tiredly. "I gave you some extra heat because I was mad at you for having more resolve than me. So 'Sergeant Gandy' is sorry for being a shit commander."

Eochaid nodded. "Thanks."

Gandy picked up a dead leaf and began pulling pieces off of it.

"I have something else I need to say," she said, after destroying a third of the leaf. She sat for so long that Eochaid wondered if she'd changed her mind.

"I've never seen you be like you were today, Eochaid," she murmured. "First, more upset than even on the very worst days of training. And then, so...hard."

"Don't worry about me, Gandy."

"Pfff. It's my job. I worry about all *eleven* of you idiots."

"Well then, don't worry about me any more than anyone else."

"I can't help it. You were my friend long before you were my responsibility. You're the only one of this lot I specifically *chose*."

"Maybe asking for me was a bad idea."

"What? No. You *belong* with us. The platoon needs your talents. But...If you wanted, you could take one of the horses — head back to rendezvous with Captain Allard. Give him a more detailed report of what we've found than what Moreri can send him magically. There'd be no shame in it."

"If you want, I—" Eochaid said.

"I can even send you back to Vesh for a while. You didn't get a winter leave. Maybe Hutch and whatshisname—"

"They're in *Termana*," Eochaid interjected. "Gandy, are you trying to get rid of me?"

"What? No! I *want* you here. You've helped me, and you're the only one here I can unload on. But I'm also your sergeant."

"And you're worried I'll panic again."

Gandy sighed. “No, not exactly. It’s combat. Half the platoon’s had it get under their skin in some way. *I* got hit by a spell once that made me run from a fight. No, I’m worried because it’s so unlike you. I don’t want to make it worse.”

Eochaid felt the knot of emotions inside him. Kallen’s kind, calming work seemed to be keeping him above the roil. Some of the tangle was still too painful even to look at, but for the first time the bitter ending at Arcernoth was cool enough for him to touch. Carefully, he framed his words.

“In Arcernoth, we made so many mistakes. Just one wrong thing after another, building on each other until the mistakes started killing people. And the worst was that when everything went to hell...we didn’t trust each other.”

Gandy sat with his words a long time before speaking, a serious look on her face. “I can’t promise that we won’t make mistakes. But I won’t let us compound them. And if I ever, *ever* act like Varith, feed me to a vengaurak.”

Drizzle began to coat the landscape, beading on Eochaid’s cloak.

“Speaking of trust,” Gandy said, “I had a long talk with Drask after we did the interrogation. About his...ability.”

Yeah, he’d have had to tell her how he was doing it. “That’s a stalker secret.”

“Gods, Lenahr, didn’t we just talk about this? It’s a secret we should keep from our enemies, but Drask was keeping it from his friends. From his *commander*.” She crumpled the remains of her leaf. “I got him to tell me what happened between you, him, and Mareka, too — don’t think I hadn’t noticed the tension among you three, or that you were sulking up in that damn watchtower. Drask’s done more to undermine trust in my platoon than the Dar al Annot!”

Gandy sighed. “I should have brought it up sooner, but here’s how foolish I was — I hoped that getting into the field again would fix things between you!”

Eochaid closed his eyes and nodded.

Gandy continued. “If we’re going to succeed in this mission, I need you three to get along. To have each other’s backs.”

“I can. I trust them with my life.”

“Well, good. Glad to hear it.”

“But maybe...not with my feelings so much.”

Gandy laughed. “Yeah, I get that. Well, I’ll deal with Drask.”

“And Mareka...?”

“To be as mad as she was at your getting in the way of the mauler, I think she’s forgiven you.”

“You think so?”

“Talk to her.”

Eochaid shook his head. “Not yet...I can’t.”

“When you’re ready, then.”

He nodded.

“Can you *work* with them?” Gandy asked.

“Yes. Definitely. If you’re going to let me stay in your platoon.”

Gandy tweaked his ear. “I *want* you to stay, shit-for-brains.”

“Good. I want to see this mission out,” Eochaid said. He puzzled over the conversation he’d heard on waking up in the hut, pulling together the pieces, and frowned. “What exactly *is* the mission?”

Gandy laughed. “Mormo’s little friends found some kind of magic urn thing. The *amphora*, the slitherin called it. They think it’s full of Mormo’s essence, and that they can use it to bring her back.”

“That would be bad.”

“That would be *very* bad. They’re taking it across the Steppes to the Hornsaw.”

“Then we better find them before they do.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Gandy gathered the platoon in the morning and stood them at attention. Eochaid noted a new stiffness to her spine. The attentive air of the others suggested they'd had seen it too. *Everyone's quiet. Waiting.*

"Our full company's on its way," Gandy began, "along with the rest of the platoon. But for now, it's just us. We have to find the titanspawn and their artifact. Above all, the vigil needs us to track them and report their location so the Captain can get to them and take that 'amphora' away.

"This is the most important mission in the Veshian Vigil today," she said, transfixing her soldiers with her gaze. "I believe this will be the story that gets us all free drinks for the rest of our lives. *If we live.*"

Gandy leveled a finger, scanning down the line of vigilants. "I've seen tensions in my platoon. People keeping secrets. Holding grudges. Picking fights. That's over, today. From here out you trust everyone else in my platoon with your life. If you have disagreements, you settle them or you bring them to me. If you can't do that, pack your gear, take your horse, and ride north. Anyone who can't stand back to back with every other soldier here belongs back with Captain Allard, not out here with us."

Mareka stole a glance over at Eochaid. Her hands were clenched in determined fists at her sides, but her face was solemn, and her eyes were bright. The band around his heart eased its grip.

The vigilants broke camp and rode south, following the path the dead slitherin had been on. For the first day they rode hard, pushing the horses and themselves to make up time while they could.

The deeper they went, the stranger and more gnarled the terrain became. More than once they had to backtrack to find paths their horses could follow, and sometimes those paths wound close to the edge of ravines full of brush and tumbled rock. Already further into the Steppes than they'd gone on their months of patrol, they pushed on.

At times Eochaid felt as if the land must have been stirred with a titanic pitchfork to create such a jumble. *This isn't like the part of the Steppes where we used to hunt*, Eochaid thought. The land north of Trela was wild, to be sure. It was deadly. Its hills and valleys were ominous. *But it made sense.*

The platoon's survival skills steered them clear of most living threats. Once, a pack of twisted goblin-like creatures with numerous, spider-like eyes threw stones at them until Moreri dropped a pillar of divine fire on their heads. Another time, something paced them on the far side of a knifelike ridge, never coming into view but howling hungrily and scrabbling at the hillside as if desperate to climb over and feast.

Their nights were more anxious as well. Any artificial structure would be conspicuous against the tumbled landscape, so they would find crevices or copses of trees for Henmeth to erect her shelter in. Some nights there was no good place for it. The platoon would sleep out in the cold and wet, with nervous watchers eyeing the darkness for intruders. They relied heavily on magic to hide, protect, and bolster them against the land and elements.

In the end, it took them five days to reach the gathering place the slitherin had revealed.

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"There's nothing," Drask growled.

All morning Gandy's platoon had been divided up, scouting the landscape around the spot for cultists: patrols, or a camp, or at least signs of passage. Eochaid and Kallen had covered miles without seeing a sign of anything but beasts. Now the scouting parties had gathered again, and as each one reported, Gandy's expression grew sourer and grimmer.

"Vangal's sweaty balls," she exclaimed, poring over Henmeth's thick book of maps for the third time since Eochaid had started watching, "this is *definitely* the place!" She slammed the book shut and stalked around the clearing, rubbing her temples as she walked. "If Ardleigh was lying, where'd the slitherin come from? If the *ratman* was lying—"

"He wasn't," Drask interjected curtly.

"—then why was he so specific?" Gandy continued. She shook her head and sighed. "Okay. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe we're just early. Moreri, you're with me — I need to send a message to the captain and ask what he wants us to do. Henmeth, you and Kallen go over the maps again for any errors in our route here. The rest of you, compare notes. We'll probably need an overnight camp, and I want it secure and hard to spot."

Moreri rose and followed Gandy. Henmeth and Kallen glumly opened the map-book again.

"What do we do if nothing turns up?" Zane asked.

"Up to command," Drask said. "Either scout a wider area or ride home."

"We already did some good," Eochaid said. "We wiped out a small tribe of Red Witches. Fewer of them is never a bad thing."

By the time Gandy and Moreri returned, the vigilants had identified a likely spot to hole up in: a deep gully in the side of a grassy hill, where the shelter would blend into boulders but its guards would have long views of their surroundings.

“Okay, we have our orders,” Gandy said. “We camp tonight. If Henmeth or Kallen can’t find anywhere we went wrong in getting here, we dig in and wait for the captain and the main force.”

They guided their horses into the bottom of the gulley to shelter in a copse of trees, then climbed the hill. Henmeth cast her spell so that the shelter was tucked very tightly into the gap, digging partly into the rock faces on either side, and the vigilants gathered brush and grass to further break up its outline. From below, even Eochaid had trouble spotting the place.

They gathered forage for the horses and settled in: Gandy, Henmeth, and Kallen to pore over the maps, and the others to take watch or rest. Eochaid spent most of the night on the rainy hillside, hidden in a hunter’s blind. When he came in to sleep, Henmeth was snoring quietly at the table and Gandy stood by the window staring into the dimness. Eochaid patted her shoulder and rolled into a bunk.

They ranged out again the next day, hunting for signs and finding nothing. They gathered extra food for the horses, and then settled in to wait and watch. Eochaid sat at the table watching Henmeth and Zane discuss what spells they might each prepare for the following day when loose stones clattered outside the door as someone slid down from the watchposts above. Moreri opened the shelter door and ducked inside.

Gandy popped to her feet. “Something?”

The cleric’s sharp teeth glinted even in the dim light. “Oh, yes,” he said. “Something.”

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The tents were placed in a large clearing about a mile from the vigilants’ shelter — against the trees where they were less easy to see, but Eochaid had studied this landscape for hours each day. It wasn’t a huge party, but they were clearly not wayward travelers. The platoon’s spyglass was powerful enough to show that neither the men nor the women had hair, and their skin had an unnatural tint to it. They moved with an unwholesome fluidity as they set up their tents. That would have been enough, but there were also the alarming beasts that traveled with them: bear-sized, with scaly hides, club-like tails, manes of writhing tentacles around their heads, and toothy mouths that dripped a dark liquid.

“Gorgons,” said Kallen. “High and low, both. Definitely servants of the Serpent Queen.”

“Which ones?” Zane asked. “Are the gorgons the lion things or the people?”

“Both,” Drask replied. “Mate with one another, too, I gather. Have little clutches of eggs together, each one a surprise!” He grinned acidly as the color drained from Zane’s face.

That night’s watch was uneasy with an enemy so close. Gandy ordered her platoon to pack up all they could in the event they had to flee. But in the morning the gorgons in the camp below seemed confident in their own safety, keeping a posted watch but not sending scouts into the woods. Luckily, the low gorgons stayed close to camp as well. *If one of those things smelled the horses...* Eochaid thought. *Well, just be glad they haven’t.*

The camp grew slowly throughout the day. New clusters of tents rose every few hours: a party of goblins and bugbears, a group of druids, and a few serpent-like beings that Henmeth called 'asaatthi.'

Then as evening fell, the rumble of drums came on the wind. Out of the wilderness a column of armored asaatthi marched, flying banners that depicted a great, grinning serpent. Rank upon rank of the snake warriors emerged and lined themselves up on the field. Eochaid's skin prickled as he counted them: at least a company. At their center, a small cadre of asaatthi dressed in brighter colors surrounded two who carried a dark clay urn on poles between them. As it came into view, a cheer rippled through the camp. The assembled cultists began to chant, dancing and waving their hands in the air.

Eochaid glanced at Gandy. Her eyes had gone hard. "Time to call the captain," she said. She tapped Moreri's shoulder and backed carefully down the slope and out of view.

"More of them than we can take," Mareka muttered.

"*Way* more," Drask replied. "And they're between us and the reinforcements. Suppose we're spies for now."

Captain Allard sent back his orders an hour later: stay in place and observe. Report any changes, but remain unseen no matter what. And so they watched from the hilltop for another night. The cultists lit bonfires in the darkness and danced around them, casting eerie shadows into the forest.

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In the morning, Gandy summoned Eochaid and Drask. "Well, it looks like Ardleigh steered us right," she said. "But he's still an evil little shit, and I'm not an idiot. You two are to go down into the forest near the camp and assess their lines. If it looks like they're in *any* way aware of us, get back right away. I don't like feeling this lucky."

Zane cast a few spells on them both to aid their stealth before they carefully picked their way into the woods. Eochaid followed Drask, who moved like a breeze through the trees and scrub, finding every shadowy path and bit of cover on their way. About half a mile from the shelter, Eochaid caught a faint whiff of putrescence.

He tapped Drask on the shoulder and whispered, "I smell carrion." He sampled the air again carefully and pointed off to the right. "Fairly fresh, I think."

Drask scratched at the stubble on his chin. "Best go see," he muttered.

The carcass had been an elk. Eochaid guessed it had been killed in the night. Its back was broken, and its attacker had taken its time killing the poor beast — blood showed where it had crawled away from the place it had been brought down. All the entrails and much of the meat were gone. On what was left of the hide, Eochaid saw not only claw and fang marks, but deep, bubbled burns around each bite.

"Low gorgon on the hunt," Drask said. "Their drool burns. Playful monsters, too. Let you think you've escaped, then pounce on you again. Drive prey to exhaustion sometimes."

They advanced even more cautiously. Eochaid was careful to follow in Drask's footsteps, alert against any noise. *Of course, these gorgon things can likely smell us*, he thought. Drask halted them a hundred feet from the clearing. Both vigilants lay down and crawled to where they could see. Eochaid drew his muddy cloak over his head and watched from under its shadow.

The camp bustled with life. A great council of unsavory figures who Eochaid assumed were important members of the cult stood and spoke loudly around the amphora, which rested on a wooden trestle set on a table for the whole camp to see. At regular intervals, pairs of asaatthi spearmen walked the camp's perimeter. Other cultists wandered and talked. Somewhere, a low gorgon roared, prompting a cheer. The camp, Eochaid thought, had almost a carnival atmosphere. *Why not, if their 'mother' is coming back?*

After an hour of careful observation, Drask signaled Eochaid. They crept back, deeper into the trees and away.

"Good fortune for us," Drask said. "Cocky snake-humpers don't seem concerned at all about an ambush."

Back at the shelter they compared numbers and wrote their report. With Moreri's help, Gandy transmitted it on to Captain Allard.

"Well done," Gandy said. "We won't risk another mission like that if we can help it, though. We'll use Henmeth to watch them from here."

Melancholy crept over Eochaid that evening, though he was at a loss to say why. The little shelter was warm. The others seemed to be in good cheer, or at least excited. Yet Eochaid hung back, sitting on his bunk with his copy of *Krainin Pum*.

The mission's going well, he thought. *I've been doing well*. And yet a lump sat in his belly.

Henmeth laid her hand on his shoulder. "You're sad," she said, with such comical seriousness that Eochaid laughed.

"I am," he said. "Thanks for noticing. I wish I knew why."

"I thought you'd been doing better lately," she said.

"You watch me that closely?"

"Of course!" she said. "You're one of my closest friends, Lenahr!" She laughed.

Am I really? He thought back: all the times they'd paired up in combat. All the questions he'd asked her about the Hills and the creatures that dwelt in them. All the times he'd listened in amusement as she lectured on about some magical triviality. *I guess I am*.

The pang in his chest deepened. He shook his head to clear it away. "Well, it's kind of you to take my mind off it," he said. "How can you scry on the enemy camp? I thought you'd need hair or a possession or something to find a person."

"Oh, I'm not scrying!" she answered. "There's a better spell for this. Since we can see the camp, I can summon a sort of magic eye in the middle of it. Can't hear, but I can do plenty just by seeing."

“Huh. That’s a lot better than the way we did...” Eochaid’s words trailed off. In his heart, the pain blossomed. In his mind, he saw Cooper. He remembered the warm bunkroom under Arcernoth — its close stuffiness when Cooper was struggling over his spells.

Henmeth’s face fell. She took his hand in hers. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Did I say something?”

“No,” Eochaid stammered. “It-it’s not you. I’m thinking back to...to friends I had in the vigil. Friends I lost.”

Henmeth squeezed his hand tightly. “Sorry,” she said. “I remember how it hurt when we lost Sergeant Ullwycke. He was our commander before Ga — uh, Sergeant Gandy.”

They sat for a minute, listening to the bustle of the platoon in the little shelter. Eochaid drew comfort from the firm grip of Henmeth’s small hand, and from her presence.

“This is the biggest mission I’ve been on since then,” he said. “I didn’t expect it to hit me so hard.”

Henmeth looked deep into his eyes. “I’m glad you’re with us, Lenahr. I could never do what you do — fighting with blades, getting so close to the enemy. I mean, Mareka’s strong, but you and Drask, you’re just so graceful when you fight! We *need* that. I couldn’t do my part without your help and your protection.”

Henmeth’s lips twitched. She breathed in as if to speak and stopped herself. Then she opened her mouth. “Lenahr,” she said, so quiet it was almost a whisper, “are...are you scared?”

“No,” Eochaid said. “Not scared.” He frowned. “Well...no, scared isn’t the right word. *Anxious*, I guess. Missions like this, when they go wrong, they can go *really* wrong. I’m anxious about messing it up.”

Henmeth looked down at her hands. She sat silent, gathering herself. “I’m scared,” she said. “And anxious. And excited. This is the work I’ve tried to do all my life — to heal something broken in the world. To change it for the better. This is where I want to be. It’s where I *need* to be. And you’re where you’re needed, too.” She kissed him on the cheek and fled to the safety of her books.

• • •

It took Henmeth several castings to find anything of use. While her magical-eye spell would work over any distance that she could see, it was hard for her to place an eye-sized object in the camp a mile distant. But the invisible sensor could move at a walking pace, and Henmeth would search whatever part of the camp it appeared in.

Toward the center of the asaathi quarters, she discovered the tent of their commander. In her tent she was hosting members of the other Mormite delegations: a few gorgons and druids and a bugbear. On the commander’s table, there were maps. Henmeth followed as the commander and her guests pointed out locations and paths, and when the magic eye blinked out, she rushed back into the shelter and scribbled furiously on her maps and papers.

“They’re waiting for someone else, I think,” Henmeth chattered as she wrote. “They were gesturing and talking a lot about the paths to the east. I thought maybe that’s where the asaatthi came from at first, but I’m pretty sure it’s someone else.”

Gandy chuckled. “I hope they’re waiting on those slitherin we killed — that’d keep them here until the captain arrives.”

They sent the information back to Captain Allard, along with what Henmeth hoped would be the amphora’s route when it left: a southwesterly path toward the Hornsaw Forest. Allard, only a few days away, altered his route slightly based on the new information.

That night on Eochaid’s watch, the camp lit up again. Through the gloomy distance even the spyglass didn’t reveal much of what was happening, so Eochaid left Kallen watching and went to the shelter to wake Henmeth. Together they crawled into the hunter’s blind on the hill and Henmeth cast her spell.

The camp was buzzing. “I can’t see why from here,” Henmeth said. She closed her eyes, concentrating.

“There’s a new group,” she said. “The asaatthi are greeting them, and the others are cheering.” She opened her eyes.

“It’s more slitherin!”

The enemy packed their camp the next morning. Around noon, they rallied around their artifact, cheering. Then a Red Witch slitherin priestess and an asaatthi in flowing red robes lifted it down from its perch and strapped it to the back of a slitherin mauler. A vanguard of asaatthi left first, and the rest of the camp formed a column behind them.

The vigilants, being a much smaller group, had already broken camp. Moreri sent Captain Allard a warning to quicken his pace, and then they were off, horses moving quickly but quietly through the twisted landscape.

The size of the cultist force was both a danger and a blessing. The threat of discovery kept the vigilants far from their prey, and without Rahalphion or Cray to help they had only Henmeth’s spells to follow the enemy host. But the long column moved slowly and left a notable and visible trail. The vigilants stopped twice that day for the wizard to cast her magical eye spell. Henmeth could send the eye high into the air when valleys or thicker woods obscured the scouts’ view.

They followed all day and camped for the night on the back of another hill, facing away from the field where the enemy pitched their own tents. The cultists had moved steadily but without hurry, and their sentries moved with a confidence that suggested they felt secure in their strength.

I guess they should, Eochaid thought. *They outnumber us. They still will even after the captain gets here.*

In the morning they moved on. Captain Allard’s forces were close. He expected, he said, to mount his first attack that night. Moreri and Gandy spent a great deal of time figuring out how to use Moreri’s limited message spells to send every scrap they knew

about their opponents: number, disposition, strengths, and weapons. Henmeth and Kallen, with the help of whichever other vigilants weren't watching over the group at a given time, formulated their own strategy for how to aid the attack.

As it happened, the map showed a hill ahead of the cultist band, and to the side of the easiest trail. With a little hard riding Kallen thought their small group might reach it and be in place there before the battle began. Once Gandy was satisfied she could send nothing more of use to the captain, they galloped as fast as they dared. Eochaid, Mareka, and Drask took the lead, riding in a wedge and watching for ambushes or beasts stalking the wilderness. Eochaid felt a little of his old excitement rising. It felt good to know his mission, and it buoyed him up to feel so sure that it was the *right* mission.

They reached the hill and worked their way up its back to a flat area that could serve as a camp. Gandy ordered a tighter watch than usual in case they'd miscalculated the path of the enemy. Henmeth had spent all her attention on her magical sensor spell, so they erected lean-tos with tarps instead of the usual shelter. They lit no fire and hardly unpacked. Regardless of the battle's outcome, they would be moving again — it was only a question of where.

Once it was dark enough to cloak their movements, Eochaid and Mareka escorted Henmeth to the hilltop where she could see the enemy in the distance. Henmeth was excited, but tired enough that she stumbled on the slope. Mareka caught her arm and steadied her, and Eochaid went ahead to help her up. From the hill's crest the view was excellent. Several miles distant, the enemy column moved into position. They carried few torches, as many of the titanspawn could see easily in darkness, but enough to spot them from the hill. Henmeth sat down with the spyglass, and Eochaid and Mareka watched over her.

With Henmeth engrossed in observation, Eochaid became increasingly aware of Mareka's presence. He resisted the urge to look at her. In his mind he formed words he might say to her, but each sentence he considered felt stiff and insufficient to close the gap between them. He frowned and rose silently to his feet, moving carefully back into the thicker scrub.

He had done, he realized, an excellent job of not being alone with Mareka until now. *It's not that I don't want to talk to you*, he thought. No, he wanted that very much. But not now, not if he risked another storm of panic like the night after their last battle.

"Lenahr?" Mareka emerged from the scrub.

Eochaid bowed his head. *Well, so be it.* "Here," he said.

Mareka looked oddly small to Eochaid as she approached him, as if some part of her had drawn back, diminishing her usual brash presence. *I don't remember her looking that way on the climb up here*, he thought.

She seemed to wrestle with some decision, and then met his gaze.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I..." She swallowed. "Moreri told me to wait until after our mission, but I need to tell you. You understood us — the manticora, I mean — better than almost anyone of another race that I've met. You never shamed me for being a hunter.

You were never afraid I'd hurt you or humiliate you. I thought you felt the joy of the hunt, and of the kill. I...didn't realize it might be *different* in you."

Eochaid closed his eyes. He felt laid bare: all his fears and shames, with the icy thread that ran through the center of them all. *Not even Amra...* Or at least, if Amra Varith had seen the chill presence inside him, she hadn't understood its meaning.

"I saw it in you, after you killed the slitherin. I couldn't sleep, only think over and over again of how you called my name when I was standing over Drask. I finally understood. And then, for me to be angry at you..." She shuddered. "There's a blade inside you, like a claw, but it comes out whether you want it to or not. If my claws did that, if *my* rage...?" Mareka's voice trailed off to nothing.

They stood together in the dimness and the wet, and for a moment Eochaid forgot there was a hill, a mission, a world outside. The icy place inside him, still frightening, seemed less awful now that it was understood. His mouth opened without his willing it. "I missed you," he said.

She stroked his cheek, then ran her clawed hand up, carding it into his hair. "No more secrets will come between us," she said. "Whatever comes, I promise you — that's done."

"Lenahr! Mareka!" Henmeth hissed. "It's the captain!"

Chapter Forty-Four

Eochaid and Mareka hurried back through the shrubs and dropped beside Henmeth, who had laid down the spyglass and begun weaving her spell. Mareka scooped up the glass and held it to her eye. Eochaid squinted through the darkness.

The faraway clusters of torchlights were drawing together, changing from a line to a clump.

“Something’s stirred them up, for sure,” Mareka muttered. “I can’t see much, but the torchbearers are running...oh, wait — this one’s dousing his torch!”

Many, though not all, of the distant lights were going out. Eochaid cursed under his breath.

“I’m useless here,” he muttered. “You two watch. I’ll get Gandy.” He slipped back under cover and jogged down to the campsite.

Eochaid fetched Gandy, who brought Moreri with her for communication with the captain. Henmeth’s spell found its mark, and she did her best to interpret the confusion of the dimly lit battle for them.

Through her magic eye, Henmeth saw Captain Allard’s vigilants approach from the northeast. Outnumbered as they were, they didn’t attack in strength, but harassed the enemy flank. Initially the enemy (especially the low gorgons, likely frustrated from days of camping and little to hunt) took up the chase, following the attackers and stringing out the cult’s forces. But then the slitherin Red Witches reached the scene and began to direct the battle. The cultists hardened their lines and maneuvered quickly when the vigilants struck again from a new angle, driving back the Pelpernoi soldiers only as far as needed to keep the body of their procession from harm. The column slowed, but it did not halt. The tight ranks of asaathhi around the amphora did not waver.

Gandy sent a message to Allard, warning him of the enemy’s strategy and laying out their positions. Not long after, a barrage of magical fire and Skylash’s distinctive bolts of lightning erupted from the woods and blasted the ranks of the high gorgons. Even from where he was, Eochaid could see a body tossed into the air by one of the explosions. Not all the high gorgons died, but it was enough to send their bestial allies into a frenzy, bounding off into the wildlands after the scent of those who’d killed their masters. Several of the surviving high gorgons followed, calling after their beasts. In the end only a handful ever rejoined the main column, and many of those were wounded and limping.

By that point Henmeth had exhausted herself, using all the power she could to cast and maintain her magic eyes. Eochaid carried her back down the hill, with Mareka to steady him. By the time they reached camp, Henmeth had fallen deeply asleep. They put her in her bedroll and waited anxiously for more news.

• • •

Gandy and Moreri did not return until almost dawn.

“Saddle up,” Gandy called as she entered the clearing.

“Did they get the amphora?” Zane asked.

“No,” Gandy said.

“So, what news?” Kallen asked. “Are we joining the main force?”

“We’re riding ahead again,” Gandy replied. “The enemy still doesn’t know we’re here, and the captain’s milking that for as long as it lasts.”

Gandy’s soldiers packed the last of the camp and mounted their horses. The weather worked in their favor. Low clouds hid them from the cultists’ column but didn’t dampen them with drizzle as they rode. Before long, Henmeth nodded in her saddle. Eochaid gently took her reins to guide both their horses. Kallen studied the maps as she rode, hunting for another good spying place. Distractions, caution, and exhaustion slowed their ride.

They found another hillside and made their camp among the rocks at its base. Henmeth and Moreri slept — a necessity if they were to recover their spells — and Zane took a turn at surveillance. He cast the same bird-calling spell he’d used to find the party of slitherin pilgrims and sent the five little songbirds that answered him off to find the enemy and gauge their distance.

The cultists had sped up their pace, though not enough to surpass a small party on horses. However, they’d also changed direction and were well north of their expected path, and far, far from the hill where Gandy’s platoon had stopped.

“Vangal’s hairy, sweaty ballsack bounced off Denev’s chin!” Gandy yelled. “Which means we’re out of position and of no use to the captain. And I can’t reach him to tell him because our cleric’s exhausted. And if we *ride* again to get *into* a good position, then we’ll *still* be useless because Moreri won’t get the rest he needs to get the spell *I* need to tell the captain anything!”

In the end, they waited. Unless Gandy wished to split the under-strength platoon into squads, they had no choice. Without both Henmeth and Moreri, there was little more they could do. Most of the platoon rested, except for Gandy, who had no interest, and Eochaid, who had no need.

“You’re thinking hard, Lenahr,” Gandy said quietly, a while after the others had dozed off.

“Yeah, I suppose,” he replied. “Trying to work out plans that would help.”

Gandy gave a hollow laugh. “Come up with anything?”

"No," Eochaid said. He scratched a bearded cheek. "Thinking of strategies from the marsh that we could use. Magic's amazing, but I wish we had more tools for when it runs out."

"We do," Gandy grumbled. "Rah and Cray. Who're with the captain's company. On the far side of the enemy from us."

"I could infiltrate the enemy force," Eochaid suggested.

"No, you couldn't."

"Yes, I could."

Gandy tweaked his ear. "By 'couldn't,' I meant 'and survive,' shit-brains. Keep thinking."

• • •

During the hour that Henmeth and Moreri spent preparing their spells, Eochaid helped Kallen work out a new route. Mormo's faithful, they reasoned, still had to get the amphora home to the Hornsaw for it to be of use. They might have turned north for a little while to confound Captain Allard's skirmishers, but soon they'd have to return to a westerly path.

They rode hard through the night and into the early morning. Zane's little birds stayed willingly with him as long as he had oatcake to feed them. They huddled in his cloak in the darkness and flew along with them once the gray dawn light was bright enough.

The area they rode through was full of pits and crevasses that forced a circuitous path. The birds flew ahead and circled back as if impatient with the lumbering horses. They were climbing the narrow route out of a long, deep canyon when one of the birds came shrieking back from around a blind curve. Gandy reined in hard, and the rest of the platoon halted behind her.

Before she could dismount, a party of asaathis swept around the corner and fired a volley with shortbows. Gandy's horse screamed.

Eochaid rolled from his own mount and charged, readying his swords and closing in before the archers could draw again. Mareka and Drask came close on his heels. Even as the nearest asaathi dropped its bow to reach for a sword, an arrow sank into its sinuous neck and felled it.

The skirmish ended in moments. The asaathis were scouts, lightly armed and ill-prepared. Eochaid and his allies cut them to ribbons and tossed them over the cliff's edge.

"Zane, can you send your little friends ahead to see if there are more of these guys on the path?" Gandy asked. "I don't want another surprise like that."

Zane nodded and dispersed the birds. While they waited, Moreri treated Gandy and her horse for the arrow wounds they'd taken.

Zane's birds returned. "Sergeant," he called, "we need to find another route."

"Why's that?" Gandy asked.

“The birds say there are a *lot* of ‘snakes and rats’ up above where the path comes out,” he answered.

They took a branching path that led them back down the crevasse wall. The new route brought them up far ahead. It also deeply unnerved Eochaid, as his horse regularly kicked pebbles off the side of the narrow ledges. Glancing back, he could see that Mareka was nearly terrified. But the horses, despite their weight and width, found the way surefootedly.

They crested the edge of the crevasse carefully, picking a spot where they could keep to the cover of a side gulley whose lip was lined by large boulders and trees. Henmeth spent one of her magical eyes to ascertain the enemy’s position. Once again their tiny group was ahead of the enemy force, which was camped not far from where they’d nearly emerged. They left their horses in the gulley with Zane to watch over them. Gandy and the others climbed the slope into the cover of the boulders to observe what they could.

The enemy had made camp with the valley to their back, on a long stretch of level, open ground with little cover beyond grass clumps which were only beginning to stand up again after the winter wind and snow. At the camp’s edges asaathi guards waited behind tall, sturdy shields. With each group a robed asaathi waited and watched — likely a mage of some kind, Henmeth concluded.

“They’re dug in pretty well,” Gandy said. “Captain Allard’s advantage has been in sneak attacks at range, and they’ve figured that out and put a stop to it. A direct assault might get into the camp, but it’d cost us too much to try more than once.”

Eochaid squinted at the camp. *Definitely fewer of them*, he thought. *I don’t think I see any more of the low gorgons. But still a large force, and the captain’s sure to have lost men as well.*

“Maybe use casters to break the lines,” Gandy said. “Henmeth, what do you think? If we snuck closer and pushed from our side?”

Henmeth shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. “See how they’ve spread their spellcasters out among the sentry parties?” She gestured at the little clusters that surrounded the camp. “I think they’re out there to counterspell anything our mages cast at the camp. Normally, mages fight from the rear unless they’re part of an assault.”

“So, they’re... what, there to quench fireballs before they go off?” Gandy asked.

“It can be done,” Henmeth answered, “If you’re skilled and have a clear idea what the other wizard’s going to cast. I imagine by now they have a good idea what spells our mages use.”

“They could be healers,” Gandy said.

“I don’t think so,” Moreri said. “Not with one for each squad that way.”

Kallen put down the spyglass and Eochaid picked it up to study the enemy camp more carefully as Gandy and the others talked tactics. Almost all the soldiers he saw were asaathi, with just a handful of robed druids. Something nagged at him, a question he couldn’t quite chase down.

The camp was set up to protect a cluster of tents at its center, and the asaathi who went in and out of them looked better armed and armored — officers, perhaps?

He counted troops and tried to guess their structure. *Foot soldiers there and there, archers mostly there. Those two tents are the druids, I think, and that tent's the asaathi casters. But...*

Eochaid realized what he'd been wondering. "Henmeth? Did you see the slitherin'?"

Henmeth glanced up and frowned thoughtfully. "Um...I don't think I saw them."

"Well, then, where are they?" Eochaid asked.

"Killed off, maybe?" Kallen suggested. "We know the captain was whittling them down."

Eochaid shook his head. "The gorgons, maybe. But Red Witches are smarter than that. They were the ones who rallied the troops during the first attacks."

"Might be huddled in one of the tents," Gandy said. "Waiting in reserve."

"Maybe," Eochaid conceded. And yet he sat with the spyglass, scrutinizing the camp even after the others slipped back down the rocks with Gandy to send their findings to Captain Allard.

• • •

The captain's troops had acquitted themselves well, but their goading drew the enemy out less and less far with each attack, and they'd been unable to create an opening to get close to the amphora. The enemy knew the value of their prize and protected it jealously. Allard inquired if Gandy's scouts had further ways to send messages.

Eochaid suggested that if Cray were with the captain's troops, perhaps he could send the falcon Vila as a messenger. Within an hour, the beautiful bird swooped out of the sky and landed beside Eochaid, *kakking* to him in her raspy voice and plucking at his hair. Soon she was winging back to Cray with a carefully plotted map of the enemy camp.

Henmeth and Zane, meanwhile, spent their time researching a question for the captain: why had the cultists stopped? Both sides' spellcasters were exhausted, but that was more of a concern for the vigil forces, being smaller. It was possible the cultists knew this spot and had decided to fight on familiar ground, but that was only a guess. Allard was unwilling to commit to the costly assault without more certainty that there wasn't a hidden trick.

Zane's birds were useful to an extent, since they could flit through the tents — as long as they avoided any druid who might notice their behavior. Through them, he identified the tent of the asaathi commander, which Henmeth made the target of her magical sensor. She was lucky in her casting, landing the eye right outside the tent. Inside was a trove of scrolls, many lying open.

"Let me see," Henmeth muttered. "Maps. Some message scrolls. Scribbled orders... wait. I see a message. Oh, this is it! Give me something to write on!"

Zane handed her a scrap of parchment and a quill, and Henmeth carefully copied down what she saw. The message she wrote was in a strange tongue, not one Eochaid was familiar with.

"It's in Titan Speech," Henmeth said. "I read it pretty well." She opened her eyes and held the parchment up.

"My dear Erisuuk," she read, "No, the heretics shall never have the Great Mother's essence! I understand your concerns and agree. I include a map to a place where they cannot overrun you. Hold them there. I will send a bevy of my sisters to help. Soon our queen will blot all these nuisances from the land. Signed, Hielaa."

Kallen's eyes hardened, and the color left her face. "Did you say 'Hielaa'?"

Henmeth nodded nervously. "Why?"

"Because the only 'Hielaa' I know is a hag," Kallen replied, "and she's a leader among the Dar al Annot."

• • •

They sent a copy of the message to the captain and waited anxiously for his answer. It was already noon, and night was more to the advantage of the asaathli than the vigilants.

Through it all, Eochaid could not silence his doubts. Where were the slitherin? While some of the ratman broods were content to charge their enemies blindly and carry a fight through numbers, the Red Witches were the opposite: clever, devious opponents who won by strategy and avoided battle unless they had the means to win.

He used the spyglass whenever it was idle, searching the camp and its surroundings. He saw none of them in the camp, and the surrounding lands offered nowhere to hide. At least, none that would be useful in an ambush. His frustration kept him at it, though.

Are they spying on Captain Allard the way we are on the cultists? Eochaid frowned. *No, that doesn't sound right. They wouldn't all go scouting, not when the cult could use spellcasters so much.*

The camp. The tents. The grassland. There was nowhere else for the rat-folk to be. *But how does hiding them help if they're part of this coming battle?*

The thought hit Eochaid like lightning, and his breath caught in his throat. As fast as he could he slid back off the rocks and jogged back to camp. "Zane! Zane!" he called.

The young mage's head popped up over by the horses. "Lenahr? What's happened?"

"I need your birds," Eochaid said. "Right now, if you can!"

Zane looked around. "Well, I...yes, two of them are in camp." He whistled, and the two nut-brown creatures flitted down onto his shoulders.

"Great!" Eochaid said. "I need you to fly them down into the crevasse. Have them look for slitherin, or for any sign someone's climbed down there."

“Lenahr!” Gandy snapped. “Maybe you could *ask* before commandeering platoon resources. I want to know what this is about.”

Eochaid ducked his head apologetically. “Sorry, Gandy. I have a good guess where the slitherin are.”

Gandy raised a skeptical eyebrow. “A guess?”

“That’s what I need the birds for.”

Gandy’s forehead furrowed. “And why would they be in the crevasse?”

“To keep the amphora safe,” Eochaid said. “To run with it on their own if they had to.”

Gandy thought for a moment. “Zane, send those birds. Now.”

The birds sped off and over the edge. In the meantime, Eochaid and Gandy took the spyglass and crept to the side of the crevasse.

“I don’t see anything much,” Gandy said.

“Hard to, with the steep drop-offs between here and the bottom,” Eochaid answered. “They probably won’t be far from the main camp.”

Gandy scanned the crevasse with the spyglass. “You sure they haven’t just run for it?”

“No,” Eochaid said. “Red Witches are smart, not cowardly. I think they’re close enough to call reinforcements, but far down enough that they can scatter if the *asaatthi* lose.”

Gandy nodded. “We might box them in down here, but I doubt we could dig ‘em out before Hielaa’s reinforcements got here. I hope you’re wrong about this.”

“Me too,” Eochaid replied. *But I don’t think I am.*

• • •

It took twenty minutes for Zane’s birds to confirm that there were slitherin deep in the crevasse. Gandy glared up into the cloudy sky for a moment, then grabbed a rope. “Come on,” she said to Eochaid. “I need to see this to be sure.”

Steep walls and outcrops made observation difficult. Eochaid and Gandy tied off the rope to a sturdy boulder and clambered carefully downward, out onto a protruding outcrop. Eochaid leaned far out, hanging onto a stubborn, scraggly tree that had wedged its roots deep into the stone. Gandy held out the spyglass to him. “Don’t drop it,” she said. “Probably cost as much to make as one of your magic swords.”

Eochaid lifted the glass to his eye with his free hand. He traced the slope down from the enemy camp. The motion of the tree, slight as it was, made it difficult to focus, but he scanned what he could see of the valley bottom.

By a cluster of fallen boulders deep in the crevasse, a figure stood. Eochaid adjusted the spyglass and frowned. The person (the figure was human) was wearing vigil armor and trousers, but there was something wrong with it. Its arms hung limp at its sides, and

it swayed stiffly. It turned and stumbled a few steps. From the side its head was shaped strangely, as if it had been crushed, and the back of its armor hung loosely.

Undead, he thought.

From behind a boulder a crouching, robed figure emerged, guiding two more staggering corpses and gesturing to them. As it darted back under cover, Eochaid noted the scabrous tail that peeked out from under its robes.

“It’s them,” he said.

They scrambled back up the canyon wall to the camp and contacted Allard, who replied tersely.

“He has no troops to spare for us,” Moreri relayed. “He’s calling the attack before nightfall, but he says if you’re sure about the amphora, we should pursue it. Cray is sending Vila to us so we can reach him later, if need be.”

Gandy looked from Moreri to Eochaid to the crevasse below. She stared for a long moment, drew a deep breath, and released it slowly.

“We’re going,” she barked. “Secure your gear for combat. When Vila gets here, we go.”

The vigilants sprang to life, packing up their few loose items, tightening their armor straps, checking blades and bows. When Vila scudded silently in from the grassy plain above, they were ready.

Drask, Mareka, and Eochaid led the way, scouting a safe trail. The others followed, guiding the horses. The canyon was quiet except for the patter of water dripping on stone, the scuff of padded horseshoes, and the occasional soft snort of a horse’s breath. The cloud-dimmed sun was low, and in the canyon the shadows were long. At each bend the scouts checked the way ahead until after many turns and twists, Drask raised a hand and pointed. A bit ahead was the knot of boulders, and around it prowled the undead.

The scouts returned to where the platoon had stopped.

“Three walking corpses. Definitely our men,” Drask growled. “Musta picked ‘em up where they fell.”

“We’ll deal with them if we can, but the amphora’s our *absolute* priority,” Gandy said. “Here’s my plan. First, we use any magic you all can think of to strengthen and protect us all. Next...Zane, do you have that ‘make the squad disappear’ spell ready?”

“The one that hides everyone near whoever I cast it on?” Zane answered. “Yes, I do.”

“Good. You cast it on me, and then watch the horses. The rest of us sneak as close as we can. We spend a minute or two to get the layout, and then we jump them. As soon as you can, Henmeth, and I mean the *moment* you can, you grab that urn and you teleport with it to Lave.”

Henmeth’s face went white.

Gandy waved away her concern. “No! This is the only mission that counts today. If every one of us dies, but that artifact gets to Lave, we’ve done good. And trust me, I don’t

plan on all of us dying! Once Henmeth and the whatsit are gone, the rest of us fall back in good order to the horses and ride like Vangal's horsemen are on our heels. When we get clear, we send Vila to the captain with the good news. Then we ride straight north."

"Anyone have anything to add? Anything I've missed?"

The vigilants each considered, then shook their heads. Henmeth was the last, and she conceded unwillingly. Eochaid noted the tension in her neck, and her tightly clutched hands.

"Good," Gandy said. "Mareka, Moreri — watch that camp. If anything changes, get me. Otherwise, we wait until we hear the captain start his attack."

The vigilants settled in to wait. Eochaid sat Vila on a stump and gave her the sign to wait. She chirped at him, but quieted when he fed her a strip of meat.

Henmeth paced by the horses. Her eyes focused elsewhere as if on some distant puzzle, shaking her head from time to time as if to dismiss an unsatisfactory solution. Eochaid caught her arm.

"You feel guilty — useless," he said.

Her head snapped up, her eyes wide. "N-no, I—"

"You're not," Eochaid said. "This is the mission. We each have our parts — the thing only we can do. You're the only one in the *company*, not just the platoon, who can get that artifact where Mormo's brood will never touch it. All *I* have to do is protect you until you do it. And then run for home right after."

Henmeth smiled nervously and squeezed his hand. "You protect them after I go," she said, looking deep into his eyes. "You get them home!"

Eochaid nodded.

They sat.

Chapter Forty-Five

The roar from above came more distantly than Eochaid expected. At first he thought it might have been the wind, but then eldritch lights flared against the clouds: spellfire hitting or missing its mark. A distant clap of thunder or bursting flame echoed from the walls, weirdly distorted by twists in the stone, booming and repeating.

“Platoon,” Gandy hissed, though everyone was on their feet and moving already. Zane, Moreri, and Kallen each cast spell after spell on their fellow vigilants. Eochaid’s senses sharpened. His sinews tightened. He felt as sturdy as an ox, but light enough on his feet to dance on a tightrope. Confidence took hold of him. He felt ready.

“Zane,” Gandy said, “do it.”

“Good hunting,” Zane said, and cast his spell. An unseen curtain seemed to descend around them. Eochaid could feel its presence even though nothing visible had changed.

“Hand signals only from here on,” Gandy said, and waved them forward.

The vigilants advanced silently, watching each footfall, careful of every pebble. Drask and Eochaid led the way, picking the quietest, surest path. The rest followed in their footsteps. They closed the distance quickly.

They slowed when they reached the undead guards around the camp. Eochaid’s stomach sank a little. *I knew these men*, he thought. *Not well, but I knew them.* The woman with the crushed head had marched with them to hunt the carrion hounds months ago. She’d helped them haul the new sail-arm for the mill in the winter camp. *The slitherin poison anything, anyone they touch.* The familiar chill crept up between his shoulders. *But I swear, you are the last that these will ruin.*

Zane’s spell held. Silent as ghosts, the vigilants passed by the grisly guards and reached the boundary of stones. Inside, several slitherin males with blades drawn chittered at each other and pointed up the cliff. A pair of Red Witches snarled and squeaked orders at them. Two more of the robed slitherin stood to one side by a dark place at the foot of the cliff.

The darkness was a shadow, Eochaid realized, cast by a canvas tarp the ratmen had pegged to the wall and staked into the ground. Dirt and stones heaped up on it blended it into the terrain so well it would have been impossible to discern from above.

There, Eochaid gestured.

Gandy glanced and nodded. She raised her hand. *Attention. Orders.*

Swiftly and silently she laid out the final plan, moving her troops into place. They spread out, taking position near each clump of slitherin, following them as they moved, blades out. Finally, she pointed to Henmeth. *You*, she gestured. *The tent*. Henmeth nodded and raised her hands, fingers ready.

Gandy brought her fist down.

Henmeth's fireball was deafening, rebounding on the canyon walls with physical force. The camouflaged hiding place blew open, spilling a flaming Red Witch onto the open ground and showering stones and dirt in all directions.

At the same moment, Mareka roared and slammed two of the males against a boulder, stabbing and stabbing with her claws. Eochaid sliced the throat of one, shoved it away, and drove his blade into the side of a robed witch, who staggered back, hissing. All around them was melee and chaos.

The Red Witch snarled and pointed her open palm at Eochaid. Before he could react, a sparkling obsidian beam lanced out at him. As it passed through, it felt as if his blades and pack grew heavy, dragging him down. Instinctively he slumped forward, turning the motion into a tumble that closed the distance and forced the witch back toward where Mareka was disemboweling a male.

His strike missed the witch, but she had nowhere to flee, caught between Eochaid's swift blades and Mareka's towering rage. She began another spell, but as soon as he saw her hands moving Eochaid seized the opportunity. One blade stabbed the Red Witch's thigh and the other cut a gouge across her face.

Grimacing in pain, she opened her arms wide and spat out an ugly syllable in some unclean language. Her snarl twisted into a vicious sneer and she grabbed at his arm as he recovered his stance, and where her hands touched, agony flared.

Eochaid yelled involuntarily. The witch's first attack had drained his strength. This one felt as though she was sucking the very blood from his veins with each brush of her hands, and his skin felt burned and raw. He spun clear and backed off. She laughed shrilly, and the wound across her face closed even as he watched.

Eochaid danced in again, keeping carefully clear of the witch's touch. He sliced and slashed, driving her back. She muttered another word in the same grim speech, but before she could finish her spell, Mareka closed an arm around her throat and hauled her off her feet.

A *bang* split the air.

Eochaid whirled toward the sharp crack of sound. Henmeth lay against a pile of rubble, shaking hands black and blistered. Five feet away on the ground, a leaden urn with jug handles on each side rocked where it lay. Even a glance showed it for an unholy thing. Twisting, swirling snakes were carved on every inch of its surface, moving queasily as if alive in the slightest shift of the light. An iron cap sealed with the sigil of the god Chardun, the Slaver Lord, choked the container's throat and bottled up whatever vile relic of Mormo it contained. A poisonous green sheen over the whole surface of the thing flared and then faded as he watched.

Sibilant shrieks and snarls brought him back to his senses. Two ratmen with spears broke from the melee, one running to grab the amphora and the other charging Henmeth with his spear.

Eochaid growled and flung himself forward, closing the distance. The slitherin raised its spear over Henmeth, but Eochaid rammed his blade through its back and out its chest. Yanking the sword free, he pivoted. The other ratman had grabbed the amphora and was turning to run. Eochaid rolled and came up slashing.

Hamstrings cut, the urn-carrier fell forward. Eochaid's next stroke pinned it to the ground.

The fight was over. Ignoring the gurgles of dying rats and the shouts of his fellow vigilants, Eochaid ran to Henmeth.

"What happened?"

She shook her head. "I-I cast the spell, and then... it was like running into a wall. The spell went properly, I'm *sure* it did, but there was an explosion, and I... I'm still here." She tried to push herself to her feet and winced as her singed hands touched the earth. Eochaid pulled her up, his strength already returning.

"Chardun's Hell!" Gandy shouted. "It didn't go?"

"No," Henmeth answered. "I don't know if it's anchored, or—"

"Can you destroy it, then?" Gandy interrupted. "Whatever's the biggest, meanest spell you have!"

Henmeth nodded. "Yes, but... it could be dangerous."

"Right," Gandy said, "everyone *well* back! Kallen and Moreri, with me! Watch above for any sign the snakes have noticed us!"

The vigilants took cover behind the ring of boulders. Henmeth stood alone, facing the vessel where it lay on the ground, slitherin blood dripping from it. She closed her eyes and began the spell. Deftly she swept her hands in front of her and spoke a word of power. As she opened her hands again, a biting green beam lanced out and played over the amphora, which flared green itself. The light sparked and began to arc, splitting and spilling around the leaden cask rather than piercing it, and instead carving grooves out of everything else it touched—the ground, the stones, the corpses—and leaving only dust.

"Stop!" Gandy shouted. Henmeth dropped her hands and wobbled where she stood. The light faded. The amphora rocked to a stop on the scarred earth.

"Shit," Gandy growled.

From just outside the circle came a gurgling laugh: a slitherin, her blood pooling around her. "Now you see," she hissed in Veshian. "Mormo is the poison in the wound. Her flesh is the stone that chokes, and try as you might, you can *never*—"

Drask's blade, still burning, cut her throat. "Doesn't teleport," he said. "They tried." The body slumped to the ground.

Gandy frowned quizzically at Drask. He gave a tiny nod. *He read the witch*, Eochaid thought, *and the news wasn't good.*

Gandy sighed. "Well, that's that," she said. "We can't stay here. We ride the thing out. Once we're clear, we join up with the captain. Kallen, grab the thing. Moreri, do a quick heal."

Moreri muttered a prayer to Tanil and spread his arms wide. A renewing burst of energy washed over Eochaid and soothed his raw skin where the witch's hands had burned him. Henmeth stretched her hands, the blistered skin a little less angry.

"Anyone still too hurt to move?" Gandy snapped.

Though bruised, bloodied, and battered, all the vigilants were standing.

"No?" Gandy asked. "Good. We'll heal up fully after we put some distance between us and this. Melee to the front. Spells and archers, with me. Watch for surprises! Go!"

Quickly and quietly, the platoon moved out. Mareka took the lead, with Eochaid and Drask on either side of her, watching every shadow. Henmeth, Moreri, and Gandy encircled Kallen, who lugged the ugly, heavy artifact. Above them on the clifftop, the battle raged on.

They rounded the turn. Zane stepped out of the shadows. "Did—oh, Tanil!" he exclaimed.

"Horses. Now," Gandy ordered. "Lenahr, send the bird. Tell the captain we're going *east*. We'll make plans when we get out of the valley. We can't afford to be trapped down here."

They untied the horses. While Eochaid scribbled his message and tied it to Vila's leg, Gandy dumped her backpack and crammed the unwieldy leaden vessel inside. "Don't want them to know which of us has it," she growled, stuffing what little else she could back into the bag.

"Find Cray, Vila!" Eochaid said to the bird, and lofted her into the air. She flapped her beautiful wings and sailed off, skirting the canyon walls.

Gandy watched the bird go for a moment. Then she pulled herself into the saddle.

"Unless the person with the amphora falls, don't stop! And if I *do* go down before we get out of the ravine, grab the pack and go!" Gandy called. "Ride!"

Gandy turned her horse and thundered off, east along the canyon bottom. The others followed. Eochaid spurred his mount ahead of hers. *If there's an ambush, let me meet it first, Gandy.* The racing mounts tightened up. Kallen joined him in the lead, her eyes sweeping the shadows.

Kallen, a superior rider, set the pace. Eochaid gratefully let his horse follow hers to spare more of his attention for possible enemies. Before long the horses had carried them well clear of the battle on the plains above. Eochaid spared few thoughts for the captain and his fellow troops, though, intent on the shadows and points of cover ahead.

The floor of the crevasse climbed, winding among rocks and slowing their headlong race. Eochaid leaned out on each turn, his hands always ready to leap from reins to blades.

At its crest, the valley mouth opened onto level ground studded with shrubs and boulders. Craning his head high, Eochaid saw no waiting ambush. Kallen slowed her mount a bit, squinting ahead, hunting for the route they'd taken on the ride in.

Something flickered into being at the corner of Eochaid's vision: a reptilian figure holding a crossbow, the string still vibrating after launching a bolt. Even as Eochaid turned his head, four more asaathi archers appeared from thin air, their bolts already flying — a whole squad of bowmen, hidden in plain sight by magic. Roaring the alarm, Eochaid hauled on his horse's reins and began a skidding turn that almost threw him from the saddle.

The vigilant column was scattering. Three of the horses had gone down, and Mareka's mount bucked and kicked, its saddle empty. Asaathi swordsmen had broken cover and were charging out of the boulders on the rim toward the knot of vigilants, who stumbled to their feet and got ready to meet them.

"Vesh! Vesh!" Kallen shouted, spurring her mount and racing back toward the fight. The words stirred Eochaid's blood, but as he brought his horse around he saw the cluster of crossbowmen furiously working their bows, loading fresh bolts. Howling, he drew his sword and rode them down, his mount's hooves slashing at scaly figures and scattering them in all directions.

Something grabbed at Eochaid, jerking his saddle and reins. An asaath spellcaster appeared, its arms around the horse's neck and a dazed look in its eyes. The horse reared. Eochaid gripped hard with his thighs and jabbed with his sword, impaling the creature's shoulder. It lost its grip, fell, and was trampled.

"Ho! Yah!" he shouted, wheeling the horse back towards the center of the battle and quickly assessing the scene.

Zane struggled to control his limping horse, which had a bolt in its hindquarters. Drask and Mareka were fending off the first wave of attackers. Gandy and Henmeth, dusty and bruised-looking, were polishing off the remaining crossbowmen. Kallen had Mareka's horse by the reins and was dragging it back toward the battle. Eochaid charged in, and as he drew close he saw Moreri. The manticora priest was pinned between his fallen horse and one of the others, struggling to pull himself loose.

Eochaid reined in by Gandy and Henmeth. Even as he did, Henmeth put Gandy's hand in his and boosted her up behind him.

Eochaid glanced up. The swordsmen had been driven back, but not defeated. Mareka roared at them and shouted challenges, but they were regrouping, and more were emerging from the grasslands.

"Vigilants! To me!" Gandy shouted. Drask and Mareka, a pile of dead asaathi at their feet, turned and ran towards them. Kallen swept alongside and grabbed Drask to pull him up.

Mareka sprinted on. "Brother, dig out and make yourself useful!" she shouted.

"Mareka, can you run?" Gandy shouted. "If so, get him on a horse and follow us, fast as you can. Henmeth, mount up!"

Henmeth took a few steps towards Kallen and the spare horse. Something wriggled by her feet: a small snake. Eochaid almost ignored it in the chaos of the fight, but something raised the hair on the back of his neck.

Eochaid took a breath to speak. As he did so, the serpent expanded and reshaped itself in an eyeblink into a man wearing druid's robes. The stranger shouted a word in Titan Speech and struck Henmeth with his open palm.

She staggered back, her mouth opening. A horrible, sick, certain look filled her face. Her eyes, looking at Eochaid's, were terribly sad.

With dreadful swiftness, a change rippled through Henmeth's slight frame. Her body shuddered. Her skin changed color, erupting in scales. Her eyes closed. Her flesh writhed, and her clothes and belongings began to collapse as if she had melted. From every hole and seam of her clothes a torrent of snakes poured, and Henmeth was gone.

Eochaid's horse reared, backing away from the writhing carpet in a panic. It was all he could do to keep in the saddle. Gandy bellowed wordlessly, grabbing for her bow. The others yelled as well, Mareka pounding forward like a juggernaut. Moreri, pinned though he was, lashed out with his claws at the enemy druid, slashing his ankle.

The druid cursed and stepped out of Moreri's reach. He swept a hand and the swarming snakes moved as a mass, covering the pinned cleric and the horses. Moreri began to scream.

Mareka yowled. All semblance of restraint and thought left her face and she threw herself at the druid, tearing into him so hard that one of her clawed gauntlets tore loose from its straps. They went down in a tangle.

Cheering, the asaatthi swordsmen charged.

"We have to go!" Eochaid shrieked. He turned his horse. "Mareka, we *have* to go!"

Zane hurled a green, acidic arrow into the asaatthi ranks. Kallen had dropped the reins of Mareka's horse. She and Drask looked desperately around them, paralyzed.

Laughing, the druid changed his shape again. A serpent twice Mareka's size wrapped itself around her. She sank her teeth into its hide, flailing at its thick, armored body.

"*Mareka!*" Eochaid shouted again. He dropped his reins. Even as he reached for his second blade, Gandy's hand closed on his own.

"No," she croaked. "Ride, Lenahr. Now."

Eochaid hesitated. The chill hunger for vengeance, to join Mareka and tear apart the druid until there was nothing left, nearly blinded him. His blood thundered in his ears.

"The amphora," Gandy said, in a choked, desperate voice. And then she cried, loudly and clearly. "Vigilants, *ride!*"

The fog lifted from Eochaid's mind. Though his heart railed against him for doing it, he grabbed up the reins and kicked the horse forward. Kallen and Zane did the same, Kallen taking the lead again, and Zane's poor, limping animal the rear. And as they rode away, each of them glanced back at the terrible cost of their victory.

Chapter Forty-Six

They rode another hour, the scrub whipping their legs, the horses fighting their way valiantly over the twisted terrain in fading light. Then Zane's horse collapsed and couldn't rise.

"It's not blood loss," Kallen said, working the bolt out of the beast's twitching side. The horse didn't even kick, merely coughed weakly. A thin stream of bile and chewed grass dripped from its nostrils.

"Careful," Gandy said. "Asaatthi poison their weapons, like the snakes they are. So much easier to run down your prey when it's puking its guts out."

Kallen sniffed the barbed head, grimaced, and threw the bolt away into the grass. "Yes, it's poison."

"They wanted us on foot," Gandy growled. "They aimed for our mounts. Speed was our only advantage."

"Did it pretty well," Drask said. "Too many to ride now, even doubled up."

Eochaid drew his sword and cut the horse's throat, a clean, quick stroke.

"What do we do now?" Zane asked. "They'll catch us if we rest long enough to regain spells!"

"Could split up," Drask said. "Two with the amphora, the rest on foot as a rearguard."

"No," Gandy said. "We have better odds together. And in this terrain, the horses aren't enough of an advantage anyhow." She stood. "Take anything you need from the saddlebags."

When they finished, Gandy gave each mount a dried apple from their provisions. Then she cast a spell and whispered to Eochaid's mount, which whickered and tossed its head.

"Go, then. And thank you," she said. "Run fast. Run far. And if you find other vigilants, tell them where we went!"

The horses whinnied and cantered into the wilderness, breaking into a gallop once they reached open ground.

"I told 'em they were safer without us," Gandy said. "They'll try to reach Allard if they can, but they're gonna leave a nice, long trail for the snakes to follow — one that leads away from us."

“And what do we do?” Eochaid asked.

“We hike east, and then north,” Gandy said. “We leave no trail, and we let the wilderness cover us. They can’t search all the Steppes for us, and we’re as fast on foot as they are. Once we’ve opened some distance, we rest. Once we have spells back, Zane uses his little birdies to find the company and we join back up. Sound good?”

The vigilants nodded raggedly.

“Then shoulder your packs,” Gandy said. “We’ll rest after we make some more miles.”

• • •

They marched in silence, the crunch of boots on gravelly soil or the scrape of leather dragging on wet stone the only sounds. The shock of each footfall transmitted itself up Eochaid’s numb body. His joints were stiffening now that the battle spells had worn off, and he could count all the injuries that he’d sustained by their stings and protests.

And inside? Inside Eochaid, the wind blew through fresh, ragged holes where friends had been torn out. His heart hurt. He tried to conjure calmness, *tried* to silence the whistle of the wind through those holes. Numbness would be better. But he couldn’t. It was all he could do to keep pace with the others.

Glancing ahead, he saw Gandy. The pack with its hard-won cargo hung heavy on her shoulders, and though she strode with a purpose, her movements had a desperation to them.

“You know, um...” Zane said, drawing alongside Eochaid, “of *all* of us, if anyone could...could survive that, it’s her.”

A flash lit Eochaid’s mind: the image of Mareka, her jaw clenched on the druid-snake’s side, digging into his flesh with her claws and vengefully tearing ragged chunks out of him. *Could she? Amra did, somehow.* He glanced at Zane, whose eyes were bright. *He wants me to say it.*

But hope was too much to ask of him. Henmeth was gone, and Moreri was gone, and who knew how many others. Instead, he nodded and kept marching, his breath ragged and his body growing weary even with the ring.

They marched together shoulder to shoulder for a while, putting step after step between them and what had gone before.

“Does...” Zane said. He paused, his breath rasping as he kept up the pace of the march. Eochaid wondered if he’d changed his mind. He glanced at the elven vigilant, who looked suddenly very young. Tears dripped down Zane’s nose, and his hands were clenched into fists.

“Does it ever get easier?” Zane stammered. “You...I know you’ve fought before. Lost people. Does it ever...?”

“No,” Eochaid said. “It doesn’t.”

“Would ya want it to?” Drask answered from behind them. “Kinda monster you’d

have to be? Death's the blade that cuts loved one from loved one. Don't give a rat's ass if there's light 'n' love on the far side. No, to Chardun's pits with that garbage. Death is miserable — always will be. Nemorga will have me kickin' and screamin' if he gets me at all, and if I meet him I'll spit in his eye for all those he's taken from me."

The halfling's breath was labored, and his words carried a biting intensity that surprised Eochaid.

"And when he came after Mareka today," Drask snarled, "I hope she left him some new scars."

"That's a battle I'd like to have seen," Kallen said. "If I live, that's how I'll tell it."

They marched another few hours, well into the night. Gandy called a halt partway up a bluff of tumbled stone, where a crevice between two huge boulders offered a little shelter and a good view of the land below.

"Lenahr, you and Drask sleep first," Gandy said.

"Gandy, I can—"

"No. In the dark, you're our best weapons. I want you rested and ready," Gandy snapped. "Wake up when you wake up, but *sleep*."

• • •

Sleep took Eochaid like an assassin, despite his desire to resist. He woke almost as quickly. His body still hurt, but his nerves were no longer so numb and sluggish. He rolled out of his cloak and crept to the entrance of their little cave. Gandy, bundled up in her own cloak, was barely more than another lump in the landscape. She lay pointing outward, the picture of vigilance, scanning the terrain for the slightest motion, the brass spyglass at her side.

Eochaid put his hand on Gandy's back. "I have this," he whispered.

"Good," she said. "I'll keep watch here. You do a quiet check outside, then pick a place upslope with cover and a different view."

"Gandy, no."

"No mistakes, Eochaid — I promised you," Gandy replied.

"Go to sleep, Sarge. Or whatever it is you elves do."

Gandy twisted around to see him. Her face was angry, haggard, weary beyond reason.

"Rest, Gandy. You haven't slept since *I* last did. *I have it*."

Gandy blinked. Then she stiffly crawled back into their shelter, curled up in her cloak, and lay still. Eochaid took her place, and didn't move until the others woke at dawn.

• • •

For several days they marched at a risky, punishing pace. Gandy applied her talents as a ranger at every opportunity to confuse any pursuit. She followed busy game trails where their tracks would disappear among those of passing beasts. She guided them up cliffs. She marched them over bare rock ridges and avoided vegetation they might disturb. Slowly she began bending their path from the east towards the north.

They'd been on their feet since dawn. The morning was growing old when Gandy called a halt and jogged them into the shade of a boulder.

"I saw people north of us," she said. "Rest a minute. Any luck, they're just tribesmen or prospecting cannibals."

The vigilants laughed raggedly. Gandy pulled out the spyglass and Eochaid helped her scramble onto the boulder. After a minute, she began to curse.

"What's wrong?" Kallen asked.

"They're here," Gandy muttered. "There's a godsbedamned asaathi patrol to the north, a little way ahead of us. And there's at least one group behind us to the west who don't look like vigilants."

She slid down off the boulder. "I don't think they know where we are. Neither group's on our trail. The ones to the north are patrolling. If they knew we were coming, they'd be in ambush like...like before."

Gandy closed her eyes and rested her head against the boulder.

"Keeping us from Vesh," Drask said. "Blocking us from joinin' the captain. Smart."

"So we can go east," Gandy said, "And we can go south."

"Could we run into New Venir?" Kallen asked. "Lenahr, you're from there. What would our chances be?"

Eochaid laughed. "Terrible," he said. "The nobility and priests would hand that thing straight to Calastia. They'd do anything to earn favor with Virduk. The *best* we could hope is that Belsameth would want it for herself." He shuddered.

"Forget that," Gandy said. "No evil gods get the thing, not unless I'm already dead. What other routes do we have?"

Kallen pulled out Henmeth's maps and opened the large one of the Steppes as a whole.

"Not promising," said Drask, leaning over the parchment.

"No," Gandy said, "Not promising at all. So, what's our best bad choice?"

"I think it's the Eni River, here," Eochaid said, tracing the ragged line that marked the eastern border of the Steppes. "There's a good deal of barge traffic, and they travel in groups for safety."

"I'd bet the merchants would be happy to help stranded vigilants and curry favor with Vesh, too," Kallen interjected.

Gandy frowned. "Vangal's balls, that's a long journey alone."

“Cult’s watching for us to go north, though,” Drask said, “or double back and break through to the captain. Won’t be expecting this.”

Gandy stared at the map. She shook her head. “Okay, that’s our route. We’ll strike out south for a bit, then head straight east. We should be able to outpace them.”

• • •

They marched on much as they had for several more grueling days: fast but careful, only pausing briefly to check for pursuers.

For two days, there were none. Then at dawn on the third day, Kallen saw a host of asaathi to the north. There were dozens of them: swordsmen, archers, robed figures, and even a few lordly ones on horseback. The column was not searching, but surging ahead through the scrub into the east.

“Chardun’s Hell,” Gandy hissed. “They’re cutting us off! Take cover!”

As quickly as they could, the vigilants took shelter in the woods around a stubby butte. Backs to the stone and hidden by the shadows and foliage, they readied their defenses. Zane cast his bird spell for the first time since the battle. Four dusty little birds answered the call, and he scattered them into the surrounding land with orders to look for other bands of people of any kind.

“That was almost a company,” Kallen said. “They can’t have enough soldiers out here to scatter them around. Not unless they’ve brought in half of Kan Thet.”

Gandy shook her head. “I’m worried they may have... I don’t know, seen us in a crystal ball or something.”

“Doesn’t work like that,” said Eochaid.

“He’s right,” Zane said. “Without something personal, and especially without names, even a hag couldn’t do it. The most they could do is narrow it down — maybe figure what direction we’re moving.”

“Well then Enkili’s pissing on us, vigilants,” Gandy said. “That’s the only answer left. If they have more than that one company here, we’ve had it.”

They waited a tense hour for Zane’s bird spies to return, watching on all sides for scouts or troops closing in.

One by one the birds returned. First the two that had flown north and east, which had each unsurprisingly seen a great many snakemen moving away off to the east. Then the two that flew south and west returned, and they had seen nothing.

“Huh,” Gandy muttered. “Maybe this *is* just our bad luck, but I don’t like it. I need ideas.” She sagged against her boulder and opened her hands.

“They could be beaters,” Eochaid said. “Like hunting dogs, sent to flush us out.”

Gandy nodded. "Or force us to keep our heads down and give the rest of them a chance to catch up. Damn, that makes an awful kind of sense."

"Aye," Drask said, "But best we don't dwell on it too much or they'll succeed in pinning us down."

Gandy massaged her forehead. "We've got to get out of here," she said.

"I could provide cover for us," Zane said. "Create distractions with illusion spells."

Kallen nodded. "I have some good illusions too. Between us, we could confuse them, send them off in the wrong direction."

"I don't want to draw their attention," Gandy said, "Not if there's any chance they're only here by luck. No, we head south again, then east."

"We can't let them drive us south much more," Kallen said. "They'll push us into the hunting range of the slitherin around South Fang, into the wrack dragon's domain."

"It's more of a risk to them than us," Eochaid said. "The dragon of South Fang and his slitherin are Gaurak's, not Mormo's. They'll be really angry to see a horde of asaatthi charging into their territory."

"And you're going to tell me how two enemies is better, yes?" Gandy said with a half-smile.

"I hunted on the land south of the Fang," Eochaid said. "It's not that different here, from what I'm seeing. The Brown Gorger slitherin brood are vicious, but they're not real imaginative. I think I can guide us through without being noticed, provided the dragon doesn't show up."

"Risk we'll have to take," Gandy said.

• • •

Once again the vigilants turned south away from safety. They sped off over the trackless land. Eochaid took the lead from Gandy. These lands were cousin to the borderlands north of Trela where he and his fellow villagers had hunted. The feel of the land grew more familiar with every southward mile they marched, but that didn't bring him comfort. These were the nightmare lands of his childhood; the places men came only in groups strong enough to frighten off the hungry beasts of the hills. *I'm a grown man now*, Eochaid thought, and laughed bitterly. *Yeah, a grown man who knows all the better how dangerous the rats are around here.*

Instead of increasing their pace, Eochaid applied his familiarity to caution. As soon as he sighted the first splay-toed track in the dirt, he took them off the faster game trails and into less-traveled areas. He avoided any place that might conceal an ambush in numbers and kept his ears pricked to the sounds of the woods around him not just for sounds, but also for the descent of silence. This far south the trees grew thicker, and Eochaid kept

to their cover. *Not likely the dragon will be out hunting*, he thought, *but if it comes it's a bigger worry than rats or serpents.*

More days, and more miles. The weather, which had been merciful, turned spitefully soggy. They passed a disagreeable rainy night in a wet thicket. But with Moreri and Henmeth dead, Zane couldn't spare spells for comfort. The damp crept into their clothes and the chill sapped their strength. The next day's going was slower. Zane was clumsy and tired. Drask, though he kept up the pace, was curt and humorless. Even Kallen's cheer had a hollowness to it.

We're worn to the bone, Eochaid thought. For all their training and all their tricks of endurance and woodcraft, even vigilants needed sleep, food, and time off their feet. Eochaid's ring spared him the worst of it, but his pack felt heavier than it had, and the night's cold took a long time to leave his body even at their steady marching pace.

Not long after sunrise as they were crossing a flat, forested valley, the birds abruptly ceased their calls. Eochaid raised his hand for a halt, then signaled *cover*. Somewhere in the undergrowth, something large was crashing through the brush towards them. The vigilants dropped into cover and drew up their muddy cloaks. Eochaid eased his blades from their sheaths and heard Gandy draw an arrow.

The crashing grew louder and louder, and then a huge crescent elk thrashed its way out of the brush. The beast's lips and nostrils foamed, and its sides heaved desperately. It plowed straight across the open ground and sprang deep into the underbrush on the far side. The bushes hadn't stopped quivering from its passage when a pack of hairy, brown slitherin sprinted into view. They wore ragged scale mail and chain belts but ran like beasts, their mouths gaping and eyes locked on their prey. They each wore scimitars, but several had not even bothered to draw them. The one in the lead had only a scabbard, evidently so ravenous that it had dropped its blade during the pursuit. Eochaid waited until the hunt grew distant and then led on, putting distance between them and the gluttonous hunt.

Late in the morning, their path took them up a long slope to a bare ridge with little cover on the far side. Eochaid slowed and then halted them near the tree line.

"I need to find a way down the back of the ridge that doesn't leave us out in the open for so long," he said.

"I can use the time to check for pursuit," Gandy said. "The rest of you...take what rest you can."

Drask and Kallen pulled out their waterskins. Zane slumped against a boulder, his eyes closing.

Gandy and Eochaid crept out along the ridge, keeping to patches of grass. "Zane's pretty well spent," Gandy muttered. "barely got enough rest last night to renew his spells."

"We all are," Eochaid whispered.

They crawled in among a cluster of boulders choked with grass. Eochaid scanned the area nervously, but there was no sign of the dragon. He nodded to Gandy, who pulled out the spyglass. Dark circles showed around her eyes.

"You're not looking great either," he muttered.

Gandy growled and turned to her work.

Looking down from this angle, Eochaid found a field of broken rock on the far side of the ridge with enough shadows and rough growth to conceal them on their way down. He planned the route in his mind and then looked behind him. Gandy was still squinting through the glass, looking back the way they'd come. Eochaid turned back to the south to study the landscape further ahead. The sky was clearing a bit, and a higher knot of hills ahead was visible. He followed the line of them, and near the top he saw the familiar, blunt shape of South Fang jutting up far above them.

"Found them," Gandy muttered.

"Where?" Eochaid asked. He rolled over and crawled to the lip of a boulder to look.

Gandy pointed carefully back along the valley below. "Dunno how they found us, but they're coming down from where we made camp last night."

Eochaid could just make out movement in the trees, perhaps five miles off. "How many are there?"

A beam of sunlight crossed the valley where a gap had opened in the clouds, and metal gleamed between the far-off trees: armor or spears.

"Hard to count with the glare," Gandy said, "but I think it's that company from before. Scaly little fanatics just won't give up!"

Warm sunlight rolled over the ridgeline. Eochaid shielded his eyes against the sudden brilliance. Still it dazzled him, gleaming off the stones, the wet grass, and the brass of the spyglass.

"Shit!" Eochaid cried, and threw his cloak over Gandy and the glass.

"What the—" Gandy sputtered. Then she gasped. "Fuck. Oh, fuck, no!"

"They might not—"

"Not taking the chance," she growled. "Vangal's fucking *balls*." The spyglass clattered as she put it away. "Quick, back to the others!"

Gandy belly-crawled through the grass, and Eochaid followed. "Damn me, how'd I forget to cover the glass?" she snarled.

They reached the trees and stood. "Up, vigilants! I fucked up, and we need to move."

Drask and Kallen nearly leapt to their feet, but Zane sat oblivious where he'd been when they first stopped.

"Up, Zane!" Gandy said, prodding him with her toe. "Enemy's coming, and we have to move right now!"

Zane's body jerked, and he groggily found his feet.

Eochaid led the others through the descent at a crouching run. Behind him he heard Gandy say, "We'll rest soon, I promise."

They scrambled through the woods, speed all but eclipsing stealth. Eochaid watched nervously for movement, for the glint of scales or a flash of fur in the underbrush. *We have to get clear*, he thought. As they sped along, he fumbled through his memory of the terrain he'd seen from up on the ridgeline. The enemy, if they didn't care about stealth, could come around the ridge on open ground. He bent their course to stay higher on the side of the next ridge.

The river they were approaching would be a problem, though. *Can't get caught fording it or their archers will chew us to bits*. He remembered a bend where the rising bedrock of the hills ahead pooled the flow and channeled it into a valley. *Just at the head of the pool*, he thought. *The water's fast, but not as wide, and the bank at the far side is lower*.

"This way," Eochaid called. "We can slow them down by crossing the river!"

"If they're right on our heels..." Gandy gasped, vaulting over stones.

"They're not," Eochaid said, "At least not all of them. My only hope is that the Gorgers hear the asaathi first and leave us alone!"

They scrambled along the hillside, keeping to the trees until they reached the flatter land near the crossing. They sprinted through the low brush toward the water's edge. At the far end of the great pool, water roared as it tumbled from the pool into the valley. *Almost clear*.

He ran along the slippery shoreline toward the spillway at the end of the pool. The waterfall was wide but shallow, and very loud. *About sixty feet of water to cross*, he thought. *Then up and into the woods on the far side*. The narrow, slippery route would be very hard to guide a whole company of armored asaathi through.

He risked a glance back. Gandy was shouting and pointing upstream. A squad of asaathi horsemen thundered along the bank, lances lowered.

"Come on!" Eochaid yelled, waving the others on towards the crossing. "Fight them on the far side! Come on!"

The exhausted vigilants staggered toward him, splashing into the water: Zane and Kallen, then Drask, then Gandy. Eochaid took up the rear. Icy water swirled up and around his thighs. Behind them, the horsemen raced closer.

A shout. Kallen. He turned.

A brown flood swarmed down the bank on the far side, coming in directly from Eochaid's planned escape route: a dozen Brown Gorgers, two dozen, red eyes glaring and mouths wide. They sprang into the water, swimming with alarming speed. Eochaid yanked his swords and readied to receive the charge, but the slitherin took no notice of them. Instead, they surged towards the asaathi horsemen and their mounts.

Eochaid stared in disbelief. More gorgers leapt from the bank into the water, one landing right beside Gandy. Eochaid raised his blade to strike, but Kallen grabbed his arm before it could fall and pointed at Zane. The mage's hands were raised, as if he'd cast a spell. The pause was enough for Eochaid to register the subtle translucency of his hands. *He*

made us invisible! The elven wizard had used the same spell that had hidden them from the slitherin and their undead guards back in the valley.

The Brown Gorger threshed its way past him and onto shore to join the frenzy there. *It won't work for long, Eochaid thought. One of them will blunder into us.*

He splashed over to the others. The noise of the waterfall was tremendous, almost enough to drown out the clash of arms behind him. *Only three ways out, he thought. Through the snakes, through the rats, or into the falls.*

He raised his hand and signaled. *Orders?*

Hold, Gandy signaled impatiently. Her eyes were intense, distant, hunting for some unseen solution.

Go, signaled Kallen, and pointed over the falls.

Negative! Hold! Gandy signaled.

Kallen grabbed her shoulder, pointed to Gandy's bulging backpack.

Negative. Go, Kallen signaled.

Gandy thought. Shook her head. Worked her jaw. *Go, she signaled, at last. She pointed to Eochaid. You. Lead.*

Eochaid looked over the edge at the foam and roil below. Behind him, the battle raged loud enough to hear. He sheathed his blades and glanced at Gandy and the others, then raised his hand to signal. *Follow?*

Gandy opened her mouth. Though her words were drowned by the shrieks of slitherin and horses and the roar of falling water, he could see the words on her lips: "Go, shit-brains!"

Eochaid leapt into the mist.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Stones battered him. Water tore at his clothes, his pack, his eyelids. Sound and cold numbed his nerves. Then he smashed into something solid and slimy, and the water launched him briefly through air. He choked down a breath of it before the mad tumult caught him again and whirled him away. Light, then darkness. Another impact filled his closed eyes with brilliant stars, and another drove the air from his lungs. Desperately, he clawed out with his hands, pulling toward the surface. One hand struck something hard enough that he could hear the dull *snap* through his own bones. He spun and ricocheted, bouncing off gravel, and then it was lighter again. Chest screaming, he threw out his other hand, which broke the surface and clawed through something that scratched and tore at him. *Branches*.

Finally, his arm wrapped around something that did not snap or spring away. He latched on with all his strength. Though the water whipped and twisted him, it carried him up to the surface. He sucked in a lungful of air. The river ran fast here, under trees and shrubs that bent to drink from it. There was a clay bank, and Eochaid hung from one of the sturdy roots that protruded from it.

Something bounced off a rock further upstream: a bedraggled figure, small, limp, and bloodied. *Drask*, Eochaid thought. He gritted his teeth and reached out with his injured hand, fighting the current and combing the water. When something struck the hand, he grabbed.

“Aaaagh!” The scream was involuntary, as the bones in Eochaid’s hands ground against each other. The river twirled him again, nearly tearing him from his branch, but both his hands somehow held. He had Drask by one pack-strap.

Desperately, he cast about for any way out of the punishing torrent. Behind him on the inward bank there was a lower area, but it was on the wrong side. He could barely shift his grip for fear of slipping loose, and if he did he was certain he’d never find Drask again.

Another shape came down the river from above, head above the froth and fighting the current.

“Gandy!” he coughed, spitting water.

Gandy struck out across the current and slammed into the bank just below Eochaid.

“Is that Drask?” she called.

“Dunno if he’s alive!” Eochaid answered. “There’s a low spot over there!” He jerked his head towards it.

“Okay, hang on!” Gandy reached behind her and fumbled a length of rope from her pack. One-handed, she tied it around Drask’s shoulders.

“When I give you the signal,” she called, “you let go, okay?”

“How—”

“Just trust me, Lenahr!” Gandy shouted. Holding the end of the rope in her teeth, she kicked mightily off of the bank and fought her way across the current again. At the little cut in the bank, she held tight to a big root. Then she looped her rope through, wrapped it twice around her arm and cried “Now!”

Eochaid let go. As the water took him, he wrapped his arms around Drask’s limp body and held on. They swept downriver. The rope went tight, and they swung around the curve and across, slamming into the far bank. Eochaid reached out with his undamaged hand and grabbed the roots. The rope jerked, stopped, jerked again. Foot by foot, Gandy hauled them from the river.

It took an eternity to get Drask and Eochaid up the bank. The three of them collapsed in a muddy heap in the leaves and lay gasping. Drask was breathing, if shallowly.

Eochaid risked a look at his hand. Several fingers were swollen and bent awkwardly, and one was bruised nearly black.

“Where...where are Kallen and Zane?” He wheezed.

Gandy lay silent, only breathing.

“Fuck,” Eochaid said.

He shivered violently and his hand began to ache, as if his body had decided that the time for comforting shock was over. He dragged his arms out of his pack-straps and rolled the pack over with his good hand. The side pocket where he’d kept a healing potion was dripping a red fluid, and the flask had clearly been crushed. Cursing, he rolled it onto its other side. The potion in the other pocket was intact. He opened the flap and pulled it out.

“You injured?” he asked Gandy, and crawled to Drask. The halfling had a deep scalp wound and a burgeoning goose egg where he’d crashed into a rock on his journey. “I think Drask needs a potion, too, for his head. We probably all do.”

“He cast a spell,” Gandy muttered. “Zane. To help me swim, I think. I felt stronger.” Her voice was flat, toneless, tired.

“The rats started to turn. Kallen threw some spell at them — startled them back. I knew it wouldn’t hold them long, especially with Kallen visible. I shouted to run, and Zane and I went to the falls. I jumped. I — I thought they’d follow me.”

Eochaid fumbled with the wet potion flask, but without two hands and shaking from the cold, he worried he might dump the precious liquid trying to unstopper it. “Gandy, I n-need help,” he said.

Gandy rolled over. Her face was a blank mask, her eyes hollow. He opened his mouth, hunting for words to reassure her.

A rumbling growl began, so deep it passed through Eochaid's body in waves. The ground shook. Across the river, a gout of fire shot into the sky. Acrid smoke began to trickle through the trees. Something huge heaved itself up on four long, powerful legs and raised its head on a sinuous neck. Its body was the black of burnt wood, of ashes. It was speckled in glowing red and orange embers and in streaks of gray and white that looked like bones charred clean of meat. Smoke poured off the glowing body: great choking, sooty clouds that pooled around its feet.

The growl grew stronger, louder. The beast unfurled wings like burnt leather, opened its mouth and roared with a thunderous voice like a thousand trees burning.

Raw fear burst in Eochaid's blood, almost too much to master. As it was, he barely had the presence of mind to grab Drask by the shoulders and haul the limp body as he backpedaled further under the trees, digging his way into the roots where they protruded. Gandy dug in and cowered beside him. The firewrack dragon roared again, loudly enough that Eochaid's ears rang.

In clear view on the leaves where they'd first collapsed, sat Eochaid's pack and the precious bottle of healing potion. *Fuck.*

Gandy followed his gaze. As the dragon's head turned away from their hiding place, she darted out, scooped the pack up and grabbed the potion. Just as she crabbed back into cover, the dragon roared a third time and brought down its enormous wings in a rush of wind, smoke, and burning cinders that blotted out all light.

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The sounds went on for a long time, loud enough to hear even over the waterfall. The asaathhi must have fought well, but in the end the dragon prevailed and bellowed its victory through the valley before departing the way it had come.

Once she was sure that the dragon's attention was on its battle with the asaathhi, Gandy dared to open and hand Eochaid the healing potion. He considered, then poured the rich red draught carefully into Drask's mouth. In moments, the halfling's eyes fluttered open. He looked around in confusion and fear. Eochaid put his finger to his lips, and Drask nodded shakily, wide eyes taking in the greasy, clinging smoke and drifting embers. The three of them cowered among the tree roots well after the beast had gone, leaving only the crackle of flames among the wet trees and a thick coat of greasy ash.

Eochaid's hand throbbed terribly. *I can still walk with a broken hand, he thought, and anything much we have to fight now will probably be the end of us.*

Drask pressed a flask into his hand. "Here," he said. "Can't imagine how it survived that battering — precious little else is still in my pack! Maybe Hwyrdd's not as useless as I said he was."

"Thanks," Eochaid said. He drank the potion in the flask and felt his hand knit itself back together, the pain melting away.

"Damn," Gandy growled. She'd opened her own pack, and her hand came away sticky with ruined healing draught. "This godsbedamned amphora crushed *both* my bottles." She licked the murky mixture of potion and ash on her palm and spat it out, choking.

"No good," she said. "Well, I was better off than you two anyhow. I'll survive without it."

The three of them looked like unfired clay statues, smeared with mud, leaves, and ash from head to foot. They took stock of their other equipment: soggy clothes, soggy rations, blades, and little else. Gandy's bow and arrows were gone, though she still had her rapier. Drask had lost his waterskin. Eochaid had lost his rope, flint, steel, and bedroll. Gandy's spyglass lens was cracked, and the case was full of water and grime.

"Between us we have about one ranger's normal gear," Gandy said. "Well, we make do. Lenahr, can you find the way without..." Gandy swallowed hard. "...with no maps from here?"

"I think so," he said. "We can go a little faster, since the Gorgers around here will be back in their lairs, feasting."

"And the dragon?" Drask asked.

Eochaid frowned. "I'd bet it'll go back to its lair, too. It doesn't venture out much, even to feed."

"So we take a direct route and cut closer to the lair," Gandy said.

"There won't be much cover there," Eochaid said. "The dragon's burned the rock bare for a long way around the Fang itself."

Gandy surveyed the dripping ruin of the surrounding woods and scratched at the grime on her chin. "I think speed's the priority," she said. "We won't last much longer out here, and if more than a handful of asaatthi survived, we're in no shape to fight them off. I think we're faster than them, and I'd rather travel on open ground where we'll see them sooner and have time to pick where we meet them.

"We go fast, and we cut through those burned lands. And any asaatthi that catches up to us learns I can still fight with a sword."

"And if the dragon's still about?" Drask asked.

"Well," Gandy said, "then we hope he shits the amphora somewhere safe."

• • •

They cleared the treeline in a few hours more. The land was blasted brown and black where it wasn't gray, just stone and dirt. Eochaid glanced nervously up toward the imposing bulk of South Fang as he ran, but the dragon didn't come roaring out of its lair.

Drask and Gandy pounded along behind him. Drask coughed raggedly from time to time and struggled to keep the punishing pace, but did not complain. An hour into the open ground, he grunted and called out. “Gandy! Runners, behind us!”

They skidded to a stop. Coming down through the field of basalt towers they’d passed through twenty minutes earlier, three figures ran with a lithe, inhuman motion.

“All the hells!” Gandy snarled. “Keep running. We’ll deal with them when we have to stop and rest. Let’s get as far as we can first! Go!”

They plunged ahead, abandoning all pretense at stealth. Eochaid took the straightest path he could find, only turning aside when their course would drop them into a gulley. As it was, each of them slipped and fell more than once on the steep, bare slopes.

They scrambled up a rockfall too wide to avoid, and Gandy called a gasping halt at the top to sip water and gauge their pursuers’ progress. Eochaid wet his mouth from his waterskin and handed it to Drask, who gulped it down.

Gandy was staring back the way they’d come. Eochaid got back on his feet and joined her. *Seven* serpentine figures were running behind them now, following the same path they had down the opposite slope. As Eochaid watched, two more crested the rise and began the downward journey.

“Still there, are they?” Drask asked. “Then time’s a’wasting!” He struggled to his feet as well and scrambled down the rocks of the far side.

At the base of the slide, the ground leveled off for a long way. The going was easier and faster, but Eochaid had to slow his own pace for Drask and Gandy, who both stumbled if they matched his top speed. Together they raced towards a notch in the next ridge. Eochaid picked the clearest path he could see to get them up it.

His tired mind raced. *I can’t keep running them like this. We should be nearing the trees again — maybe we can lose the asaathi and go back to sneaking. The woods thicken a lot between here and the river. If we stay well north of Trela...*

He crested the ridge. Below, perhaps half a mile off, the trees returned. This land was familiar. He’d never seen it from this high on the hills around South Fang before, but these were hunting grounds he knew. Grinning, he turned back.

Gandy and Drask leaned against the far side of the stone notch, exchanging a determined look between them.

“Still nine,” Drask panted.

Gandy nodded and blotted the sweat from her eyes. “Think that’s all the dragon left.”

“Fast little snakes,” Drask said. “Reckon they dropped their armor.”

“Makes sense,” Gandy replied, and unslung her pack. “Only way they could catch up to us. But they’ll be a *lot* easier to carve up, too.” She grinned, her white teeth against the gray of her skin giving her a wolfish look.

Drask drew his rapier. “Aye, they will.”

"Gandy, we can't. Nine's too many to risk the amphora!" Eochaid said.

"We're not risking the amphora," Gandy said. Hooking her pack with her boot, she kicked it to Eochaid's feet.

Fear ran pinpricks up and down Eochaid's skin. "No," he said. "No, no!"

Gandy threw her arms around him and hugged him, hard. When she let go, he clung to her hand.

Gandy's eyes bored into his. She picked up the battered pack and pressed it to his chest. "Eochaid, you're the fastest of us. You're stealthy. You know these grounds. You know the people. You'll last *days* longer on that waterskin than either of us will. It's *you*. You get the job. Take this godsbedamned ugly hunk of metal to Vesh, and *smite* any bastard that tries to take it from you. We wouldn't have made it here without you. You can *finish* this, if anyone can."

"Go, kid," Drask grunted, and ignited his rapier.

"See you, shit-brains," Gandy said. "If we survive we'll meet you at the Eni." Blinking furiously, she took up a place next to Drask and drew her sword with an air of distaste.

Drask sniggered quietly under his breath.

"Eating soup with a fork, you said?" Gandy asked.

"Think that was it," Drask chuckled.

"I could use some godsbedamned soup," Gandy answered, and chopped the air with the rapier.

Both of them lifted their blades in salute to Eochaid.

Eochaid thought his heart would break. Still, he heaved Gandy's backpack to his shoulder and ran toward the woods, toward their enfolding shadows and wild paths, as if he intended to run all the way to Lave himself.



Epilogue

He wasn't dead. He remembered pain, and sickness, and collapsing in his mother's house. A vision of Chardun, burning in his mind. Then snippets, glimpses. A wagon. A blanket. His mother's voice. A long darkness. Cold. Hands lifting him.

Then a calm voice speaking without words.

His mind grew wings and followed the wordless voice through the length of his memory. He remembered enrolling as a vigilant. Training. Amra, Hutchling, Gandy. Then Arcernoth. Balak, Sennet, Jade, Holtz. Amra again. Agony and woe. Hutchling. Pelpernoi. Gandy, Henmeth, Drask. Mareka. Sorrow. Pride. Unyielding determination. Then finally, his mother and Kane.

Above and through all these memories a scratching sound flowed, varying in speed and intensity at times but unceasing. And the voice without words.

Now dampness touched his tongue, and the taste of cool water.

The scratching had stopped.

"Good, good," said a voice — the same voice, only coming in words now. A warm velvety softness stroked his forehead and down his cheek.

His throat was raw, but the water soothed it. He felt a chill dribble run down his neck. Then his head was lifted up. He forced his leaden eyelids open. A cup in front of him — he drank more, greedily.

"Very good," the voice continued at his ear. "Not too fast, though."

He drank until the clay cup was empty, and then fought to focus his eyes on more distant things. The room was dim, lit by a flickering lamp somewhere, and the air felt slightly damp. High in the wall was a barred window. He tried to turn, but his head was held in place by the person with the voice, the one who had offered the cup.

He tried to lift his hands but found them trapped at his sides, tied to the bedframe he lay on. His armor was gone, replaced by a rough sackcloth jerkin. His medallion, ring, and swords were gone.

"Where...?" he croaked, and swallowed again. "Where am I?" His voice was hoarse and raspy.

"You are *home*," said the voice, "in New Venir."

The person who held him helped him sit up straighter, and then moved into his view. She was dressed in black robes. An amulet hung at her breast: a disc of obsidian with a thin circle of silver inlaid around its circumference.

"If we are done, mistress, may I go?" said another voice.

Eochaid turned to look. To the side sat another woman, much older, at a small table. A tall stack of parchment sat upon the table next to many empty ink bottles. The woman held a quill.

"Yes," said the woman beside Eochaid. "You may go. I want copies made of that — for the reports and archive. Just the parts about the Serpent Amphora for now, but the rest should be copied by the end of the week."

"Yes, mistress." The scribe collected her papers, including a tall pile that had overflowed onto the floor, and walked out of view.

"The Amphora—" Eochaid said.

The woman — priestess — beside him lightly laughed. "You couldn't keep it a secret from *us*, Eochaid. Even the best of vigilant training couldn't have protected you. Not when we have all the time and resources. No mind is that strong, particularly yours."

Despair gripped him. "What will you do? Will you bring the Amphora to Emperor Virduk?"

She smiled coldly. "Don't fret. We don't have it. It's long gone — probably all the way back to Vesh by now. That much, you accomplished."

Eochaid half sighed, half sobbed. Then he nodded, satisfied. "Then get it over with. Kill me."

The priestess laughed again. "Oh, no, Eochaid Lenahr. You betrayed your country and your prince. You forfeited your right to just *die*. No. You must be *punished*."

Eochaid swallowed. "And after that, then you'll execute me?"

She knelt beside him and ran her fingers through his hair. There was something cold in the gesture that repulsed Eochaid, and he pulled away. "Oh, sweetheart," she said, "I've seen inside you. I know your deepest thoughts. Your dark soul. To *kill* you would be such a *waste*."

She stood up and looked down on him with a tiny, chill smile. "No. I think the cult may have an interest in you. After your punishment, of course."

She stepped out of view, and he heard a rattling and scraping behind him. A hulking shirtless man dragged a heavy trunk into the room. Several leather straps and whips dangled from the man's belt. Another man walked beside him, dark and thin. He opened the trunk and began pulling various sharp tools and instruments from it, which he arranged on the ink-stained table.

"Remember, Zella," the priestess said. "He is to be punished, not killed."

Zella, the dark man, bowed his head reverently. “Of course, mistress. She Who Guides My Blades will guard his life as I work.”

Eochaid closed his eyes and prayed quietly. “Madriel, please—”

The priestess grabbed Eochaid’s chin, yanking his head around, and looked at him with empty, pitiless eyes. “Madriel can’t hear you anymore, Eochaid,” she said. “You belong to Belsameth now.”

Second Epilogue

The sage reached the end of the chapter. He sighed and closed the heavy book. Then he took a sip of tea to soothe his tired throat and looked up.

Across the room, a woman sat in his favorite armchair, watching him. He knew she was there — had been there the whole time. But she had been quiet, listening intently. Perhaps *she* was why he had read aloud, although up until this moment he had not quite realized it was her that he was reading to.

“It is not often I am visited by a goddess,” the ancient sage said.

“It is not often that I have need of such a renowned sage,” she answered.

The sage ducked his head, half smiling at the darkly beautiful presence who graced his home. “You honor me, Lady. Do you want to hear the rest of the tale?”

“Of the Serpent Amphora? No. I already know how that story ends.”

“Yet you were interested enough to have listened so far.”

“I am interested in the other tale,” the goddess said. “Of the man.”

“Eochaid Lenahr?”

“Yes. He is...a curiosity.”

The goddess’s piercing gaze made even the ageless sage uncomfortable, and he looked away. “Indeed, he is,” he said. “I have been studying him for some time.”

“Because of his involvement with the Amphora?”

“In part — that *is* how I discovered him,” the sage replied. “But no. He sits at a singularity of moment, a confluence where several great threads of our history bend and change their paths, all around a few events. Those lines, and their juxtaposition around the fulcrum of will and conscious—”

The sage paused and glanced at the goddess. Her expression had not changed, but he worried he had lost her interest. *Always stay on the good side of goddesses*, he thought, *particularly this one*. “I don’t bore you, Lady?”

“Not at all. Please continue. I am very curious to know more about this...juxtaposition.”

The sage breathed an inward sigh of relief. “Is my Lady familiar with the concept of parallel coherence, such as one would find in overlapping dimensions?”

The goddess's features went flat. The slightest hint of a frown brushed her lips, and an ember of anger flickered behind her eyes.

Oh, dear. "Of course, my Lady must *intimately* understand conjunction between multiple intersecting planes of reality," the sage stammered. "I should be clear — that is not what I refer to."

Her expression relaxed. "Go on."

"I have made, I may say, a particular study of the art of divination. At the extreme edges of divination magic, one is forced to conclude that all choices are, in their way, real. To a normal mortal, moments pass like sand through an hourglass, where each grain reaches the neck and passes singly through to the bulb below. But the truth is less simple. An hourglass with no neck, perhaps, or...or the drops of water in an ocean, jostling and making currents. The grains or drops pass one another in parallel. All the grains fall, and in its world, each grain is the one that counted.

"When I push my craft past a certain point, that is what I see. Multiple Scarns, each slightly different. The major incidents run similarly through nearly all of them — the Divine War, the fall of the titans, the rise of the gods. But their flow varies in each. Different people. Different heroes. Different plots and purposes. And yet..."

"Yet?"

The sage tapped his fingers unconsciously on the thick book. "Yet in every one, Eochaid delivers the Serpent Amphora to the town of Trela. At least, in every one that *I* have studied so far."

The goddess sat forward in her chair, eyes widening. "That event is...as significant as the Divine War?"

The sage smiled. "Nearly as, or so it seems. Yet the *circumstances* around it are frequently different. He is often not a Lenahr — rarely from Trela as I described, or even New Venir. Usually he's just a low-ranking vigilant who chance leads to this path."

"Yet in every case, every flow, he's still Eochaid?"

"It appears so. Not the same *man*, exactly, but a vigilant named Eochaid."

The goddess gazed off into unfathomable distance a moment. "That *is* interesting," she said, finally. "But what happens to him afterward?"

The sage raised his eyebrows at the question. "Surely...surely my Lady *knows* already."

"Only in this universe," the goddess answered.

"Ah. Well...often he dies in delivering the artifact to the heroes — fate seems to point in that direction. Yet more often he survives. A handful of times he even travels with the heroes who take it onward — the amphora reaches Vesh safely in nearly all the possibilities, although the circumstances of the journey vary."

"You said Fate points him to death."

"So it seems. Yet—"

“Yet he usually survives.”

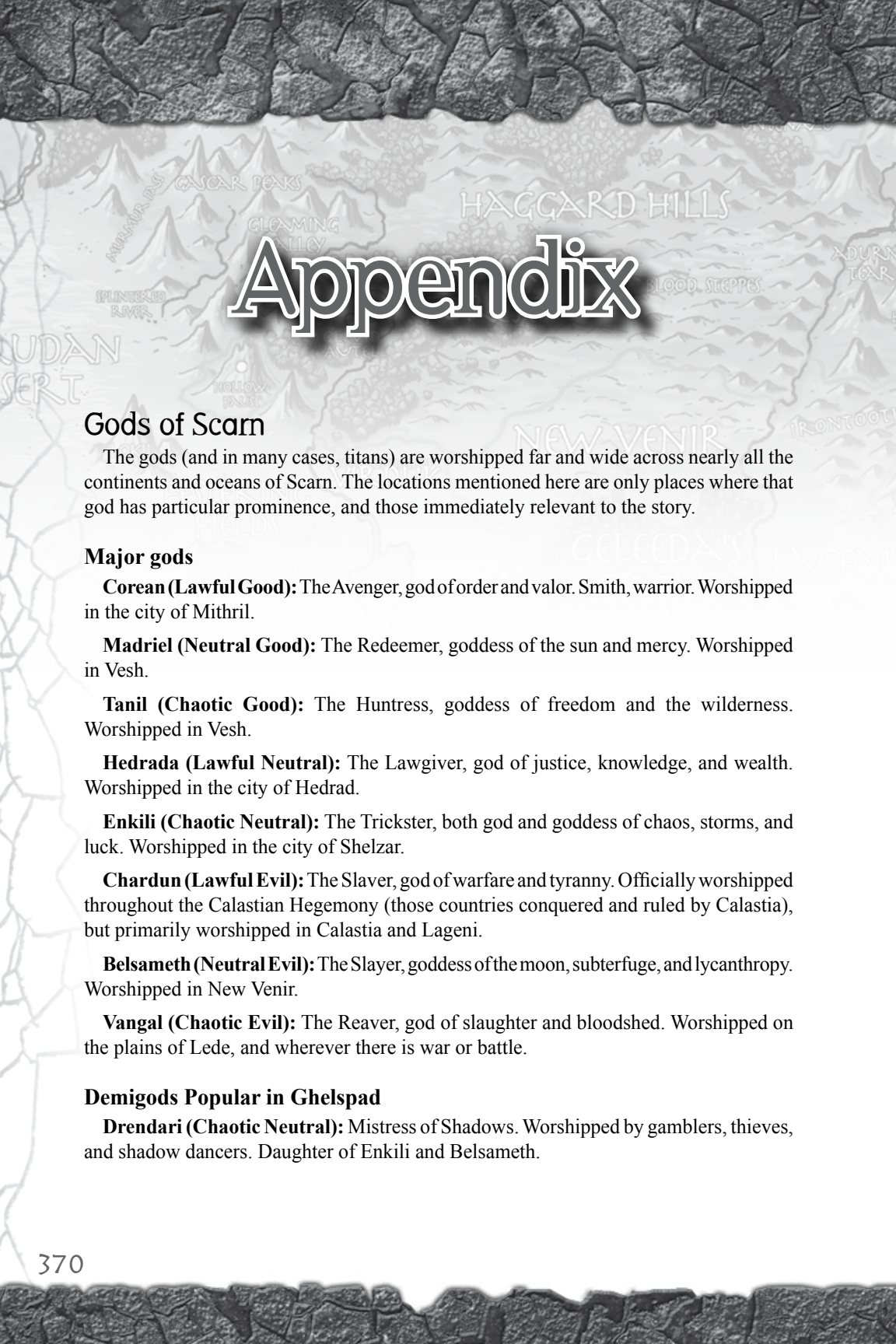
The sage nodded. “It’s very interesting.”

The goddess sat back, steeppling her hands at her chin and closing her eyes.

He sat in silence, waiting to see what the goddess would do — if she would speak further, or leave and allow him to return to his studies. But she remained still, sitting in his easy chair. Thinking.

Finally he broke the silence. “If I may ask, Lady, why are *you* so interested in Eochaid?”

The goddess opened her eyes and returned the sage’s gaze. “I have a use for him,” she said. “For a man who can defy Fate.”



Appendix

Gods of Scarn

The gods (and in many cases, titans) are worshipped far and wide across nearly all the continents and oceans of Scarn. The locations mentioned here are only places where that god has particular prominence, and those immediately relevant to the story.

Major gods

Corean (Lawful Good): The Avenger, god of order and valor. Smith, warrior. Worshipped in the city of Mithril.

Madrid (Neutral Good): The Redeemer, goddess of the sun and mercy. Worshipped in Vesh.

Tanil (Chaotic Good): The Huntress, goddess of freedom and the wilderness. Worshipped in Vesh.

Hedrada (Lawful Neutral): The Lawgiver, god of justice, knowledge, and wealth. Worshipped in the city of Hedrad.

Enkili (Chaotic Neutral): The Trickster, both god and goddess of chaos, storms, and luck. Worshipped in the city of Shelzar.

Chardun (Lawful Evil): The Slaver, god of warfare and tyranny. Officially worshipped throughout the Calastian Hegemony (those countries conquered and ruled by Calastia), but primarily worshipped in Calastia and Lageni.

Belsameth (Neutral Evil): The Slayer, goddess of the moon, subterfuge, and lycanthropy. Worshipped in New Venir.

Vangal (Chaotic Evil): The Reaver, god of slaughter and bloodshed. Worshipped on the plains of Lede, and wherever there is war or battle.

Demigods Popular in Ghelspad

Drendari (Chaotic Neutral): Mistress of Shadows. Worshipped by gamblers, thieves, and shadow dancers. Daughter of Enkili and Belsameth.

Erias (Chaotic Good): The Lord of Dreams. Worshipped by mystics and visionaries. Son of Belsameth and the titan Mesos.

Goran (Lawful Good): God of the dwarves. Worshipped in the dwarven city of Burok Torn.

Hwyrdd (Neutral): God of the halflings. Worshipped in the Heteronomy of Virduk.

Idra (Chaotic Good): The Courtesan, goddess of love, sex, and secrets. Worshipped by hedonists, prostitutes, and lovers. The result of the titan Hrinruuk raping his daughter Tanil.

Manawe (Chaotic Neutral): Mother of the Oceans. Worshipped by sailors, fishermen, and sea people.

Nemorka (Neutral): The Gatekeeper, god of death. Worshipped in Hollowfaust.

Titans of Note

Chern: The Scourge, titan of plagues and disease. He is buried somewhere deep beneath the Mourning Marshes. His essence has seeped into the land, poisoning it.

Denev: The Earth Mother. The only titan to side with the gods during the Divine War. She sleeps somewhere deep beneath the ground, where her power spreads across Scarn, slowly healing the world from the wounds it received during the Divine War. Revered by non-evil druids, the elves of the Ganjus, and popular among farmers.

Gaurak: The Glutton. The gods and Denev entombed him alive after ripping out his teeth. His followers include many titanspawn in the Blood Steppes.

Hrinruuk: The Hunter. Tanil tricked him by stealing his bow and wrestling it to her will. She beheaded him in battle, but even headless his body lived on to wreak havoc across the land. With help, she eventually chopped him into tiny bits and buried them.

Kadum: The Mountainshaker. He is chained in a deep trench in the middle of the Blood Sea, east of Ghelspad. The gaping hole in his chest where his heart was ripped out is the source of the poison that gives the Blood Sea its moniker and reddish hue.

Mesos: Sire of Sorcery. The eight major gods banded together to destroy him, which the stories say triggered the Divine War. His destruction spread sorcerous magic across all of Scarn.

Mormo: Mother of Serpents. She was ripped apart near what is now the Hornsaw Forest, turning the forest into the home of aberrations and monsters. Her followers gather bits of her viscera, hoping to somehow reconstruct her.

Calendar of Scarn

Scarn has four seasons, each with four months. Each month is twenty-five days long, broken up into three weeks of eight days. Each month covers one phase of Belsameth's moon, which also passes through a constellation each month. The twenty-fifth day of each month is an extra day, widely used as a day of rest.

Spring

Corot, the month of strength. Constellation: Ursos, the Bear.

Tanot, the month for hunting. Constellation: Lycaeus, the Wolf.

Enkilot, the month of storms. Constellation: Rukha, the Roc.

Belot, the month of death. Constellation: Sikklos, the Scythe.

Summer

Chardot, the month of war. Constellation: Destrios, the Warhorse.

Madrot, the month of the radiant sun. Constellation: Khepira, the Scarab.

Hedrot, the month of wealth. Constellation: Imperatus, the Emperor.

Vangalot, the month of disasters. Constellation: Drachys, the Dragon.

Autumn

Charder, the month of servitude. Constellation: Charys, the Siren.

Madrer, the month of harvest. Constellation: Astarra, the Mother.

Enker, the month of travel. Constellation: Kylos, the Wheel

Corer, the month of crafting. Constellation: Malneus, the Hammer

Winter

Taner, the month of good fortune. Constellation: Delphos, the Dolphin

Belsamer, the month of darkness. Constellation: Vespis, the Bat

Hedrer, the month of protection. Constellation: Turros, the Tower

Vanger, the month of pestilence. Constellation: Nekheros, the Vulture

Days of the Week

Corday

Madraday

Taniday

Hedraday

Wildday (honoring Enkili)

Charday

Belsaday

Vanday

Denday, in some regions called Landsday, the end of every third week.

Major Holidays in Ghelspad

Carnival of Flowers: the spring equinox, on the second Wildday of Tanot

Festival of the Sun: the summer solstice, on the second Vanday of Madrot

Feast of Wheat: the autumn equinox, on the second Belsaday of Madrer

Grim Day: the winter solstice, on the second Vanday of Belsamer

There are many other holidays celebrated throughout Ghelspad, depending on the region. The four seasonal holidays are older and a carryover from the pre-war Old Calendar (OC). The new After Victory (AV) calendar was set by the gods at the end of the Divine War.

Vigils of Vesh

Arcernoth Delta Vigil serves in the Mourning Marshes, southeast of Vesh. Its headquarters, Riverrock, is right in the middle of enemy territory. It is nicknamed the Marsh Vigil. It's on the front line against the titan-worshipping slitherin, and is the vigil Eochaid wishes to join.

Strength: 400 **Headquarters:** Riverrock **Commander:** Kinthas "Silverblade" Ardante

Beltanian is the largest and first vigil and works directly with the home commander. It is found in the Veshian capital Lave and makes up the bulk of the forces at Vigil Watch Fortress in Bride Lake. It provides tactical and logistical support to all the other vigils.

Strength: 500 **Headquarters:** Bride Lake **Commander:** Dareatha Kelo

Behjurian Vigil serves with the Mithril knights, primarily in the city of Mithril northeast of Vesh.

Ganjus Vigil protects the Ganjus forest to the west. It works with the wood elves of the Ganjus, and joining this vigil requires fluency in the elven language. Most members are elves.

Hornswythe Vigil is based near the mouth of the Hornswythe River in eastern Vesh, and frequently assists the Arcernoth Delta Vigil on missions. **Lolharden Vigil** works in the forests of Eastern Lede, and mostly tangles with orcs, proud (lion centaurs), and the Horsemen of Vangal.

Maritime Vigil works on the Blood Sea coast in the south. It's "the one with boats."

Metyrian Vigil works in the western Kelder foothills. It's "the one with horses."

Mullis Town Vigil protects the caravans that run on the Cordrada Corridor between Mullis Town and Mithril. It's "the one with wagons."

Pelpernoi Vigil works in the Haggard Hills, just north of the Blood Steppes and south and west of the Ganjus forest.

Semanye Vigil is stationed in the country of Durrover, which is northeast of the Calastian Hegemony and currently at war with Calastia. It's made up of "*probably* spies."

Vigil Organization

Squad: 3-6 unranked vigilants, under a **corporal**

Platoon: 2-4 squads, under a **sergeant**

Company: 2-4 platoons, under a **captain**

Battalion: 3-5 companies, under a **vigilant-major**

Vigil: 3-5 battalions, under a **vigilant-marshal** (typically 200-500 people; theoretically from 200-2400; currently the smallest is 250, with the two largest between 400-500 people)

The recruit trainee program rarely grows larger than a single company. A new platoon forms every few months, depending on when each new batch of recruits join. The recruits are not technically part of a vigil but report up through the Beltanian Vigil command. Trainee squads are led by a senior trainee given the rank of corporal, who then roll up to a Beltanian Vigil sergeant.

Lieutenant is an officer rank of similar level to a captain, but without a specific command. They serve as specialists and advisors. Above marshals, a **commander** may lead multiple vigils in times of crises. All vigils of Vesh are led by the lord home commander. The home commander is elected every five years. The current home commander is Kelemis Durn.

Slitherin Broods

There is a slitherin brood for each of the fallen titans. This section describes the broods most relevant to the story.

Diseased: Spawn of Chern. Most slitherin in the Mourning Marshes are members of this brood. Immune to illness themselves, they cultivate new diseases to spread among their enemies.

Red Witches: Spawn of Mormo. They are powerful mages with a broad range of skills. Above all else they seek to bring back their progenitor, the titan Mormo, and destroy the Divine Races.

Brown Gorgers: Spawn of Gaurak. They are always ravenous, and hunt in many wild regions of Ghelspad for anything they can catch.

Foamers: Spawn of Kadum, and larger than most slitherin. This group includes pirates who frequently raid the coast of the Blood Sea. A small group of them has made its home among mysterious ships found in the Mourning Marshes.

Black Pelts: Spawn of Mesos, the Sire of Sorcery. They are powerful sorcerers, well organized, and seek to unite the different broods of slitherin, although most other broods dislike them.

Forge Crawlers: Spawn of Golthagga the Shaper. Some are master mechanists, while others are apothecaries who create deadly poisons.

Stalkers: Spawn of Hrinruuk the Hunter. They are more likely to be found in civilized cities than in the Mourning Marshes, but some broods hire them as mercenaries.

Author's Notes

In 2000, just prior to the release of the first Monster Manual for the new 3.0 edition of *Dungeons & Dragons, Sword & Sorcery* (then a division of White Wolf Publishing) put out its first book in the **Scarred Lands** campaign setting, **Creature Collection**. In the frenzy around the new D&D I picked it up and leveraged it to start a new D&D campaign in the setting. I was immediately hooked. The depth of the Scarred Lands blew me away, and it became my world for all things D&D ever since.

Sword & Sorcery also published a series of Scarred Lands modules: the *Serpent Amphora Cycle*. When my campaign reached a good break point, I had my players roll up new first-level characters to run through the modules. The series started with a free PDF download prequel, *The Serpent Amphora*. You can still get that version (for free) at DriveThruRPG.com.

Early in the module, the PCs (player characters) are introduced to an NPC (non-player character) who points them in the direction of the module's plot, only to die a short while later. As a way to encourage and motivate the players and make things interesting, I decided to make this NPC the older brother of one of the PCs, expanding the "make the ranger born in the village" sidebar option from the module. Possibly because of this relationship, the players worked extra hard to keep the NPC alive, and it seemed a shame to force his death at the end of his introduction. The PCs then left on their mission, leaving the NPC named Eochaid* behind and still alive.

Two modules later, the story once again sends the PCs in the direction of the original village where the campaign started. Eochaid's brother, the PC Kane, decided to take a brief stop in his home town on the way, to check in on his family. I didn't want to deal with that plot just then, and to add a mystery that would keep things interesting I decided that no one in the village had seen Kane's family since the night Kane and his companions left on their mission. Kane was too busy with his quest to further investigate their disappearance, setting up a plot thread for later.

After we finished the modules, the "serpent" party merged with the original Scarred Lands party (conveniently all at around the same level) to create a new group of PCs, Kane still among them. They had a new mission, the start of a new campaign. But the question still remained: What happened to poor, dying Eochaid?

I got my chance to reintroduce Kane's older brother when the plot needed a bit of a push again. A lot had changed. Eochaid was very far away from their little home village, and a very different man. Eochaid helped the party out for a session or two, the plot moved forward, and he disappeared again into the background. But this only introduced new questions. Why had Eochaid changed so much? What happened to their mother? As GM, I had Eochaid drop some hints, but I had yet to decide on the full story.

Eochaid quickly became one of my all-time favorite NPCs. More of a "GM PC," really, with a fully generated character sheet and associated information. Eochaid began actively adventuring with the party. He was not only the occasional "voice of the GM" (sometimes it's nice to join the player's in-character conversations); he became an interesting foil

and built relationships not only with his brother, but with all the party members. The players even came to view him more as a PC than anything else. At one point, the PCs even begged him to chase down an annoying villain who'd trapped the rest of them in a fight so she could run. "Can Eochaid kill her? Don't let her get away again!" When he managed to make the kill (with honest, open die rolls) the room broke into cheers.

I eventually retired him, but he appears before our latest group of PCs (the fifth in this setting that I've been running, on and off now, for over 17 years as I write this) as an occasional guide and "important NPC."

The last campaign book for the original **Scarred Lands** was published by *Sword & Sorcery* in 2004, only a little over four years after the first. But there is tons of material out there, over 40 books, and it took me some time to collect and read them all. Geek that I am, I consider myself a Scarn (the world of Scarred Lands) expert, pulling continuity, plot, and story together from between the pages of occasionally conflicting (and sometimes infuriating) books. But there was still a finite amount of material to cover, and my latest campaign looked like my last on Scarn.

Then, in October of 2013, Nocturnal Media and Onyx Path Publishing acquired the rights to the Scarred Lands, started rereleasing the old material as PDFs, and published new works in the campaign setting. I was excited beyond belief. Only a new Star Wars movie could get me more excited! (Oh wait, that happened, too! So...you get the idea).

I picked up the first publication, **Gauntlet of Spiragos**, right away.

And I was immediately frustrated. In the intervening decade I'd taken Scarred Lands in my own direction, fleshing out metaplots, gods, characters, creation stories — everything. This new story just didn't fit *my* world. So I thought, and I thought. And I hemmed and hawed. And came to realize that before I could move on to this new version of Scarred Lands, I needed to wrap up my own. Was there some way I could transition from the old **Scarred Lands** materials to the new?

And then I got an idea. I realized I had a story to tell. So, here I am, writing Eochaid's story, and in part using it to make that transition — consistent as it can be with the old sourcebooks, while also updating to and introducing concepts from the new books.

This is my way of introducing you to Scarn and the Scarred Lands. If you're already familiar with it, then awesome! I hope you recognize some of your favorite elements. If this is your first time hearing about it, and you like what you read, all 30+ of the original Scarred Lands books are available on DriveThruRPG.com. They have frequent sales and two free intro modules, including the one referenced in my prologue. New books are also coming out for Pathfinder and 5th Edition OGL D&D, and so far they are amazing. If you plan to start a new **Scarred Lands** game, I highly recommend starting with those new books.

This first book is a prequel to the *Serpent Amphora* cycle, linking old lore with new. More books, should they happen, will explore more. This book is *not* a reproduction of my D&D campaign. A direct one-to-one reproduction would be hard to tell and boring to

read if you weren't a player. This is Eochaid's story (at least the first part), not the PCs'. Future books may incorporate later elements from my campaign.

The other thing it is *not* is the only truth. I imagine many of you are gamers, and I'm not out to limit your options at the table. The wonder of tabletop gaming is sitting down with your friends and creating a story as good as (and more personal than) any novel. This is just *one* version of the Scarred Lands: one interpretation of the major metaplots, one answer to its many open questions. I hope you enjoy it. I'll be gratified if you decide to fold it into your own. But what I'd love even more is to hear you say "Your book gave me ideas!"

We're gamers. Tell *your* stories. And then when you meet me, tell me about them. And, of course, what happened in your game if Eochaid lived.

—Sarah L. Stewart, March 2018

*Note: In the module, Eochaid is spelled Eôchaid. But I found the ô character too much of a pain to use, so I dropped it. I personally pronounce the name as Ee-oh-kade (rhymes with "see go paid"), but then again I didn't know "Belsameth" had a "z" sound in it.



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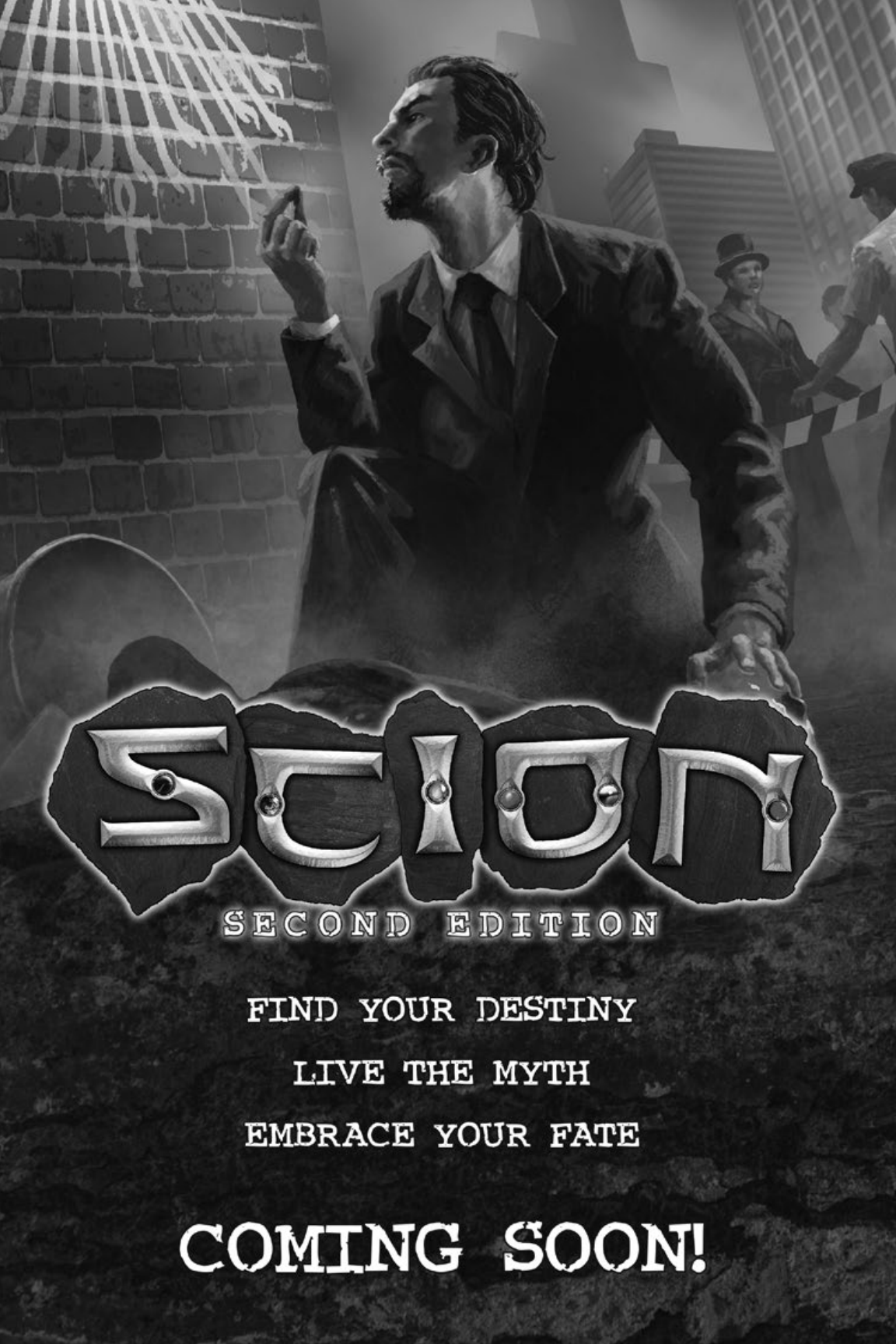


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