

Chapter One: The Swallowtail Festival

“For five years, the faithful of Sandpoint have attended church in temporary structures erected after a fire destroyed the previous temple. The Late Unpleasantness took from the people of Sandpoint friends, family, and possibly, their hope. However, they have stayed, despite the physical and emotional anguish, and they have kept their faith as a new temple was built. Five years after The Late Unpleasantness and the citizens of Sandpoint’s faith was rewarded as the new temple, built to worship many gods, was completed. And now a festival was organized to consecrate the new temple.”

Valtyra ran these thoughts through her mind as she sat on the bench near a food vendor. She watched as more and more people arrived to the small town of Sandpoint, joyous and excited for the festival. The half-elf looked up at the building across the square from her.

The new temple looked beautiful.

Bright white stone formed the base shape of the spires and the foundation while grey stone composed the fine decoration and the frames for the multicolored stained glass windows which depicted well known and uncommon tales of the gods. It was designed so that multiple services could be held at the same time and each “wing” held the theme of a different god or goddess. The temple was mostly for the worshippers of Desna, the goddess of the traveler and luck, but Iomedae, the goddess of valor and justice, Sarenrae, the goddess of healing and redemption, and Torag, the god of forging and strategy were represented here among other faiths.

Valtyra pulled her blonde hair back from her face for the hundredth time and sighed in pleasure. She had always been one for history and architecture and the temple did not let her down.

“Missus... please tell them to stop staring at me,” came a roughened, inhuman voice from beside her.

Valtyra looked at her companion. Bubnug was a goblin, a race not loved in Sandpoint. A goblin raid was a huge part of The Late Unpleasantness and the people of Sandpoint had not forgotten it. The only reason that the goblin pirate was still living was because Valtira had vouched for him, which was not easy. He had been Valtira’s companion for three years now, and she had come to like the green-skinned midget. He believed that he was Valtira’s boss and that everyone should be bowing down to him instead of staring in hate. For he believed that he was chosen by the goblin “god” Badoom to kill his enemies and burn anything that got in his way.

Badoom did not exist, of course, yet there was something to Bubnug’s claim. When he fought, he was able to catch his blade on fire and he showed a mastery with fighting with a lit

torch that amazed Valtyra. But when she asked him to cast a fire spell, he looked confused and said that he had no idea how to do that.

She left her rambling line of thought and smiled at the wide-headed goblin, "Don't worry Bubnug. Remember, you are Firelord!"

The goblin gave the half-elf a wicked smile and said, "Missus right. I Firelord!"

Valtyra chuckled and looked up at the platform where a brown haired, average looking woman stood. The woman looked at the crowd that was now forming in front of the platform and smiled a contagious smile.

"Welcome, friends, family and travelers," she yelled in excitement, "To the Swallowtail Festival! It is good to see so many people here with us today to celebrate the consecration of our new temple. It looks like even Larz Rovanky was able to tear himself away from his tannery to join us!"

The crowd chuckled at this and the woman's smile widened in response, "I am Mayor Deverin, mayor of our great town of Sandpoint, and I am glad to say: Welcome to Sandpoint and the Swallowtail Festival!"

The crowd clapped enthusiastically as Mayor Deverin left the platform and a heavily armored man walked up. He took off his helmet and it was easy to see that he had seen his fair share of fighting. Scars lined his face and he held a serious expression that calmed the crowd down.

"I am Sheriff Belor Hemlock, and I would like to remind everyone to please watch themselves around the evening's bonfire. I also would like to request a few moments of silence as we remember those who lost their lives to the fire that claimed our previous church."

Sandpoint went completely silent as its citizens bowed their heads and pray. Valtyra did not bow her head, or pray, but she did stay respectful for the rest of the people. Bubnug was about to say something, but the look Valtyra gave him shut his mouth instantly. A full minute passed before the sheriff raised his head and said, "Thank you."

He then left the stage and no-one came up. The crowd started muttering in confusion, but stopped as the Mayor walked back on stage.

"The next speaker was scheduled to be Lonjiku Kaijitsu, a nobleman here in the city," the Mayor explained, "However, he is not able to make it today due to a sudden illness."

Valtyra heard a woman behind her mutter, "I highly doubt that."

Valtyra turned to see a foreign looking woman wearing a red sleeveless top shaking her head in annoyance.

“What do you mean,” Valtira asked.

The woman looked at the half-elf and said, “I just doubt that illness took my father. He never wishes to speak to the people.”

Apparently, that is all the woman wanted to say, because she turned her attention back to the platform where a new man was now standing. He was able to bring the crowd’s mood back up with his rousing anecdotes. He then speaks of the long process the town went through to finance and construct the new cathedral and throws in a bit of self-promotion at the end, inviting everyone to stop by the Sandpoint Theater the next evening to view his production of “The Harpy’s Curse” starring the famous diva Allishanda!

Valtyra has heard of the diva, but she had never seen the woman in a play. She may have to go to the show just to see if the diva kept to her reputation. The man left the stage and another man, this time in religious robes and other decorations, took the stage and yelled, “Thank you all for attending, and now I, Father Zantus, am glad to call this festival open!”

The crowd started to clap and cheer enthusiastically as they started to part for the various attractions surrounding the square. Valtira rose from her seat and called to Bubnug.

“Come on, Bubnug! Let’s see about having some fun!”

The goblin jumped to his feet and followed the half-elf as she walked to the nearest game. For about three hours, the duo moved from game to game, which they started with Bobbing for Apples (which Bubnug amazed everyone by getting two apples in his mouth at once), headed towards the Archery range (Valtyra and Bubnug both were beaten badly by a human archer from the River Kingdoms named Alicia) and ended at the Sparring Circle (Valtyra and Bubnug ended up fighting each other and Valtira barely won).

At noon, the party-goers were called back to the platform where cages of butterflies were placed and the man with clerical robes stood.

“A long time ago, Desna fell to earth for the first time. She was found by a blind child and was nursed back to health. For her kindness and service, Desna transformed the child into an immortal butterfly.”

The man then unlocked the cages and a storm of swallowtail butterflies rose into the air in a spiraling riot of color to the cheer of the crowd. The children started chasing the butterflies, trying to capture the fluttering critters in their tiny hands, but the butterflies were always quicker.

Everyone watched the spectacle for a second or two before the Zantus says, "Please, we invite you to head to the food booths where lunch is provided free by the taverns of our fine city."

With that, the crowd dispersed again. Most went straight to one booth, where Valtira and Bubnug were sitting hours before. The woman with the red top was smiling as she served fish and drinks to her patrons. Valtira nodded her head towards the booth and started walking over to it. Bubnug followed very close behind as Sandpoint's citizens continued to stare at him with mixed wonder, confusion and hate.

They arrived at the booth, and actually had to wait in line for a few minutes. Valtira overheard a patron in front of her in line say that Ameiko's curry-spiced salmon could beat even the White Deer's peppercorn venison. When Valtira got her plate, she could not dispute the statement as the salmon was out of this world! Valtira looked over at Bubnug, who was poking at the salmon with his fork.

"You don't like it," Valtira asked.

"Bubnug hate cooked meat."

"I'll find you something later then."

"No. Bubnug go now."

Before Valtira could dispute the goblin, he got up and walked out of the city gate with his sword cane in hand and tricorne hat on head. Everyone seemed to relax slightly as they saw the goblin leave. The half-elf frowned after the departed goblin and sighed. Bubnug has never had an easy life, but Valtira wished that the goblin could get a little more sense than he currently had. She guessed that he couldn't really help it though. Goblins were raised from day one to fend for themselves, which did not really give much time for sense to grow. They thought that they were invincible, which was bad in a combat situation. At least it would be for a normal human. Bubnug seemed to make his illusions into a shield and sword.

She was brought out of her thoughts as the Father returned to the stage. She looked at the sky and saw that the sun was nearing the horizon. She was surprised at how long she was lost in thought. It was just noon about five minutes ago in her mind.

The Father held a stone in his hand. He stared at the sky until the sun was half-way down the horizon, then he threw the stone to the ground. The stone broke apart and let loose a large *boom* that could probably have been heard from across Sandpoint, if not beyond. A stray dog that had crawled under a nearby wagon to sleep starts awake, and the buzz of two dozen conversations quickly hushes as all heads turn toward the central stage, where a beaming Father Zantus stood. He clears his throat and takes a breath to speak. But before he could, a

woman's scream slices through the air. A few moments later, another scream rises, then another.

"What is going on," Valtyra mutters.

Then, new voices could be heard- high pitched, tittering shrieks that sound not quite human. However, Valtyra and most of the citizens of Sandpoint knew what creatures made those sounds.

Goblins.

Goblins were attacking Sandpoint.

Chapter Two: Goblin Raid

“Goblins are small creatures that love only a few things in life: fire, food, singing and raiding. Though they are generally unintelligent, they are still dangerous for the fact that they can hide in ways that we still have yet to figure out, and that they have no care for what or who they kill. Their hatred of dogs and horses are evident in their behavior. They live in tribes, but never seem to work together.”

Valtyra pulled her rapier out of its sheath as a small creature ran right by her and tackled a dog to the ground. She turned away so she could not see the blade move across the dog's skin. Where her head ended up looking showed her little promise for the survival of Sandpoint: she stared right at a line of goblins running toward the square from a covered wagon down High Street to the south. They numbered in the multiple dozens and they were all screaming and yelling in pure joy as the half-elf started hearing what could only barely be considered a song from all sides.

“Goblins chew and goblins bite,
Goblins cut and goblins fight.
Stab the dog and cut the horse,
Goblins eat and take by force!
Goblins race and goblins jump,
Goblins slash and goblins bump.
Burn the skin and mash the head,
Goblins here and you be dead!
Chase the baby, catch the pup.
Bonk the head to shut it up.
Bones be cracked, flesh be stewed,
We be goblins! You be food!”

Valtyra had to shake her head to get the horrible sounds out of her head. The goblins were getting closer and closer. The crowd was panicking and not helping matters at all.

“How does trouble seem to follow me,” she muttered to herself before charging for the closest goblin.

The goblin was distracted by the curry-spiced salmon on the table closest to the stage and the creature did not even see Valtira's blade before it entered its chest. The goblin screamed and tried to pull its blade out of its straps, but Valtira quickly twisted her blade and swung it horizontally out of the goblin. She did not look as the corpse fell to the ground before she found her next target and ran for it with a look of controlled disgust.

This goblin was a bit smarter than his partner and dodged to the side as Valtira's blade came forward in a vertical arc. He also had his blade, a scavenged and holed blade that the

goblins called a 'dogslicer,' already in hand. He tried to leap onto Valtyra, but found ground as Valtyra jumped backward. Before the goblin could get up, though, an arrow entered his head.

Valtyra swiftly twisted around to find Alicia, the archer from the games, pulling another arrow and finding her next target. Valtyra then surveyed her surroundings and saw that the city guard was starting to get themselves together and control the situation. However, the goblins outnumbered the guards at least three to one, if not more, and the goblins were getting the upper hand.

They needed some motivation.

Valtyra, hoping that her voice carried above the sound of battle, raised her blade in the air and let loose a battlecry, "For Sandpoint! For Desna!"

With that, she turned expression into action by running straight for the bulk of the goblins in the square. She did not look back, but she could hear the thundering footsteps of the guards as they followed in her wake. The goblins saw the mass of guards advancing on them, and instead of running away like Valtyra expected, they ran forward themselves. Both groups clashed and a bloodbath commenced.

Valtyra did not let the details of the fight enter deep into her mind as she cut, stabbed and knocked down goblin after goblin. She could not let the details endanger her and the guards. The guards fought well, but it was apparent that they have not had to fight anything other than their friends in sparring matches, because they made foolish mistakes that could have cost them their lives. With each guard that fell, the morale of the rest diminished while every goblin death did nothing but spur the goblins on.

"They are going for the bonfire fuel!"

Valtyra broke herself from the fight and looked towards the bonfire fuel. Sure enough, there were six goblins that ran straight for the piles of wood and jars of oil. A quick look around showed that no-one was able to get to the fuel except her, Alicia, and a male halfling casting spells and attacking with a stolen goblin blade. Valtyra called to them and gave a 'follow me' wave of her hand before she ran to the goblins who were out to make Sandpoint have a bonfire of a town.

Halfway towards the goblins, Valtyra saw an arrow go right past her ear as its path found itself in a goblin's back. Then, right as Valtyra approached the group of goblins, a glob of near translucent water was lobbed over her and landed on two other goblins taking them to the ground struggling for breath. The survivors turned just in time to find a blonde half-elf right in their faces.

Her rapier stabbed forward and entered a goblin's head. She could not pull the blade out in time to avoid an attack from her right, so she let go of her blade, leaped over the now dead goblin, and tossed one of her daggers, previously sheathed, at her attacker. The hilt of the blade smacked the goblin's nose and the crunch of bone was heard. She landed and had to move aside from another blade, but this one scored a hit across her forearm. She hissed in pain and twisted around to roundhouse kick the goblin in the head. However, this goblin was distracted by a flower in the ground, and ducked down in time to avoid the kick.

Valtyra growled in annoyance and used the goblin's head as a footstool to get over his body and grab her rapier. This evidently angered the goblin as he shrieked in fury and leaped for Valtira's throat. Valtira struggled with the rapier but it was stuck in the goblin's head and would not come out. Before the leaping goblin could get halfway to the half-elf, a line of frost smacked the goblin in the side. The goblin's momentum changed direction and out of the path of Valtira.

"Thanks," Valtira yelled towards the halfling before she was able to finally pull the blade out of the goblin's skull.

She looked up in time to see a goblin who managed to sneak up to the fuel with a lit torch. She had no time to warn her companions, no time to plan her approach or time to even think at all. She charged the goblin, ignoring all of the attacks that were attempted on her as she passed combatants. She reached for the goblin pyro and realized that her momentum would place her in some of the now-spilled oil and she would slide past the goblin.

Once again, with no time to think, she dropped her rapier right before hitting the oil. As she thought, she started sliding, but her sliding would put her right in line with the goblin pyro. Before the goblin pyro touched the torch to the oil (she was distracted with her maniacal laughing), Valtira grabbed the goblin in one arm, making sure that the torch would not fall. The goblin immediately started squirming. Valtira held onto the lunatic as she slid past the piles of wood and the rest of the spilled oil. She knew when she hit dry ground as the sudden friction sent her and her captive tumbling.

The pyro left her grip and recovered from its tumble before Valtira. As Valtira was trying to get up, the goblin jumped on her and bit down on her arm with incredible force. The goblin managed to get as many sharp teeth into her as possible and Valtira screamed in pain. Reacting in pure panic now, she tried to shake the goblin off. When that did not work, she sent panicked punches to its head, however the goblin kept its jaws locked on her arm.

The goblin finally let go as both arrow and frost hit it. Valtira held her arm close to her chest as she watched the goblin pyro try to escape but fail as even more arrows and rays of frost hit her. After that, it was all Valtira could do to keep the pain at bay. However, memories of burning buildings, large humanoid beings and a figure laying in the snow, invaded her mind. She fought and fought, and finally managed to get the memories back into the farthest corners

of her mind. When she came back to reality, she felt a hand on her arm and the teeth marks were starting to fade. She followed the hand to its owner and found the halfling concentrating. She then focused on the trails of water that led from her wounds, down the halfling's arm and down his body into the earth. The wounds closed and the pain was gone, yet she still felt tired.

"Sorry," the halfling said as if he knew what she was thinking, "I had to use some of your energy to power the channel."

Valtyra got up slowly and tested her arm. It was stiff, but she could move it without major issue or pain.

"Thank you."

The halfling gave her a grin and said, "Just don't do it again."

Alicia was just walking up to them, with Valtira's rapier and dagger in hand.

"That was a nasty bite, miss," the archer said with a heavy accent, which did not sound at all from the River Kingdoms, as she returned the weapons, "Are you sure that you are alright to fight?"

"I have to be," Valtira responded.

She turned to the Halfling and said, "I don't think I ever got your name."

The halfling looked up and responded, "Lotho Surefoot."

The archer kept a serious expression on her face as she said, "Alicia Riverhand"

Valtyra, still testing her arm, said with a small grimace of pain, "Valtyra."

Lotho looked at her expecting her to say something else. Valtira knew what he was looking for. Even half-elves had a family name, but she did not want to think about anything related to her family name. It was too painful.

She tried to ignore his look and said, "Let's finish this. It looks like the fight has moved to the north gate."

As if to confirm Valtira's statement, a scream of pure fright and the loud bark of a dog came from the north gate. Without another word, the three of them ran for the north gate.

Chapter Three: Die Dog, Die!

“Scholars have never gotten the answer to why goblins hate dogs with such passion. Some think that it is hardwired in their brains, like a dog’s desire to chase cats. Others say that it might be related to the fact that goblins have rodent-like creatures called ‘goblin dogs,’ saying that goblins may think that dogs are pale imitations of the goblin dog. They could just be driven by fear to hate dogs. Whatever the reason, if goblins are attacking, they will go for dogs before any human.”

The three companions arrived at the north gate to see that the battle had indeed moved here. Guards were all over fending off the lunatic goblins at the edges of the area and nearby buildings were starting to catch on fire. However, there was no-one at the actual gate except for a mounted goblin, a cowering noble, and a dog.

The creature the goblin was mounted on, a goblin dog, bit into the neck of the dog, and memory flashed into Valtyra’s mind before quickly fading again. She looked in time to see the dog fall and seven goblins, who apparently were hiding in barrels or boxes, get out to cheer before turning on the noble. The noble screamed again as the goblins started to move forward menacingly.

Before Valtyra could start running, Lotho let loose another glob of water that launched like a cannonball at the group of goblins. The water landed and the mounted goblin somehow remained mounted, but his companions could not keep their feet. They fell to the ground, coughing out water. The mounted goblin turned his attention to the group of three that were now running towards him. Alicia stopped about halfway to start letting loose with arrows, letting them fall like rain onto the goblins. Lotho held his stolen blade high and with Valtyra nearby, they started cutting into the goblins.

Valtyra started on the right, taking a goblin in the heart with her rapier. She then turned to the next goblin on her right and elbowed the creature in the face. Bone crunched and crackled as the force of the impact took what little nose it had and some teeth. She pulled her rapier out of the first goblin, and would have finished off her second target with a swipe to the neck except Alicia yelled, “Valtyra!”

The half-elf turned around and barely had enough time to parry a blow from the mounted goblin’s horsechopper, a makeshift goblin halbard. He cackled madly as the goblin dog he was mounted on tried to take a bite of her with its rat-like teeth. She leapt back, but the goblin dog managed to scratch her lower arm.

She growled in annoyance and saw a lance of frost shoot right over the goblin’s shoulder. The goblin did not even flinch as he went for Valtyra again. She blocked a halberd strike to her chest and leapt forward and to the side, trying to get a hit on the goblin. The dog was not having it though and twisted around so that the blade missed the goblin and dog alike.

Valtyra leapt into the air, hoping that she could get a good strike and possibly get the goblin off of the dog, but the dog quickly got its mouth around her leg and slammed her down back first onto the ground. Her breath was released in a large exhalation, and she was stunned for a couple of seconds. If the goblin wasn't distracted by his own semi-evil, mostly stupid laugh he would have been able to kill her right then. Instead, Valtira recovered from the ground pound and rolled backwards over her head to her hands and knees. However, she soon realized that her rapier was not in her hand. It was laying underneath the goblin dog, and she had no chance of getting it back now.

Valtyra called to the others, "I'm going to need some help over here!"

"We still have three maniacs trying to rip our faces off," Lotho yelled back.

Valtyra dodged a charge from the gobbling dog and cursed under her breath. She just needed to survive until the others could come help her. That was only a few moments, she hoped. She just needed to get it done.

The goblin pulled out a bow and started nocking an arrow as the goblin dog prepared to charge again. Valtira shifted her feet and prepared for the charge, keeping the bow in mind. The goblin dog ran at her and at the last moment, like a matador, she turned on the balls of her feet and avoided the charge. In that same moment, she unsheathed one of her daggers and prepared to throw it. However, an arrow entered her left arm, distracting her enough to mess up the throw. The dagger landed about twenty feet away from the mounted goblin. She grimaced in pain and did some more planning in her mind. She had to do better, or else the next arrow will enter her skull.

The goblin dog was coming around for a second pass and Valtira started moving. She headed for the left and the dog had to alter its movement to follow. The goblin tried to take this opportunity to shoot Valtira, but apparently he did not know about leading the target because all of his arrows missed the mobile fighter. She, in turn, threw another dagger which stuck into the goblin's leg. She had to be careful though. She only had three more daggers.

Valtyra got a glance at her comrades as she was moving, and saw that they were still fighting two goblins. Numerous goblin corpses surrounded them, some battered with arrows and some frozen over. More must have tried to attack them since there were more than seven goblin corpses laying around. They would still be distracted for a few moments.

That glance was enough to distract Valtira as well. As she returned her attention to her fight, a weight slammed her to the ground from her back. The goblin dog squeaked in pleasure and raked its teeth across her neck. They don't break skin, but it sends a shiver down her spine nevertheless.

“Longshanks fight well for longshanks. But time to see if longshanks bleed well.”

She could only see one of the goblin dog’s paws at the side of her head and feel the other paw on her back, but she could hear the string of the bow get pulled back and could imagine the maniac’s smile as he prepared to release the arrow. Valtyra struggled to get the paw off of her and get up, but the goblin dog had a good hold on her. She tried to find her rapier, but it was out of reach, at the same place it was when she was ground pounded. She could not reach her daggers because of the beast on top of her, and she had nothing else she could do.

“Hey! Small, green and ugly!”

Valtyra, the goblin and his mount turned to see Lotho and Alicia standing in front of a pile of goblin corpses. Alicia held her bow nocked and aimed at the goblin while Lotho held a glob of water in his hand.

“You,” Lotho said, “Might want to back away.”

The goblin grinned and the goblin dog squeaked in amusement.

“Longshanks things longshanks can win. Me like see longshanks try.”

Lotho grinned in response and instead of speaking, threw his glob of water straight into the air. It flattened and froze until it became a solid disk of ice and started to flow all around Lotho. He then bared his stolen goblin blade in a guard position and charged the goblin dog. The goblin dog braced itself and charged towards Lotho. Valtyra groaned as the dog put more pressure, then released the pressure on her back from its brace and leap. She gets to her knees to catch her breath and watches the fight between Lotho, Alicia and the mounted goblin.

Valtyra had to admit. Lotho was skilled.

The halfling, after starting his charge, froze the ground between him and the goblin dog in a thin sheet of ice. He started a controlled slide that took him underneath the goblin dog’s leap and let his blade enter the dog’s underside. The blade did not enter deep, but it went in enough to draw blood. The dog squeaked in pain and landed wrong. It got back up just in time to have two arrows enter its side. It looked like it was about to charge the archer, but Lotho lobbed another glob of water which smacked the goblin dog and its rider. Lotho then sent his floating shield in a Frisbee-style throw and it caught the goblin rider in the side tossing him off of his mount. The shield came back to him, and now that Valtyra was close enough, she could tell that he was tiring. Whatever he was doing was taking a lot out of him. Yet he got up and ran to the goblin to fight him one-on-one while Alicia took the attention of the goblin dog.

Valtyra got to her feet, a little shakily, and moved to pick up her rapier. Being pounded into the ground multiple times did nothing good for her body, but when she picked up her

weapon she managed a nice jog speed as she went to help Alicia fight the dog. The dog's attention was solely on Alicia, so it did not see Valtyra enter her rapier into its rear flank. It turned to Valtyra, but got an arrow to the neck. It tried to turn back to Alicia, however, it started shaking in fatigue and fell to its side. Cuts, bruises and frost covered its whole body, and it was finally too much for the creature. Valtyra did not hesitate as she took her blade and entered it into the creature's skull through its eye.

She looked to find Lotho finishing off the goblin with a blade thrust to its chest. The goblin tried to fight fiercely on the blade but did not last long before dying. Lotho let go of the blade and let both fall to the ground. He then collapsed onto the ground himself. Valtyra and Alicia both ran to him and found him still breathing.

"That," he panted, "Took a lot out of me. Phew, I think I need a nice bath and some nice feminine hands on my back."

Valtyra smiled in relief and patted his head while looking around, "It looks like the rest of the goblins are fleeing towards Junker's Edge. We won. We deserve rest."

"Valtyra," Alicia said, "There is something that has been bugging me."

"Yeah?"

"Where is the goblin that was with you during the festival?"

Valtyra did not understand what she was saying at first, but her brain pushed through the fatigue and she realized: Bubnug! He did not come to the fight, at least that she saw, and he left right before the raid. She could not help but think: Did he start this raid? Was he the one that caused all of this?

Footsteps sounded from her left, and Valtyra looked up to see that the noble was walking up to them. He had a huge smile on his face and he went straight for Alicia.

"Your skills in battle were wonderful, my lady! Just superb! I must also say that your beauty matches that skill as well," he grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it.

Valtyra and Lotho both look at each other and grin at Alicia's embarrassment.

"Why. Um. Thank you," Alicia stuttered.

"Please, I implore you to meet me at the Rusty Dragon in the next day or so! I must repay you for rescuing my life and see your beauty again before I leave town," he turned to Valtyra and Lotho and added, "Your friends may come as well, of course."

He turned his attention back to Alicia and said, "Now, if you may excuse me, beautiful, I will take my leave. Farewell, my lady."

He bowed to Alicia and walked away. Alicia stared after him in confusion while Valtira and Lotho stared after him in a mix of amusement and annoyance. Alicia looked back on her two companions and asked, "Was I just asked out on a date?"

Valtira and Lotho looked at each other before they both burst out in laughter.

Chapter Four: The Desecrated Vault

“The result of a goblin raid is almost never good. They burn buildings. They kill animals. They wreak havoc on food storages. But they are all cowards. Unless they take mellowroot, they will run when they realize how precarious their situation is. So, if you are attacked, let them know that you are the bigger force and in control. And if they do damage, make sure that you respond in such a way that they will never bother you again.”

It was a rough day for the citizens of Sandpoint. Goblin corpses were scattered all over Sandpoint’s town square and the north gate, but the people could breathe a sigh of relief that none of the citizens died, and that those with serious injuries would keep living. Those that could work started making fires and throwing the corpses into them letting the purification of the flames flow over the tainted creatures. The sun rose back into the sky onto fires still burning, and citizens starting to walk back home, praising the new “heroes of Sandpoint” as they passed.

The heroes stayed by the fires, watching the flames lick over the wood and corpses. All three of them thought the buildings that surrounded them could have been consumed by this fire if they had not intervened. They all took comfort in that, but Valtyra still thought about Bubnug. She could not believe that he would have assisted his brethren, but he was nowhere to be seen, which made her doubt. They stayed by the fires until they burned out. Once the last ember lost its life and went dark, the heroes found their way to the Rusty Dragon Inn for some sort of rest.

However, disappointment rose when Valtyra heard a loud conversation from inside the inn.

“Do you know where they are,” a roughed, slightly familiar male voice asked urgently.

“No-one has seen them since the town square emptied,” a female voice answered.

“I need to find them. If you see them, then tell them to come to me.”

Valtyra rounded the corner of the doorway and saw Sheriff Hemlock talking with Ameiko. He was just turning towards the door when he saw the half-elf standing there. He rushed up to her and frantically cried, “I need your help. I know you have done much for Sandpoint already, but my guards cannot handle this.”

Valtyra sighed and looked at her companions for confirmation. She could see the black rings of fatigue around their eyes, but they nodded eagerly.

“Very well,” Valtyra said, “Let’s go.”

The sheriff led them up River Street and High Street before coming to the entrance of the graveyard across town from the inn. Father Zantus was pacing back and forth along the

open gate muttering to himself and did not notice the group walking up until they were right next to him. The man flinched in shock but then ushered them to follow him.

“After cleaning the goblin raid,” he explained, “I returned here to do my daily walk of the graveyard when I walked past the burial vault of the late priest, Ezakien Tobyn. Its door was left ajar, and I heard voices from inside. I ran for the sheriff immediately.”

Lotho grunted, “Just point it to us. I don’t want to have to heal the priest. All of our faces would be red.”

Valtyra, without thinking, burst out laughing. She tried to quickly control herself, but it ended up taking a couple of minutes whilst leaning against a tombstone in order to calm her down. She was somewhat glad to see that the other two heroes were also trying to control themselves with more success than her. The Father and sheriff glanced at each other in confusion and worry before the three calmed down.

“I am serious though,” Lotho said, a hint of the laughter still in his voice, “You two should stay back.”

Hemlock wanted to argue, but Zantus put a hand on his shoulder. The sheriff relaxed and nodded. The three heroes unsheathed their weapons and inched forward to the vault. As they got closer, Valtira started to hear the voice that Zantus mentioned. But, it sounded familiar.

Very familiar.

She could not figure out who the voice belonged to though, so she kept with the others and looked around the now open stone door. The daylight was bright enough to see the inside of the vault, but no-one was inside that she could see. Yet the voice continued. There was only one coffin in the vault, and it was slightly opened. She walked up to it but before she could reach the coffin, she was startled by the sound of crunching bones.

It was only a skeleton.

She shook the fright from her head and noticed that Lotho walked around the coffin across from her. He had a glob of water ready in his hand and was looking at the lid of the coffin intently. Valtira shifted her rapier from her right to left hand and braced herself. Taking a deep breath, she started pushing the lid to the side.

A small voice sounded from the coffin.

“Missus?”

Valtyra gasped and dropped her rapier. She pushed the lid with both hands and said, "Don't hurt him!"

Lotho looked at her in confusion as Bubnug leaps up and hugged Valtira as tightly as he could. Footsteps sounded from behind her and Alicia, in a suspicious tone, says, "It's your goblin friend. What is he doing here?"

Bubnug was shaking uncontrollably. Whatever happened must have frightened the small creature to no end. Valtira wanted nothing but to take the goblin back to the inn and take care of him. But Alicia was on to something. They needed to know what happened.

Valtira set the goblin onto the floor, noticed the dirt and blood on him, and asked, "Why are you inside of a coffin? Where were you during the raid? What happened?"

"I left for food in forest," Bubnug started to explain, "I followed flowers and trees until I spotted animal. I killed it and started putting meat into pack. Before I eat, I see group of goblins and tall man head for city."

Valtira, Lotho and Alicia stared at each other in shock.

"You said that there was a man with the goblins? What did he look like?"

He shrugged, "Black robe. Black hood."

Valtira heard Alicia curse under her breath. Bubnug turned suddenly to her with a shocked look on his face. Valtira turned his attention back to her and she asked, "What then?"

"I follow. They climb over wall to stone field. They enter here. I watch them take body. I think that bad. So I fight. I win against all except robe man. He grabs me, puts me in there," he points towards the coffin, "Then shuts me in. I could only get lid open enough for air."

Valtira pulls the goblin into a tight hug and he hugs back.

"What is taking you so long?"

Valtira turns to see Hemlock in the vault's doorway. Her turning was enough to allow Hemlock to see Bubnug. With longsword in hand, the sheriff immediately leaps for the goblin. Valtira grabs her rapier and parries the blade away from Bubnug. Ignoring the half-elf, the man goes for Bubnug again. Bubnug just skitters back in fright, trying to get away from the man but Valtira gets in front of him and blocks the blade once more.

"What are you doing," Hemlock howls, "You dare protect a goblin?"

“This goblin,” Valtira asks while ducking a swing, “Damn right! He had nothing to do with the attack. He even tried to take out their leader!”

“It lies!”

“I trust him!”

“Then you are a fool!”

A new voice rang throughout the vault, “Enough!”

Everyone turned to see Father Zantus in the doorway. He was looking at the two combatants with a look of disappointment.

“I will not have the grave of my predecessor desecrated further!”

He walks to the sheriff and says, “Do you think that the town needs any more chaos? We managed to survive the night due to these fine people. No matter if she,” he points to Valtira, “Is right or wrong we should take the time to understand. She says that she trusts the goblin. Why not try to believe her?”

“I cannot take the chance that she,” Hemlock points the blade at Valtira’s chest, “Is wrong. The goblin may not have been a part of the attack, but it can be spying.”

Valtira backed away from the man until she was next to Bubnug. This let her see her two companions with weapons readied. She just hoped that they were to defend her instead of attacking her. Their attention was on the sheriff for the time being.

“Has the creature attacked you yet?”

“No.”

“So, you started the conflict. Without thinking. Before you attacked, I noticed that he was hugging the woman. Is that the behavior of a normal goblin to you?”

The sheriff looked at Bubnug, who was hiding behind Valtira’s leg. He stared for what felt, to Valtira, like a year before the sheriff lowered his blade.

“I guess not. But Sandpoint will not accept this. At all.”

“No, they will not. But we will continue on. We always have and always will.”

Hemlock nodded before walking out of the vault without turning back. Father Zantus sighed and bowed to Valtira and Bubnug before departing himself. Valtira kneeled down and hugged Bubnug again before saying, "Let's return to the inn. We all deserve rest."

Alicia and Lotho follow Valtira and Bubnug, focusing on the goblin. While no-one had their weapons out any longer, Alicia and Lotho kept their hands close to their weapons. Bubnug kept clutching Valtira's pants like a frightened child and she, in turn, had her hand on his head like a protective mother.

It was not until they reached the town square that more issues began. Citizens were walking to the new cathedral for the more somber consecration ceremony when one of them spotted the heroes with a goblin. A yell sounded from the crowd and everyone started to back away. Valtira reached for her weapon. She was tired and extremely annoyed. She did not want to hear another thing about Bubnug and she was ready to show her displeasure to the citizens that they saved.

But, once again, Father Zantus interrupted with, "Please, citizens of Sandpoint. Hear me!"

The Father was slowly descending the stairs to the cathedral with arms and smile wide. The crowd looked at him in confusion as he stepped between them and Valtira. He turned to the crowd and said, "I know that we have had an awful experience by goblins. I know how you feel about most goblins. But remember that these fine people helped keep us safe, and the goblin in their midst also helped. So, I implore you. Treat him as another person."

The crowd started yelling, concentrating their aggression past the priest and to the goblin hiding behind Valtira. Her anger started to boil over again and if it wasn't for Bubnug grabbing her hand, she would have drawn her blade.

Bubnug started walking towards the Father sword cane in hand but sheathed. He did not have any menace to his movements or face and did not flinch as the crowd started flinging dirt at him. Valtira tried to run to him, but Lotho held her back.

"He needs to do this."

"But they'll tear him apart!"

"Trust in him. If he is as you say, and not a foe to Sandpoint, then he has to prove it. Not you."

She tried to bowl him over, but he called water from the ground to lock her in place. With the water around her ankles, the best thing she was able to accomplish was a face plant into the

ground. She crawled towards the goblin and only made it a couple of inches before the water held her fast.

Bubnug was now next to Father Zantus, who was looking at the goblin in shock as he past the Father and continued until he was a few feet for the crowd. The crowd continued to yell and toss dirt as the goblin pulled out the cane's blade, which was still coated with goblin blood. However they sobered as the goblin stuck the blade into the ground. They noticed the blood both on the blade and staining his clothes.

"I Bubnug. I goblin. But I exile. I thrown from tribe and joined pirates."

By now, the crowd was silent, mostly in confusion and shock, and no one but Bubnug moved.

"There I met Missus," he turned to Valtira, "And we joined together. I defended town, and I have blood proof."

He stopped talking to let the townsfolk think about what he said. Valtira could only stare at the goblin. She did not know if she wanted to hug the goblin to death or smack him upside the head. Bubnug pulled the blade out and cleaned it as much as he could before returning to Valtira. The water Lotho had called released the half elf and she hugged the goblin tightly.

"I did it," Bubnug said.

"Yes you did."

She released him and said, "Let us go to the inn."

They walked towards the crowd, who moved out of the way in wonderment. The four of them entered the inn, found out that they had rooms available for free for the next week, and crashed onto the beds: not to wake up again until the next day.

Chapter Five: Monster In the Closet

"The sun rising is a chance for new choices, new opportunities, and new problems. Embrace the new day, but always be cautious. For fate will not leave the victims of her game alone."

Valtyra awoke to the bright burning of the noonday sun. The bed next to her was still occupied by the small form of Bubnug breathing, his chest slowly rising and falling rhythmically. She smiled and stretched, letting out a small yawn before getting out of bed. The half elf was buckling the final strap of her weapons when Bubnug sat up, looking around blearily.

"How do you feel, Bubnug?"

He looked at her in confusion for a second before yawning, "Tired."

"Well, we can't sleep all of the time. Get up, get dressed and we'll see about getting food."

He groaned but got out of his bed and got dressed in his pirate outfit. While he did that, she thought about how she met the creature. He was thrown out of his tribe at birth and had to survive on his own. The Shackles is a dangerous place, even on the small islands to the east, but somehow Bubnug survived for a few years, surviving on nothing but the sword cane that he found while exploring and the animals he managed to kill.

He found his freedom from the island and its inhabitants in the form of The Lucky Maiden, a pirate ship that had made landfall for repairs. He sneaked upon the ship and waited until they had made land again. At least, that was his plan. Five days into the voyage, he was found by one of the crew. He was shown to the rest of the crew and was almost keelhailed, but Valtira took pity upon the goblin and was drafted into her servitude. They soon became close friends and now here they were, away from the pirate life and have become heroes of Standpoint, even if Standpoint did not agree.

Bubnug, at this point of Valtira's thoughts, finished strapping his shirt and put on his tricorne hat.

"I am ready, Missus."

They walked out of their room and down the stairs to the dining room. There was no-one in the room except for the staff of the inn and three people seated at the table closest to the door. One of them, Alicia, noticed them and waved them to the table. Lotho looked up and smirked as Valtira approached.

"Look who's finally awake," he said before taking a sip of his drink.

Valtyra sat, "How are you two up so early?"

Alicia shrugged, "I've always woken up early."

Valtyra gave her an annoyed look, which made Lotho grin harder. Bubnug sat down next to Valtyra and swung his legs back and forth like a child. He did not seem to notice or care about the wary looks the rest of the table gave him. It was the third person at the table, Aldern, who broke the silence.

"I was just talking with Alicia about my repayment for her timely rescue."

He did not notice Valtyra and Lotho's disbelieving looks as he continued, "I suggested that we should go on a boar hunt. I love to hunt myself and would like to do so before I return to Magnimar. This would also give the chance to raise Sandpoint's morale as we will cook the boar and hold a feast."

Valtyra liked that idea. While she had never hunted before and the thought of trying pleased her, she also figured that this would give Sandpoint the opportunity to trust Bubnug.

"I am in," she said.

Bubnug looked up at Valtyra, "Can Bubnug come?"

"Of course you can!"

Valtyra shot the others a look that dared them to disagree. None of them did.

"I'll join you," Lotho said setting down his mug.

Alicia looked around the table and sighed, "What the hell? I'm in too."

Aldern smiled and opened his mouth to speak, but the inn door slammed open. A middle aged woman rushed in with a baby in the crook of her arm and a young boy about seven or eight beside her holding her hand.

"Where are they?"

Everyone at the table stood up and moved to the woman.

"Are you alright, ma'am?" Aldern asked. He guided her to the table as Lotho guided the boy to the table next to his mother.

Bubnug came from around the table and when the woman saw him, she screamed and tried to get away. Aldern held her still and tried to reassure her that Bubnug wouldn't hurt her. The scream stopped Bubnug in his tracks for a couple of seconds before Valtira told him to get Amieko. He ran off and Valtira turned her attention back to the woman.

"What happened, ma'am? Why do you need us?"

It took the woman a moment to control herself. The baby was crying but the boy just stared at the table in some form of shock.

When she got herself under control, she said, "I am Amele Baret. My son is Arene. We were at the Standpoint Festival when the goblins attacked. Arene saw something that has given him nightmares since. The past couple of nights he has screamed about a goblin in his closet. My husband threatened him with sleeping in the woodshed if he couldn't get past a night without screaming. Later that day, Arene was taking a nap and screamed again, but then we heard our dog yowl in pain. We ran into the room to find our dog dead and a goblin on..."

She stopped as the memory seemed to return and upset her. At this point, Bubnug returned with Amieko. Amieko had some food and drink in her arms and she sat them down before hugging the woman. The hug seemed to calm Amele down and she continued, "A goblin was on top of Arene, biting his arm."

She then rolled up Arene's shirt sleeve and he gave no reaction. Everyone else, however, gasped as they saw the multiple bite marks. Valtira unconsciously rubbed her own arm where the bite marks from the goblin pyro still showed.

"Where is your husband," Lotho asked as he motioned Amieko for more water.

Amieko got up and the woman answered, "He chased the goblin to the closet and I panicked. He might still be at the house."

Valtira nodded, "Alright. Lotho, stay here to help them with whatever they need. Alicia, you, Bubnug and I will go investigate the house. Where is it?"

"The third house on Prickleback Lane from the west," Amele said.

Valtira nodded and motioned for Alicia and Bubnug to follow. They grabbed their weapons and followed close behind. As they are not native residents of the town, it took them a while to arrive at the house even though it was just two blocks away from the inn. Bubnug opened the door and pulled out his blade, keeping the cane sheathe in his other hand. The blade lit on fire as if on its own and all three of them entered the house.

It was almost completely silent, which got Valtira's nerves shaking. She readied her rapier and one of her throwing daggers as they started checking the house one room at a time. The first floor was clear. They moved to the second floor with Bubnug still in the lead. They checked each room systematically until they arrived at the third room.

It was clear that this room was a child's room. A small bed was against the left wall with the bed facing towards the center of the room. Next to the bed was a small table which held a family drawing and a closet was on the other side of the bed. One of its doors was held open and blood could be seen on the smooth wood. Bubnug walked around the bed while Valtira and Alicia stood on each side of the doorway to the hall, ready to intercept anything if it tried to escape.

Bubnug found a man's corpse on its stomach, head inside of the closet. He pulled the body back and gasped at the man's head. It was only bone and blood. The muscle and skin was ripped off. Before he could do more, he was attacked. He could not see the form before it barreled into him, but as he landed on his back he could see that it was another goblin: blood coating his lips and hands. The goblin's eyes were wide with insanity and he just started laughing as he ripped into Bubnug. He scored Bubnug's face before Bubnug pulled his head back and head butted the feral goblin.

The feral goblin cried out in pain while holding his head. This gave Valtira the view she needed to throw a dagger and for Alicia to shoot her arrow. The dagger missed the goblin but the arrow grazed the creature's forehead. The feral goblin screamed incoherently and lunged for Alicia. Valtira intercepted the goblin by slicing diagonally upward which caused the goblin to miss Alicia and fly into the hallway. The goblin slammed back first into the wall and Bubnug leaped after him, blade held high. The flaming blade entered the feral goblin's belly, but he did not seem to notice as he raked and bit at Bubnug.

Bubnug fell back, holding his face and trying to stem the blood flow. The feral goblin took this opportunity to get up and run out of the house and screams could be heard almost immediately from outside.

"Get up Bubnug," Valtira yelled as she ran past him, "He's getting away!"

Valtira and Alicia entered the sunlight and noticed the goblin heading for the market. They gave chase with weapons ready. The feral goblin entered the busy market and started jumping and biting on various citizens. They could not shoot or throw anything until they got the goblin away from the masses of citizens and the goblin definitely did not want to leave until he took some humans with him.

Valtira charged forward and reached out to grab the goblin. However, the goblin let go of his target and avoided Valtira's hand. He then ran for one of the fruit stalls, zig-zagging

through the crowd of onlookers, and wrapped his hands around a cutting knife. He then went for the throat of the fruit vendor.

Bubnug came out of seemingly nowhere and shoulder-tackled the goblin in mid-air. They both rolled away from the stall and the tumble separated them. The feral goblin got to his feet and swung his knife at a woman holding her child. The knife entered her shin and she cried out in pain.

However, he was now away from other people enough for Alicia's bow. She let loose with a barrage of arrows, only two of them making any marks on the goblin. Valtyra and Bubnug went forward together and flanked the goblin, trying to trap him between them. The goblin lunged at Valtyra in such a way that she was forced to side-step or else be disemboweled. The feral goblin ran through the hole that her side-step created and was able to avoid the flaming sword cane blade from Bubnug.

The feral goblin did not see the ice shard that entered and exited his head. He fell to the ground and the knife left his now limp grip. The three combatants turned to see Lotho and Amieko running into the market from the direction of the Rusty Dragon. Lotho went straight for the woman who took a knife to the shin and Amieko started directing the people of Sandpoint back to their homes.

Soon after, the Sheriff and a few of his soldiers arrived and started asking questions. An hour later, they all returned to the Rusty Dragon to tell Amele the news, who completely broke down into tears. Arene just continued staring at the table, showing no reaction to the news. The baby, when she heard her mother's crying, started to cry too and Amele held the child in her arms tightly.

Hemlock leaned into Valtyra's ear and whispered, "Thank you for your help. I will take her to the church for a few days."

Valtyra nodded as the sheriff rose to guide the family out of the inn. Bubnug looked after them until they left the inn, then he looked up at Valtyra and asked, "Did we do good?"

Valtyra sighed, "Honestly, I don't know."

Chapter Six: The Hunt

"Secrets are wonderful things. They are the information that we keep within ourselves, locked away from everyone else unless we willingly unlock them. Yet they always seem to do more harm than good."

Valtyra took a seat at the table where she was sitting only a short while ago and sighed. The others followed suit and the group was quiet for a few minutes. Aldern broke the silence with, "Come on! We can't sit around moping all day! Let's go on that hunting trip!"

Bubnug immediately brightened up, stood and ran to Valtira, tugging at her shirt sleeve. Valtira could not help but smile at his childish antics, "Sure. Let's get going. The boars won't hunt themselves."

She got up and let Bubnug lead her out of the inn by the sleeve. The others followed suit and Aldern directed them to the Goblin Squash Stables, keeping Bubnug out of earshot when mentioning the name.

"I will be there in a bit. Please, pick your own mount and I'll pay for it. Oh, and make sure that Bubnug is nowhere in sight. The man who tends the stable hates goblins with a burning passion no one can match and the showdown you had today will not help matters."

Before any of them could say anything, he walked away. They stopped long enough to look at each other and shrug before continuing to the stables. It took them half an hour to find it, as they kept getting lost and no-one seemed to want to help them. They groaned when they arrived and realized it was right next to the Rusty Dragon.

"Please keep back," Valtira urged Bubnug, "We do not want to make trouble."

Bubnug crossed his arms and pouted, but he stepped out of the way of the door. She smiled reassuringly at him and she led the others inside.

Many different smells, most of them unpleasant, invaded their noses. Valtira recoiled and noticed that the others did as well to her relief.

"I apologize," a roughened voice chuckled from the back of the stables, "When you run a stable, you get all sorts of interesting aromas."

A man wearing leather armor and holding a horse brush came from one of the stable rooms. He had a smile of amusement on his face as he surveyed the three.

"Hello sir," Lotho said, "We are in need of some mounts."

His smile widened slightly at the word mounts. "You have come to the right place my friend. Please, peruse my fine selection."

The three heroes walked down the hall of stables, looking at each horse as they passed. Most of the horses just continued whatever they were doing as the heroes walked by, whether it was eating or staring. However, there was one that caught Valtyra's attention. It was a pure white shire horse with red, reptile-like eyes. The horse stared at her with the most evil glare that a horse could give. To Valtyra, it seemed as if the horse was exuding malice and distaste. Yet, there was something about it that resonated with her.

"I'll take this one," she said.

The stableman just stared at her.

"What?"

"Val," Lotho whispered, "Are you sure you want that horse?"

"Why would I not?"

"Don't you feel the energy surrounding it? Do you really want that darkness around you constantly when you are riding it?"

"It only gave me the evil eye," Valtyra shrugged, "A lot of things have."

Lotho stared at her in disbelief, "I... have no idea what to say to that."

"Let her have the horse," Alicia told him.

She was petting the mane of a beautiful chestnut quarter horse. The horse rubbed its head against her cheek and she smiled slightly.

The stableman looked between the three heroes before shrugging, "If you are willing to ride it, I am willing to sell it."

He looked at the halfling, "What about you?"

While Lotho looked at the two options that he had as he could only ride ponies, Valtyra studied the 'evil' horse.

It continued looking at her with its glare. However, it was muted slightly. Maybe by respect. Or possibly with contempt. It otherwise did nothing to her.

"Well then, Shadowshine," Valtira grinned, "Challenge accepted."

By then Lotho had chosen his steed. It was a tan haired Boer pony that seemed to be overflowing with energy. It was bouncing back and forth and rubbing against Lotho's cheek as if it wanted to ram its face through his head. The halfling laughed at that and mimicked the pony, which seemed to get even more excited by this action.

The stableman went to the back and started writing something on an enlarged sheet of parchment.

"Who will be paying?"

"I will."

Aldern walked into the stables and straight to the stableman, looking at each horse as he passed. Shadowshine stared at the man with the same look he gave Valtira, but Aldern did not seem affected by the eyes or the supposed aura of power. Aldern even gave a slight bow to the horse.

He talked with the stableman for a few minutes before they shook hands and went to the back. They both came back with saddles, bridles and saddlebags among other gear.

The heroes looked in shock at this and Aldern laughed, "Did you think you would get the horses and nothing else? No! The heroes of Sandpoint deserve more!"

With that, they all went about getting the horses ready and learning the basics of horse riding and care with Alicia chiming in with a comment or two. Shadowshine gave them some issue, but calmed down under Valtira's hand. This gave the others pause. They did not speak up though. What would they say if they did?

When the horses and the riders were ready, Aldern walked them to the gate where Bubnug was waiting. Bubnug was frightened of the horses, but Valtira helped reassure him that he would be fine. That was hard to do with Shadowshine's mere presence, but they eventually coaxed him onto the beast.

With the goblin on the horse, everyone else mounted up and Aldern led them to the Tickwood Forest. The ride took approximately half an hour and during the ride Aldern started asking about the heroes, especially Alicia, which both Lotho and Valtira found annoying.

They all learned (through careful pushing by Aldern) that Alicia was not originally from the River Kingdoms. She was a native of Varisia, the nation where they currently were. She was born to a group of nomads and traveled with them when they left Varisia after the Late

Unpleasantness. No matter how Aldern pushed, he was not able to get Alicia to tell why she returned to Varisia.

Lotho was more willing to talk about himself. He was from the southern nation of Cheliox, the powerful nation of infernal clerics and worshippers. He was one of the few people that resisted the evil of the nation and led a hospital for those abused by the clerics of Cheliox. It did not last though, because a group of the guards came to tear down the hospital. Lotho managed to escape with a few key allies and fled to Varisia.

Aldern then turned to Valtira. She knew what was coming and she did not like it at all. The past was too painful to remember for her. However, she breathed an inward sigh of relief when they arrived at the edge of the forest. Three men awaited them at the edge, mounted on horses and surrounding a wagon and oxen. One of the men noticed the heroes and rode out to meet them.

“We are ready!”

“Very well,” Aldern nodded, “Let us go.”

They all entered the forest with the three men in the lead and the wagon in the rear. The heroes gazed around in wonder at the beauty of the forest. They could hear the chirps of birds and the rustling of the leaves under their feet. About five minutes after entering the forest, the group stopped and the lead men dismounted.

They started grabbing various items such as cymbals, drums and small metal cones. Their horses, as if they knew what was going to happen, started backing away slowly. Lotho, Alicia and Aldern’s horses started backing away as well, but Shadowshine stayed right where he was, as if he did not care.

“What are they doing,” Lotho asked Aldern in a confused tone.

“You might want to ready your weapons,” was his only response as he pulled a bow from a strap on the horse’s side.

The others looked at each other and shrugged in unison. They pulled out their weapons just as the men started clanging, banging and blowing on their various instruments.

Chaos erupted.

Birds squaked and flew out of various trees, cat-like creatures roared, and the squeals of pigs rose from the forest. The ground started to rumble as a horde of animals ran towards the horses. Shadowshine was the only horse not to rear up and force his riders off. The ‘evil’ horse instead charged forward, taking Bubnug and Valtira with him.

“Get the horse to stop, Missus,” Bubnug howled.

“I wish I could!”

Shadowshine ran forward into the horde of animals and ignored all of them except for one. The poor boar noticed that it was the target of the horse’s attack and started to run away. The horse gave chase and all the two riders could do was hang on.

“If you’ve got any fire, use it!”

“Horse moving faster than Bubnug think.”

Valtyra took that as a no. She thought of the best way to deal with this situation. The only thing that she could think of was to force control onto it.

“Sheathe my rapier,” commanded Valtira.

“Why,” asked Bubnug, but he grabbed the weapon anyway.

Now, with both her rapier and his sword cane sheathed, all he had to hold him to Shadowshine was Valtira’s outstretched arms on either side of him. She made sure that she held the reins with both hands and once she was ready, she pulled hard to the right following parallel to the boar’s path. Shadowshine whinnied and tried to fight Valtira. The half-elf yelled ‘Hang on!’, mostly for her own sake and exerted control over the beast.

They fought back and forth and it showed as their path of travel kept waving. The boar did not seem to care as it turned again, this time to the left. Valtira wordlessly exclaimed and pulled Shadowshine to the left as well so that they were behind and slightly to the right of the boar.

“Bubnug,” Valtira grunted, “Take my daggers and hit the boar!”

“But Missus! I can’t throw!”

“Do you want to control the horse?!”

“Well,” Bubnug hedged.

Valtyra growled as she continued fighting the horse. Bubnug whimpered slightly and grabbed a dagger from her dagger belt. Bubnug held it ready to throw and Valtira said, “When I say throw, you throw it.”

Bubnug nodded. The boar turned again and Valtyra forced Shadowshine to follow the boar parallel again.

“Throw!”

Bubnug threw the dagger, and it struck the boar’s hind quarters. Bubnug cheered and reached for the next dagger on his own. Without waiting for Valtyra, he threw the dagger, which bounced off of the boar’s flank hilt-first and stuck into the ground. Bubnug ground his teeth and grabbed something from his belt. It was a glass vial with an orange paste inside. Bubnug chugged the paste and grabbed another blade, but it was not a dagger. This time, he pulled his sword from its cane sheath.

Before Valtyra could do anything, Bubnug stood on Shadowshine’s back and leapt at the boar. He yelled the whole time he was in the air and he, to Valtyra’s amazement, managed to mount the boar by means of wrapping his small arms and legs as much as he could around the boar’s back. Once he felt secure, he raised his blade and stabbed into the boar’s side. The boar squealed and turned sharply. Bubnug almost flew off of the boar, but he managed to hang on to his blade, which was secure in the boar’s body.

Valtyra, who was just doing what she could to keep with the boar, watched this in a mix of worry, annoyance and amazement. She could see that the boar was weakening and it was only a matter of time before the creature would fall dead. Sure enough, five minutes later, the boar stumbled and fell to the forest ground. The immediacy and force in which it did this tossed Bubnug over its head. He somersaulted a couple of times before stopping with his butt in the air.

Shadowshine, seeing the boar dead, stopped as well, and this time Valtyra could not stay on. She flipped over the horse’s head and landed sharply on her back. She groaned and sat up, trying to inspect her spine for injuries. Once she got to her feet and felt good enough to move around, she stomped in annoyance to Bubnug.

She reached her hand to the goblin and asked, “Where are they?”

The goblin looked down in shame and pulled two vials from his belt. They both held the same paste that Bubnug drank before.

Valtyra studied the vials for a full minute, letting the shame and suspense kill Bubnug before she said, “I thought so. Mellowroot. I thought we got that addiction kicked out of you.”

“Missus, please-”

“You know what this stuff does to you,” her voice was rising in both volume and intensity, “You have your fear for a damned good reason, yet you want to kill that fear with Mellowroot!”

We worked for two years to kick you off of this plant, yet you returned. Did you have some without me noticing during those two years?"

All Bubnug could do was stare at the ground. After a second of silence Valtyra yelled, "Look at me and answer!"

The goblin flinched. This stopped Valtyra's anger in its tracks. She just stared at him, unable to speak, and with tears rolling down her face.

"Val! Bubnug!"

She quickly wiped the tears away and turned to see Lotho crashing through the leaves and trees. He saw them, then looked at the dead boar, then smiled, "You got it!"

He then called back behind himself, "I found them!"

Alicia and Aldern walked up to them with more grace than Lotho had. They talked for a couple of seconds before getting to work on the boar.

All Valtyra said to Bubnug was, "We'll talk later."

Chapter Seven: The Shopkeeper's Daughter

"Tempress! Fiend! You will not have control over me!" 'Wrong,' she purred, 'I already have control, because I know your weakness, mortal: Desire.'"

Valtyra helped carry parts of the boar back to the wagon which was only about five minutes from where the boar fell. The wagon, she saw, already had the corpses of other animals. She threw her contribution in with the others and asked, "Is this what you were doing while I was being taken for a ride?"

Lotho moved around her and dropped the pieces he had, "Yeah. We even got a firepelt cougar."

"How long was the chase?"

"About fifteen minutes." Alicia answered.

Valtyra grunted in surprise. Bubnug came around to drop off his pieces, but Valtira pointedly ignored him. Lotho and Alicia looked at each other. They seemed to do that a lot now. Was it because of her?

Aldern threw what he had into the wagon and clapped his hands together, as if the action would remove the blood magically.

"Well, we pulled in a good haul. Let us return to Sandpoint!"

They all mounted and Aldern rolled his hand in a 'move it along' gesture. The group moved forward at a steady pace and it took about ten minutes longer to get back to town because of the large haul they had. Aldern and Lotho were the only ones who talked since Alicia was keeping watch of their surroundings and Valtira was still ignoring Bubnug. The goblin held his head down the whole trip.

The gates were opened for them and they entered to an empty town. The feeling of sadness and worry still hung in the air and it had a visible effect on the heroes.

"It will take a while to get the meat cooked," Aldern said. The atmosphere did not seem to bother him, "Please rest and relax. I'll be sure to send for you when the feast is ready."

With that, he and his servants continued on to the Rusty Dragon. The heroes stayed where they were for a few seconds, looking around town and wondering what to do. Right as they were about to start moving again, a young woman walked up to them. Her arms were crossed over her belly, her shoulders were slightly hunched and she held her gaze down at the

ground. When she reached the heroes, she looked up at Valtyra, which sent a surge of nervousness up the half-elf's spine.

"I need help." The woman said, "My father has been too preoccupied with my sister's life to notice that there are pests in our basement."

"Pests?" Valtyra asked, "What pests?"

"Rats, I think." She answered, "I could have sworn one of them was as big as a goblin!"

Valtyra and Lotho looked at each other skeptically.

"Would you help, ma'am?" the woman pleaded to Valtyra.

"What do you think, Lotho?"

He shrugged, "You would be the one to do it. Rats do not require all four of us."

Valtyra thought she saw the woman's mouth twitch up but did not think much of it. If it is as she says, and the rat issue is true, then it could be an escalating problem. Besides, it seemed as if the townsfolk did not like them as of now. Helping this woman could help gain that trust back.

"Alright then," Valtyra dismounted Shadowshine and handed the reins to Bubnug, "You all head back to the Rusty Dragon. I will be there when I am done."

They headed off for the inn and Valtyra motioned for the woman to lead them toward her home.

After a few moments of walking, the woman asked with uncertainty, "Have you been fighting long?"

Valtyra raised an eyebrow at the question, but answered, "Since I was ten years of age."

At an intersection, the woman led Valtyra to the right, away from the Rusty Dragon, "So, it has been a long while, huh?"

"About twenty years."

There was a moment of hesitation before the woman laid her hand on the half-elf's arm, "You... you don't look more than twenty years of age."

Valtyra smiled uncomfortably at that, "Well... thank you."

They arrived at a building with a hanging sign of The General Store above the door. Valtyra stopped in front of the door, looking at the sign.

“Wait, are you Katrine Vinder, the shopkeeper’s daughter?”

The woman seemed slightly disgusted at the mention of Katrine and took her hand off of Valtyra’s arm to open the door, “No. I am his other daughter, Shayliss.”

Her eyebrows raised at that. She was led inside and down the stairs behind the counter into the basement. She did not see any sign of the father, Ven Vinder, or the sister. Her senses started tingling at that. This was strange. It was still somewhat light out. There should be customers, or at least the father at the counter ready to help purchases.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and Valtyra saw nothing but rows and rows of bottles. She walked over and pulled one out of the shelf to look at it. It was wine. Ven Vinder had a large storage of nothing but alcohol.

She put the bottle back, "Where are the rats?"

She heard a rustle of cloth from behind her, "At the end of the rows."

Valtyra pulled her rapier out of its sheath and headed for the end of the row she was currently in. She searched for a minute or so before turning around, "I don't think that y-"

She halted as she found Shayliss Vinder standing there with only her underwear. Valtyra's brain flatlined. She had no idea of what to do as Shayliss slid into an embrace and kissed her. She flinched, but did not fight it. She did not even have to ability to think about fighting it.

It wasn't until she was pushed onto the cot that she realized it was there. The cot creaked loudly, but the two were too deep in the moment to notice. However, after about five minutes of intense kissing, Valtyra did manage to hear footsteps. From upstairs.

Hearing the footsteps was enough to jolt Valtyra awake. She jerked into the air and rushed to get out of the cot.

“What-” Shayliss began, but Valtyra put a hand on her mouth.

“Someone’s coming!” Valtyra hissed.

Shayliss's eyes widened and she started getting her clothes together. There was not many places to hide, with only shelves of wine for cover. She headed into whatever shadows she could find as the form of a fairly bulky man stepped off the stairs.

"Who is in here?" He had a very booming voice and it echoed throughout the basement.

"It is just me, father."

The shadow of the man turned sharply away from where Valtyra was hiding. She was surprised that the man could not hear the sound of her heart beating like a marching drum. He moved into the room himself and went behind a row of wine bottles.

Valtyra inched forward, but froze at the man's voice, "Why are you down here, my daughter?"

"Just making sure that nothing has happened to your storage."

"Are you on about the rats again?" His tone of voice changed slightly to annoyance.

Valtyra inched closer to the stairs. Her heart was racing even faster now. She inched again, and again. She was just a few feet away from the stairs when she kicked a glass bottle. She flinched again as the bottle hit the shelf and made a loud sound.

"What was that?" her father asked.

"Maybe a rat, father. I'll look."

"When you are done filling your fantasy, head for the Rusty Dragon. There is supposed to be some sort of feast there."

"I understand, father. I will be there."

Valtyra hugged the shelf as the man started climbing the stairs. She could not stop her heavy breathing as she saw the man's shoes stop near the top.

"To whoever else may be in here," he said, "Know that if I find you. If I find out that you have touched my daughter. Know that you will suffer."

Valtyra did not move, but her breathing became quicker and heavier. She could not see the man's head, but she figured that he nodded.

"Good. Carry on."

He finished walking up the stairs and shut the door to the basement behind him. Valtira felt the presence of Shayliss next to her and instinctively grabbed her arm. She felt Shayliss pull her away from the stairs and around the row.

“That was close.” the woman said.

“Yeah. Would your father really...” Valtira’s voice trailed off.

“He does tend to be over protective,” she answered with a shrug, “But I would not worry for now.”

“When you get told that you might suffer later, it is kind of hard not to worry.”

“You will be fine.” Shayliss kissed her cheek, “Just make sure he does not see you walk out.”

Valtira nodded and carefully walked out of the General Store. She managed to do it without being seen by anyone and returned to her room in the Rusty Dragon. The others were there and stood up when she entered.

“How did it go?” Lotho asked.

“Just fine. Oh, and don’t mention to anyone about me going to help her today.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t. It will be better for my health and safety.”

Both Alicia and Lotho stepped up to her at that, ““Better for your health and safety?’ What the hell happened?!”

“Well,” Valtira stuttered slightly, “It involves an overprotective father, a basement, and some wine bottles.”

Both of them just stared at her in shock while Bubnug just looked between everyone. He seemed confused, as if trying to figure out what was happening between them all.

“You mean...”

“You didn’t...”

Valtira looked down, “Just keep it down, would you?”

Lotho and Alicia looked at each other and huge grins appeared on their faces. Valtira blushed slightly at that, "Damn you guys."

At that, the pair burst out into laughter while Valtira just sat there, cheeks becoming redder by the second. Bubnug continued glancing between all of them confused.

"I hate you all."

Chapter Eight: Trouble at the Rusty Dragon

“Let them drink and eat themselves silly!” Adra said to the Twisted Sister, ‘For they deserve their merriment!’”

It took Lotho and Alicia about fifteen minutes to calm down. During that time, the noises from the bottom floor continued to grow louder and louder until it could be heard through the floorboards of the room. Valtyra, once Lotho and Alicia quieted, got up, removed her equipment and headed down to the eating room. She heard the patter of Bubnug’s footsteps behind her.

While she was still annoyed at the goblin, she knew that now was not a good time to have their talk. So, she just grinned slightly and asked, “Are you going to eat whatever they give you?”

“Bubnug don’t like cooked meat.”

“Its good for you to try new things.”

“But Missus.”

She turned to the small creature with that small smile still in place, “Life is about experiences, right?”

He looked up at her with hope in his eyes and smiled back, “But Bubnug don’t like experiences.”

Valtyra just grunted and walked down the steps. Bubnug followed in her wake. They walked into the large room and were astonished at how many people were there. Most of the seats were full already and more citizens were walking into the inn.

“Let’s find a seat, Bubnug,” Valtyra had to yell over the noise slightly, “before even more come.”

They circled the room, and it took some time before they could finally find a seat. They sat down and were immediately joined by Amieko and Aldern. Aldern sat next to Valtyra and Ameiko took their drink orders.

“Welcome to the party!” Aldern yelled over the merriment. It was obvious that he had already gotten himself into a stupor.

“Are you really already drunk?” Valtyra could not hold back her smile.

He hiccuped three times in a row before answering, “No, not at all!”

This time Valtyra could not hold back her laughter. At the sound of her laugh, Aldern smiled. Ameiko then returned with their drinks and a plate full of meat, potatoes, and a small jar of powder each. Valtyra uncorked the jar and smelled various spices.

Bubnug looked down at his plate and gasped. He started to eat what was on his plate as if he would never eat again. Valtyra got a glimpse at the meat before it was shoved into his mouth. It was raw.

“Damn it Ameiko!” She yelled to the barkeep, “I’m trying to get him to try new things over here!”

Ameiko just shrugged and continued on with her duties. Minutes later, Lotho and Alicia joined them.

“You enjoying yourselves?” Lotho asked.

“Some more than others.” Valtyra responded pointedly looking at Aldern.

Ameiko stopped by just to get Lotho and Alicia’s orders before returning to the kitchen for the hundredth time since Valtyra found her seat. In the next hour, Valtyra started matching Aldern mug for mug, and it did not seem like she was going to stop any time soon. When Valtyra was barely able to keep upright in her chair, a bard came up to a makeshift stage in the front of the crowd of drunks and started playing songs that the customers all knew well including “The Tale of Brodgar the Giant Non-Giant” and “Icewell.”

Before the bard finished a personal rendition of “Where the Boars Dwell”, Lotho poked Valtyra’s shoulder, “I’ll give you fifteen gold pieces to walk up there and sing whatever she plays next.”

“What? You want me to start the trend of ‘Shong Night’ at the local tavern?” Valtyra slurred.

He pulled out his pouch of gold and showed it to her, “Fifteen is all I have. I would bet more if I could.”

Valtyra smirked, “You’re on.”

Valtyra stood up and stumbled her way to the stage where she tried to sing “Grand ol’ Me.” It would have been better if anyone could actually understand what she was singing, but the whole room cheered anyway, the loudest cheers coming from a drunken Shayliss to the left of the stage. When she was done, Valtyra decided to just step directly off the stage instead of

using the stairs as it was the most direct path to her reward. She fell on her face, but got up and walked back to the table as if nothing had happened.

Lotho laughed while passing her the pouch, "No one could understand you, but it was still incredible nevertheless."

Valtyra snorted as she grabbed the pouch. At least, she tried to. As she lifted her arm to grab it, she went face first to the table. Lotho checked her pulse and reported, "Asleep."

Alicia chuckled slightly, "She could not beat Aldern apparently."

They both looked at Aldern and noticed that he was also fast asleep on the table. Smirking, they turned to Bubnug who was just looking around with a strange look on his face. He had three plates in front of him, all of them empty of meat, but full of potatoes.

An hour of various frivolity and shenanigans, in which Valtira woke up twice only to fall back asleep, passed before the door of the inn slammed open. Everything quieted as people turned to see the figure at the doorway. He was an older man, past his middle age years and a bit on the lanky side. He stormed in and yelled, "Kata kou!"

No one spoke up. He continued moving into the room until he spotted Lotho, Alicia, Bubnug and the passed out Valtira. His mouth turned up into a small, dark smile and he walked up to the table. Lotho and Alicia stood up at his arrival and Lotho bowed. Alicia only gave him a deadly glare.

"Lonjiku Kaijitsu, I presume." Lotho said.

"How dare you," Lonjiku growled, "How dare you act that way towards me. You, the ones who endangered the townsfolk by your ill-advised antics against the goblins!"

"Excuse me?" Alicia asked.

"You heard me, girl. You should have left the defense of the town to its trained professionals!"

"If we had not intervened with our 'antics,'" Lotho exclaimed, making air quotes at the word 'antics,' "Then a lot more people would have been hurt or even killed!"

"It is convenient, though, that you did happen to be at the right place at the right time," Lonjiku put a finger on his chin, "I wonder why. Could it perhaps be because you have a goblin ally of your own?"

The room gasped slightly at that. All eyes seemed to turn to Bubnug.

“He did not do it,” Alicia said into the silence, “Bubnug did not initiate the assault on the town.”

Lotho turned to Alicia in surprise. She did not seem to notice Lotho’s look.

“Then who do you think did?”

“Don’t you think it is odd,” Alicia asked, “That you were gone from the day’s activities?”

The room gasped louder. Lonjiku’s face started turning red quite rapidly and Lotho’s look of surprise turned into one of horror.

“How dare you?!” He reached out for the archer, but she sidestepped the man easily.

Before anything else could happen, the doors to the kitchen burst open and Ameiko asked, “What the hell is going on here?”

Everyone turned to her. Nothing could be heard for a couple of moments save for the fire lighting the room and the drip of soup falling from the ladle in the woman’s hand. That moment of silence was broken by Lonjiku, “Kutch gata jo!”

Ameiko’s eyes hardened, “Pota frani trigat.”

As they went back and forth, Lotho leaned to Alicia and asked, “Do you have a damn death wish?”

“I am not afraid.”

“That much is obvious, but that does not answer my question.”

“Bullies are the worst kinds of people.”

Lotho shook his head and looked up just in time to see Lonjiku reach out for Ameiko. Ameiko twisted her body expertly and smacked the old man’s head with her ladle. Whatever remains were in the ladle fell out and landed all over the man’s head and clothes. He stood there for a few moments, as if not knowing what to do, before stomping toward the door. He turned back toward his daughter and said, “You are as dead to me as your mother! Dead!”

He stormed out of the doorway. Ameiko sighed and looked down at her ladle, “I’ll need a well-cleaned ladle now, since jackass stew’s not on the menu.”

The whole room let out a huge cheer and laughter. Ameiko smiled widely at that and proceeded to grab a washcloth to clean the mess on the floor. Bubnug got from his seat and walked up to the woman.

Since the noise picked up, Ameiko had to bend down to hear him. Whatever he said put an even wider smile on her face and she handed him the washcloth before going to get another one. They both worked together to clean the floor. Valtira woke up and Lotho pointed her at the two. Valtira smiled at the goblin before falling back asleep.

Chapter Nine: Grim News from Mosswood

"The eye of the storm has passed. Now you must face the other side of the hurricane. Some say that the other side is worse than the beginning. Will you survive?"

Valtyra woke up with a monstrous headache. The sunlight streaming from the open window next to her did not help things in the slightest. She had not even opened her eyes yet, and she felt as if she was in Hell.

She must have groaned because there was soon a presence at her side, "Is Missus alright?"

This time she heard herself groan, "Not so loud!"

"But-"

There were some footsteps from a tarrasque near the foot of her bed.

"How do you feel, Val?" Lotho asked, putting a cool cloth on her head.

The cloth was heaven against her burning head. She moaned in pleasure before muttering, "Worst. Hangover. Ever."

"This is why you don't try to match a noble tit-for-tat when it comes to drinking."

"Can you kill me already?" she complained as she held the cloth in place.

"Stop being a baby. Now get up, we have been called to the town hall. Alicia already left."

"Can't you go without me?"

"No, now get up. They are waiting for us."

"You give me pleasure then take it away." Valtira groaned and forced herself to get up slowly.

Bubnug ran over to grab her equipment, and each footfall resonated within her head painfully.

"Thank you." She muttered, taking the equipment from his hands.

He watched in wonder and worry as Valtira slowly buckled her equipment. She managed to get everything on, albeit slowly, and Lotho led her out of the room with much complaining from the hung-over half-elf. Valtira noticed that there was no trace of anything that happened during the night. Everything was cleaned and polished to near-perfection and the tables were rearranged as they normally are.

Ameiko smiled as the three came down, "I must say, you all know how to entertain. Let me know if you have any more game. You earned me a lot of business and laughs."

"I think some had more fun than others." Lotho commented, tilting his head at Valtira, who was still holding the wet cloth to her head.

"Ha! True indeed."

Lotho led Bubnug and Valtira out of the inn, who groaned at the sunlight. "Lotho, turn off the sun."

Lotho's eyebrow raised at that, "Turn off the sun? Now you ask for the impossible."

"You just want to see me suffer."

"Aye," Lotho said sarcastically, "all I want to do in life is have you suffer."

"Thanks for agreeing."

They don't even make it past the market square before they are stopped by citizens of Sandpoint. A woman approached Lotho and shoved a loaf of bread into his arms.

"Please do take this with my thanks. You look like you need it anyway, young man!"

Before they could move, a man walked up carrying a small bundle. He knelt down in front of Bubnug and said, "I have heard about you, goblin. I have heard that you hunted a boar by yourself and tried to save the remains of a well loved priest. That is why when Ameiko gave me the firepelt cougar's pelt; I knew exactly what to make and for whom."

He unraveled part of the bundle. It was a hooded cloak. It was of masterwork quality and held a fiery quality to it when in the sunlight. Bubnug looked up at Valtira, who smiled weakly and nodded. He grabbed the cloak and put it on.

"It maybe a bit large for you," the man explained, "I have never made anything for a goblin. But I hope it will be of help to you, and when people ask, please mention Grandis Lowlander, the tanner of Magnimar."

Bubnug was too enthralled with his new cloak to respond, but Lotho bowed and said, "We will."

"Before you leave," Grandis said, "I made some cloaks for you too. They are not firepelt cloaks, but they should still suffice."

They each took a cloak from the man and nodded. Smiling in obvious pride, Grandis bowed and walked away. They put on the cloaks themselves before continuing on to the town hall.

The town hall was not a large building, but it was bigger than any of the other buildings in Sandpoint. The three entered and found Alicia standing at the head of the table closest to them. She had a hide cloak on as well, and held her arms crossed as she turned towards the door.

"You finally got here."

"The baby did not want to get out of bed." Lotho responded.

Valtyra only grunted as she stood next to Alicia. Three other people looked at her with hints of smiles. Valtira recognized two of them as Sheriff Hemlock and Mayor Devrin. The third was an elf who looked like she ran from Magnimar and fell into every mud puddle along the way. Valtira saw her twitch slightly. The elf's eyes were trained on Bubnug the whole time. Bubnug stood behind Valtira's leg, as if ready to hide.

"Heroes," the sheriff said, "This is Shalelu Andosana, an unofficial member of Sandpoint's town guard."

The elf snorted at this and bowed her head a bit more respectfully towards them. Lotho and Alicia respond in kind, but Valtira kept a watchful eye on the woman. Shalelu seemed to notice this and smirked slightly, "Do not worry. He just startled me for a second. I will not harm one of those who helped protect Sandpoint."

Valtyra relaxed at this. Bubnug moved from Valtira's leg with a confident stride. Apparently her words pleased the goblin immensely.

The sheriff continued, "Shalelu has been a thorn in the local goblin's side for years. There are few that know goblins more than she."

His face grew darker as he said, "She has reported that Sandpoint has not been the only place in the region that has had goblin troubles. In short, there has been an increase in goblin-related raids along the Lost Coast, particularly in the dale between Nettlewood and Mosswood. Only a day ago, a farm south of Mosswood was burnt to the ground by a group of

goblins. Shalelu was thankfully nearby, and while the farm could not be saved, she did rescue the family and drive off the goblins. The family is currently staying at another nearby farm.”

At this, Hemlock nodded to Shalelu. She stood up and walked closer to the heroes.

“Belor’s told me of your work against the goblins. Well done. I’ve dedicated the last several years of my life to keep them from causing too much trouble around these parts, but they’re tenacious and fecund little runts. Like weeds that bite.”

She looked down at Bubnug, “Present company excluded, of course.”

Bubnug looked up at Valtira in confusion.

“She means she does not mean you.”

Bubnug smiled and nodded.

“There are five major goblin tribes in the region and, traditionally, they’re pretty good at keeping each other in line with intertribal squabbles and the like. Yet, from what I’ve been able to piece together, members of all five tribes were involved in the raid on Sandpoint. A fair number of the Mosswood goblins I dealt with yesterday were already pretty beat up, and there was a lot of chatter about the ‘longshanks’ and ‘traitor’ who killed so many of them. Now that I’ve met you, it seems obvious from their description who they were talking about. Seems like you’ve made an impression.

“In any event, the fact that the five tribes are working together disturbs me. Goblin tribes don’t get along unless they’ve got something big planned, and the big plans require big bosses. I’m afraid that someone’s moved in on the goblins and organized them. And judging by these recent raids, what they’re organizing seems like bad news for all of us.”

“Damn,” was Lotho’s only response.

“So, this leader has gathered all of the tribes together.” Alicia said, “But why did they need the remains of Tobyn?”

Shalelu’s jaw dropped slightly in shock, “What?”

“We found out,” Hemlock explained, “That the attack on Sandpoint, at least the main attack, was a distraction. They were after Tobyn’s remains all along.”

“And we think that this leader of theirs was there,” Valtira added.

The elf swore and started pacing, obviously thinking. The mayor did not say anything as she was writing something. When she was done, she folded and sealed the parchment with wax and handed it to Hemlock.

“Go south to Magnimar,” she ordered, “See if you can get any more soldiers. We need reinforcements until we can decide the extent of the goblin threat.”

The man nodded and left the town hall. The mayor turned to Shalelu next, “We need more information. Could you sniff around Shank’s Wood, Brinestump, Mosswood, Devil’s Platter and other goblin homes and see if you can discover anything else about what’s going on?”

The elf nodded, “I’ll leave tomorrow.”

The mayor then looked to the heroes, “Would you please keep a public presence? The people have really started to get fond of you and seeing you around town will do a lot for keeping worries down over the next few days.”

Lotho bowed almost immediately, “Of course, ma’am.”

She smiled slightly and relaxed immensely, “Good.”

They all left the building except the mayor.

“Would you have dinner with me?” Shalelu asked once they were outside, “I would like to hear your story of the attack.”

“Sure,” Lotho said, “We would be happy to.”

The elf smiled, “I’ll meet you at the Rusty Dragon then.”

Chapter Ten: The Missing Barkeep

"It's soon time to strike! Get the weapons ready! Get into battle positions! We go to war!"

Valtyra laid awake that night, flipping and tumbling one of her daggers between her fingers. She could not stop thinking about what Shalelu told them during dinner.

"In Varisia, there are five different goblin tribes," Shalelu started, "The Birdcruncher goblins are the closest to Sandpoint. They live within caves along the western edge of the Devil's Platter, although, traditionally, they are the least aggressive of the five. To the south are the Licktoad goblins of the Brinestump Marsh, pests who are excellent swimmers."

She paused to take a drink of her ale before continuing. "To the east are the Seven Tooth goblins of Shank's Wood. They have secured a place for themselves by raiding Sandpoint's junkyard and rebuilding the stolen refuse into armor and weapons. Further east are the Mosswood goblins, likely the largest tribe but one traditionally held back by feuding families within their own ranks."

"And finally," she sighed, "There are the Thistletop goblins, who live on the Nettlewood coast atop a small island that some say holds a passing resemblance to a decapitated head."

"So, you're saying that all of them were involved in the attack." Lotho asked.

"Yes," Shalelu nodded, "They did. Not only that, but they were led to attack."

"By whom?" Valtira asked.

"I don't know. But we know that it is this 'longshanks.'"

Valtyra stared down at her water in thought. Then, something came to her.

"Do the tribes have goblin heroes? Someone that they look up to?"

"Of course not," Alicia said, "Goblins don't have that kind of intelligence."

She flinched and looked down at Bubnug, "Except you of course."

Bubnug wasn't paying attention. He was playing with his raw steak and making a small mess of it.

"Actually," Shalelu responded, "They do."

The three heroes looked at her in shock.

“While you are right that goblins do not usually achieve any real measure of notoriety. But when they do, they are practically worshiped.”

“Well,” Valtira pressed, “Who are they?”

“There are six goblins in Varisia who currently have the status of ‘hero.’ There is Gugmut, an unusually muscular and tall goblin from Mosswood who, it is said, had a hobgoblin for a mother and a wild boar for a father.”

Alicia snorted at this, but Shalelu ignored her. “Then there is Koruvus. He was a champion of the Seven Tooth tribe, as well known for his short temper as he was for his prized possession - a magic longsword sized for a human that the goblin stubbornly kept as his own. The champion vanished several months ago after he supposedly discovered a ‘secret hideout’ in a cave along the cliffs, but the Seven Tooth goblins remain convinced he’s out there still, a ghost or worse, waiting to murder any goblin who tries to discover his hideout.”

“These guys sound like real winners so far,” Lotho commented.

“Just wait,” Shalelu pulled another drink, “Because the fun gets rolling with Vorka.”

Bubnug jumped up at this. Shalelu glanced at him and said, “Looks like Bubnug knows of who I speak.”

“Yes. Bubnug knows,” the goblin whispered, “Vorka bad. She eats goblins.”

“She’s a cannibal,” Valtira exclaimed.

“Yes,” Shalelu answered, “She is called a hero by any goblin except the Licktoad tribe, who unwillingly share her space.”

“You would think that they would move.”

Shalelu leveled a gaze at her, “You think that the tribe is smart enough, even collectively, to think about that?”

Valtira shrugged, “Maybe. Is that all?”

Shalelu shook her head, “Nope. There is the obese chieftain of Brinestump, Rendwattle Gutwad. It is said that he never leaves his throne. There is Ripnugget, the leader of the

Thistletop goblins and the leader of the best lair, according to the other tribes. And last, but certainly not least, is Bruthazmus, the bugbear.”

“Wait,” Valtira asked, “A bugbear? I thought you said that all of the heroes were goblins?”

“You don’t know?” Lotho asked in confusion, “Bugbears are in the goblin family.”

“But... they don’t look like goblins at all.”

“The association is a distant one. But hobgoblins, goblins and bugbears are all goblinoid.”

“Anyway,” Shalelu interjected, “Bruthazmus is infamous. He lives in northern Nettlewood and often visits the tribes to trade stolen goods from caravans for alcohol, news or magic arrows. He has a particular hatred of elves and we have tumbled occasionally. Neither one of us has been able to get the upper hand, but I will swear to you that I will not be the first to fall.”

The dagger flashed in the rising sunlight as it flipped into the air and fell back to Valtira’s fingers. What Shalelu gave them was useful, but nowhere closer to giving them an idea of what was going on. They needed a lead. Someone or something that could show them the direction in which to move.

As the dagger lifted into the air again, there was a heavy knock and the door to the room slammed open. This made Valtira jump and she had to roll off the bed before the point of the dagger could enter her head. It instead dug into the bed point first to the hilt.

In the doorway was an elderly halfling woman. She was breathing heavier than normal and sweat and tears were pouring down her face.

“You must help,” she half yelled, “She’s gone!”

Valtira got to her feet and led the woman inside. At this point, Bubnug was awake, “Missus?”

“Get Lotho and Alicia. They should hear this as well.”

The goblin ran out of the room, and soon arrived with a half dressed Lotho and Alicia.

“What is going on,” Alicia asked.

“This woman says that she needs help.”

The woman was muttering to herself and rocking back and forth slightly. Valtyra moved the woman to the bed and sat her down. It took a couple of moments for the woman to calm down, but when she did, she started blurting out information.

“Ms. Kaijitsu is gone! She did not come down to start breakfast. This is the first time this has happened since I could remember. Worried, I knocked on her door. When I did not get a response, I entered her room to find it empty and the bed unslept in.”

She then reaches to one of her pockets and pulled out a sheet of crumpled up parchment. She hands it to Valtyra, “I even found this near the bed.”

Valtyra opened up the parchment, and found writing. She tried to read it, but she could not understand what it said since it was in a foreign language.

“I can’t read this.”

“I translated the letter on the other side.”

Valtyra turned the parchment over and saw that the woman did, in fact, translate the letter.

“Hello, sis!

I hope this letter finds you well, and with some free time on your hands, because we’ve got something of a problem. It’s to do with father. Seems that he might have had something to do with Sandpoint’s recent troubles with the goblins, and I didn’t want to bring the matter to the authorities because we both know he’d just weasel his way out of it. You’ve got some pull here in town, though. If you can meet me at the Glassworks at midnight tonight, maybe we can figure out how to make sure he faces the punishment he deserves. Knock twice and then three times more and then once more at the delivery entrance and I’ll let you in.

In any case, I don’t have to impress upon you the delicate nature of this request. If news got out, you know these local rubes would assume that you and I were in on the whole thing too, don’t you? They’ve got no honor at all around these parts. I still don’t understand how you can stand to stay here.

Anyway, don’t tell anyone about this. There are other complications as well, ones I’d rather talk to you in person about tonight. Don’t be late.

Tsuto”

“So,” Lotho asked, “Who is this Tsuto?”

The woman sighed, “He is Ameiko’s brother, born a year before her. He was something of a scandal when he came into the world as he is a half-elf.”

“What’s so scandalous about being a half-elf?” Valtyra asked with a hint of aggression.

“Oh, it is not what you think,” the woman hastily corrected herself, “But because of the fact that neither his father nor mother are elven.”

She allowed that information to sink into the heroes’ minds before she continued; “It was obvious that old Lonjiku wasn’t the boy’s father, and his rage at the discovery of his wife’s indiscretion was the talk of the town for months. Atsui never revealed who the father was, and it’s a testament to Lonjiku’s stubbornness that they remained married.”

The woman stared at Valtyra as she said, “Tsuto was sent to the Turandarok Academy to be raised outside of the Kaijitsu family, ignored by his father and forbidden visits from his mother.”

She nodded at Valtyra’s look of horror, “Yes. It was a tragedy. However, Ameiko would visit Tsuto, once she found out about the boy at the age of ten. She would visit a few times a month to keep him company, bring him some food, and promise him that someday things would get all sorted out. That changed seventeen years later, when they had a terrible argument. He struck Ameiko. I do not know what the argument was about, but it was severe enough to send Ameiko away from Sandpoint for a year, making a living as an adventurer.”

“What made Ameiko come back?” Lotho asked.

“Her mother’s funeral. Tsuto was quite public in his opinions that his father pushed Atsui off a cliff to her death. During the funeral, there was a confrontation and Lonjiku nearly broke Tsuto’s jaw with his cane. Tsuto cursed the man and left Sandpoint. Ameiko has tried to reestablish contact with him ever since, but was never able to track him down. I am worried that Tsuto is up to no good. Since the sheriff is out of town, you are the only ones I can turn to.” she looked to the goblin. “Your background doesn’t matter. Please, head to the Glassworks and find out what happened to Ameiko as soon as possible.”

Valtyra nodded and rose to her feet. She started strapping her equipment together and glanced to the others, “Well, what are you waiting for? Get ready!”

“Missus think there be fight?”

She paused in securing her sword belt to respond to the goblin. "Tsuto blames his father for the attack. Whether that is true or not, I suspect that there will be guards to protect Tsuto. No matter what happens, I have a feeling that blood will be spilled today."

Chapter Eleven: Glass and Wrath

"The arrows have flown, swords have been drawn. Yet they just keep staring at each other. Like two cats, waiting for someone to make the first move."

The whole town was quiet as the four heroes rushed to the glassworks. The huge building was silhouetted by the sun which made finding a doorway difficult. Valtyra tried to open the first door they found, but it was locked. Lotho tried the next one, but he could not get it open either. Alicia went around the whole building only to discover that none of the other doors would budge.

"No luck," she whispered, "And I could not see anything through the windows."

"What now?" Lotho asked, "Can any of us pick locks?"

Valtyra and Alicia shook their heads. Bubnug walked up to the door and pulled something out of one of his pouches. The others watched as he fiddled with the door's lock and managed to get it open. He turned around and grinned like a pleased child.

Valtyra looked at him in shock, "Where did you learn to pick locks?"

"Four-eyes," he answered, still pleased with himself.

Lotho asked, "Who is Four-eyes?"

"A mate on our ship," Valtyra replied, "He was a master rogue. No wonder you became friends!"

Alicia gave a small, impressed smile. "He should scout for us."

Bubnug nodded and entered the building. They soon noticed the flickering light from a torch, which gradually disappeared into the dark.

"What is going on?"

The three heroes turned to find a small girl and a woman standing behind them. They stared at the three of them with suspicion and a hint of confusion.

"We were told," Lotho began, "That something may be going on at the Glassworks."

"So," Valtyra finished, "We decided to check it out."

"What do you mean?" The woman demanded.

“Don’t you think that it is strange that the store is not open yet?”

“Well,” she hedged, “I guess so.”

“We just want to make sure that nothing wrong is happening. Once Bubnug gives the all clear, we will-”

Valtyra was interrupted by the sound of shattering glass from the other side of the building.

“Stay back,” Valtyra yelled as the three heroes ran, weapons drawn, to the sound. They turned the corner just in time to see Bubnug, torch in hand, flip a goblin over the edge of the cliff the glassworks stood near. The goblin screamed in fright on the way down.

“Shit,” Alicia breathed.

“There are goblins here,” Valtyra exclaimed, “And they know we are here now. We must attack before Amieko is moved!”

She ran to the broken window and dove through it. The glass scratched her clothes, armor and bare skin, and one shin got impaled by a large piece of glass, but she made it through. Her momentum halted when she got a good look at the room.

It was a room straight out of a horror play.

The bodies of eight men and women lay in various stages of dismemberment. Signs of massive burns and hardening glass covered the corpses and the nearby goblins hold glassworking implements. The missing parts of the corpses were pinched by the tools. The goblins dropped them when they saw her and grabbed their weapons.

Memories once held back streamed forward. Multiple corpses, burning buildings and massive figures holding limbs invaded her mind in great detail. She snapped back to reality, but quivered in rage. The grip on her weapon tightened and she ran for the closest goblin she saw, ignoring the glass in her leg.

The goblin screamed in glee and charged for her. They met halfway and clashed blades. Valtyra forced the dogslicer away from the goblin and thrust her rapier into the creature. She pulled the blade out and bull rushed another goblin toward one of the furnaces. The goblin bounced off of the stone surrounding the hole of the furnace and landed on a few shards of glass. The goblin got up just in time to have the fiery blade of a sword cane enter its head.

Bubnug flung the goblin off of the blade and went back to back with Valtyra. Goblins jumped at them, but they were cut down by the pirate duo. The goblins seemed to realize who they were messing with, and those who survived the pirates' initial assault started to run from the room. Arrows and ice shards started raining down upon the mass of goblins, but a couple managed to escape.

Valtyra tried to follow, but the pain of the shard in her leg finally caught up to her and she stumbled to the ground. More shards entered her arms and she cried out in surprise. Bubnug kneeled next to her but she waved him off, "Find Amieko!"

He looked pained, but nodded and ran off. Alicia followed him, but Lotho knelt next to the half-elf.

"Would you stop getting hurt? I can't heal you all of the time."

"Just get this thing out of me," she growled.

"Fine, fine grumpy-pants."

He placed his hands on her leg and arm. Water flowed from his hands and entered her wounds. The shards popped out of her skin and the wounds started to close. Before they could completely heal, however, a shadow rushed by them and something smacked Lotho upside the head. He groaned and held his head in a palm. Valtyra looked up just in time to see that the shadow was dragging a human-shaped body. They rounded a corner, but Valtyra was able to tell that it was Amieko that was being dragged.

The half-elf rose to her feet, despite the slightly open wounds, and ran after them. Her wounds prevented her from gaining ground, but she was able to keep them in sight as they ran through Sandpoint. People were milling around town now, and they gasped as they saw the shadow dragging Amieko. The chase wormed its way through the town square and out the north gate. The shadow quickly mounted a horse, with Amieko in the saddle in front of it, and sped off, following the Lost Coast.

Valtyra stopped running when the shadow mounted the horse and started howling incoherently after them. She fell to her knees and continued howling.

"Val! Get on!"

She turned to see Lotho riding on his horse. Shadowshine was behind him, and it did not look like the horse was going to stop. Valtyra rose to her feet, leapt for the horse and landed on her belly. She struggled to get saddled properly, and after a few, almost fatal, failed attempts she managed to get on securely.

They raced off to follow the shadow and its captive. They were able to catch up enough to see the horse and its riders. Lotho had to duck from an arrow that almost imbedded itself into his head.

“He’s shooting at us,” he screamed.

“Just keep moving!”

Shadowshine started swerving back and forth as he continued advancing on the shadow’s horse. Valtira readied her blade, and when she was close enough, attacked the shadow. The attack was clumsy and the shadow was able to parry the blade with ease with his shortbow. Being this close to the shadow gave the half-elf the ability to tell who he was.

He was a half-elf. She could tell that the man was related to Amieko. They had the same facial features and same stature. However, the look the man gave her was something that Amieko would never be able to give anyone: pure hate.

“You must be Tsuto,” she swung her rapier again.

He dodged to the side and sheathed his bow. “In the flesh.”

A lance of ice shot past the man’s shoulder. Another hit the ground between the horse’s hooves. A third almost hit Valtira in the back.

Valtira swung her blade again. “We need to work on your aim, Lotho!”

“I’m a healer, not a shooter!”

He launched another lance and this one stuck in Tsuto’s leg. Tsuto grimaced in pain but gave no other reaction as he landed a fist in Valtira’s face.

“Gah! He hits hard!”

“It just means he loves you! Might not want to let Shayliss know!”

“Shut up!”

She swung again and her blade connected with Tsuto’s arm. He held the injury close to his side and tried to speed ahead. However, he was unsuccessful when Shadowshine closed the distance quickly.

“Parasite,” Tsuto muttered through clenched teeth, “Why don’t you just go back and crawl into the hole you came out of?”

“Frankly, because you are starting to get on my nerves.”

Her blade met only air as Tsuto dodged again. As Valtira was preparing for a backswing, Tsuto dramatically slowed his horse so that he could ride next to Lotho. The halfling was not expecting that, and could only raise a ice shield before a fist hit him. Valtira tried to slow as well, but Shadowshine had his own agenda. He sped up for a few seconds, but then made a u-turn and barreled forward.

Tsuto and Lotho were too focused on their conflict to notice Shadowshine and his shocked rider running right at them. Valtira only had a few seconds to raise her blade, and managed to raise it to waist height before Shadowshine passed them. She cringed as she felt the blade enter Amieko as well as Tsuto, but could not think on it for long as Shadowshine continued forward at a frantic pace.

“Note to self,” she whispered to herself, “Horse does not equal ship. Learn how to ride a horse.”

“Val! He’s getting away!”

As Shadowshine was rounding for another pass, Valtira looked and saw that Lotho was getting off of the ground and back on his horse. Tsuto was already racing away and would be soon out of sight.

A surge of annoyance rose in Valtira and she took a tight grip on her reins. As Shadowshine completed his turn, Valtira kicked Shadowshine’s sides with as much force as she could. Shadowshine whinnied in what seemed to Valtira like respect, and galloped forward. At this point, Valtira could tell that Shadowshine was growing tired, but they had to keep the man in sight.

They were not able to catch up with him again, but they were able to keep pace. The chase had already taken ten minutes, so when they had been riding for another half an hour, Valtira had to wonder when they would arrive at where ever this guy was taking them. After yet another half an hour of riding, they finally arrived outside some sort of stone monument. Tsuto swiftly dismounted and dragged his sister with him into the bushes.

Valtira dismounted and was about to follow when Lotho grabbed her arm.

“Let me go!”

“I do not know what has been going on in that head of yours, but you are not thinking clearly! We need to wait for the others!”

“Why? He just went towards a stone monument. We should be able to take him out together.”

“Val, that is not just any stone monument. That is Thistletop, the hideout of the Thistletop goblins. If Tsuto is confident enough to lead us here, then it might mean huge trouble for us. Let us wait until we can all attack at once.”

Valtyra stared at him in annoyance, but shook off his grip and leaned against a tree. Lotho smirked slightly and dismounted. The half-elf looked up to Thistletop broodingly. This was it. Once they took care of Tsuto, then peace could return to Sandpoint.

It will happen. One way or another.

Chapter Twelve: Thistletop

“Let them have it, my brothers and sisters! Give them no quarter, for no quarter would they give you!”

It took about an hour for Alicia and Bubnug to arrive on Alicia’s steed. Valtyra was still brooding against her tree and Lotho decided to take a small nap on the opposite side of the same tree. He awoke at the sound of the horse’s hooves and made his way towards the group.

“You’ve finally arrived.” Valtyra commented.

“It took a little bit to get Bubnug on the horse. We also looked around the Glassworks after killing the other goblins.” Alicia explained

“Oh?” Lotho asked, “Did you find out anything?”

“Tsuto is not the real leader of this bunch.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tsuto is just a servant,” Alicia said while pulling some parchment from her saddlebag, “The real leader is Nualia, the adopted daughter of Ezakin.”

Valtyra took the parchment and started reading:

“The raid went about as planned. Few Thistletop goblins perished, and we were able to secure Tobyne’s casket with only one problem while the rubes were distracted by the rest. That problem was taken care of and is probably dead. That does not matter though, for I cannot wait for the real raid. This town deserves a burning, that’s for sure.”

“Wait,” Lotho interrupted, “The ‘real raid’? They are planning another attack?”

“Yes,” Alicia answered, “He does not give any sign of when though.”

“There is an image of Sandpoint,” Valtyra mentioned, “It shows the battleplan for the attack on Sandpoint days ago.”

“Keep reading.”

Valtyra, with an annoyed glare towards Alicia, did so:

“Ripnugget seems to favor the overwhelming land approach, but I don’t think it’s the best plan. We should get the quasit’s aid. Send her freaks up from below via the smuggling tunnel in

my father's Glassworks, and then invade from the river and from the Glassworks in smaller, but more focused strikes. The rest, except Bruthazmus agree, and I'm pretty sure the bugbear's just being contrary to annoy me. My love's too distracted with the lower chambers to make a decision. Says that once Malfeshnekor's released and under her command, we won't need to worry about being subtle. Hope she's right.

My love seems bent on going through with this - nothing I can say convinces her of her beauty. She remains obsessed with removing what she calls her "celestial taint" and replacing it with her Mother's grace. Burning her father's remains at the Thistletop shrine seems to have started the transformation, but I can't say her new hand is pleasing to me. Hopefully when she offers Sandpoint to Lamashtu's fires, her new body won't be as hideous. Maybe I'll luck out. Succubi are demons too, aren't they?"

"He's sick," Lotho commented as Valtyra finished reading.

"We know more now," Valtyra said and started walking for the brush that Tsuto entered, "So let us take care of Thistletop."

"What about this quasit and Malfeshnekor?"

"The most dangerous on our plate is Nualia as of now," Valtyra explained, "We must take her and her fortress out first. After that we can take care of the other stuff."

"Are you sure you are not doing this just to keep running from your past?"

Valtyra froze in her tracks, right before entering the brush.

"What? What do you mean by that?"

Lotho walked forward to stand next to the half-elf, "It is just a hunch, but it seems like whenever you fight, you get memories. And I will figure out the source."

With that, he walked into the brush. Valtyra stared after him for a couple of seconds before following. She could hear Bubnug and Alicia behind them. The path soon became very narrow with Valtyra and Alicia having to bend over in order to not get stabbed by thorns or smacked by branches.

It took them about five minutes to reach the other side of the brush, and they found themselves within a chamber made from trees and vines. No-one was around, though, and the area was quiet.

"You would think that a fortress would have some sort of guard." Lotho commented.

“We aren’t at the fort, though.” Valtyra replied as she continued forward.

They moved quietly with weapons drawn through the halls and rooms made from nature. The place was too quiet, and all four of the heroes became visibly nervous. A half an hour of wandering later, they finally found themselves at a small wooden bridge, leading to the stone fortress. They could see, now that they were close enough, that the stone was in the shape of a massive head. The bridge led to the top of the head and that the structure of the fort sat on top of the head.

Valtyra was about to start crossing the bridge when Alicia grabbed her arm. Before the half-elf could complain, Alicia shushed her and whispered, “It is rigged.”

“How can you tell?”

“The roping on the left side of the planks are wrong.”

She knelt down next to the bridge and studied it, “If I am correct, when a certain amount of weight is put on the bridge, the left supports will disconnect and the planks will swing.”

“Could you fix it?” Lotho asked.

“It would take a long time, something we do not have.”

“How much weight could be put on it?” Valtyra placed her hand on one of the planks to test it.

“I cannot tell, but we should probably go one at a time.”

With that, Bubnug stepped on the bridge and started to walk. The others watched in shock, which then turned to horror as the bridge swayed some in the wind, then into relief when the goblin made it to the other side. Seeing Bubnug’s success, the heroes followed suit, one at a time. Besides the bridge’s dangerous swaying from the wind, everyone made it to the other side without trouble.

Now that they were on the stone head, they could see that the place was...

Deserted.

No-one was on the watchtowers surrounding the building. Nothing patrolled the outside. No sounds could be heard inside of the fortress.

Nothing happened.

“What the hell is going on?” Valtira whispered.

Lotho looked around worriedly, “Is it a trap?”

“Well,” Valtira said, “We won’t be able to do much just standing around wondering about it.”

She walked up to the double doors and noticed some details she could not see before. The stockade was made of thick wood which seemed to have been scavenged from ships. A few nameplates remained affixed to some of the beams, while other timbers look like they might have once been masts. She held her rapier in a fierce grip and opened the door suddenly to try and surprise anything on the other side.

No goblins were in the room to look shocked. The room itself had hard-packed soil as its floor, as if the builders either ran out of lumber after building the walls and roof, or as if they simply never thought about building a floor. A number of poorly preserved horse and dog heads were mounted along the eastern wall, while along the southern wall hung a pair of large black-feathered wings tacked to the wall with daggers.

“Oh my,” Lotho whispered while putting his hand over his mouth in surprise and horror.

“This must be a trophy room,” Alicia said.

Valtira noticed that one of the daggers holding the black-feathered wings seemed different from the rest. She pulled the blade out of the wall and studied it. It had a pearl handle. Nothing else was really remarkable, but she sheathed it in one of her throwing dagger sheaths, then took the other six daggers and did the same. She had to improvise since she did not have enough extra sheaths.

“Where to now?” Lotho asked, “We have six different doors to try. Two of which are double doors.”

“Go for one of the sets of double doors,” Valtira said, “They seem to always go somewhere important. We also do not have time to explore every room. Amieko is still here.”

She growled slightly on the last statement, but it seemed that no-one noticed it. Lotho walked for the set of double doors on the western wall and cautiously opened it. It was a hallway with torches lit on either wall. Another set of double doors was at the other end of the hall, and a single door was in the middle of the right wall. Alicia stepped into the hall and reached out to open the single door.

She stopped, though, when she saw that the door was nailed shut.

“Should we try to open it?” She asked.

“No time,” Valtyra whispered, opening the double doors at the other end of the hall.

The doors opened into a spacious room. An open flight of stairs starting at the opposite side of the room wound up to a trapdoor in the ceiling about thirty feet up. She climbed the stairs quickly and opened the trapdoor. It led to the top of one of the watchtowers. The only thing up there was a bag which, upon inspection, holds multiple half-eaten pickles. She climbed back down the stairs and reported, “Nothing but a bag of pickles.”

“This is getting strange.” Lotho muttered, “Why are there no guards?”

“Did goblins leave?” Bubnug asked.

“No,” Alicia said with confidence, “They could not have just packed up and left. You two would have noticed. And some of the marks and signs around here are fresh.”

“Where?”

“I am not sure. They might be meeting in a floor below.”

“Fine then.” Valtyra snarled as she opened the door to the north.

It opened to a large open area. Tenacious clumps of partially trampled grass grew fitfully here and there in the hard-packed earth, in places stained with blood or scratched with furrows. To the north, what appeared to have been two dead goblins lay slumped at the entrance to an outbuilding. Near the two dead bodies were four goblin dogs. They were raking their claws at what looked like a storage shed and something inside of the shed whinnied loudly.

Valtyra unsheathed the pearl handled dagger and threw it at one of the goblin dogs. The blade hit the rodent’s shoulder and left only a small mark. The rodents all looked towards the door where all four of the heroes now stood. There was a moment where no one moved. Then, the goblin dogs rushed for the heroes.

Each hero took a rodent. Valtyra leapt into the air and landed on the other side of the rodents. The one that she hit with the dagger turned around without stopping its momentum and made a beeline straight for the half-elf. Like a matador, when the goblin dog got close enough to Valtyra, she leaped to the side and swung her blade upward. The blade entered the rodent’s side and left a diagonal line of blood. Quicker than Valtyra expected, the rodent recovered itself and jumped at Valtyra, pushing her to the ground.

This time, though, she was more prepared.

The impact with the ground caused her to let go of her rapier, but she had one of her daggers in her other hand, and she drove the blade as far as she could into the rodent's throat. The goblin dog struggled weakly for a few seconds before it went limp. Valtyra pushed the corpse off of her, and saw Alicia offering to help her up. She accepted the help and noticed that Bubnug was already working on the shed's door. Instead of picking the lock, he took his blazing blade and cut the door in two, then four, then eight pieces. A horse immediately rushed out of the shed and started trampling on the goblin dog corpses. Once the beast calmed down some, Lotho and Bubnug offered it some food from their belongings. It seemed grateful for the food, and nuzzled Lotho and Bubnug's face before leaving through the open door.

The heroes grabbed their equipment and headed out. The door on the north wall led to a hallway which opened to a throne room of sorts. A crude looking red carpet led to a makeshift throne made from wood, metal and cloth. Wooden pillars lined either side of the carpet and the walls and ground were made from sloppily placed stone tiles. There were three doors that led from the room, including the one that the heroes stood at.

"No one here either." Lotho muttered.

Valtyra walked over to each of the doors and peeked past them. One of the doors led back to the first room. The other led to a hallway with a single door at the other end. The others followed her into the hall and to the other door. The door led to a set of stairs going down.

"Let's go." Valtyra said, leaning forward to start descending the stairs.

"Missus." Bubnug called.

The others turned to the goblin, who was looking at the wall next to the door. The goblin scanned the wall, until he stopped at one of the stones. He pushed the stone in, and the wall slid to the left. A room that could only hold one of them showed itself. Inside of the room was a sea chest that looked worn, but long untouched. Bubnug, without thinking, ran to it and started picking.

"Be careful!"

He picked the lock with no effort, but before he could celebrate, a knife shot out of the lid of the chest. Bubnug flinched, which probably saved his life. Instead of taking him in the heart, the blade cut into his shoulder and continued its momentum until it hit the wall of the hallway. Valtyra went for Bubnug and checked his injury. It was not deep, but Valtyra wrapped some cloth around the injury to stop the bleeding.

"I told you to be careful!"

"Sorry Missus."

Valtyra sighed, "I guess you can't be blamed. Come on. Let's get the loot and continue on."

They opened the chest, once they made sure that there were no more traps, and Valtira gasped at the vast amount of loot that was inside. On top were too many coins to count in copper, silver, gold and platinum, and all four of the heroes had trouble putting them in their coin pouches. Under that was a leather pouch holding thirty-four badly flawed malachites, a gold holy symbol of Sarenrae, the goddess of healing and the sun, a chain shirt sized for Valtira or Alicia, a well crafted scimitar that Lotho took, even though it was too large for him, a pair of well crafted manacles, a jade necklace and a fine blue silk gown with silver trim.

"Is this a chest of the loot that the goblins stole?" Lotho asked.

"I would assume so." Valtira responded, "Anyway, we need to move."

They went down the stairs and found themselves in a room with a large table surrounded by chairs. A slate board to their right was covered with scribbles in chalk, but the map of Sandpoint that had been carefully inscribed on it left no doubt as to the purpose of this room. This was doubtless where the recent raid was planned.

Valtyra immediately went to the door to the left while Lotho and Alicia moved toward the table.

"Oh no."

The half-elf turned around to see Lotho holding a sheet of parchment and his hands shaking slightly.

"What is it?" She asked.

"We were right in that they are planning another attack. But we did not know what they were exactly doing until now. These notes say that the second raid will have additional goblin tribes from as far as the Fogscar Mountains to the north, but creatures called "sinspawn" who will invade from underneath Sandpoint. And that while they do not have an exact date of attack, that it will only be in a few weeks."

The room went silent for a few minutes before Alicia said, "That gives us even more reason to hurry and deal with whatever is in this place."

Valtyra shook her head, trying to get the thoughts out of her head, and agreed, "We must move."

Valtyra opened the door she stood by and moved through the hallway to the next door. That door opened into a room where the lower four feet of the walls were covered in crude drawings in mud, blood and paint. Most of the drawings showed goblins engaged in some sort of violence against humans, horses, or dogs. One picture on the left wall was at least three times the size and complexity of the other scrawlings. This image showed Thistletop from the side, the goblin stockage perched atop it like a crown. A cave was drawn into the center of this image, and looming inside was what appeared to be an immense, muscular goblin with snake like eyes and a dogslicer in each taloned hand. If the scale compared to the rest of the drawing is to be believed, this goblin must have been at least thirty feet tall.

"If that thing exists," Lotho muttered, "We are all screwed."

"Maybe it is just the goblin's imagination run wild?" Valtira asked.

"I hope so."

They stood there staring at the pictures for a minute more before continuing through the next door. When they opened it, they could hear muted voices coming from the opposite side of the hallway through the closed door. The heroes stalked up to the door and cracked it open.

Dozens upon dozens of goblins were within the room, watching the double doors to the right with great intensity. They did not notice the movement of the door opening.

Before they could close the door again, they heard a clink of metal from behind. Valtira turned just in time to see Bubnug arching over the heroes, slamming through the door, and landing in a heap in the middle of the goblin crowd. Valtira drew her blade as the figure behind them crashed into Lotho and sent him flying as well. His flight path took him past Bubnug and to the other side of the goblin crowd.

All of that took only a couple of seconds, and Valtira could not even think of leaping forward before a bastard sword was pointed at her neck.

"Walk." Said the heavily armored man in front of them.

Valtyra thought about fighting back anyway, but Alicia started back walking towards the goblin crowd, who now was watching all of them in amazement. She sighed and followed Alicia backwards, not taking her eyes off of the man.

The goblins made room for them to walk into the center of the crowd and then through the open doors that the goblins were so interested in.

The room they were led into had stone fonts containing frothy dark water which sat to the left and right of the entrance they had walked in from. Twin banks of stone pillars ran the length

of the long chamber which made a path to a set of stairs that rose to a platform about two feet off the ground. The walls surrounding this platform were lit by hanging braziers that emitted glowing red smoke, giving the place an unnerving crimson lighting that threw the bas-relief carvings of countless monsters feasting on the fleeing humans into lurid display. A black marble altar stone, its surface heaped with ashes and bone fragments, squatted before a ten-foot tall stature. The sculpture depicted a very pregnant, but otherwise shapely naked woman who wielded a kukri in each taloned hand and had a long reptilian tail, birdlike taloned feet, and the snarling head of a three-eyed jackal with a forked tongue. The left kukri flickered with fiery orange light while the right one glowed with a cold blue radiance.

But those details were not as important to the heroes as what was on the altar. On top of all of the bones and ashes was the naked form of Amieko. The woman had bruises and cuts covering her whole body and she looked dead except for the small rise and fall of her chest. She turned her head towards the heroes and lifeless eyes met Valtira's.

Her anger rose rapidly while the woman standing next to the altar holding a torch turned to the group and snarled, "What is the meaning of this?"

"I have been following them around as they snooped around the base." The armored man said with slight heat in his voice, "The only reason they got to this point is because you insist to have no guards when doing your rituals."

"Well? What are you waiting for? Finish them!"

Chapter Thirteen: Passion and Rage

“No one knows what will trigger a passionate reaction from someone. But know that once they start, they will never stop.”

Alicia was already on the move as the woman spoke. She drew her bow, nocked an arrow, and released. The arrow shot forward and managed to sink into the woman's wrist, causing her to let go of the torch in her hand. A growl came out of the woman as the torch clattered to the floor and she grabbed Amieko's wrist.

“Generals and mercenaries with me! The rest of you, kill them!”

With that, she started dragging Amieko toward a door on the left side of the raised platform with various other people, goblins and a bugbear at her back. Everyone else in the room, including the armored man, bore their weapons and leaped forward.

Lotho's arms extended out to either side of him and a dome of ice started forming around the heroes. The armored man and four of the goblins managed to get inside of the dome, but everyone else was kept out.

“Damnit!” Valtira yelled, “Let me out! We need to get to Amieko!”

“Focus, Val!” Lotho shot back, “Defend me! I cannot keep the shield up while being attacked!”

Valtira cursed again and leaped for one of the goblins. The creature lifted his blade into a defensive pose, but not in time to avoid getting a rapier in the eye. She pulled the blade out and went for a second goblin, but this one was better than his companion. He raised his horsechopper to the horizontal and deflected her blade. The goblin then twisted around and lunged the horsechopper forward towards Valtira's belly. She avoided the crude weapon and was kept at bay by the goblin in front of her. There was no way it was doing this on purpose, yet it was effective.

At least, up until the point where an arrow entered its foot. The goblin cried in pain, which gave Valtira the opening she needed to stab the goblin in the belly. It cried out again, but swung the horsechopper diagonally up. The blade caught bare skin on Valtira's leg and she hissed.

The sight of Valtira's blood galvanized the creature and it pushed for the advantage with all it could. Valtira ended up circling around the dome with the goblin slashing and lunging for her. This allowed her to see her companions' status. Bubnug and Alicia were fighting two goblins and the armored man, preventing them from getting to Lotho.

And they were holding their ground.

Bubnug's small sword cane lashed out at the man, bouncing off of the breastplate, then the blunt cane came around and slammed into the man's knee with a backhanded swing. The man lost his balance, but his shield came up in time to deflect another sword attack. Alicia, meanwhile, fended off the two goblins with bow in one hand and a dagger held backhanded in the other hand. She blocked a dogslicer with the wood of the bow and twisted around to stab the dagger into the goblin. The dagger sunk into the goblin's arm, but Alicia had to dodge out of the way from a horsechopper from the other goblin.

Then, they heard the baying of a dog. At least, that's what it sounded like in the simplest description. But when the noise entered Valtira's ears, she felt like running. She felt like she wanted to get away from whatever was making that sound and hide under her bed for a few days. Maybe she wouldn't even run back to Sandpoint. Maybe she would just find the closest rock and dig herself under it. She could barely breathe. She found herself beating against the dome, trying to escape it by blunt force.

When she came back to her senses, she was laying on the ground in the fetal position and shaking violently. She looked up to see Bubnug standing over her, flaming blade and cane in hand, fending off the armored man. Even then, she was too confused and tired to get up. All she was willing to do was look around and see that the other goblins were dead except for one, who was still fighting Alicia.

A couple of seconds later, she remembered where she was and slowly rose to her feet, grabbing the rapier on her torso. Once up, she threw a dagger at the remaining goblin who was about to lunge at Alicia with its horsechopper. The dagger took the goblin in the side, and Alicia finished it with a slice to the throat.

Both of them then turned their attention towards the armored man. Both he and Bubnug looked exhausted and beaten up, yet they both kept up with their opponent. Bubnug made a horizontal swing at the man's knee, but was blocked by the shield. The man then raised his blade and brought it back down in a vertical arc. Bubnug sidestepped out of the way, and tried for a stab to the man's side which was avoided. They kept moving around, which made it hard for Alicia to shoot or Valtira to throw.

"How are we getting out of here?" Valtira asked.

"Give me a second." Lotho answered through clenched teeth.

A cracking sound turned Valtira's head towards the top of the dome, where a blade was starting to saw at the ice. Then she looked around and saw that more blades were starting to saw from all sides.

Valtyra was about to call to Lotho when the dome of ice burst outward. Valtira stared in shock as shards of ice in various sizes from a pencil tip to a fist flew out and impaled many of the goblins that surrounded them. The few that survived looked around them before dropping their weapons and running out of the room.

Everyone that was standing in the dome, including the armored man, looked to stare at Lotho.

“Ha,” he panted, “Ha ha. And she thought I would never be able to do that.”

Valtyra arched an eyebrow at him. He gave her a fierce smile and said, “Just give me a minute to breathe.”

The armored man, still staring at the halfling, let his weapon and shield clatter to the ground and fell to his knees. Then, as if coming to some sort of sense, he fell to his hands as well and started begging, “Please, do not kill me! I’ll do whatever you want!”

Valtyra growled and raised her weapon to thrust, but Alicia grabbed her wrist and held the blade back.

“What are you doing?” Valtira asked through clenched teeth, “He tried to kill us!”

“Under orders.” Alicia responded in a whisper, “He is a mercenary. We could use the extra man-power, if he is willing to join us. Remember, we are going to be dealing with Nualia’s closest people. We need every advantage we can get. He also may know their weaknesses.”

The archer got closer to Valtira’s ear and whispered, “And if he turns on us, we can deal with him as needed.”

Valtyra stared at the man for a minute before forcibly removing Alicia’s grip and snarled, “Do what you wish. I am moving ahead.”

With that, she stormed out of the room to follow the woman and her group. She could hear the pitter-pat of Bubnug’s feet coming after her.

After walking past a makeshift prison, turning left through a hallway, and entering the next room, she realized that she just walked in a complete circle. The room she just entered was where the group was led through to move into the shrine. She turned her head left and watched as Lotho gave her a huge wave.

She ignored him and continued back into the art room. Before she had time to react, she was slammed in the chest by an arcane missile. The force of the attack sent her to the ground,

but she managed to roll to her knees giving Bubnug the platform he needed to leap into the room and swing a flame covered blade at whoever sent the spell.

Valtyra looked up to see that Bubnug's blade failed to score a hit, but the blunt cane smacked against the female wizard's cheek. Valtira got to her feet and stepped to the woman's side and effectively had her cornered, as she stood in front of the door the heroes first came through. When she was in position, Valtira stabbed her rapier forward, sinking the blade into the woman's side.

Surprisingly, the woman gave no indication of pain as she pulled something out of her pouch, pointed it at Valtira and spoke a harsh sounding word in one clean motion. The rapier's blade in her hand started shaking violently before it shattered into many fragments leaving only the hilt, handle, elaborate handguard and an inch of blade intact.

Valtyra could only stare down at the blade in shock. A sensation of a hand brushing the back of her own went through her mind as she remembered first holding the blade. The countless hours of training and fighting with the previous owner and the blood spilt by the blade ran through her head. She did not notice Lotho's lance of frost or Alicia's arrow glancing her nose as the rage boiled.

She let out a primal, passionate and loud scream. Everyone paused to look at her in surprise as she drew two daggers from her dagger belt and lunged for the wizard. She could only squeak in fright and instinctively dodge as the furious half-elf thrust again and again and again with her daggers. Valtira did not see that some of her attacks bounced off an invisible field or that no-one else dared to move to help. She did not even notice that the rapier fell to the ground and was getting dirty by the mud being flung from her motions.

She continued stabbing until the woman was a mess on the ground. Then, with the anger still rising, she kicked down the door and ran into the next room.

No one else moved. The only thing that could be heard was commotion from where Valtira went and the heavy breathing of the rest of the heroes and the mercenary.

"What was that?" The mercenary asked.

"I don't know, Orik." Lotho answered.

"What do?" Bubnug whispered, picking up the dirty handle of the now ruined rapier.

"We save Amieko. We will see about Val later."

"Is Missus bad?"

Lotho kneeled down and put a hand on the goblin's small shoulder and said, "No. But there is something wrong with her. And we need to help her."

The goblin's eyes started watering, something that Lotho did not think was even possible until now, "How?"

Lotho sighed, "I do not know. Right now, we need to get Amieko out of here. You ready?"

Bubnug glanced down at the rapier and said with ferocity, "Yes."

Chapter Fourteen: Battle of Thistletop

“You do not know what war is,’ he said, ‘War is not senseless fighting. Nor is it meaningful. War is simply trying to figure out which side is more convicted to their side of the story. The losing side not only lose the fight, but lose their story.’”

Bubnug slid what was left of the rapier in his belt and tightened his grip on the sword cane. With a wave of his hand, he led the others into the war room, with those he led looking on with slightly amused glances. They all noticed, when they entered the room, that a section of the opposite wall was now gone. Instead, there was just a set of stairs that led downward into darkness. Drawing his blade again, Bubnug started down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, they arrived at a room that had two pillars supporting the ceiling in it. In many places the stone walls, floor, and ceiling were caked with ancient grime and soot. Alcoves in the left and right walls contained partially damaged statues of a man in robes who clutched a book and a glaive. The entire room was canted toward the heroes and whatever ancient upheaval caused the complex to tilt knocked the statues from their bases to that now they leaned towards the party within their alcoves.

“Well,” Lotho commented, “This is interesting.”

Bubnug’s ears instinctively twitched as he started to hear noises coming from the hallway on the other side of the room. He started running for the hallway when he realized that it was the sounds of combat that he heard. He did not even notice it when there was a click, halfway through the hall, and two iron gates slammed down from the ceiling. Luckily, he was on the other side and the gates missed him. However, his companions were stuck in between, and the statues hidden in alcoves in the hallway began to move.

The goblin did not stop for a moment as he reached a division in the hallway. He went through the open door to the left and found himself in a room with wide stone ledges of red marble which lined the curving walls. The walls were well lit by four burning skulls that sat in each corner. Three chairs were scattered and damaged along with books, bones, jars, shelves and other objects. In front of Bubnug was a fountain filled with blue water.

As well as Valtira fighting two goblins, the huge bugbear and Nualia. One of the goblins rode a massive toad creature and carried a dogslicer. The other had a black and orange furred beast fighting beside him.

If Bubnug was human, he may have considered Nualia beautiful. Except for the scars on her belly. And the demon hand.

Bubnug only stared for a moment before jumping into the current fray. Valtira was busy with Nualia and the goblins, so Bubnug went straight for the next threatening target: the bugbear.

The huge furred thing laughed as it noticed Bubnug racing towards it. It flipped its heavy flail in its hand once before bringing it down to crash into Bubnug's face. Bubnug waited until the last moment to avoid the attack, and while the brute was recovering, rushed close and slashed the bugbear's side with a running sweep. The bugbear growled and made a twisting swing, but Bubnug was already out of range. Bubnug continued running until he reached the wall, then he climbed up it shortly before twisting himself mid-wall and took a second to aim himself. He targeted the bugbear's shoulder and launched himself putting a spiral in the leap. He missed the shoulder, but the spin let him avoid the tongue of the giant frog.

Bubnug landed, the momentum of the spin causing him to turn in a complete circle, and noticed that he now had three opponents: the bugbear, the giant frog, and the goblin on top of the frog. The goblin was wearing clothes and accessories that marked him as a chieftain which made Bubnug hesitate. Goblin chieftains could be an issue to the unwary.

Bubnug gritted his teeth and braced his sword cane and blade. He waited for a second and let his enemies attack first. They both rushed forward at the same time, with flail and dogslicer in hand. Both weapons came crashing down to find the spot where Bubnug was empty. Instead, Bubnug managed to jump onto the flail and sink his blade into the bugbear's wrist.

The bugbear opened his mouth to yell in pain, but a lance of frost flew from the room's entrance and entered its hole. The ice expanded and soon the creature could not move its mouth.

"Maybe that will shut him up." Lotho said as he entered the room.

The bugbear turned to Lotho and swung its flail down, but an arrow appeared from behind Lotho and caused the flail to go off course. That and Bubnug's blade caused the flail to hit the wall and become stuck. With muffled grunts, the bugbear tried to remove the flail, but could not. This gave the goblin the opportunity to attack the bugbear's leg.

The muffled grunts turned to muffled screams as the needle-like stabs and slashes from Bubnug's blade became numerous. The bugbear finally pulled the flail out of the wall and the momentum launched the flail at Lotho, who still stood at the entrance of the room. He was preparing a ice shield for a horsechopper, so the shield was not strong enough for both weapons. The flail hit the shield first and the ice shattered into tiny pieces. Lotho managed to avoid the flail, but the horsechopper hit the halfling in the shoulder. Bubnug could hear the sound of the stone blade against bone just before Lotho yelled out in agony.

Before the weapon could be pulled back, Bubnug made an uppercut that split the makeshift halberd in two. Lotho groaned as the stroke shook the blade still in his shoulder. Bubnug then kicked the bladeless end of the shaft into the chieftain which caused the goblin to lose balance and fall off his toad-mount.

Orik then charged into the room and tackled the bugbear to the ground. Bubnug could not watch their exchange because the chieftain started using the broken shaft as a quarterstaff. The goblin was surprisingly quick with the staff and Bubnug could only parry the wood before it hit either him or the recovering Lotho. Thankfully an arrow shot from the entrance hit the chieftain in the chest. This gave Bubnug the chance to finish the goblin with a clean sweep through its head.

Orik was finishing off the bugbear quickly and because of Alicia, the only one still standing was Nualia, who the enraged Valtyra was still fighting. They both looked worn down, but were otherwise unharmed.

“Ah.” Lotho said next to Bubnug. His voice held a hint of pain, but mostly realization.

“What?” Bubnug asked.

“We’ll talk about it later.”

With that, Lotho walked up next to Valtyra and Bubnug followed in confusion. They made a circle with Valtyra and Orik around Nualia. The circle was barely completed before Valtyra leaped forward with both daggers extended. The other three took the cue to attack.

Nualia countered all four of them.

She sidestepped Valtyra’s daggers and parried both Bubnug and Orik. Lotho’s shard of ice was ducked and she then threw the goblin and human with a simple flick of her wrist.

“Enough playing around!” She boomed.

She pointed her finger and said, “Targa Inflicta!”

Valtyra’s next advance towards Nualia was halted as immense pain wracked her whole body. Nualia sighed in pleasure and was about to conjure more magic. However, Alicia’s arrows cut the woman off as they entered her belly. She hissed in pain and blocked another arrow with her chestplate.

Orik and Bubnug did not give her the chance to recover as they flanked her and swung simultaneously. Nualia avoided Orik’s blade but received a nice cut on her back from Bubnug. She twisted around with her blade extended. The blade grazed Bubnug’s belly and blocked

Valtyra's daggers with the little armor she had. Alicia fired two arrows, which passed by Nualia's neck and left tiny lines of blood.

"The Mother of Monsters has shown me my destiny!" Nualia yelled, deflecting daggers and ice, "She has shown me what I am to become and I will finally be rid of this taint!"

She aimed her open palm at Bubnug and snarled, "Targa Good Protectic!"

The ground under Bubnug started to glow with red runes and circles. They flashed brightly and the goblin was thrown off his feet and into the wall behind him.

"I will be reborn! I will be at my god's side and I will have my revenge on those evil men and women of Sandpoint!"

Bubnug sat up and shook his head, trying to get it working again. It worked enough to notice Alicia flying into the room and landing on her back heavily. Tsuto walked in behind her with a bloodied shortsword in hand. Alicia clamped her hand against her chest and Bubnug could see blood slowly pooling around the wound.

"Well done, Tsuto!" Nualia said with a huge grin.

He bowed, "Thank you, my love."

"Now," Nualia aimed a finger at Bubnug, "What is your last word, Hero of Sandpoint, Traitor to the Mother of Monsters?"

Bubnug looked around the room. Lotho was holding his shoulder, but the clothes around the wound was damp with water and blood. Alicia was still stemming the blood at her chest and would not be getting up. Orik was holding his own head and seemed too stunned to move for the next few minutes. Valtira was facedown on the ground and would have looked dead except for the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

He and Lotho seemed to be the only two still able to fight, but both were exhausted. They only had one chance.

Better make it count.

His sword cane blade was a couple paces away. He would not be able to grab it, unless he distracted Nualia and Tsuto.

"Well?" Nualia asked, slightly impatient.

"Catch." Was Bubnug's response.

He grabbed the shattered rapier's hilt and chucked it at Nualia. Nualia and Tsuto both flinched out of the way of the dirty metal and Bubnug lunged for his own weapon. Tsuto swung at the goblin, but he missed. Bubnug gripped his blade tightly and his momentum caused him to stand in front of the only entrance to the room.

Before Nualia or Tsuto could attack, light from the fire of torches appeared in the hallway behind Bubnug. Nualia grinned as the flames came closer. Bubnug, however, did not move at all. The flames were close enough to show the wielders: the goblins who ran earlier. They stopped a couple of steps behind Bubnug in some semblance of a formation.

"Thank you for returning." Nualia said with a wave of her hand, "Please take care of them."

The goblins did not move.

Nualia frowned, "Why are you just standing there? Get them!"

One of the goblins stepped forward and stopped next to Bubnug.

"For Bubnug! For Badoom!"

The goblins charged forward and Bubnug joined them after a stunned second. The other heroes could only watch as the mass of goblins overwhelmed Nualia and Tsuto. What lack of skill the goblins had was replaced with numbers as the two villains could do nothing but surrender to their fate.

"Lamashtu!" Nualia screamed, "Help me! I was to be reborn! To be rid of this taint! I was to be by your side!"

No answer came.

Chapter Fifteen: Aftermath

“As the fight ends, as the last body to fall hits the dirt, there are those who ask if the fight was needed. But they are usually quieted by those who have not thought about or interacted with the other side. The historians are already recording their glorious victory after all.”

After a couple of hours of rest and Lotho’s medical skills, the heroes were able to stand and move around. With Bubnug leading the goblins, the group went around searching the fortress for loot and other items. Valtyra split from the group to try and calm down.

She found her way to Nualia’s bedroom. The door opened into a space that seemed to serve multiple purposes. One side had a curtained master bed with silk sheets. The other side held a desk chair and hanging lantern. Valtyra walked to the desk and started looking around it. Most of it was notes on attacking Sandpoint, which she kept. However, near the end of her search, Valtyra uncovered two hardcover books. She opened the first and found dated entries with multiple entries to a page:

“Wealday, the Fifteenth of Calistril, 4696 AR

Diary,

I am not sure what to write. Father told me to write whatever I wanted. He would not look. He promised.

But I don’t know. Maybe something will happen tomorrow.”

Valtyra skipped ahead dozens of pages, wondering when Nualia started this diary:

“Starday, the fifth of Gozran, 4696 AR

Diary,

I am getting mad at the other kids. They keep teasing me and playing mean jokes on me. Whenever I tell father, he just says that I must forgive them. Just like Desna would. But why should I? Why can I not be mean to them like they are to me?

I just hope they stop soon.”

Valtyra jumped at least a hundred pages forward:

“Oathday, the third of Rova, 4698 AR

Diary,

Now the adults are making my life hell. The kids may make jokes, but at least I am used to them by now. The adults are all superstitious and think that my hair increases "fertility" (whatever the hell that is), that I can drive away evil spirits with my voice, and even cure rashes and warts with a single touch (ew!). They have been telling me to do weird things and I hate it!"

Valtyra took a seat and read one more entry near the end:

"Toilday, the first of Lamashan, 4709 AR

Diary,

It has been a while, has it not? I met a man I thought would be my husband. He was the only one who seemed to understand my pain. I could count on him to be there after a day of jokes and strange requests ready to comfort me. I had to keep our relationship a secret because of father, so we would meet at hidden places. After months, I found out I was pregnant.

He ran. Father was pissed. But not as much as me. Father made me pray for forgiveness, locked me in the church and lectured me nightly. Eventually, my anger rose enough for me to go into a frenzy. Which caused me to miscarry my baby of seven months. I fell into a coma.

In my coma, Lamashtu showed me the truth. My angelic heritage, the thing that caused pain for me, was indeed a curse. The Mother of Monsters showed me what I had to do to be rid of it. I burned down the church, locking my father inside, and left to find the Skinsaw Cult. They gave me a medallion called a Sihedron Medallion and helped me find Derek, my 'lover.' But killing him did not sate my hunger. My next target: Sandpoint. But first, I must be reborn.

I must become the monster I am destined to be."

Valtyra closed the large book and just sat there. Could they have tried to help her? No, she attempted to kill hundreds in Sandpoint.

But they caused it.

Didn't they?

She picked up the second book and opened it. It had a couple of pages filled with strange words. Next to each word was some sort of description. Near the end was rules on how to use "Words of Power." She would have to read more into this later.

Valtyra was getting up after grabbing all of the important papers and books when Alicia appeared at the door.

“Everyone is ready.”

Valtyra nodded and followed the archer out of the complex. The others were already crossing the rope bridge one at a time. Valtira was the last to cross and she kept her head down, lost in thought. She did not even remember getting on Shadowshine and riding next to the squadron of goblins on goblin dogs.

They were halfway back to Sandpoint when Lotho, keeping Amieko secure on a makeshift sled behind his horse, slowed to ride next to Valtira.

“Do you have the feeling that we forgot something?”

It took a few seconds for Valtira to respond, “What do you mean?”

“I just have this feeling that we left something undone.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Valtira said with exhaustion in her voice, “We took care of Nualia, made sure the goblins won’t attack again, and saved Ameiko. We’ve done enough for a day.”

Lotho thought about it, “I guess. But I will not be able to shake it for a while.”

She shrugged, “Your choice.”

“Speaking of,” Lotho said, “We need to talk later.”

“About what?”

“You.”

With that, he sped back up gently, leaving a confused Valtira behind. She shook her head and urged Shadowshine forward.

Chapter Sixteen: Trust Issues

“Do you think anyone appreciates what you do? No one does. They do not know what you did or what choices you had to make. And so when something bad happens they blame you.” ‘Lies!’ ‘Just wait,’ he said, ‘When they march with torches and blades to kill you, you will know that I was right.’”

It took them a couple of hours to return to Sandpoint as their large mass slowed them down significantly. Waiting at the gate of Sandpoint was Mayor Deverin, Shalelu and Shayliss. Once the group was visible, Shayliss ran up to meet Valtyra halfway but halted when she noticed the goblin squad. Valtyra dismounted and walked to the woman while Lotho led the group away. The two women hugged and Shayliss asked, “What is going on?”

“I’ll explain it later. I need to speak with the mayor first.”

Shayliss did not seem to like the answer, but she nodded and released the hug. Valtyra crossed the distance to the mayor and bowed respectfully. The mayor nodded her head in answer, “We have something to discuss.”

Lotho returned with Alicia as Valtyra said, “Yes. We do.”

Deverin led them to the town hall without another word. Any guards that they passed glanced at the group with suspicion and sometimes outright disgust. They made it to the mayor’s office without incident and Deverin closed the door behind them before sitting behind her paper-covered desk.

“So,” she made a temple her fingers, “Let’s start with why I have dozens of goblins currently stationed outside of Sandpoint.”

The three heroes looked at each other awkwardly before Lotho took the lead, “If it wasn’t for them we would not have escaped alive.”

“Oh,” Deverin’s voice took on a tone that Valtyra could not place, “So, because of that, you decided to let them loose. Who gave you the authority to do so?”

It was obvious in his voice and stance that Lotho was struggling, “No one ma’am. But-”

“Good,” she interrupted, “I thought someone decided to make you mayor.”

“Of course not, ma’am. But-”

This time he was interrupted by her fist slamming her desk in sudden rage, “I do not want to hear it! You have overstepped your bounds! We may have named you ‘Heroes of

Sandpoint,' but that does NOT mean that you can do whatever the hell you want! You cannot make these alliances on your own! Especially with such evil creatures!"

Lotho held back from making a thoughtless comment.

Valtyra did not even think about it.

"What about Bubnug?" She said, "You named him a 'Hero of Sandpoint' as well, yet he is one of these 'evil creatures.'"

Everyone in the room, except Shalelu, stared at Valtira in open-mouthed shock. She took the opportunity to continue, "Also remember that we just risked our lives, yet again, for Sandpoint and actually almost died. Yet you want to latch onto an idea you do not fully understand and when we try to explain ourselves, you close your ears like a child."

The mayor's face gradually turned red with barely controlled anger, "You dare to talk to-"

This time Valtira cut into her sentence, "I am not done yet. You have done enough talking."

The mayor rocked back in her seat.

"The reason the goblins came with us," Valtira growled, "Was because they saved our lives. They follow Bubnug to the point of worship. There is no way they will attack us because they do not want to anger Bubnug. And you don't want them in Sandpoint, right? Guess what? We already planned for them to have an encampment outside Sandpoint which is where they are treating Ameiko. We will also see about gathering the goblin tribes in Varisia-"

"What's left of them." Shalelu commented.

"Under one banner." Valtira finished.

The mayor stared at Valtira for endless seconds before leaning forward, "So, you are telling me that I should leave enemies of Sandpoint alone outside of my town because they follow one of their own who was a part of the group that saved my town?"

"No. I'm saying you will."

The mayor stared for a moment, "Fine, But if they make one mistake, they will be killed." She paused, "All of them."

Valtyra only nodded before turning around and leaving the room. Lotho stood slack-jawed for a moment before he bowed to the mayor and rushed out of the room. Alicia

followed, but Shalelu did not leave the room. The door closed behind the group as they made their way to The Rusty Dragon. Amieko was at the bar looking over everything while the halfling woman that called on Valtyra worried over the barkeep. Valtyra was about to stomp up the stairs, but Lotho finally managed to get in front of her.

“I want to have that talk now.”

She tried to push past him, but ice formed around her ankles and trapped her there.

“You cannot walk away from this. We will have that talk.”

The half-elf growled, but Lotho did not budge. She gave in and sighed. Lotho took that as assent and the ice evaporated. He led her to a table farthest away from the doorway and sat down. Alicia climbed the steps and a couple of seconds later, Valtyra heard a door close upstairs.

“I won’t open the conversation with ‘are you alright’ because we both know you wouldn’t answer truthfully.”

Valtyra snorted.

“So, I am going to open with, ‘Are you sure you have chosen the best fighting style?’”

Valtyra jerked her head up at that, “What?”

“You heard me. Because to me, the answer is ‘no.’”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You have to have noticed by now. Almost every fight, you get into a near uncontrollable rage.”

She thought about it, “So? What does that have to do with my fighting style?”

“Remember the goblin raid? Remember how much trouble you had without the anger?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Think to Thistletop. When you lost control, you killed a spell caster and challenged the five strongest members of the group, including Nualia, and survived for about five whole minutes! And Nualia had to use spells in order to get a good hit on you. You even only had two daggers!”

She was starting to understand, "So... what? Do I just change my style and that's it?"

"Oh no," he shook his head, "Nothing like that. Unless you want to that is. What I am suggesting is that you simply learn to control that rage."

"Control it?"

He nodded.

"How?"

Lotho glanced up, "We'll figure it out later."

He rose to his feet, nodded at someone, and climbed the steps to his room. Seconds later, Shayliss sat down next to Valtira.

"Hey," she said softly, "How are you?"

The question held more weight than a general greeting. Valtira thought she was going to keep quiet, but her mouth started running.

"I don't know, Shayliss. We just took care of a woman bent on taking revenge on Sandpoint out of pure anger and started a process that could help protect Sandpoint further, yet we are nearly thrown out or killed because the process includes goblins."

Shayliss only watched as Valtira continued, "Along with that, I'm told I have anger issues and keep getting strange looks from everyone. It's as if they think I am going to burst any second. And I," she sighed, "I have to wonder if they are right."

A hand touched her cheek and pushed so that she faced Shayliss.

"Do you know why I chose you days ago?"

"I was the prettiest?"

Shayliss snorted, "While true, no. I chose you because I watched you fight during the raid. I saw you try to lead the guards. I watched you defend the town and risk your life to keep the town from burning. But most of all, I watched as you did that while keeping those strong emotions at bay. You have a good heart, Valtira. You just show it differently than others." She smiled, "And I think you need someone by your side."

"What about Bubnug?"

“While he is probably a wonderful companion, he cannot give you or be what you need.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need someone that can help release that tension you keep bottled up. Someone that can help you get loose once in a while. That feast did a lot to help you.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Shayliss laughed, “Of course I am. The woman is always right.”

“What about me?”

“You are more of a man than I am.”

Valtyra growled half-heartedly.

“See?” Shayliss was still smiling.

Valtyra could not help but mirror that smile, “Alright. You win!”

Chapter Seventeen: The Next Test

“You are needed again, heroes. For evil has returned. It laughs at you, taunts you with words to anger. Can you overcome? Or will this be your final day? Only you can decide.”

“Keep your arm up, Greenhead!”

The goblin across from Valtyra in the sparring pit raised her wooden dogslicer while the goblin dog she rode on charged forward. Valtyra waited for the rodent to get right next to her before she stepped to the side and brought the fake rapier up to parry her opponent. The mount made a u-turn and waited. Valtyra clapped twice and yelled over the sounds of other goblins training, “That is all! Good work!”

Greenhead bowed slightly and aimed her mount towards the mess hall. The half-elf chuckled and headed for Bubnug. He was watching over the training on top of his horse which was the same one they saved from Thistletop. The goblin had named it Strider when he was told that it found its way to Sandpoint once it was freed. The beast immediately took to Bubnug, but it was two weeks until Bubnug was used to the horse, and another couple of days for him to finally love the horse. But they were now completely inseparable.

Valtyra looked at the banner behind the goblin and attached to the horse’s flank. It depicted a sword cane with a crown at its tip and flames surrounding both. A literal interpretation of “Firelord,” true, but that’s what Bubnug chose. He had that right, though, since he now commanded over two hundred goblins. Half of the goblin tribes in Varisia had united under his banner. And it was only a matter of time before the others did as well.

“Commander!” Valtyra called.

He turned to her and smiled his toothy goblin smile, “Yes, missus?”

“Greenhead did wonderfully. A couple more days and she’ll be ready to join the cavalry.”

“Great!”

“I’m headed back to town.”

“Thank you. missus!”

She nodded and headed for the gates. Just inside, Shayliss was standing there. She looked up to see Valtyra and ran up to give her a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, Shayliss.” Valtyra said.

“Hi Valtira! Did everything go alright?”

“Yep. Greenhead will move up to the cavalry soon.”

“Wonderful!”

They started walking toward Sandpoint hand in hand. Shayliss seemed to have something on her mind, and it took her a minute to speak her thoughts, “I wanted to ask you something.”

Valtira turned her head to the woman.

“What is that ring you’re wearing? You’ve only had it on for a week.”

Valtira looked down and fought the rush of emotions like Lotho had been training her to do for the past three weeks. She was able to control it, but it was obvious that she was holding it back as she said, “It was my brother’s graduation ring.”

Shayliss’s eyes widened in understanding and she did not answer back. She was the only one who knew about the half-elf’s past, and Valtira wanted to keep it that way. Valtira did not know why she decided to put on the sapphire setted gold ring, but she pulled it from under her bed after she told Shayliss her past.

Trying to change the topic, Shayliss asked, “Do you know why the goblins love Bubnug like they do?”

Valtira shrugged, “I just thought that they saw a goblin hero in Bubnug, like the other six... or three now... heroes.”

“That could be true, yet how could they know the name of ‘Badoom’ and use it like they did? You told me that they said ‘For Bubnug! For Badoom!’ yet how could they know those names to use?”

“Are you saying that Badoom may actually exist?”

“I don’t know. There are many gods out there, even goblin gods. We can’t know everything, can we?”

Valtira thought about that, “I do not think I can accept Badoom as a god, goblin or not.”

“Yet you haven’t told him.”

“He’s precious to me, no matter what race he is. I couldn’t hurt his feelings like that.”

“Is that also why you haven’t talked with him about the mellowroot incident?”

Valtyra just shrugged.

“Oh,” Shayliss snapped her fingers, “Before I forget. Lotho wanted to talk with you about the medallion you found on Nualia.”

“I hope he has more than ‘It’s made out of metal.’” Valtira sighed.

Shayliss started to giggle, “Is that what he said last time?”

“Yes. I would have gotten more information if he had told me the sky was blue.”

The woman kept giggling, “I can see your face after that.”

“And it’s hysterical isn’t it?”

She could only nod before her giggles turned into full out laughter. Valtira smiled slightly as she waited for the laughter to die down. It took three minutes, and at that point they could see the North Gate. The two guards stood at either side of the gate as normal, but a third figure was walking past them into Sandpoint. It held a sack over its shoulder.

“Alicia must be back from her hunting trip.” Shayliss commented.

“Let’s just hope this time everything remains dead.” Valtira said, remembering the Rusty Dragon in panic as a not-quite-dead boar ran throughout the inn, finally being slain by a frying pan.

Shayliss was about to respond, but stopped as Sheriff Hemlock ran up to Alicia and beckoned Valtira to him.

“Shayliss, run back and tell Bubnug we need him.”

She nodded and ran back to the goblin camp. Valtira walked up to Hemlock and asked, “What is going on?”

“Not here,” he said, “Lotho is waiting for us at the Rusty Dragon.”

The three of them walked briskly to the inn and as they got to the door, the clomp-clomp hooves on dirt sounded as Bubnug and Shayliss rounded the corner on Strider. They dismounted and stepped up to them.

"I don't know what is going on," Valtyra told Shayliss, "But you should-"

"No." Shayliss shook her head, "I will not."

"But-"

Shayliss raised an eyebrow as if daring her to continue.

Valtyra sighed, "Fine."

All of them entered the inn and sat as far away from any eavesdroppers as possible, which was not hard as the room was almost empty of patrons. Valtyra found that odd. The Rusty Dragon was almost always somewhat full no matter the time of day or weather. Lotho pulled up a chair just in time for Amieko to take their orders. Hemlock was the only one to order and he ordered the strongest drink she had: The Dragonsfire. When it came to the table by a confused Amieko, he shot it down, shook his head in disgust, and tapped it indicating a refill. Only when the second one was shot down did he speak.

"First, let me thank you again for all you've done for Sandpoint. It's fortunate you've proven yourselves so capable, because we've a problem I think you can help us with-a problem I wish I didn't have to involve anyone with, but one that needs dealing with now before the situation gets worse.

Put simply, we have a murderer in our midst-one who, I fear, has only begun his work. I'm afraid something similar to the Late Unpleasantness. Last night, the murderer struck at the sawmill."

At this, Shayliss tensed up.

"And they're in... in pretty gruesome shape. The bodies were discovered by one of the mill workers, a man named Ibor Thorn, and by the time my men and I arrived on the scene, a crowd of curious gawkers had already sprung up. I've got my men stationed there now, keeping the mill locked down, but the thing that bothers me isn't the fact that we have two dead bodies inside. It's the fact that this is actually the second set of murders we've had in the last five days.

I come to you for help in this matter-my men are good, but they are also green. They were barely able to handle themselves against the goblins, and what we're facing now is an evil far worse." He turned to Bubnug, "No offense."

He turned back at the table in general, "I need the help."

Before anyone could ask, Shayliss stood up and declared, "We need to go! Now!"

Valtyra looked at her with concern. Shayliss normally had a level head but it looked like she was about to fall apart now.

She glanced at Hemlock, "Can you take us?"

He nodded.

Chapter Eighteen: Sandpoint Lumber Mill

“You never know what you had until it’s gone’ is a wonderful saying. But a better one is, ‘You never know how someone will act until they are taken to the extreme.’”

Sheriff Hemlock led the group through the woods outside of Sandpoint. Shayliss clung tightly to Valtira’s arm throughout the whole trip and her hands were shaking violently.

“What is it, Shayliss?” Valtira asked.

The girl did not respond. Hemlock looked back on the girl with worry in his eyes. Valtira had to wonder what was waiting for them at the mill. Minutes later, they came to a clearing with a large, stone-walled, building. A crowd of onlookers stood outside the only door and two guards were struggling to keep them back. The sheriff pushed through the crowd, and while they did not quiet down, they moved out of the way so the group could approach the door without too many issues.

The grip on Valtira’s arm tightened significantly as Hemlock cracked open the door enough for the heroes to walk through one at a time. Everyone froze in shock at what they saw inside.

It looked like a slaughterhouse.

Blood mixed with sawdust splattered most of the surfaces. Two corpses were visible, one hanging by a hook on the wall, the other stuck to the mill’s sawblade. Shayliss let go of Valtira and rushed for the corpse on the sawblade. It took the half-elf a second longer to recognize who it was, but when she did, she chased after Shayliss and pulled the girl in close before she could touch the body of Kathrine Vinder, oldest daughter of Vin Vinder, and Shayliss’s sister.

Shayliss struggled in Valtira’s arms before going limp. Valtira let her down and just hugged her as she cried. It was torture for Valtira to hear the girl’s despair, but she was not going to let go.

She calmed down after what seemed like hours, and she asked, “Why?”

“I do not know.”

“She was not the best person, but she was my sister. She should not have died.”

“No one should.”

Shayliss's shoulders sagged down even more, "No, but I'm not talking about just anyone."

A brief flash of a bloodstained snowscape entered Valtira's mind, but she pushed it back. Shayliss was the one upset here. She would not get upset as well. The ring on her finger felt heavy as she turned Shayliss around. Her usually beautiful face was tear stained, her eyes bloodshot and her cheeks red.

"I know. We will do what we can to figure this out. But you need to get back home. Your parents are probably worried sick."

Shayliss looked back at the body and nodded. Hemock's footfalls sounded from behind them, "I'll take her home. I need to talk with Vin anyway."

Valtira nodded and helped the girl up. The sheriff placed a hand on her back and led her away from the scene. The half-elf looked back the corpse of Kathrine and started studying it. The blade was a deadly weapon in this case as it cut the woman's body nearly in half, yet it must have gotten stuck on something, or else it would have gone completely through. She started walking around the body to study the other side, but her foot hit against something on the ground. It was a bloodstained hatchet. The blade was not as sharp as it should have been, but it apparently still did the job as a chunk of meat was stuck to the metal.

"Alicia!" She called.

The archer stepped over and asked, "Yes?"

Valtira pointed to the hatchet, "What is that on the blade?"

The woman knelt down and picked up the axe. Her eyes narrowed at the meat. She then sniffed it and recoiled.

"What?" Valtira asked.

"It smells horrible. But I know what the creature was. It was a ghoul."

"A ghoul?"

"A creature that has not completely died, but keeps rotting away."

"That seems like a lot of undead beings." Valtira said skeptically.

Alicia shook her head, "But ghouls retain a part of their minds, and they gain more strength than when they were alive. They are also created when a person contracts ghoulish fever."

Valtyra's eyebrows raised at that, "Really?"

"Yes. They are not creatures to take lightly."

"No," Lotho said, walking towards them, "And this one had a plan."

"What do you mean?"

"The man was killed cleanly. He had a Sihedron Rune carved into his torso, and I think he was alive when it was made."

"The Sihedron Rune? Why? And do you know who it was?" Valtira asked confused.

"I do not know why, and I don't know who it was, but I found this on the corpse's back. I was looking to see if the rune was the only thing carved into it. Answer: yes."

He pulled out a sheet of bloodstained parchment and handed it to Alicia. Valtira looked over her shoulder as she read the front side. It simply said, in blood, "Alicia." She flipped it around and read, also in blood, "You will learn to love me, desire me in time as she did. Give yourself to the Pack and it shall all end." It was signed, "Your Lordship."

"Why is it addressed to me?" Alicia asked.

Valtyra watched Alicia at the corner of her eye. The woman held her usual emotionless demeanor, but her hands were clenched hard, making her knuckles turn white. Her eyes were also shifting back and forth, as if looking for a foe.

Lotho shrugged, "But you need to be careful. You might be a target later."

"So," Valtira said, "We can assume that the killer is this "Your Lordship" person, right?"

"We can't jump to conclusions, though. We should get back to Hemlock and ask him what he knows."

Lotho was looking at Alicia when he said that, obviously taking Valtira out of the equation.

"I am going with you." She stated.

“Would you not want to be with Shayliss?” He asked.

“Yes, but I will stay. I need to take care of this thing that harmed her family.”

Lotho smiled slightly and nodded, “Alright.”

Just then, Bubnug returned from wherever he was and said, “There is spot. Footprints, sight of place and footprints leading to river.”

“To the river? Why?”

The goblin shrugged.

“Alright. Let’s go see Hemlock then decide what to do next.”

Chapter Nineteen: Ibor Thorn and Vin Vinder

“Knowing has always been the first part of understanding. But can you understand when all you hear is bias?”

The group walked through the woods to return to town. Occasionally they were asked by the onlookers what had happened, but they only shook their heads and said nothing. When they did return, the town was active despite the late hour and people looked out their windows at the Heroes of Sandpoint as they passed.

The heroes found Hemlock exiting the Vinder household with a look of controlled worry. He turned to them as they arrived and seemed to relax some.

“Hemlock,” Lotho said, “What information do you have that we do not know?”

“I have two suspects, although...” He let the last word hang there.

“Although?”

“I do not think they are guilty. I really just brought them in out of protocol. I was going to release both in the morning.”

“Could we talk with them? What are their names?”

“The first is Ibor Thorn, the other worker at the mill. The other is Vin.”

Lotho raised his eyebrows, “Why him?”

Valtyra snorted, “He’s overprotective. He threatened me when Shayliss tricked me weeks ago.”

Hemlock nodded, “He also attacked me in a rage when I told him the news.”

Lotho looked between the two, “Ah.”

They entered the Sandpoint Garrison on the other side of town and walked downstairs towards the holding cells. They did not have to walk far before Hemlock said, “They are here. I have things to do. Stay as long as you need.” With that, he turned around and started talking with his guards.

Lotho walked to the cell to their immediate left and said, “Hello? Thorn?”

Stones crunched as the form inside got up from the bed and hurried to the furthest corner of the room it could reach.

“Thorn,” Lotho softened his voice, “Please calm down. We just want to ask a few questions.”

“I,” Thorn stammered, “I have a-already told th-the sheriff all I-I know.”

“Then, would you tell us? Any information you can give could save lives.”

Thorn thought about it and said softly to himself, “But. I promised.”

“Is it worth lives keeping your promise?”

He thought about it some more, “I... I guess not.”

He walked slowly to the bars of the cell and whispered, “Kathrine and Harker had trysts every night.”

“Was Harker the man in the mill?” Lotho asked, taking out pen and paper.

“Yes,” Thorn nodded, “I usually got to work later than usual, and he never said anything about it, but it was pretty obvious. But while her father is overprotective, I don’t think he did it.”

“Why not?” Lotho asked.

Valtyra answered for Thorn, “It’s not in his nature. He may curse, get furious and talk big. But he would never kill. Beat you unconscious, sure. But not kill. Besides,” her voice went almost imperceptible, “He would not know about the rune.”

“The rune was placed after death, though.” Lotho answered with the same softness, “Anyone could have killed him.”

“Then what about his daughter?”

Lotho opened his mouth, stopped, closed it and shrugged. Thorn just looked between them confused.

Alicia stepped up as if to say something, but Bubnug beat her to it, “You hide something.”

Thorn snapped his head to Bubnug and sputtered, “W-what?”

"You're not telling us everything." Alicia said giving Bubnug an annoyed look, "What are you not saying?"

The man looked torn. He muttered to himself and his eyes shifted around before finally saying, "Harker was cooking the books. He had been for years."

"What do you mean?" Lotho asked.

"He was embezzling money. Skimmed from the top of sales and businesses. The Scarnettis have a ruthless reputation and I would not be surprised if they hired someone to kill him."

Lotho nodded and said, "Thank you. Please rest. We won't bother you anymore."

They walked away and once they were out of Thorn's earshot Valtyra asked, "What's next?"

Lotho gave her a neutral look, "Vin Vinder."

"Why?"

"I want to talk with him. See his reaction."

"My word isn't good enough?"

"Honestly," Lotho said with a flat tone, "No. You're close to the Vinder family, even if it is through Shayliss alone. That paints a certain light on the family in your eyes.[end quotation]"

Valtyra clinched her teeth in annoyance, but could not dispute him.

They walked further down the hall and soon found the cell that held Vin Vinder. The man was pacing his cell furiously, but when he saw the heroes he stopped in his tracks.

"Ah, so he sent you here to interrogate me, huh?" He started stepping towards the bars as if a hunter on the prowl, "The 'Heroes of Sandpoint.' The ones who saved us from the goblins, yet consort with them right outside our town. I know that you have been studying a medallion with the same rune that was found on Harker's body. "I think," he said as he reached the bars and clamped them with his bulky hands, "you killed him and my daughter." His gaze turned to Valtyra. "You deviant!"

Valtyra crossed her arms and gripped them hard. Her eyes narrowed at the man, but there was no other reaction.

"I know you have been sleeping with my daughter. You are even taking her to that rotten pigsty of a camp! I should kill you here and now so you don't have a chance to harm anyone else, you goblin loving piece of shit deviant!"

The grip on both the bars and Valtyra's arms tightened significantly, each so that they could not strangle the other. Valtyra turned to Lotho and asked, "Did you get what you wanted?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'll meet you outside."

She walked away, arms still crossed, and made her way outside. Once outside in the now pouring rain, she found the closest tree to her and slammed her fist into it as hard as she could. Wood splintered, but it could barely be heard over the sound of the downpour. Pain lanced up her hand and arm, but she did not care. She proceeded to kick the tree until she lost her balance and landed on her butt. Breathing heavily, she stared at the dent she just made. The attacks on the tree helped her anger evaporate.

Some time later, a hand fell on her shoulder. She looked up to see Bubnug standing over her.

"Missus alright?"

She smiled. Either he did not understand what Vin said, or did not care. She wished she could be like that, "Yeah. I am. Where are the others?"

"Inn."

She nodded and let the goblin lead her away from the garrison and the dented tree.

Chapter Twenty: The Abandoned Barn

“Death is a smell you can never forget nor ever get used to. It is not only a physical smell either, but a smell that grates on the mind and soul.”

Valtyra walked into The Rusty Dragon with Bubnug to find Alicia talking to the sheriff.

“Where’s Lotho?” Valtira asked.

“He’s upstairs studying what we have so far. We are to take anything else we learn to him.” Alicia answered.

Hemlock started talking before Valtira could, “I was just explaining to Alicia how and where we found the first murders. A patrol of guards along the Lost Coast Road were assaulted by a deranged man near an abandoned barn. He was obviously insane and ill with his flesh fevered, eyes wild, mouth frothing and clothes caked with blood. The guards subdued him and checked the barn. They found three mutilated bodies.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slightly bloodstained piece of parchment, “This was on one of the bodies.”

Alicia took it from him and read it out loud, “Messrs. Mortwell, Hask and Tabe - A deal has come about that I need capital for. It involves property and gold, and though I am not at liberty to tell the exact details, it will make us all rich. Come to Bradley’s Barn on Cougar Creek tonight. We can meet there to discuss our futures. Your Lordship.”

“Your Lordship? Again?” Valtira muttered.

“Whoever he is,” Alicia commented, “He has to be our killer.”

“What are you talking about?” Hemlock asked.

Alicia and Valtira gave each other an uncomfortable glance before Alicia carefully said, “We found something that links ‘Your Lordship’ with the lumber mill.”

Hemlock made a thoughtful grunt, “We have a serial killing then.”

“Hemlock,” Alicia said, eager to leave the conversation, “Give this to Lotho for us and tell him that we are going to the barn.”

He nodded and took the letter. Alicia hurried out the door with Valtira and Bubnug in tow. Once they were out of earshot, Alicia muttered, “I’m glad I did not have to tell him what we found and whose name was on it.”

Valtyra nodded, "I want to ask you something."

"What?"

The half-elf took a deep breath, "Do you know who 'Your Lordship' is?"

Alicia said nothing. Valtira was about to ask again when the woman whispered, "I hope I'm wrong."

They arrived at the stables and before Valtira could ask more, Alicia was on her steed and kicked off towards the town gate. As Valtira mounted Shadowshine, she had to wonder what Alicia was hiding and if it would get them killed.

It was a fifteen minute ride to the barn. The building sat against the road and two guards stood at the entrance. Apparently they knew the three riders on sight because they walked up and helped the heroes dismount without a word. They then opened the barn doors and the smell of blood, rotting flesh and mold slammed into the three heroes. Bubnug did not react, but Valtira reeled back and Alicia covered her nose.

Inside was a scene similar to the mill. The difference were that there were no bodies and that the building, besides the blood, was near bare. The only piece of furniture was a chair.

"Bubnug," Valtira said through her hand, "Check outside."

The goblin walked around the building and the women stepped to the chair. It was a simple piece of furniture made out of oak wood. But the most noticeable feature was what was not on it: Blood. In a room covered with blood, this single area did not have any. There was also a bundle of ropes, with knots still tied, on the floor behind the chair.

"Someone was tied to this chair," Valtira whispered, "And did not die."

"The insane man must have been the one."

Alicia walked around the inside of the barn. She stopped at one of the corners of the barn and stared.

"How many people were sent that letter?" She asked.

Valtyra put a finger to her chin, "Three."

“Then why are there three concentrations of blood?”

“Because all three di-” She stopped as she realized what Alicia was getting at.

“Exactly.”

“So who was tied up? ‘Your Lordship?’”

“That would not make sense. Why would he tie himself up?”

“If we are right in that he is a ghoul, then he might not be able to think rationally.”

“Yet he was able to write a good enough letter to lead these men here?”

Valtyra just shrugged.

“We should get back. I think we have everything we can get from here.”

“You go on. I need to check on Bubnug.”

Alicia gave her a strange look, but nodded and walked out. Valtira followed her out, but turned to head for the back of the house. The archer continued watching her until she was out of sight. The clomp-clomp of horseshoes sounded a few moments later.

“Bubnug? Can you hear me?” Valtira called.

Crackling leaves sounded Bubnug’s approach, “Yes, Missus.”

“Did you find anything?”

The goblin started to shake his head, but froze. His nose twitched twice. Then twice more. Valtira froze as well, trusting Bubnug’s instincts and senses. He turned to the right and started walking slowly.

Valtyra followed with a hand on her dagger. They went like that for five minutes before Bubnug immediately stopped and looked around.

“What is it?” She whispered.

“Smelled something.”

“What?”

“Rotten. Like at saw-place.”

Her eyebrows rose, “A ghoul? Is it nearby?”

“Don’t smell more.”

She relaxed, “Must have run then.”

She nodded towards the barn and headed back. So they could talk with the mysterious fourth man.

Chapter Twenty-One: The Sanatorium

“What do you think I am doing to them, sir? Helping them? Making sure that they will live healthy lives? Fluffing their pillows and telling them a bedtime story? No. I am a scientist. If I tell them anything, it is that they are a subject, a pawn, someone that will give me answers, willing or not.”

Alicia was walking out of Sandpoint’s Garrison as Valtyra and Bubnug rode through the North Gate, “The fourth man is Grayst Sevilla. He is currently at Habe’s Sanatorium.”

“Where is that?” Valtyra asked.

“A couple miles south of town.”

She nodded, “Let Lotho know what we found. Bubnug and I will go on and visit.”

Without a word, Alicia mounted her horse and rode further into town. The other two raced from the North Gate and circled around Sandpoint.

“Why we fast?” Bubnug yelled over the sounds of the horses’s gallop.

“I have a feeling Alicia is a part of this, willing or not. I want to get there with enough time to investigate before something happens involving her.”

“No trust?”

“Not exactly,” Valtyra hedged, “It’s more like caution. Besides, I think she is cautious about me as well.”

“Oh.”

He seemed to ponder about something for a moment, “Missus?”

“What?”

“What did man mean about ‘sleeping with daughter?’”

Valtyra’s stomach dropped and she choked out a wordless sound.

“I mean. You always slept at inn, right?”

Her face started heating up. She could not get any words out of her mouth. She would have never thought that she would have to give ‘the talk’ to anyone but especially not to him.

“Missus?”

She violently shook her head, “Don’t worry about it. You’ll understand later.”

The Sanatorium came into view and Valtyra raced for it happy to leave the conversation behind. It was squat and very unimpressive being made only of stone and housing three floors. It did not even hold windows or a slanted roof, as if it was the cheapest thing anyone could have bought. Valtyra kept a hand on her dagger as she tied her horse to a nearby tree.

“Be careful,” she whispered.

Bubnug landed with a soft thump and nodded. Valtyra walked up to the door and turned the knob, expecting it to be locked. It opened to a tiny bare room. As she stepped onto the floorboards, the wood creaked loudly which made her cringe. A hallway ran straight ahead with a door at the end, and a door to the left. She walked through the door to the left and entered into a room with a simple desk, two doors to the left and right, and a rope hanging from the back corner. A sign hung off the edge of the table, “Pull for Service.”

She shrugged to herself and pulled on the rope. Bells could be heard from the upper floors ringing a steady rhythm. The floorboards on the upper floors creaked as someone descended. Seconds later, a weary middle-aged man walked into the room.

“Can... can I help.. you?” He asked nervously.

Valtyra bowed, “My name is Valtyra, and this is Bubnug.” She waved her hand at the goblin, “Alicia will be here soon. We would like to speak with Grayst.”

He grew even more nervous, “Why?”

“We just want to ask a few questions about some events that have happened.”

“Is that all?”

Valtyra bowed slightly, “Yes. I promise you.”

“So, you will leave after you get what you need?”

Her eyebrow raised at that, “Yes.”

“Could you prove that by leaving your weapons here?” The man pointed to the desk.

Valtyra hesitated, “Uh. Sure.”

She started unsheathing her blades and placing them on the table. Bubnug was to do the same thing, but Valtira cut him off and shook her head. He looked confused, but he left the sword in the cane. The man did not seem to notice the exchange as he nodded in satisfaction and waved them to follow him.

He led them through a dining room and upstairs. They then passed cells which were mostly empty. When they stepped into the cellblock, screams and moans sounded from two of the cells. As they walked through, Valtira looked into both cells. Both held men, one of them did not have eyes and wore a farmer's outfit while the other was a man in his mid or late nineties. They continued to yell and bang against the bars, but they could not reach out far enough to touch the group.

Valtira followed the man up another set of stairs and watched as he unlocked the door at the top. The door led to another set of cell blocks, but only one was occupied this time. It held a furred creature that huddled against the far wall who did not seem to notice them. The man seemed to ignore the creature as well as he unlocked a door to his left. He waved the two heroes through and shut the door behind them all.

The room was a medical room, with shelves of books, vials and boxes. There was a dresser drawer open which contained various tools of varying sizes. In the middle of the room was a table covered in wet and permanently caked in blood. On top was a man tied up in a straight jacket. His skin was deathly pale, his eyes almost completely bloodshot, his hair only a few strands and his teeth either rotted off or sharpened to inhuman levels.

Bubnug did not seem affected by the pale man's near-death appearance, but Valtira could only stare slack-jawed as he got to a sitting position. She shook her head clear and stepped forward, "Grayst Sevilla? Right?"

He said nothing.

"Sevilla? Is everything alright?"

He still said nothing.

Valtira turned to the man who led them to the room, "Has he always acted like this?"

The man shrugged, "It was either this, or mutterings about nonsense."

She folded her arms and frowned, "This is going to get us nowhere then."

Before the man could open his mouth, multiple sets of footsteps sounded from outside of the room. The door opened and Alicia walked in followed by a red scaled, hooved being. Valtira

recognized the red woman at once. She was a tiefling, a race that held the blood of demons inside of their human-like bodies. The blood gave them different physical and mental traits, such as enhanced sight, deadly claws and amazing speed.

“Sir,” she had a rough, lizard-like hiss of a voice, “I found her sneaking around the perimeter. What should I do with her?”

Alicia hissed a curse and tried to turn around, but the hold on her arms were tight. Valtyra could not help but smile at her face. She put her hands on her hips and smirked, “Alicia, you know it is impolite to sneak around someone’s home.”

Alicia glared daggers at the half-elf, which made the smirk widen. The man who was called ‘sir’ glanced between the three women and he asked, “A friend of yours?”

Valtyra tilted her head and watched Alicia’s face, “Some may think that. She would disagree.”

Alicia gritted her teeth, but everyone froze as noise came from Sevilla. They all turned to find that Sevilla was staring at Alicia with bulging eyes.

“He said.” Sevilla whispered in a hoarse voice, “He said you would visit me. His Lordship. The one that unmade me said so. He has a place for you. A precious place. I’m so jealous. He has a message for you. He made me remember it. I hope I haven’t forgotten. The master wouldn’t approve if I forgot. Let me see... let... me... see...”

“What the hell?” Valtyra muttered to herself.

She looked back to Alicia to find the archer staring at the pale man. Alicia whispered, “Richard?”

Valtyra’s eyes widened, “What?”

“Ah.” Sevilla said, “He said that if you came to his Misgivings, that if you joined his Pack, he would end his harvest in your honor.”

He then collapsed and moaned.

“What the hell is going on?” Valtyra muttered again.

The moans turned to shrieks seconds later and he lurched to his feet. During his rise, he broke from the straightjacket and lunged forward at unbelievable speed at Alicia. And Valtyra could not do anything to stop him.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Grayst Sevilla

“Everyone believes that the undead are weak, slow creatures that are only interested in brains. I dare you to meet a ghoul one day and think that same thing. Assuming you survive, that is.”

The green form of Bubnug flew across Valtira’s vision and crashed into Sevilla. Both slammed against a bookshelf and fell to the ground, struggling against each other. Valtira turned away from them and yelled at the tiefling, “Get him out of here!”

The tiefling had obviously been in fights before. She let go of Alicia, grabbed the man, and led him out of the room. Alicia bent down and grabbed the sword cane that Bubnug dropped in his charge. It was ridiculously small to be a sword in her hand, but it served well as a dagger. She stepped forward just as Bubnug was tossed over Valtira’s head and out of the room. Sevilla scanned the room until he saw Alicia, then leapt straight for her.

Alicia stepped to the side and brought the blade down. It sliced Sevilla’s side, but he did not seem to even notice as he swung his arm back. It hit her shoulder and she felt it almost pop out of place. She barely managed to stay on her feet and counter. The blade missed, and Sevilla clawed at her face. He took her to the ground and continued clawing at her face and body. She managed to get some hits in with the blade, but it seemed that Sevilla did not care as he kept slashing.

The weight on Alicia’s body was lifted in answer to Valtira’s kick in Sevilla’s side. Alicia coughed out gasps as the breath she did not know was gone came back in a rush. She looked up to see that Valtira was currently locked hand-in-hand with Sevilla and was holding him away from the downed woman.

“Alicia!” Valtira grunted, “Get downstairs and grab our weapons!”

The archer did not seem to understand at first, but she shook her head clear and got to her feet. Valtira heard her exit the room and head down the stairs. She just had to keep Sevilla held down for a minute or so. Her plan worked for about ten seconds, then he got the upper hand and tossed her to the side. She bounced off the table, hit the drawer of tools, then hit the floor face-first. She grabbed the open drawer and used it to help support her. Sevilla charged at her again, but she managed to pull out a scalpel before he slammed into her. The scalpel bit into frail skin, but fell out of her hand as her body hit the drawer again from the force of the man’s body. Her head connected hard with the stone wall and she blacked out.

When she started waking up, she felt something sliding under her. She then felt herself get into a sitting position against a wall and saw a green figure run through a hole. Dizziness took over and she felt as if she was going to fall over, but she started standing up anyway. As she did, she saw her rapier leaning against the wall as if it was never sundered into

uselessness. And there were three more next to the first. Confused, she grabbed two of them and stumbled to the doorway.

Bubnug was keeping a figure away from the door while some archer peppered it with arrows. Valtyra was getting her head back together, and she tossed one of the rapiers at the figure. She then moved around the table to flank the figure with Bubnug. Valtyra heard the archer yell something, but she could not understand what it was or why she should care. She just started stabbing at the figure with her blade. The metal bit shallower than she thought it should, but it seemed to be doing some kind of damage to the thing. It yelled and grabbed the half-elf around the neck without turning around. Pressure built in her head and it felt like her head would explode at any moment. She fell to the floor suddenly and she found that her butt started hurting. She must have landed on it.

A hand touched on her shoulder and she flinched violently. The hand gripped tightly and she tried to get away, but it held her still. Valtyra looked up to see that it was Alicia. The archer was saying something but Valtyra still could not understand it.

Suddenly, everything came back into focus and she rocked back as if it was a physical blow.

“-own, Valtyra!” Alicia seemed to yell, “It’s alright! We’re done!”

Valtyra flinched at the volume of her voice, “Stop screaming.”

“I’m whispering.”

Valtyra looked around slowly and weakly muttered, “What happened?”

“We won. Sevilla is dead and Bubnug is getting our horses. We are going to head back so you can get that head of yours examined.”

“I’m fine. Fine. I’m fine. Fine... fine... fine.”

Alicia shook her head and got an arm around Valtyra’s shoulders. She then dragged the half-elf through the building. Along the way, Valtyra looked down and saw that the rapiers were gone. The only things she had were daggers. Before she knew it, tears started falling down her cheeks and she started whimpering.

The next thing she knew, she was back at the Rusty Dragon and both Lotho and Shayliss were leaning over her bed.

“What?” Valtyra breathed.

“Don’t move or talk.” Lotho said, “You have a concussion. This will take concentration to reduce.”

Valtyra looked confused, but kept still as the halfling did his work. It seemed to take forever, but the pain she just realized was there softened. Her mind also seemed to start working again, which allowed her to notice that Lotho had bandages on his arms and face.

“What did you do, Lotho?” She asked.

He kept a neutral face as he checked her for more injuries, “I visited the Scarnettis. This was their parting gift after telling me that they are not involved with the murders.”

“Why did you go?”

“I wanted to check up on Thorn’s lead. It went nowhere.”

“So, where does that leave us?”

“With all of the answers we need.”

She raised her eyebrows, “Excuse me?”

“I know where we need to go next. And have an idea of who is doing the killing.”

“Alright. So, what are we waiting for?” Valtira started to rise.

Shayliss put a hand on her chest and pushed her back down, “For you to recover.”

“But I feel fine!”

Shayliss snorted, “Yeah, right. I am going to keep you bed-ridden until you are rested.”

Valtyra sighed, “Fine.”

Lotho smirked and walked out of the room without another word. The two women were the only ones left in the room, and the silence became tangible. A thought entered Valtira’s mind and she slowly turned to Shayliss. Shayliss tilted her head, “What is it?”

Valtyra narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, as if keeping her train of thought running, “Shayliss. I talked with your father earlier.”

Shayliss’s eyebrows raised at that, “And?”

Valtyra sighed, "He said that he 'knows we are sleeping with each other.'"

Shayliss looked away sharply. Valtira ground her teeth together, "Is there something I should know about?"

The woman kept her eyes on whatever she was looking at and did not say a word. Valtira ground her teeth harder, "You're hiding something from me."

Shayliss got to her feet and walked over to the window. She leaned against the windowsill and whispered, barely audible, "I'm not ready yet."

Valtyra released the tension on her jaw and sighed, "Alright."

Shayliss stared out the window towards Sandpoint's square in order to collect her thoughts. Minutes later she turned around to find Valtira asleep. She smiled slightly and moved over to kiss the woman's forehead. When she pulled her face back, she could see the drool falling from Valtira's mouth, and just barely managed to hold back the laughter trying to fight its way out. It was not something she expected from the fierce fighter, but she also found it adorable. The drool made Valtira look like a child, but she would kill Shayliss if the woman ever mentioned it. She wiped the saliva away and laid down next to the fighter.

"I promise," Shayliss whispered, "I'll tell you soon."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Switch...

“Pain is one concept that we all know but cannot understand. There are many kinds of pain. Some which people love, some which people cannot come to terms with, and some that people avoid like the plague...”

Valtyra woke up and immediately felt her muscles complain. She tried to rise, but her head flared and she fell back down onto the pillow.

“I’ve got to stop waking up like this.”

The bed shifted and she rolled over to find Shayliss fast asleep next to her. She frowned at the woman, thinking about the night before. What was she hiding? Why was she hiding it? Valtira smirked to herself at that. Like she had room to talk.

The door to the room opened and Lotho walked in with a bucket of water and bandages. He got one look at the two women before a huge grin appeared on his face. Valtira’s face heated up and she growled, “Don’t you even think about it.”

The grin only widened as he walked to the other side of the bed and set the bucket down, “If only all of us could get that lucky.”

“Another word and I *will* kill you.”

“Do you think you could find another medic that is as skilled or handsome as I? You would have to if you killed me.”

“I’m sure I could manage.”

He pulled up a stool to the bed and sat, “No. You couldn’t. Because there is no-one else like me.”

Valtyra snorted, “Fine. Just heal me already.”

“For someone who’s going to be bedridden for at least today, you are quite impatient.”

“Bullshit. I am getting up in the next hour.”

Lotho snorted in the exact manner that Valtira did, “Nope. At most you’ll be sitting up.”

He turned his attention to her face and, in a serious tone, said, “You cannot mess around with this. Concussions are a serious issue. If you don’t take it carefully and seriously, you could just make it worse, or even permanent. So, you will not be getting up today.”

Valtyra unconsciously clenched her fists and gritted her teeth, "No. I cannot."

She was cut off by motion next to her.

"Valtyra. Please, listen to him."

Shayliss entered her field of vision, "Please. Don't make this any worse."

She glanced at the woman before easing up on the anger and relaxing. Lotho continued his work as if nothing happened. It took him only a few minutes to clean up injuries Valtira did not notice and examine her head. He then got up and said, "You will be well enough to move around tomorrow. Until then, there will be someone in here to watch over you."

With that, he walked out. Valtira watched him leave with an annoyed look and then gave that look to Shayliss. One corner of Shayliss's mouth curved up, "So, have any plans for today?"

The annoyance on Valtira's face grew deeper and Shayliss's mouth broke out into laughter.

"I guess not." Valtira sighed, "But I don't like it."

"Gee really?"

Shayliss suddenly frowned and got to her feet. She walked over to the window again and stared out it. The sun was on the horizon, but Valtira could not tell if it was setting or rising. The orange sunlight fell onto Shayliss's face, but what should have been a warm feeling turned sour as her face went even darker. Her chest was rising and falling too quick to be normal breathing, but it looked like Shayliss was controlling her emotions as she struggled to speak.

"Do..." She started, "Do you wish you... can change... the past?"

Valtyra's eyes widened, "What do you mean?"

"If you could go back and prevent something from happening. Would you?"

Images of a snow covered fortress entered Valtira's vision as she answered, "I don't know."

Shayliss looked back at her and Valtira's heart twisted at seeing the tears flowing down her face. She hurried to continue her thought, "I mean. I would love to go back and try. But I don't know if doing anything differently would help."

“Even if... it saved a... life?”

Valtyra did not answer for a minute. She did not know what to say. It felt like no matter what she said, it would either be a lie or something Shayliss would not want to hear.

“Shayliss. You know I have never been one to comfort others. I have never been a philosopher or a scholar. I’m just an ex-pirate who fought only for herself and her crew and cannot seem to let go of the past. So take this as you will. But what happened to your sister was not your fault.”

The words hit Shayliss like a physical blow. She rocked back and leaned against the wall with wide, tear-stained eyes locked on Valtira, “What?”

Valtyra slowly rose to a sitting position. Shayliss started rushing to her, but she growled, “Don’t you dare.”

She then slowly stood up, ignoring the fresh pain that blasted in her head. Once she was on her feet, she was able to walk over to the slack-jawed woman.

When she was standing in front of Shayliss, she put her arms around the woman’s sides and pulled her into a hug, “Whatever you think, it is not your fault. Your guidance is what is helping me see that. So why can’t you?”

“But... I could have stopped her. I knew she was going to the mill. I could have stopped her from going yesterday. Or at least made her go later.”

“What would you have told her? Would she have even listened? And how would you have known something was going to happen?”

“I... I...”

“Shay. You have the chance to do something I could not and still cannot. You can let go. It will take time, but you can become something I never could.”

“But... I can’t. It hurts too much.”

Valtyra pulled her in even closer, “And it will. But it will fade. It will take time, but the pain will fade.”

“If it will fade, why should I let go?”

“If you don’t, then you will become like me. Someone who cannot learn from the past. Someone who will hold the pain every moment of every day. Someone who always fears what the future may hold.”

Shayliss was silent as the tears started soaking through Valtira’s clothes. They stayed like that for five minutes before Shayliss finally looked up, “That is the first time you called me ‘Shay.’”

“Well... I...” Valtira stammered.

“I like it. At least,” she attempted to give a smile, “As long as I can call you ‘Val.’”

Valtira attempted a smile back, “I guess so.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: ...and Return

"...Yet it can be recovered from. No, not immediately and no, not completely. But it will fade, and you will learn from that pain. Child, pain's a part of growing up. Without it, you will never learn. Never grow into the person you need to be."

Valtyra woke up in the bed and took a look around the room. Alicia was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, and within clear sight of the door. Her eyes were closed, so Valtira wondered if the woman was more perceptive than she thought. Perceptive enough to rely only on her hearing when playing the guardian role? She knew that the archer was a skilled fighter and had a mind to match, so it was not too much of a stretch. Then she wondered why she was wondering about that. Maybe her mind was not quite together yet.

Before her still recovering mind could refute, Valtira opened her mouth, "Alicia?"

The woman did not stir at all, but a small questioning grunt could be heard.

"In the sanatorium, you called out someone's name. 'Richard.' Why?"

Alicia did stir that time. Each limb of her body seemed to jerk in different directions and she almost lost her balance. Once she composed herself, Alicia opened both eyes and Valtira could see a mix of emotions in them: anger, annoyance, temptation to kill, and...

Sadness.

Valtyra knew she hit a nerve when she mentioned that name, but could not tell if it was a good idea to have done so. She did not even think that she would get a response out of the woman.

She was about to open her mouth to dismiss the conversation when Alicia muttered, "Richard."

Valtyra's eyes widened, "What?"

"Richard... was my... husband."

With ever widening eyes, Valtira instinctively moved her gaze to the woman's left hand. She never noticed it before, but there was indeed a ring wrapped around the slender finger. It was quite a beautiful ring with a ruby set into the golden band.

"Why did you call to him earlier?" Valtira asked softly.

Alicia seemed to be having an emotional storm within her. Her face contorted into strange expressions without pause, but Valtyra found it interesting that she never shed a single tear.

The woman finally said, "He... he..."

Before she could say anything else, the door to the room slammed open and Shayliss rushed in.

"Alicia," she called, her voice tense, "The rest need you downstairs!"

Alicia shifted back into her normal, neutral self, nodded and headed out of the room. Shayliss' eyes followed her until she apparently went down the stairs, then shut the door.

"What is going on?" Valtyra asked, trying to rise.

Shayliss pushed her back down and said, "I don't know. But a farmer ran into town minutes ago, yelling nonsense. I was only told to get Alicia from here."

"If they need her, then they need me as well! Let me up!"

"No!" Shayliss said firmly, "I am not going to let you up. You are still in no condition to go."

"But." Valtyra started to protest.

Shayliss gave her a cold stare and said, "No."

Valtyra was about to say something else, but she then noticed sweat forming on Shayliss' forehead. Assuming Shayliss ran here from the North Gate or the East Gate, that would not be an issue as that would be even a hard run for her. However, the farms are two or three miles to the south of Sandpoint, so the farmer would have come from the South Gate, only a minute away from the inn. She was, rather pleasantly, in shape as well, so the effort of running here would not exist. Most certainly not enough to cause her to sweat like she was.

Valtyra then noticed what the woman was wearing. She was wearing a white shirt with a lower-than-normal cut at the neck, brown leather trousers held up by a leather belt and brown leather boots. On top of that was a midnight black coat with a golden trim. Not only that, but the coat seemed to be thicker than normal coats should be. Valtyra had a similar coat, and it also was thicker than normal coats, but that was because hers held metal plates sandwiched between the two pieces of leather the coat was made of. In fact, the whole outfit seemed to be modeled after her own battlegear, except that she also had armored trousers and steel-toe-plated boots.

Was that coat armored? Did she have armor under those simple clothes? And if she did, why? Shayliss has said before that while she admired Valtira's fighting abilities, that she never wanted to follow in her footsteps. So, that could not be an armored coat. Yet she could not shake off the feeling that something was different about the scarlet-haired woman in front of her.

Shayliss noticed that Valtira was looking at her strongly and her cheeks flushed red, "What is it?"

At that point, Valtira realized that she was not staring at the woman's face, but her outfit, and that her mind was wandering into places it should not. She swiftly turned her head to the left and felt the heat rise to her cheeks, "It's just... that's a nice... outfit."

Damn concussion! Valtira growled in her mind.

A bell-like laugh burst from Shayliss and she said, "Oh. Why, thank you."

Before the situation could get any more awkward, a knock sounded on the room's door. Shayliss opened the door and Valtira could hear a whispered conversation and saw a note being handed to Shayliss by a green arm before Shayliss thanked the creature and closed the door. Valtira watched as the woman opened and read the note. Her eyebrows raised in surprise and muttered, "They're done already?"

"What?" Valtira asked, "What's done?"

Shayliss looked up and smiled, "I hope you can behave while I take care of something real quick?"

That smile bore into Valtira's mind and seemed to take hold, just like all of her other smiles had, "I guess."

The woman nodded and walked out of the room. Valtira's mind started to wander during the half an hour that Shayliss was gone. She was so deep in thought that the door opening again almost went unnoticed. However, the smell of Shayliss' sweat-mixed perfume pulled her back into the realm of reality. Shayliss was carrying a long bundle wrapped in heavy cloth and bound by twine. She seemed to have no trouble as she put the bundle on the bed next to Valtira.

"What is this?"

Shayliss, for the first time since Valtira returned to Sandpoint, helped her sit up in the bed. The flash of pain in Valtira's head was dimmer than it was hours ago so she thought that she would be able to get up the next day. But she was mostly focused on the bundle.

“Open it up!” Shayliss could not seem to be able to hide a huge smile.

Valtyra gave her a questioning look before she pulled the bundle towards her with both hands.

It had an exceedingly familiar weight.

“No...” Valtyra muttered.

She hurried to unwrap the bundle, only barely conscious of the twine. It took her shaking hands a couple of fumbled attempts, but she eventually opened it to find two rapiers of the same design as what she had before.

At this point, her whole body shook as she reached out to grab a handle.

“It can’t... it was destroyed.”

She hesitated. Her hand was now on the handle of the weapon and she was torn. Her beloved weapon was sundered that day at Thistletop. It was shattered to the hilt and she believed in that instant that the blade she carried with her since that day years ago was gone forever. She wanted it to be returned to her. She promised herself that the blade in her hand would take her on her journey of... redemption? Revenge? She was not sure herself, but she believed that her rapier would be the one thing to never leave her side. But when it was broken, so was her soul. She lost herself to anger, to the pain that resurfaced after these years.

She looked at the sapphire ring wrapped around her finger. The cold metal seemed to speak to her. To pull that blade out. To believe that it was still whole, still alive. That he wanted her to.

But... she kept her hand there. She did not pull the blade out. What if it was all a lie? A dream? She could not deal with that pain again. She was only just getting over the event years ago. It fought to resurface even now.

A hand placed itself upon Valtyra’s, interrupting the thoughts that went flying chaotically. She followed the arm up to its owner: Shayliss.

“You can do it.” She whispered, that smile still there, “I’ll help.”

The hand tightened over Valtyra’s and she felt the warmth travel from her hand up her arm and concentrate on her shoulder. The warmth guided Valtyra’s action as the blade started to slowly reveal itself from its sheath. Her breath started shaking more and more as the blade

was pulled out further. When the blade was fully unsheathed, Valtira could barely keep her composure.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Shayliss asked.

The three-and-a-half foot blade shone in the light of the room’s lamp which revealed that the blade was a perfect recreation, except that there were etchings near the handguard.

As if she predicted Valtira’s question, Shayliss explained, “I had them add a enhancement property. They will never rust and they will be significantly harder to break.”

At that, Valtira jerked and, for the first time in years, tears fell like waterfalls from her eyes. She then felt arms pull her into a hug. Her shaking gasps were overridden by that near-angelic voice.

“I know how much that rapier meant to you. You never seemed to recover fully after you returned from Thistletop, so I asked Savah at the Armory to reforge it and to make a copy. Thankfully, a traveling wizard was happy to help with the enhancement after I told him why.”

All Valtira could do was choke out a breath. She was overwhelmed with emotion. She did not even notice it when Shayliss had her looking straight at that angelic face that held the smile that always made her skip a heartbeat. Then their mouths connected and Valtira lost all of her fear, all of her worry, and all of her sorrow. Before she knew it, Shayliss locked the door and turned off the lamp.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Recovery

"You have taken up blades again? Well done, soldier!"

Shayliss opened her eyes at the sound of the dawn bell's ring. She looked next to her on the bed, but found the spot empty and the rapiers she gave Valtira yesterday were gone as well. Rising to a sitting position and letting the sheets cover her body, she thought back on the previous night.

Valtira had a face on her that Shayliss never thought she would see on the woman: fear and sadness. As if she did not want to see what happened next. Her whole body was shaking too. Shayliss felt it on the bed itself. The rapiers were not even unwrapped before her face shifted. And that look when the rapier was finally fully unsheathed. It would remain in the woman's memories for a long while.

She shook her head and rose to her feet. If Valtira was not in the room, and neither were her new weapons, then Shayliss knew where the half-elf was. She put on her clothes and headed for the South Gate. Right when she crossed the bridge outside of the gate, she went into the southern forested area and followed the path inside of her mind to a small clearing. Instead of walking straight into the clearing, though, she hid herself behind one of the many trees on the perimeter and poked her head around to look.

Sure enough, Valtira was there. She was wearing her usual, slightly armored outfit. The new sheathes were attached to her waist belt, one at her left side, and the other was at her butt with the point facing to the right. Shayliss hesitated at that. The only way Valtira would have been able to pull both weapons at once was if she held one of her rapiers backhanded, which would have been unorthodox.

Yet, Valtira was keeping with it. Shayliss watched her move those rapiers as if it was effortless. *Stab, Stab, Twist, Slash, Thrust, Slash, Slash* went the rapiers, and Shayliss could even hear the whoosh as those blades cut through the air. It was as if Valtira was fighting an invisible opponent and her motions became faster and faster as the "battle" continued. After a full minute of attacks, Valtira suddenly stopped, grimacing in pain and holding her head. She held herself rigid to let the pain fade before starting her attacks again.

Shayliss could only stare as the scene looped again and again. She was amazed at the difference that she saw in Valtira after last night. Valtira came here every day to practice fighting after the raid on Thistletop, yet without her rapiers, her motions seemed slow and awkward. Shayliss always thought that it was because the half-elf was not used to fighting with the daggers, but she could now see that, while it could have been a factor, the main issue was that she was confused and upset at the loss of the rapier. Now that she had the weapons back, she seemed confident in her actions.

After the fifth repeat of her sequence, Valtira stabbed both weapons into the grass and sat down in front of them. She was breathing heavily and sweat shone in the sunlight. Shayliss looked on for another minute, just taking in the woman's form, before she finally left her hiding spot. Valtira jumped at her footsteps, but she quickly smiled at Shayliss.

"How long were you there this time?" Valtira asked with that same grin.

"Only about six minutes."

"That's a minute more than last time. Getting a bit greedy this time are we?"

Shayliss shrugged, "Hey, a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do."

Valtira snorted and gave Shayliss room to sit.

"How do they feel?" Shayliss asked.

"Natural. As if..." Valtira cut off her statement. "Yeah. Just natural."

Shayliss nodded, "I figured. You seemed much more confident today." She chuckled, "Just make sure it doesn't go to your head."

"Eh. Whatever." Valtira shrugged, but that grin was still plastered to her face.

"Speaking of, how's your head?" Shayliss asked, "I noticed that you would sometimes stop practicing because of it."

Valtira nodded slightly, "Yeah. I can get about a minute of near overexertion before it flares up. So, I can get through some normal fighting without any difficulty."

"Okay, but please don't hurt yourself too much."

"Hah. As if anything could stop me."

Shayliss snorted, "Except for my hand, you mean?"

"That is only because you took advantage of my concussion. Now, you cannot stop me no matter what you do."

Shayliss glanced over, "Is that a challenge?"

"It would be, except you would find a way to take advantage of my concussion again. Let's do it when I feel better." Valtira answered with a smile.

Shayliss playfully huffed, "Fine. You owe me though."

Valtyra snorted, "Sure. Have the others returned yet?"

"I did not see them."

"Huh. I would have figured that they would be back by now."

She stood up and extended a hand to Shayliss, "Come on. Let's go back and wait for them."

Shayliss smiled and took the hand. Sheathing the rapiers, Valtira led the way out of the forest area. They had just left the edge of the forest when Valtira put an arm in front of Shayliss to stop her.

"What is it?"

Valtyra just put a finger to her lips. They both stood still, and soon Shayliss heard what Valtira must have: the stomping of hooves. Valtira put her left hand on the back rapier, and pulled it out slightly. It was a little bit before figures on horseback could be seen on the road. Valtira immediately resheathed her weapon and started waving at the figures. Shayliss figured it out afterward and relaxed.

Bubnug, Lotho and Alicia stopped their horses and Lotho called, "Hey there. Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Valtyra grinned, "If I spend on more second on that bed, I would have lost my mind, and you know it."

Lotho let out a laugh, but stopped as he noticed the rapiers, "Wait."

She nodded, "Yep. Shay had them made."

"Oh." His eyes widened, "That's nice."

He seemed at a loss for words, but Valtira's easy laugh made him relax, "Don't think about it too hard. Anyway, how did it go?"

Lotho's features darkened slightly, "We should talk about that in your room."

Valtyra's eyebrows raised at that, but she nodded, "I'll meet you there then."

The halfling nodded and kicked his pony into motion. The other riders followed him while the two walkers started their trek. An urge to hold Valtyra's hand shot through Shayliss, but she hesitated. She still could not understand Valtyra's mental state as of now, and she did not want to get a negative reaction out of her partner. Warmth seized her hand suddenly, and Shayliss jumped at that. Realizing what it was, she grabbed onto it tight before it had a chance to escape. Both women were stiff at first, but relaxed as if something clicked in both of their minds.

"Shay." Valtyra whispered.

"Yes?"

"I just..." She hesitated.

Shayliss looked at the other woman's face and found that she was biting her lip looking for the right words. Or trying to let the words out.

"Th... Thank you."

Those words seemed as if they were forced out, but Shayliss smiled anyway, "It's what I'm here for, right?"

"I guess..."

"Don't worry about it. The road is a long one. We have plenty of time."

Valtyra sighed, "I hope you're right."

Chapter Twenty-Six: Misgivings

“You’re about to put the pieces together, but are you right? If not, lives could be in danger. One mistake could end it. Are you ready to accept that?”

Valtyra entered the inn room and found her companions setting items, weapons, and other objects on her bed. There was not much there, though. Only an iron key with some kind of heraldic symbol of a flower surrounded by thorns, and a wooden coffer which, when opened, held leather pouches stuffed with money and a sheet of bloodstained parchment. Lotho immediately put the money aside, muttering to himself about giving it to Mayor Deverin. Valtira was about to ask if that was it, but Lotho turned around and started arranging the clues they found previously on the bed as well.

When he was done, he looked up at Valtira and said, “I know exactly where our next step should be.”

Her eyebrows raised, “Oh?”

He nodded, “Yes. The Misgivings.”

“Um... what is that?”

“The manor of our killer. Also known as Foxglove Manor.”

Valtyra stood frozen, “Wh-what?”

“Yes. Our killer is none other than Aldern Foxglove himself.”

Valtyra glanced at Alicia. The archer’s face seemed to have a more controlled look than a natural one.

“What makes you say that?”

Lotho sat down on one of the chairs in the room, “Despite what I said before, I was never too sure about what I was putting together. At least, not until last night. I first thought about the ties between the victims, except for Kathrine. But I could not come up with anything except money. They all were involved with the want of more money: Harker was skimming sales and the three others went after a business interest that would have given them a huge profit if it was real.”

“Money’s not a good clue to work with though.” Valtira said, “In fact, in our case it is next to no use whatsoever.”

“Oh, money is a wonderful clue... if the killer was being paid for it. But our killer is not.” Lotho replied, “In fact, I could not understand why he was killing at all. Yet, a scholar knocked on my door while you guys were investigating the barn. We talked about the Sihedron Rune found on Harker and the other victims. The rune is from Thassilon, the empire ruled by powerful wizards. The Sihedron Rune seems to be one of the most important runes of Thassilon in that it signifies the seven virtues of rule and the seven schools of magic.”

“The seven virtues?” Valtyra asked.

“Wealth, fertility, honest pride, abundance, eager striving, righteous anger and rest.” Lotho answered promptly, “But the scholar commented that the rulers were far from virtuous, so the sins of greed, lust, pride, gluttony, envy, wrath and sloth rose instead. He also commented that the fact he was putting this rune on the victims may mean that the killer is a scholar.”

“Okay,” Valtyra breathed, “I can understand that. I think.”

“Not many people are scholars though,” Alicia said, “It is usually a job that nobles pursue.”

“Exactly, which started me thinking about Misgivings.”

“How?” Valtyra tilted her head in confusion.

“Because I instantly thought of Aldern. He is a noble that seemed like a scholar from my talks with him. But I did not want to think it was him, so I went to the Scarnettis to confirm if they were involved. And, as my still healing wounds will tell you, no, they were not.”

Valtyra smirked, “So, that’s why you said to me that you knew where to go next. But you seem more confident about your answer than you were then. Why?”

“Because of that key.” Lotho pointed to the key laying on the bed.

“What about it?”

Alicia answered, “That symbol is the Foxglove family crest.”

With eyes widened, Valtyra asked, “Where did you find it?”

“Around the neck of a ghast.”

“Ah. I guess that confirms it enough for you, Lotho? Since you want to go to Misgivings.”

He just nodded. Valtyra turned a gaze to Alicia, but that controlled look remained. The half-elf was not sure if this was all to it, but there is nothing she could do now. She just had to hope that Lotho was right.

An hour later, they dismounted their horses and stood in front of the huge manor house. The Misgivings looked like it was once a beautiful manor, but age and burn marks give it a more haunted house vibe. The plants for about a mile around were either dead or tangled by thorned vines, and there was no grass to be seen.

“What a lovely place.” Lotho muttered.

“Yeah. A little renovation is in order.” Valtyra commented.

“You’d think a noble would be a better host than this.”

Valtyra just shrugged and started walking towards the manor. The path branched off a couple of yards in front of the manor and the second path led to ruins of what was once a building. It looked like it was burned down, and the only remains were small pieces of walls. Ravens were perched on the remains and all that moved were their heads, which locked onto the group.

“Missus?” Bubnug asked in the tone of a frightened child.

“Don't worry.” Valtyra said, “They won't attack.”

“But, they birds!”

“Just don't look.”

She looked back to see Bubnug looking straight down at the ground. Her mouth quirked up and she patted the goblin’s pirate hat.

They reached the door, and Alicia pulled the key from her neck and unlocked the double doors. The cold air rushed out of the doorway and the party had to cover their eyes from the dust the wind carried. Their footsteps echoed as they stepped into the room. They did not have time to observe the entrance hall before the doors started to shut behind them. Valtyra turned around to see the ravens still staring at them in the crack of the doors.

Their eyes glinted with hunger.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The First Floor

“You never know what memories will be pulled out of your head. Will you be ready to face the past you left behind? What about the present?”

With the click of the doors' latches shutting together, the inside of the manor became uncomfortably quiet. The only sounds that could be heard were the creaks and groans of the house settling on its supports and foundations. Looking around, Valtira could see the wood of the walls waterlogged and molded severely. Moldering trophies hung on the wall in front of her and to her left: a boar, a bear, a firepelt cougar whose pelt looked similar to Bubnug's cloak, and a stag. But they were not as impressive as the monster on display in the center of the room. On a raised platform, a twelve-foot-long creature crouched. It had the body of a lion, a scorpion's tail with dozens of razor barbs, huge bat-like wings, and a deformed humanoid face.

The shadows created by light crawling through the windows and reflecting softly throughout the room gave the creature a much more menacing look. It seemed like the creature would jump out and attack at any time. Apparently, Bubnug realized this too as he started shaking.

“Wh-what th-th-that?” He asked.

“I don't know,” Valtira responded, “But we should move on.”

They started walking forward through the long hallway and as Bubnug got halfway around the creature, he stopped. Valtira turned around and gave him a questioning look. The goblin sniffed a couple of times, moaned questioning, and sniffed again. He then looked at Valtira and said, “Smell burning. Hair. Flesh.”

She looked at him with worry evident, but she just smiled and said, “Just stick with me and you'll be fine.”

He rushed to her side like a frightened child and they kept moving through the hall. Loto and Alicia were already at the middle and staring down at something on the floor. When Valtira reached their side, she looked down as well. She found a mold stain that was partially covered by a damaged throw rug.

“What is it?” She asked.

“Do you notice anything about the pattern?” Alicia asked.

Valtira gave the woman a skeptical glance, but looked closer. The dark blue, sickly green and black old grew in a spiral and looked slightly uneven. But she could not notice anything special.

She shook her head, “No.”

“It looks like a set of spiraling stairs.”

Valtyra raised her eyebrow and looked again. After being told what to look for, she noticed it too. The unevenness that she found before were actually the lines of the steps and small skulls and bones. If they were real stairs, they would have reached down further than the basement and into a spot that could not be seen from where they were.

“Huh. That’s a strange thing to happen.”

Lotho nodded, “Yeah. It has to have been caused by something unnatural, but I don’t know why it would be significant.”

“You think that there are actually stairs under there?” Valtira joked.

Lotho snorted and only responded with, “Let’s move on.”

They moved on into the dining room. A mahogany table surrounded by chairs sat in the room. Twin fireplaces loomed on either side of the entrance from the hall and in front were four stained glass windows. Each window depicted a monster rising out of smoke pouring from a seven-sided box. From left to right were depicted a gnarled tree with an enraged face, an immense hook-beaked bird with sky-blue and gold plumage, a winged centaurlike creature with a lions lower body and a snarling woman’s upper torso, and a deep blue squidlike creature with evil red eyes.

While Bubnug, Lotho and Alicia fanned out throughout the room, Valtira went straight to the stained glass. She looked out a relatively clear shard of glass and saw the waves of the Varisian Bay crashing against the cliff the manor sat on.

“Huh.” Valtira muttered to herself, “Why make these windows stained glass when you have a beautiful view of the bay?”

She jumped as Lotho asked, “Maybe they have significance to the owner of the manor?”

Glaring at the halfling, she replied, “That’s the only thing I can think of.”

He looked through the same piece of glass that she did and muttered, “It looks like we will fall into the water and drown, doesn’t it Allie?”

Valtyra tilted her head at him, “What?”

His face turned dark, "The world is sinking, Allie. Why not just fall now?"

The half-elf put a hand on his shoulder, "Lotho?"

He seemed to snap back into reality and turned toward her, "What?"

"What the hell were you talking about?"

His eyes reflected her confusion back at her, "Talking? I didn't say anything."

"Yes you did. You mentioned someone named 'Allie.'"

Those reflections darkened in time with his face and he said, "No I didn't. You misheard."

Before she could say anything, he walked back to Alicia and Bubnug who were waiting at where they came in. She was going to follow him in confusion, but... *something* tugged at her. It seemed to be pulling her toward the door to the right of the windows. Her legs started to move without her brain commanding them to. Her hand reached out to open the door, and she could barely hear her companions calling to her.

The door led to a library. It featured two chairs, one of which laid on its side, before a stone fireplace. A scarf, its reds and golds contrasting with the drab palette of the room, was draped over the side of the fallen chair. A book sat facedown on the floor between the chairs. A stone bookend, carved to look like a praying angel with butterfly wings, lay on its side in the fireplace itself.

Her legs moved her into the room, and aimed her right for the scarf. She thought she saw the fabric move, and she wanted to tell her body to turn around and run. But, it was no use as her body seemed to work against her will.

Halfway into the room, the scarf leaped out and latched around Valtyra's throat. The shock of the attack, and the mysterious feeling leaving her body, forced her to the ground on her back. A form started materializing in front of her and quickly became the sweet features of Shayliss holding either end of the scarf. At this, Valtyra became paralyzed by fear and could only stare as Shayliss squeezed the scarf tighter against her windpipe. All she could do was gasp out in a fear reaction.

Thankfully, though, her instinct prevented her from immediately blacking out, which gave her companions time to enter the room. Lotho and Bubnug grabbed either end of the scarf and pulled against the scarf itself. It took half a minute of pulling, but they eventually managed to loosen the scarf enough for Valtyra to breathe and escape. With that done, Alicia shot an arrow into the fabric and the scarf became pinned to the floor.

Valtyra rose to her knees and started coughing. She put a hand to her throat while her mind raced.

Did she betray me? Just like they did? Why? I thought she, of all people, would be by my side always.

That wasn't real, a part of her reminded herself, That was just a phantom created by whatever is haunting this manor.

Is this manor haunted though?

What else could it have been? The other part of her asked. You think she just appeared and attacked? She's still at Sandpoint!

A hand fell on her shoulder and she flinched away from it. Bubnug looked down at her with a fearful gaze. Valtira shook her head, still coughing, and rose to her feet.

"Are you alright?" Lotho asked.

She nodded, and spoke with a rough hoarse voice, "Yes."

"Do you want me to look at that?"

She shook her head, which hurt her throat slightly, "No. Let's just go."

She rushed out of the room, and ignored the gazes and shrugs from her companions.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Fear and Illness

“Where is the courage that you held so tightly to? The faith that pushed you forward?”

Valtyra crossed the dining hall with blades in hand. She knocked over whatever got in her way, and she only stopped when she reached the entrance of the room. The hallway in front of her had two doors, to the left and to the right. Without any thought, she picked the door to the left and prepared to kick it down. Something pulled at her shoulder and she turned to find Alicia.

“You were never able to keep your emotions in check. Don’t you think it would be best to NOT anger whatever is watching over this house?”

Valtyra stared at her for a few moments, “I never thought you would have believed in ghost stories.”

“Not a ghost... but something.”

Feeling recovered enough to reclaim her mind, Valtira smirked and backed away from the door. Alicia nodded, nocked an arrow, and moved so she had a clear view of the doorway. Lotho grabbed the doorknob, turned it and pulled.

Nothing popped out at them.

Valtyra started climbing the stairs with Lotho right behind her. Alicia checked the hallway again before starting up and Bubnug came up behind her, closing the door. It took Valtira a couple of seconds to realize that it sounded like someone was climbing up behind them. She immediately stopped and looked behind her. Lotho raised his eyebrows, but turned around as well.

No one else was there.

She gulped, shook her head as if trying to clear it, and continued up. They arrived at the second floor and only found a door. Lotho opened it and they entered the hallway it led to. To the right were another set of stairs that led back down, and to the left the hallway curved back towards them. Valtira took the lead again and moved to the left.

Within a few steps, they found a door that was wide open to the right. Valtira walked past it as well as Lotho and Bubnug. However, when Alicia came near it, she stopped in place. The others turned to look at her as she started walking for the open door.

“Alicia?” Lotho asked.

When she did not answer, he and Bubnug tried to pull her away, but she tossed them aside while keeping her focus on the door. She passed it and almost immediately dropped to the floor with her hands to her head. Valtyra then heard something she had never, and never thought she would hear from Alicia...

Screams of unmasked terror.

Alicia fell into a fetal position and tried to rock back and forth, as if a child protecting herself from a beating. Lotho and Bubnug grabbed at her leather tunic and pulled her out of the room. As soon as she left the room, she calmed down, but stayed in her position for minutes more.

"We should rest anyway." Lotho said looking down at Alicia with worry, "I think you both need a little time to recover."

Valtyra gave him a skeptical look, but sat down and leaned against one of the walls. Bubnug plopped down beside her and no one made a sound, except for Alicia who was still breathing hard. This allowed Valtyra to hear a nearly imperceptible wail.

She became perfectly still. Bubnug opened his mouth as if to say something, but she quieted him. Lotho was giving her strange glances, but did not say anything. It took another minute, but she could have sworn that she heard it again. The wail seemed to originate from the attic.

This time both Lotho and Bubnug noticed the sound. Lotho frowned in confusion and Bubnug seemed to slip closer to Valtyra.

"Maybe this place is haunted after all." Valtyra muttered.

"Looks like it." Lotho nodded, "We should get a move on."

Alicia rose to a sitting position. Her face was pale and her eyes were dark. Valtyra had never seen her look so afraid. It unnerved the half-elf.

"Are you able to move?" Lotho asked.

Alicia answered by rising to her feet shakily. The others got up as well and continued on. Walking along the hallway, they soon found a set of double doors that were open. They did not enter the room, and no one was led there, but Lotho looked inside anyway.

The large room featured two padded chairs and a long couch facing a wide alcove lined with stained glass windows. The windows depicted a diverse array of animals and plants-from left to right: a large pale and ghostly scorpion, a gaunt man holding out his arms as a dozen

bats hang from him, a moth with a strange skull-like pattern on its wings, a tangle of dull green plants with bell shaped flowers and a young maiden sitting astride a well in a forest while a spindly spider the size of a dog descends along a string of webbing above her.

“I can’t tell if the builder of this manor was sick, crazy, an artist, or all three.” Lotho muttered.

As they kept moving through the hallway, they passed another open doorway that seemed to lead to a bedroom. Valtyra walked right past it as if she did not see it, but Lotho walked over to look inside. Nothing seemed to happen for a couple of seconds, but then he started yelling in fear. Valtyra reached for him as he stepped back and started ripping at his face.

“Allie!” He yelled, “Help me Allie!”

Valtyra grabbed him and started pulling him toward the other end of the hallway. She had to pull him back until her butt hit a wooden door they had not touched before Lotho finally calmed down. He was breathing heavily and blood was oozing from multiple scratches on his otherwise unmarred face.

“Are you sensible again?” Valtyra asked.

It took him a couple of seconds to respond with, “Yeah, I think so. Give me a couple of seconds to heal myself.”

He went to work on his face while Valtyra thought.

So far, we all had an event happen to them. I had the scarf attack, which still hurts my throat, Alicia cowered in fear and has not completely snapped back, and Lotho is currently fixing multiple wounds on his face.

She looked at Bubnug, who was helping Lotho as much as he could, Yet Bubnug has not shown any signs other than his strange scent in the entry hall. What the hell is going on? And do we have the will to keep going?

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Ilesha

“No-one realizes that those lost still remain with us. Usually, they remain in our hearts and memories. But for some, they are trapped on this Earth forever.”

Five minutes later, it looked like the whole group was recovered enough to continue. Valtyra opened the door behind her and found a set of stairs leading up. She started up them, her footsteps echoing once throughout the crowded passage. The further up she went, the more unnerved the half-elf felt. It was as if the manor itself was trying to turn them away.

The attic of the manor was in worse repair than the rest of the building. Whole walls were collapsed and dust was palpable in the air. The wail was louder than before, and seemed to be coming from the other side of the floor. Able to see the room in front of her, Valtyra noticed that it was a small workroom with various tools on the remaining walls.

The four heroes moved through the hall and passed yet another large room with stained glass windows. A desk and chair sat in the middle of the room. Dilapidated chimneys rose on either side of the door. One of the two stained glass windows depicted a dark-haired woman with pale skin, large green eyes, and a black-and-red gown; with both hands she wielded a jagged iron staff. The other window's lower half had been broken and patched with canvas; what remained of its upper half depicted a handsome man dressed in regal finery and a crown of ivory and jade. Small scorch marks marred the wood near the broken window. A battered and ruined telescope lay on its side near the desk and a large trap door in the roof was tied shut by several lengths of rope.

Valtyra instinctively reached out and held Bubnug back as he was in the middle of taking a step forward. He looked up at the half-elf with a questioning look.

“I think we've had enough worry for one night, don't you?” She asked, her voice still giving her issues.

His eyes widened as he nodded so hard she thought his head would fall off his shoulders. There were two remaining rooms at the end of the hall. The one to their left was a study with shelves of books that lined the walls. Interspersed were curious objects, such as skulls fitted with stubs of candles, tribal fetishes, and decorative scroll cases. An empty birdcage lay near the left-most wall beside a small desk and a fine leather chair. Statues and sculptures grinned from all corners of the room.

Valtyra was about to turn around, but something glimmered at the corner of her eye. Turning back, she saw that it was a small chest hidden in a wall alcove. The alcove would have been hidden if not for the disrepair of the wall and the painting which hung at one corner in front of it. It was a bad idea to enter the room, and the wailing behind her did not help the feeling, yet what was in that chest could be useful.

"I'm going in," she said, "Be prepared to pull me back."

Before the others could persuade her otherwise, she ran into the room. The floor creaked and groaned with each step, and she thought that her biggest concern would be the wood breaking under her. She stopped to grab the chest, and the plank at her feet cracked. Her instincts kicked in, and she leaped away, while holding on to the chest. Landing caused another plank to break and her foot fell through the floor. The shards of wood cut into her leather pants and ripped at her skin. Again, without thinking, she pulled her leg out and ran back into the hall.

"Don't worry. I did it." She said to the others, "No need to panic."

Lotho sighed, "How's the leg?"

Valtyra tested her leg, and felt pain rush up to her hip. Compared to her concussion, though, it was nothing, "I'll be fine."

He just snorted and shook his head. Valtira knelt down and opened the chest. It contained stacks of coins, two vials of liquid that were obviously ruined, and a copper key. She took the two vials and tossed them back into the study. They both managed to fly through the hole she made with her leg and crashed into the floor below.

With that taken care of, they stored the items and turned towards the other door. The never-ending wails sounded like they came from this room. Amazingly, this was the only room that looked completely whole throughout the attic. As if something really cared for whatever the room held.

Valtyra pulled her rapiers into her hands. She heard her companions readying their weapons as well, and Lotho tried to open the door.

It was locked.

Valtyra groaned inwardly as she realized what she had to do. She balanced on one foot and let loose with a powerful kick. The shock of hitting solid wood sparked up her wounded leg and through the rest of her body. A soft moan escaped her lips, but she spun on the balls of her foot and lashed out again. This time, she connected near the latch of the door and it broke open with a loud *crack* and while she still felt the pain from her leg, it was not as potent.

The half-elf wheezed for a couple of seconds, "Success."

"Missus," Bubnug said uncertainly, "I could pick lock."

"Or we could have just tried the key." Lotho added while holding said key.

She looked at them and realized her mistake.

“Well, it’s more fun this way.”

Bubnug gave her a skeptical look, “If Missus say so.”

Valtyra limped after the others as they entered the room. The room looked brand new with an armoire standing near the right wall. A full-size mirror, with a dark wooden frame of coiling roses, leaned against the bricks angling toward a tiny window. Yet, the whole room had an ethereal sense to it. It was something that not many, if anyone, could describe completely. The room felt colder than normal and every second that she was in there Valtira could have sworn some supernatural being went through her.

What the group was most worried about, though, was the ghost in the center of the room.

She stood on the floor of the room in small slippers. Her body was covered in a tattered navy blue dress and striped sleeves. Her nails were elongated into claws and her teeth looked sharper than normal. Midnight black hair reached down to the small of her back in a tangled and messy wave. But what got to Valtira the most was the blood on the ghost’s mouth and the soulless eyes that seemed to see through the half-elf.

The ghost turned to the group and focused on Valtira. Or, more accurately, Valtira’s throat. She then tilted her head to the side, so that Valtira could see what the ghost’s hair hid: bruises.

The ghost died by strangulation.

Valtyra’s eyes widened in realization, “You... the scarf was yours. You were killed by it.”

The ghost nodded slowly. A hoarse voice that was once feminine echoed throughout the room, “Aldern. Must... kill.”

Without another word, the ghost started to sink into the floor. The wailing sound stopped when her head fell through, and an eerie silence filled the air. Within seconds, the room’s furniture disappeared.

“She mentioned Aldern, didn’t she?” Lotho asked.

Alicia nodded.

“So, shouldn’t we follow her?”

"I suppose so. Valtyra, let's go!"

The half-elf could not stop staring with wide eyes at the spot where the ghost fell.

She was killed by Aldern, Valtyra thought, That was Ilesha... Aldern's wife. He killed her with that scarf. He killed the woman he loved at one point. Would that happen to me? Would Shayliss do that?

"Valtyra!" Lotho called, "Wake up!"

She snapped back into reality and looked at Lotho. He tilted his head to the door, "We have to get moving. Save the inner thoughts for later."

The half-elf nodded and limped out of the room.

Chapter Thirty: The Underground

“Deep, deep underground where the dead rest. Don’t wake them up, or you may join them.”

The heroes hurried back down to the first floor and found an unexpected sight. Where the huge mold stain was stuck to the floor was now a huge wooden staircase that wound down towards the darkness below.

“Well,” Lotho said, “There were stairs here after all.”

Valtyra sighed, “I knew we should have tried breaking through.”

Lotho snorted, “You didn’t believe it either.”

Using Bubnug’s flaming sword cane, the heroes descended into the unknown. Their footfalls echoed throughout the tunnel downward, soon becoming pure chaos to the ear. The smell of mold was still pungent and the dust on the stairs made the half-elf want to sneeze. What was the worst, though, was that they could not see anything past what little light the fire produced. So, Valtira could not tell how far they had gone, or how much farther they had to go.

After a minute of descending the stairs, they found that there was solid stone they could step on yet the stairs kept going down. When Alicia got to this point, she stopped and stared wide-eyed at the opening for the stairs.

“For me.” She whispered, “For me. For me.”

The others stared at her in confusion. They then saw her start whimpering and backing up the stairs. She had her hands to her head and was shaking it furiously as if trying to force away whatever she was seeing. Seconds later, she calmed down and returned to the group.

“Are you alright?” Lotho asked.

Alicia nodded, “Yeah. Another vision.”

As if on cue, predatory howls called out from below. It sounded like something was aware of the heroes and just challenged them to a fight. Confidence dripped from the howls as if from a mop and Valtira knew that the group was going to have the worst fight they ever had. That realization sent an instinctual shiver up her spine and she could see that the others had the same thoughts.

“Ghouls.” Alicia whispered, “They are ghouls.”

“Well,” Valtyra said, “We won’t be doing any good just standing around.”

She tried to evoke confidence, but her hands tightened around the sweat-covered handles of her blades.

Valtyra carefully started down the stairs again, trying to make sure that she did not give off too much sound. Thanks to her darkvision, she was able to see that they were getting close to the bottom. As she stepped on the second to last stair she heard a scratching sound and froze. The sound was getting closer and becoming rapid.

She skipped the last step and charged forward with blades ready to swing together. The creature in the cavern ahead hesitated for a fraction of a second, as if not expecting its target to attack so aggressively, then leapt into the air. As it fell onto her back, Valtyra could tell that it was a ghoul. Her blades would have hit her as well as the ghoul if she tried to attack with them, so while the creature clawed at her back and neck, she twisted and attempted to slam its head against the stone wall. The crack of bone against stone rang throughout the cavern and the ghoul’s howl rose in pitch. Valtyra then went for the wall again, but the ghoul managed to let go in time, and it was her body that connected with the wall.

The shock of impact rang her still recovering head and the flash of pain sent her to her knees. She looked up just in time to see Bubnug tackle the ghoul. His diminutive form did not have the force to knock the creature down, but it was pushed away from the kneeling half-elf. The goblin dodged to the side and lunged forward. The ghoul managed to use its dodged attack as an anchor to avoid the lunge but Bubnug was not done yet. He turned the lunge into a swing, sending the edge of his blade into the ghoul’s side. The fire of Bubnug’s blade caught on the ghoul’s thin skin and soon the ghoul started going up into flames.

He then pivoted on his feet so that he was facing the other end of the cavern. Valtyra turned her head the same way, and saw two more ghouls bounding through the darkness towards them. She struggled to rise to her feet as arrows flew past her face and towards the new opponents. As she tracked the arrows’ progress, she saw something unexpected.

Bubnug cast a spell.

He raised his hand up and fire blazed in the middle like a candle’s flame. It then expanded, taking the form of a tiger ready to pounce. Valtyra watched as it roared and fire spewed from its body. The cone of fire only reached about fifteen feet, but the ghouls ran head first into it and their skin started burning fiercely.

The first ghoul ignored the fire spreading throughout its body and charged straight for Alicia. Yet, it was met with a wall of ice. The wall then shattered and its hundred shards impaled the ghoul. Arrows started to pierce where the shards missed, yet the ghoul, now on fire and stuck by arrows and ice alike, still moved forward.

Valtyra, who finally got her senses back in order, ran to the first ghoul and thrust both of her blades into its back. It twisted around to rake at her face, but she ducked down which caused her blades to angle themselves in its body. She then twisted the blades and swung them outward so they cut out of its body. As it fell to the ground, an ice lance shot into and through its head. With that, the creature went limp.

The half-elf rose and turned around to find Bubnug avoiding the two remaining ghoul's claws. He leapt and thrust his blade into the left ghoul's head. Yet, it was still alive and showed that by grabbing the goblin and tossing him into ground. Valtira controlled the anger that quickly rose in her and charged forward.

Her first attack was an outward swing from both blades catching each of the ghouls in the side. Seeing that she got their attention, she then targeted the left ghoul. Her blades worked in tandem to slice off skin and rotting meat a little at a time. The other ghoul was not having it, though, and went for a downward claw attack. An arrow stuck into the attacking hand and the ghoul howled in pain. The howl was answered by icy wind as a shotgun blast of ice shards sent it to the ground.

Valtyra, meanwhile, held back her ghoul's claws with her blades. If she pulled back, the claws would descend, but the ghoul was not going to back down either. Through the connection of her weapons, she could feel the ghoul flinch as attacks bombarded on its back. Yet, the creature kept putting pressure on the half-elf.

It was a full minute before the ghoul finally fell limply to the floor. It nearly pulled Valtira with it, but she managed to step out of the way. The adrenaline leaving her system made her head become fuzzy, and Bubnug looked worse for wear, but they both were still able to fight.

They made their way further into the cavern. No more ghouls attacked them which made the area eerily quiet. The only sounds they could hear were their footsteps echoing throughout the cavern and the occasional drops of water from the ceiling. At the end of the tunnel they were in was an open room. In the center of the room was a huge pond of dirty water. At the far end was a large stone door.

They walked around the pond to the door and looked up at it. It was three times the size of Valtira, yet the door knob and lock was at a normal door's height.

"So," Lotho said pointedly at Valtira, "Should we try the key this time?"

Instead of giving the halfling the satisfaction of her answer, she simply stepped back. He chuckled and entered the key into the lock. A low *click* came from the door and it started to open on its own.

A gust of molding and rotting smells assaulted the heroes.
Chapter Thirty-One: Six-Foot-Deep Revenge

“They say that one will need to dig two graves for revenge. I say bull.”

Before the group could cover up their noses to the smell, a form appeared as it flew towards them. Valtyra ducked and felt the air rush past her from the speed of the form. The splash of water sounded from behind her and she felt water droplets hit her back. Taking that as a declaration of war, she charged forward. The horrible smell grew stronger as she moved, but she hardly paid attention as she entered the fray already in progress.

Her target was a very well dressed, but blood covered, ghoul with a blade similar to what a butcher might use. It ducked her double swing and leapt back. Valtyra pressed her attack, making sure that she was always only a couple of steps from it and was always trying to land a hit. Her blades whistled through the air, but were not able to connect. The ghoul eventually smacked Valtyra’s face with the flat of its blade. Then it kicked her back, sending her to the floor in a stunned heap.

While failing to recover, Valtyra saw a ghostly figure rush in and start clawing at the ghoul. Her ears were not working, so she could not hear what the ghost was saying but she saw, “Aldern” form with the ghost’s lips. Just as she was getting back to her feet, Valtyra saw that the ghoul was holding back the ghost by way of clamping down on both of the ghost’s wrists.

From the tunnel came a lance of ice, an arrow and a ray of fire. Each slammed home and left marks on the ghoul’s clothes. Yet, it did not seem to be affected by the attacks. The ghoul’s attention moved over to the tunnel and seemed to freeze.

“You came!” It yelled in a harsh, but familiar, voice. “I knew my letters would sway your heart, my love! Let us consummate our... our... HUNGER!”

Something in the ghoul changed.

Before, it looked like a small, simple man who was rotting away. Within seconds, though, its mere presence changed to one of a predator ready for the hunt. Without much effort, it tossed the still struggling ghost to the side and leapt for the tunnel.

A flash of orange and red light flared from the tunnel and the ghoul was pushed back by Bubnug. The goblin’s burning blade swung once, twice, thrice as it kept forcing the ghoul to step back. The ghoul found its way back to the blade it dropped in order to hold the ghost and ducked a swing to pick it up.

Now that the ghoul had a weapon to use, it started to hold its ground. Yet, Bubnug did not hold back. He parried and dodged the ghoul's attacks, and while each of them managed to scratch the other they were too focused to care.

At this point, Valtira was mostly back to her feet, and she joined the fight taking up a flanking position. Now with two combatants on either side of him plus the support fire from the tunnel of the magical and physical variety, the ghoul was having a very difficult time defending. Valtira and Bubnug worked in near perfect sync, keeping the ghoul from being able to focus on only one of them and working together to punch through its defenses.

Eventually, the ghoul decided it had enough of the two fighters. It grabbed Bubnug, twisted around, and tossed him into Valtira. Bubnug's body hit her hard enough to send her flying into the wall. This time, she was ready and prevented any major damage. Because of that, she was able to see the ghoul in the air ready to tear into her. Bubnug was laying on one of her arms, so she could only use one blade to fend off its claws.

Thankfully, she did not need to hold off the creature off for long. A jet of water shot from the tunnel and pushed the creature off of the two. Lotho kept the jet of water going so that the ghoul was pushed against the wall giving Bubnug the chance to get off of Valtira.

Valtira expected the ghoul to leap at her again when it got the chance. Instead, though, it went to its knees and the predatory presence vanished.

"Please!" The ghoul pleaded, "Please don't kill me!"

The half-elf nearly dropped her weapons in shock.

"I'll tell you anything you want! Do anything you want! Just save me!"

"Um." Valtira turned to Lotho, "Am I the only one that is confused?"

Lotho walked into the room and shook his head, "No. You're not. Might as well get some info out of him."

She nodded and put a rapier to the ghoul's head, "Why? Why are you doing this?"

"It is what they wanted!" The ghoul whimpered.

"Who?"

"The Brothers-"

He cut off himself. Once again, the mere presence of the ghoul changed completely. Valtyra instinctively backed away and the ghoul started to get back to his feet. It's mouth was shaped in a wide grin which unsettled Valtyra.

"I cannot allow you to speak further, Lordship." The ghoul muttered.

It then bowed in a noble bow with his left arm crossing his body. It rose again and kept the wide smile.

"I wonder," he said, "how your deaths shall affect your friends. What things might you have done that will go unfinished? What will those broken promises spawn?"

Valtyra's hands tightened on her weapons in rage.

It looked right at Valtyra and finished with, "How will your murders shape the world?"

The ghoul looked like it was about to attack, but, in her rage, Valtyra beat it to the punch. She charged forward, blades forward in an 'x' shape, and the ghoul was only barely about to parry. The half-elf held their blades locked and glared daggers into the ghoul's lifeless eyes.

"You will not kill me today, bastard," she growled, "for I have some revenge to give you."

She then leapt back and charged forward again, this time thrusting with her blades.

"And I won't give up until you are six feet deep for good!"

Chapter Thirty-Two: Underground Battle

“At least if you die here, you won’t have far to go.”

The two rapiers met only air as the ghoul twisted to the side. As the ghoul dodged, it swung its razor blade down towards Valtira’s head. She crouched down to avoid the blade and tried to counter, but the ghoul was already gone. It was already halfway across the cavern and heading straight for Alicia, still in the tunnel. Valtira could feel the rage building up as the creature dared to ignore her.

“Get back here, bastard!”

She charged forward, letting the rage pump her legs faster than usual. The wind rushed past her as her speed seemed to match the ghoul’s. Yet, she wasn’t able to get to it before it started attacking Alicia. The archer seemed stunned about something and was barely able to avoid the razor. Cuts started forming on whatever her armor did not protect and she did not fight back.

Valtira reached the ghoul and sent her rapiers through its chest. That would have been a killing blow with most creatures, especially with Valtira’s anger fueling the attack, but the undead barely noticed the damage. It kept its attention on Alicia, pushing her closer and closer to the exit of the tunnel and out to the pond.

A disk of ice came out of nowhere and slammed the ghoul against the wall. Alicia took the chance to quickly move away and Valtira and Bubnug stood between the ghoul and the archer. It tried to step around the pair, but Valtira moved to intercept and attack. Bubnug prevented it from getting around him, and it looked like the creature was getting furious.

“Out of my way!” It growled.

It tried to burst through the space between the pair, but they locked blades together and all the ghoul could do was try to push against them. The air suddenly grew colder as a disk of ice flew around Valtira and cut into the thin flesh of the ghoul. The disk continued its flight, ricocheted against the stone wall of the tunnel, bounced against the opposite wall, and cut into the ghoul again. At that point, the ice was too cracked from hitting the walls to stay together.

Valtira used the ghoul’s flinches to push against the razor. The power of the sudden push caused the ghoul to stagger back, which gave Bubnug the chance to attack. He sent his blade through swift, but precise, strikes that left shallow wounds. One of the wounds caught fire and started spreading quickly. The ghoul started to growl like a ferocious dog and leapt over the two. Valtira tried to attack it in the air, but missed completely. It then charged right for Alicia, razor outstretched.

The creature's path was blocked by a wall of ice. Burning skin and rotting bone slammed against the ice and made a *squish* sound. The ghoul, not deterred by the fact that its head was flattened, started trying to slash the wall down in mindless fury. Valtyra and Bubnug both lunged forward, hitting the ghoul where its heart should have been. This time, instead of turning its attention back to the pair, it kept at the wall even with two blades stuck in its chest.

An inhuman shriek sounded from the cavern and Valtyra could not react before seeing a flash of translucent cloth enter the ghoul's torso. The ghoul staggered and looked at the ghost of Ilesha. Instead of attacking, though, something seemed to click within the ghoul and it got on its knees, dropping the razor.

"Ilesha," it rasped, "Please forgive me."

Valtyra froze at the second sudden change in the past ten minutes. The ghoul held itself in a posture that resembled true remorse. It was as if the ghoul became human again, in mind if nothing else. Ilesha, with one hand still in the ghoul's torso, placed a hand on the ghoul's cheek and drew closer as if to kiss it. Valtyra looked around and saw that Bubnug and the others were as confused as she was.

Her attention was taken back to the undead when she heard a shriek that shook her to the core. It was a sound that was nearly tangible and made Valtyra feel like her soul was being ripped from her body. With that shriek still going, Ilesha sent her claw-like fingers into the ghoul's head and pulled. In pure reaction, Valtyra turned her head away before seeing something that should never be seen exiting the ghoul. She did hear a *thump* as the ghoul's lifeless body hit the ground.

Apparently, with her job done, Ilesha started dissipating. The last thing that disappeared was her smile.

It was the smile of a wife about to see her husband again.

Valtyra stared at where the ghost was and wondered if she would ever be able to smile like that. She shook herself out of those thoughts and walked over to Lotho, who was dealing with the group's injuries.

"Let's look around and get out of here."

He nodded and rose to his feet. Now that the fight was over, they could take note of what was actually inside of the cavern. The air in the room reeked of a horrific stench - a foul combination of decay, brine, and mold. The cave contained a rickety table, its damp surface cluttered with all manner of what appeared to be garbage: empty bottles, bits of clothing, crumpled bits of paper, and more, lying in neatly organized rows. A painting leaned against the far side of the table, facing a large leather chair that sat nearby. This chair's high back and

cushion are horribly stained by smears of rotten meat and its arms are sticky with blood. A smaller table sat against one of the walls, its surface heaped with plates and platters of rotten, maggot-infested meat.

Valtyra walked around the large table and looked at the painting. It was a beautiful, but dirty, portrait of Ilesha. She turned her gaze to the top of the table where she found a key ring with two keys. One was a tarnished iron key set with a round opal. The other was made of bronze and had an unusually long tang ending in a set of three notched blades. The head of the key resembled a roaring lion.

Under the key ring was a folded piece of parchment. Valtira pulled it out and opened it.

“Aldern,” it read, “You have served us quite well. The delivery you harvested from the caverns far exceeds what I had hoped for. You may consider your debt to the Brothers paid in full. Yet, I still have need of you, and when you awaken from your death, you should find your mind clear and able to understand this task more than in the state you lie in as I write this. You shall remember the workings of the Sihedron ritual, I trust. You seemed quite lucid at the time, but if you find after your rebirth that you have forgotten, return to your townhouse in Magnimar. My agents shall contact you there soon - no need for you to bother the Brothers further. I will provide the list of proper victims for the Sihedron ritual in two days’ time. Commit that list to memory and then destroy it before you begin your work. The ones I have selected must be marked before they die; otherwise they do my master no good and the greed in their souls will go to waste. If others get in your way, though, you may do with them as you please. Eat them, savage them, or turn them into pawns - it matters not to me. - Xanesha, Mistress of the Seven”

Valtyra grabbed the keys and note. She walked back to the others and said, “The ghoul is not our final target.”

“Oh?” Lotho asked.

Before she could explain though, the ground started to shake and the sounds of rocks falling started emanating from the tunnel.

“The area is caving in!” Lotho yelled, “We need to go now!”

Chapter Thirty-Three: Collapse

“Everything that rises must fall. No matter what. People understand that. They complain, though, when it becomes too inconvenient for the subject to fall at that time.”

The four heroes ran out to the underground pond and saw that despite the fact that the shaking only started seconds ago, the pond was almost completely full of rocks. Lotho and Alicia started running around the pond which was by far the safer route. However, Valtyra and Bubnug started hopping from rock to rock across the pond. The rocks were slippery and Valtyra almost fell a couple of times, but managed to get back to her feet to continue.

At the edge, she leapt off and rocketed off towards the stairs leading back to the entrance of the manor. Rocks kept falling, and Valtyra had to weave through the narrow tunnel in order to not be smashed by one of the deadly objects. One was falling right for her, and she did not have time to avoid it. Yet, a shard of ice embedded itself into the boulder and pushed it off course.

Valtyra turned back to see Lotho give her a thumbs up before falling to his knees in exhaustion. Alicia immediately pulled him onto her shoulders and said, “We don’t have much time!”

The half-elf nodded and rounded a corner to where the stairs were.

The stairs were caved in.

She stopped in her tracks and looked up. With her darkvision, she could see that there was no way to climb over the debris. Her rapier sang as it was pulled from its sheath and thrust into the rock. The blade rebounded violently and nothing happened to the wall in front of her.

“Damnit!” She yelled, “How do we get out?”

Alicia seemed to think for a couple of seconds, then said, “I think I know. Follow.”

She then took off at a sprint and Valtyra did her best to keep up with the woman.

“What do you mean?” Valtyra asked as she leapt around a fallen boulder.

“Remember the mill?”

It was hard for Valtyra to *not* remember it, “Yes?”

“Bubnug found signs of something entering or exiting the river right?”

This time Bubnug piped up, "Yeah! Footprints!"

"What's your point?" Valtyra asked.

"If Aldern really did commit those murders, then he, at some point, entered the river and masked his scent."

Valtyra vaulted over debris at the entrance to the pond area, "Of course."

"So, how did he get to the river in the first place, without leaving it, thereby letting his scent enter the air?"

As they rounded the pond again, Valtyra thought about it, "Perfume?"

Bubnug let out a giggle, but Alicia only growled, "No! He had to enter it from this manor!"

Valtyra finally got it as she sliced at a small boulder falling on them, "Which means there is another exit here."

"Right."

As she said that affirmative, they all found a small tunnel. A salty breeze wafted from the tunnel and muffled sounds of crashing waves could be heard only with Valtyra's slightly superior hearing. Alicia entered first, having to kneel so that Lotho's near unconscious head did not hit the top of the tunnel. Bubnug entered next, sheathing his sword cane and using his hand to help guide him.

Valtyra crouched down and entered the tunnel. She made it a good ten feet or so before something tugged hard at her ankle and she fell on her face. Pain erupted from her nose and she could feel something wet flowing around and into her mouth. But she had no time to worry about that as she twisted around to find a ghoul's hand around her leg and crawling further towards her face. She could only see this with her darkvision as a boulder blocked the entrance of the tunnel without her knowing.

"Don't..." It rasped, "Take... her..."

Valtyra kicked at the ghoul's head, but it did not flinch as it kept crawling towards her head. She then thrust one of her rapiers at its head, but it twisted to the side and avoided the thin blade. By then it had reached her head and opened its mouth wide.

There was no warning.

Water rushed through the tunnel and swallowed both Valtyra and the ghouls whole. It then quickly pulled them both through the tunnel and she could do nothing but minimize the damage to her body. She feared that her breath would run out before she made it to the surface, but seconds later, her head broke through and air filled her lungs.

She looked around, but only saw Alicia, with Lotho floating near her, and Bubnug struggling to stay afloat. No sign of the ghouls was anywhere. A sigh of relief sounded from Valtyra, but was soon replaced by a scream of pain. The adrenaline of the water was wearing off, and because of that, her nose was burning. Breathing did not make it any better, and she felt as if she was going to pass out. She barely noticed a hand grabbing her wrist and pulling her towards the shore, but she did notice when she felt pebbles raking against her armored coat.

“Missus?” Bubnug asked.

“Lotho’s out, isn’t he?” She asked, her voice affected by her broken nose.

“Yes.”

“Damnit.” She muttered, “I’ll have to deal with this until we return to Sandpoint.”

She looked up the side of the cliff and said, “Speaking of, how do we get back up there?”

“Climb.” Alicia answered mercilessly.

Valtyra sighed and rose to her feet, “Might as well start.”

She used one of her daggers to cut off a piece of her pants and set to staunching her nose’s bleeding. Once that was done, she started climbing after the others, who were already halfway up. They made it over the ledge and headed through the dead plant life towards their horses, who still remained where they had left them. They looked back at the manor.

It was completely caved in. All that remained were a few pieces of wall that managed to stay upright.

“Wonder what caused that.” Valtyra said.

Alicia just shrugged and got both Lotho and herself onto her horse. Valtyra took a last look before mounting Shadowshine. The last thing she saw were the ravens staring after them with hunger in their eyes.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Return

“Everyone knows when the heroes return.”

The trip from the manor was one of the worst things Valtyra ever experienced. Every step Shadowshine made sent a jolt of pain through her entire body up to her nose which would then send even stronger jolts of pain right back down. It was a never-ending cycle of agony that threatened to knock her out, yet she persevered until they arrived at the outskirts of Sandpoint. There, she found that a crowd had formed around the gate. A crowd that consisted of every single citizen of the town.

“Great,” Valtyra muttered darkly, “a welcoming party.”

Alicia only frowned as she kicked her horse forward and Lotho’s horse followed behind. Valtyra groaned as Shadowshine sped up as well. As soon as they entered the gate, they were encompassed by the citizens, their questions melding together into an unintelligible mess. Alicia and Bubnug tried to calm them down, but their efforts only made the citizens speak louder.

Mayor Deverin’s voice suddenly rang out, “Silence!”

The crowd gradually grew silent and parted for the mayor. Shayliss rushed around her and helped Alicia get Lotho inside of the inn.

Deverin stepped up to Valtyra and Bubnug and asked, “What happened?”

Valtyra noted that the woman’s tone was completely neutral. She could not tell, though, if it was just hiding the mayor’s true feelings or not.

“We found the killer.” Valtyra said.

Hushed whispers spread throughout the crowd at that. The mayor let them go on for a minute before saying, “Quiet.”

“The killer was none other than Aldern Foxglove.”

The mayor’s apparent mask broke. “What?”

“Yes. However, he had changed. We do not know why, yet, but he was turned into a ghoul.”

“What do you mean?” The mayor asked. “Turned into a ghoul?”

“It can happen to those who have been injured by a ghoul. I expect the sickness took him while he was at the manor.”

“Speaking of the manor,” the mayor said, “what happened to it? We heard a bunch of noise from where you came from.”

Valtyra shrugged. “It collapsed in itself once Aldern died.”

“And you were already gone?”

“No. We were still inside.”

Everyone stared at her slack-jawed.

“How do you think I got this nose?”

They kept staring at her.

“Anyway, you no longer have to worry about the killer. If he did not die by our hands, he died with that manor falling on him.”

A relieved sigh resonated from the crowd.

The mayor nodded, “Very well. Rest. We will speak more tomorrow.”

Valtyra just turned on a heel and walked into the inn. Not even noticing Shayliss walking out of Lotho’s room, she threw herself on her bed and instantly fell asleep despite her nose.

The sun was on the horizon when she woke up. She sat up, and was shocked when the flash of pain she expected never came. It was replaced with a dull pang instead.

The sheets of the bed rustled and Shayliss muttered, “You’re awake.”

“Did Lotho do this?” Valtyra asked.

“No. A cleric heard of Sandpoint’s issues and came to give his assistance. He arrived while you were at the manor.”

“Ah.”

Shayliss got to her feet and stretched. “The mayor wanted to talk more with you guys when you awoke.”

Valtyra pulled her gaze away. “Sure. Keep an eye on Lotho for me?”

Shayliss nodded as Valtyra reached for her clothes. She left her armor and weapons in the room as she headed for the mayor's office. Once again, she was the last one to arrive to the meeting, but there was one more person than expected.

He was a short and stocky man with dark brown eyes and only sideburns for hair. The clothes he wore were typical of nobility, but they seemed more elegant than Valtyra would have thought. They barely fit as the clothes stretched over his overweight body. He held himself in a bored manner, as if he was eager to get away from the town hall and do whatever he wanted.

As Valtyra entered, he turned his head to her and smiled slightly allowing her to see the man's horribly maintained teeth.

"Good morning," he said, "Valtyra."

"Do I know you?" she responded.

His smile faltered, but it was Mayor Deverin who spoke. "Valtyra, may I introduce you to Lord-Mayor Haldmeer Grobaras, Ruler of Magnimar."

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Next Job

“Are you ready for your next task? The work never ends.”

Bubnug took a small step back and his face twisted in nervousness. Valtira did not think he would know what those titles meant, but he knew the weight behind them. The man in front of them was a powerful man indeed, leading the City of Monuments, Magnimar. The stories of this man, though, were not flattering ones. The poor being ignored and murders remaining uninvestigated. There was only one reason for being here in Valtira’s eyes: He did not want to get his hands dirty.

“What do you want?” Valtira said, arms crossed.

The smile that was barely holding on dropped as Haldmeer said, “What I would like, is for you to address me properly.”

“And I would like to go back to bed.”

His face started to redden with anger, but before he could start on Valtira, Alicia stepped up and said, “I am sorry for my companion. We have all had a rough few days.”

A tense silence filled the room for the next few seconds. Then Haldmeer snorted and turned his attention squarely to Alicia, “I have a job for you.”

“What is it, Lord-Mayor?”

“There have been numerous murders in Magnimar. At first, it seemed like the normal fare for a large city, but after six deaths with the same exact signs I can no longer discount them as random killings anymore.”

Valtira’s eyebrows rose. Six deaths? With the same exact signs?

“What signs, sir?” Alicia asked.

“The same method of attack,” he said as if making a list. “The same weapon used. And the rune cut into their bodies.”

Valtira swore under her breath, “The note’s implications were right then.”

“We do not know that.” Alicia responded, “When was the last death?”

“I received a note this morning about another death. The guess is that they died during the late night.”

“While we were fighting in the manor,” Valtyra said. “And Aldern was there. Hell, it could have happened while we were fighting him.”

“It had to have been someone else then,” Alicia said.

Valtyra nodded, “We most likely would have gone to Magnimar anyway because of the note.”

“Right,” Alicia agreed.

She turned to Haldmeer and said, “We’re on it.”

The man sighed with relief. “Good.”

Mayor Deverin finally popped into the conversation. “Wonderful. Now, if you’ll excuse us, the Lord-Mayor and I need talk privately.”

Alicia nodded and the three heroes walked out of the town hall. Once outside, Alicia stepped in front of Valtyra and, with restrained anger, asked, “Could you possibly be any less rude?”

Valtyra narrowed her eyes, “What do you mean?”

“You seem to have a habit of not addressing higher ups as you should.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“It is when we get work from them!”

Valtyra stepped forward, “You consider this work?”

“What else would it be?”

The half-elf just stared at Alicia. She did not know what she wanted to do more: scream, walk away, or punch the other woman. Sanity won the day and Valtyra started walking away.

Before she got out of earshot, though, she turned back to Alicia and, thinking of Katrine Vinder’s corpse and Shayliss’s reaction, said, “This... this is not just work.”

Chapter Thirty-Six: Entering Magnimar

“Well... that’s one way to deal with annoyances.”

It was two days until the heroes were ready to head for Magnimar. Tension only rose between Valtyra and Alicia during those two days and Bubnug had to stand as mediator as well as leading the goblin army. Lotho was bedridden and was usually cared for by Shayliss and Father Zantus. When he was finally able to move around, he took Bubnug’s job as a mediator and helped calm the two women down.

Valtyra heard him sigh, breaking the otherwise silent ride to Magnimar. “What?”

His tired eyes turned to her. “I just wish life was simpler.”

“Become a mercenary then,” Valtyra kept her gaze forward, “I hear life is very simple for them.”

She heard a feminine growl from behind her.

“At least mercenaries have manners,” Alicia called from the rear.

Anger suddenly flared in Valtyra’s chest and she started to turn Shadowshine around. “What did you say?”

Water shot up from the ground and clamped over her mouth. Looking back, she saw that Alicia received the same treatment, which made Valtyra’s inner child happy. Shadowshine, seeing that Valtyra was silent and under control, snorted in something resembling laughter and continued walking forward.

“Would you both be quiet?” Lotho yelled. “You two take up most of my problems this week!”

Alicia just sat back in her saddle and nodded. Valtyra, however, started complaining immediately, her words muffled by the water.

Lotho sighed again and rubbed his temples, “I am not letting the water fall until we get to Magnimar. And I expect that you will be at least willing to tolerate each other until we get back to Sandpoint.” He narrowed his eyes at Valtyra, “Do you understand?”

Valtyra was confused about the fact that she seemed to be getting the brunt of the anger, but she nodded anyway.

“Good,” Lotho said and faced forward. “Maybe at the end of this, you will be friends again.”

She just snorted.

An hour later, they arrived at the gates of Magnimar. Thick metal bars intersected at numerous points along the twenty foot length, and the stone frame looked as if it withstood many attacks and just sniffed in response. Two guards stood outside of the open gateway and they stepped forward as the four of them rode up.

“Halt!” the guard on the left called.

All four horses stopped and the guards flanked them on either side.

“State your business,” the guard said. His voice sounded as if he had already done this for hours and he was tired of it. It must have been close to the end of his shift.

“My name is Lotho,” Lotho said, “this is Valtyra, Alicia, and Bubnug. We are here on behalf of the Lord-Mayor to investigate some issues you are having.”

Both guards placed their hands on their weapons and stared at Bubnug, “It’s a goblin.”

Valtyra would have reacted strongly to them if she was able to speak. Even though they had arrived at Magnimar, her mouth was still covered by water. Bubnug flinched away from the guards and looked as if he was ready to run away. Lotho nodded politely and, while looking at Valtyra, said, “I understand your mistrust. But Bubnug has saved our lives many times, and is controlling the goblins of Varisia so they do not attack towns and cities.”

The guards gave each other a questioning glance.

“It is true that the goblin attacks have lessened in the past few months,” the right guard muttered.

“Could it really be because of this goblin, though?” the other guard asked.

Valtyra was ready to go off, but the acidic look Lotho gave her was enough to keep her reigned in. The guards whispered to each other for a couple of minutes, but then nodded to each other and said, “You may go through.”

The heroes nodded and started through the gate. Yet, before they got too far, the left guard asked, “Hey! Why does she have her mouth covered in water?”

Lotho turned back to them and said, "She has a hard time getting along with others. This to make sure she stays good."

The guards laughed at that and Valtyra could feel her cheeks redden. Behind the water, she tried to grumble about Lotho not having to embarrass her, but nothing but the occasional muffled sound came through. When they were far away from the gate, she could feel the water slosh away.

"There. Now you can speak."

"I hate you right now," she growled at Lotho.

"Good," he said with a grin, "That means I'm doing my job as a babysitter correctly."

Valtyra tilted her head at him, "What?"

Instead of answering, he kicked his pony forward and said, "Come on children. Time to investigate."

Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Foxglove Townhouse

“Never take what you see at face value.”

The four heroes spent the next three hours talking with guards and citizens and looking at maps to figure out where Aldern’s townhouse was in Magnimar. Apparently, it was not a place that people liked to talk about. They said that there was a certain energy surrounding it that seemed sinister, yet no one dared investigate. Especially since it had been uninhabited for the past two or so weeks. Fortunately, though, they found a homeless man who was willing to lead them to the building in question. For a couple of coins, of course.

Valtyra looked up at the run-down townhouse and whistled. “This is it?”

Once the man got his payment, he immediately left, so the question was just thrown out there for anyone.

“I would assume so,” Lotho said, “The townsfolk said that it had not been lived in for about two weeks. Yet, it looks like that might be an underestimation.”

“The front door is boarded up as well as the first floor windows. Should we break in? Or find another way?”

“Well,” Lotho hedged, “It would have to be the back door, if there is one. There is no way that any of us would be able to climb to the second or third story and open the windows.”

“Alright then. I’ll look for a way in.”

Valtyra dismounted Shadowshine and moved around to the back. The back yard had a wooden fence surrounding it and the half-elf could not reach the top of it, even on tip toes. She backed up, readied herself, and took a flying leap. Her fingers gripped the top of the fence’s boards and she heaved herself up.

The yard was just as run-down as the house itself. Leaves covered the grass in many shades, the workshop was nearly demolished and Valtyra hoped that she imagined the streaks of blood mixed in with the wood of the fence. She shook her head and walked up to the back door. It was made of simple, but durable wood and it only had a few scratches on its dirty surface. Valtyra tried the doorknob and was surprised to find it unlocked.

“Hey guys!” she yelled, “Back here!”

A minute later, the others were making their way over the fence, thanks to Lotho’s ice stairs. When they saw Valtyra with the door wide open, they tensed up and readied their weapons. She pulled her own weapons out and led the group inside expecting a trap.

“Hello?” a voice called from somewhere to the group’s left.

All four of them turned that way and found a beautiful woman standing in the room’s entrance. Her smooth and slightly tanned skin was accented with a noblewoman’s jewelry and her midnight black, shoulder length hair. She wore a long, leaf green dress that had white lace flowing down its sides.

Valtyra felt that the woman looked familiar, but she could not place her finger on it.

“Oh!” the woman put her hand to her chest, “J-just take what you want!”

Besides her, Valtira saw that Lotho put away his weapon and canceled the spell he had ready, “I apologize, ma’am. We were told no one had lived in here for weeks.”

“You’re not thieves?”

“No ma’am,” he responded, “We are just trying to investigate some events happening both here and in Sandpoint.”

The woman mouthed out, “Oh” and waved her hand in a come-along gesture, “Please, come in then and we can talk about it.”

She left the entranceway, and Lotho was about to follow her, but Valtira held him back.

“Are you sure about this?”

He raised an eyebrow, “What do you mean?”

“Do you not smell the trap?”

“It does seem weird, sure, but we need information. The longer we keep the diplomacy up, the better chance we have of learning something.”

“At the cost of our lives?” Valtira asked.

“It won’t come to that.” Lotho sounded completely confident.

“Are you going to join me?” the woman called from the other room, “I am getting tea heated for you!”

“Yes ma’am!” Lotho responded, “We are coming.”

Without giving Valtira another glance, he and Alicia followed the woman and polite conversation started up. Bubnug stepped to the half-elf's side and looked up at her worriedly.

"Why do I feel like the others don't trust me?" Valtira asked softly. She shook her head and walked into the next room with Bubnug right behind her.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Pleasantries

“I have always hated social parties.’ ‘Why?’ the squire asked. ‘Because one has to follow specific rules. Specific customs. I’d rather just say as I wish.’”

The room Valtyra entered was a dining room. An oval table was placed in the center of the room and ran parallel to the long walls on the left and right. Six chairs made of expensive wood with elegant decorations carved in surrounded the table and two candleholders sat at the center. Tea cups were already placed at four of the seats and the woman who invited them in was setting out two more. Bookshelves lined each wall that did not hold a door and was full top to bottom with books of various sizes, colors and lengths. On the floor was a red and gold rug which did not completely cover the expensive hardwood underneath.

Relative to the rest of the house that they have seen so far, it was kept much better. That was not saying much, though, as dust still clung to most surfaces and the wood of the bookshelves looked like they were ready to fall at any time. Looking at the books closer, she could see that the books were close to falling apart. Yet, Valtyra could tell that this room was maintained better than the rest.

Something at the back of her mind twinged at that, but she felt as if the others were already set against her enough. So, she just sat down at one of the empty chairs and Bubnug sat next to her. Almost immediately, the woman started pouring tea into the cup with a smile and nod. Valtyra stared at the woman as she walked around the table filling cups. The woman’s demeanor is one of a pleasant host. Yet, she lived in a house that was run down and not taken care of. And it is supposed to be the house of Aldern. So why was she here in the first place?

“How long have you lived here?” Lotho asked.

“Oh,” the woman said as she sat herself down, “About a week.”

“A week?” He responded, “We were told that no one has lived here for a couple of weeks.”

“And the house looks like it has not been taken care of for longer.” Valtyra muttered.

Lotho gave her an annoyed look, but the woman did not notice her tone or Lotho’s glare. “Yes. Well, I have not had a chance to clean up since moving in.”

Lotho nodded, “I understand what you mean. I’ve never been able to clean up after moving until the month after.”

“Right?” The woman said with a pleasant smile, “I don’t know how some people can handle it.”

“Do you know who the previous owner of the house was?”

The woman tilted her head in thought, “I was told that he was a noble of some sort. But he went crazy or something.”

“That’s one way to put it.” Lotho commented.

While Lotho continued to make small talk with the woman, Valtyra thought furiously. She knew she had seen the woman somewhere before, but where? The latest place she has been would be the townhouse. However, that would not be helpful as if she truly did live here, or was pretending she was, then of course there would be portraits and such of her. Sandpoint was next on the list, but she had only been there for about a month, and that was not enough to get familiar with every single person in the town. That just left the Misgivings Manor.

Wait.

The manor had many different portraits inside. Some included a woman of exquisite beauty with long black hair, noblewoman dresses and jewelry and slightly tanned skin. Not only that, but there was also the ghost of Aldern’s wife that had the same features, granted more dead and withered looking, but the same nevertheless. Valtyra put the memory of the ghost and the portraits next to the woman at the head of the table and her eyes widened as they matched.

She suddenly stood up knocking over her chair and the tea cup. Tea spilled onto and over the side of the table and everyone else jerked their heads up to her. As they did, Valtyra could hear footsteps from upstairs.

“What are you doing?” Lotho asked.

“Missus?” Bubnug asked as he rose to his feet as well.

Valtyra ignored them both and asked the woman, “Who are you?”

The woman tilted her head in confusion but Valtyra also saw a glint in her eye, “Whatever do you mean?”

“You may look like her, but you are not lesha.”

“Valtyra!” Lotho exclaimed, “You are being severely rude to this woman who has allowed us to stay despite our behavior!”

“I knew you were well meaning. But not blind as well.”

“Excuse me?” Lotho asked getting to his feet.

Alicia did not say anything, but it looked to Valtyra as if she was getting ready to leap at her. Valtyra, in response, drew her rapiers and pointed one at the woman and another at Alicia. The tea in the remaining cups started moving and she knew that Lotho was about to send magic her way.

Before he did, though, the footsteps from upstairs descended stairs at the other side of the house and entered the kitchen.

“May I ask what is going on here?”

Valtyra turned around and nearly dropped her weapons in shock as Aldern Foxglove stood in the entryway of the dining room.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Mistrust

"It is amazing what the slightest mistrust can do."

'Aldern' did not seem phased by the two rapiers pointed at various people in the room. In fact, he smiled at Valtyra as she shifted one of her rapiers from Alicia to Aldern.

"Who are you?" Valtyra asked.

"I am Aldern Foxglove, of course." He replied as if it was obvious, "You should know that by now."

"Bull! We saw Aldern die after being turned into a ghoul!"

"A ghoul?" 'Aldern' shook his head, "Are you sure it was not a dream?"

Raw anger rose in Valtyra. She knew that this thing in front of her was not Aldern. It could not have been. The real Aldern was a ghoul, an undead creature that took the life of Katrina. The creature would have killed many more people if they had not stopped it. Yet, whatever was in front of them dared to masquerade as Aldern and mock her as if she was a moronic child. The memory of seeing Katrina's body and Shayliss's reaction fueled the anger even further.

"You make light of what happened?" she growled.

"What do you expect? You're the one that is telling such tall tales."

Valtyra surged for the 'man,' but could not as something clamped over her feet. She fought to try and swipe at him. Her blades could not reach him and his smile only grew wider.

"I will kill you!"

"Would you back off?" Lotho yelled. "I don't know what has gotten into you!"

Valtyra turned angry eyes toward the halfling, "They are not really the Foxgloves and you know it!"

"Even if they weren't," he said, "would that mandate killing them in their own home?"

"This isn't their home!" She nearly screamed at him, "This is the real Aldern's home!"

The woman stepped around the table to Lotho and put her hand on his shoulder. Her face was one of fear, but Valtyra could see a small glimmer in her eye that spoke otherwise.

“Please don’t let her hurt us! We are just trying to live our lives without any conflict.”

Lotho placed his hand on top of hers reassuringly and said, “You will be safe.”

Fresh irritation filled Valtira and, without thinking about it, she dropped one of her rapiers, drew a dagger from the belt draped over her shoulder, and tossed it at the woman. The tiny blade struck home in the woman’s chest and she was thrown back by the force. Her back hit the wall and she slid down with blood covering where her body touched. It was immediately apparent that the woman was not human.

Her blood was midnight black.

Lotho and Alicia just stared at the ‘woman’ as she rose back up to her feet and her features started to melt. What was under them was something out of a nightmare. It was only barely humanoid and its skin was wrinkled beyond imagination. Hands and feet ended with limbs elongated and claws. Instead of facial features, it had slits where its eyes, nose and mouth should have been. Standing up fully, it was almost able to touch the ceiling. Turning around, Valtira could see that ‘Aldern’ also melted into a creature of almost exact proportions.

“Do you believe me now?” Valtira asked.

“Just shut up and fight!” Lotho responded, releasing her feet.

Both of the creatures roared and lunged at Valtira.

Chapter Forty: Faceless Stalkers

“When you are fighting a creature that can change its face, keep your head. Even if they do not change, you could make them do so in your mind.”

Valtyra was on the move as soon as she saw the creatures rush at her. Instead of stepping backward, like any sane person would do, she ducked down and kicked herself forward with blades angled downward and almost touching wood. The creatures sailed above her, and each of them swiped at her with their claws, but their elongated limbs did not give them the room they needed to land an attack. Sounds of inhuman screams ripped through her senses and she turned back to see that Bubnug thrust his blazing blade into the fake-Aldern’s chest. Valtira figured that it was the fire that did more damage than the blade itself, but the stab did its job as the creature landed awkwardly.

The moment of hesitation to get back to its feet gave Alicia the chance she needed to send arrows into the thing’s skin. It turned to Alicia and swung at her, but she was already twisting to the side and the claws only left very shallow lines on her cheek. As if she summoned it forth, her dagger was in hand and on an arcing path for the creature’s neck. Fake-Ilesha crashed into the archer, and the dagger missed its mark completely and flew out of hand. The tiny blade clinked against the far wall and it might as well have been in the Worldwound for the good it was going to do her.

Valtyra pivoted on the balls of her left foot and flung herself at the fake-Aldern, who was trying to take the opportunity his ‘wife’ was giving him. Her rapier skewered it in mid air and then thudded into the wooden wall. A growl of rage emanated from the creature’s slitted throat and it started clawing at the woman. The thought to leave the creature there pinned against the wall flashed through Valtira’s mind and she was about to turn around to help the others. Something tugged at her, though, and it did not take much energy to place what it was.

Frankly, she was not sure if she wanted to help the others. The mistrust that was building up in the group was all pointed her way. Well, except Bubnug, but he did not count in her mind. Some childish part of her wanted her to drop everything and just walk away and she was very tempted to do just that. The thing that held her there, though, was not the desire to help her ‘partners,’ or even to make sure the citizens of Sandpoint would be safe. No, what kept her there was the fact that she still had some payback to deal out for those who started this whole murderous spree to begin with.

And she would start with this thing.

Valtyra ducked under a strike from the fake-Aldern and swiped her remaining rapier across the thing’s belly. A growl of pain was interrupted by another cut to the creature’s face. Then another to its arm and yet another hit its legs. Valtira kept at it, her strikes moving faster and her anger rising. Something slammed into her side and she felt wood connect with her

shoulder. Bone threatened to disconnect from bone and she had to clench her teeth against the need to scream. She lashed out with her elbow and caught the fake-lesha upside the head. It sent a fist into Valtira's cheek and stars flashed in her vision. Her vision returned and she found herself on the floor with the creature about to open her throat.

Before it could, a fire covered blade cut through the creature's hand and sent it into the wall. Valtira grabbed her dropped rapier and thrust it up into what would have been the jaw of a normal person. The tip of the weapon poked out the top of its head and it crumpled to the floor.

She pulled her blade out and saw that her other weapon was still stuck in the wall with a dead creature still pinned on it. When she pulled it out, the creature fell to the ground limp. Lotho and Alicia immediately started looking through the room as if ignoring her.

"Thank you for the help." Valtira said with obvious annoyance.

When she did not get a response, she sighed and motioned to Bubnug for him to follow her, "Let's check upstairs."

Chapter Forty-One: The Search for the Brothers

“Looking for a cult is something that is usually very complex. They leave a web of trails and falsehoods behind them and are protected by legality. But, they hide in the simplest of places. Places that, if someone took a second to think about, should be obvious.”

Wood creaked and groaned as Valtyra and Bubnug climbed the stairs to the second floor. All along the walls was dust, mold and rot, and it only got worse as they ascended. The top two or so stairs were so rotted that Valtyra did not trust her weight on them and had to jump in order to make it over them. Bubnug, not realizing what Valtyra was doing, stepped up onto them, but nothing happened. Valtyra gave him a look of mild annoyance before turning to the double doors to her left. She heard the goblin move down the hall where a door on either side was closed.

The room beyond looked like a study. A long desk sat at the other end of the room with piles and piles of paper, books and trash on top. Behind the desk was a window that looked outward toward the inner city and was cracked throughout. To either side of the desk were two bookshelves full to the brim with books in similar condition as the ones below.

She looked through the bookshelf, finding books such as *Maps of Varisia*, *Religions of the World* and *The Science Behind Mathematics*. There was no book that hinted toward dastardly deeds or evilness, so she moved to the desk. Business papers, requests for transport wagons, and inventory sheets littered the top, but nothing of note.

Sighing, Valtyra called, “Did you get anything Bubnug?”

From the other side of the townhouse, she heard the goblin say, “No, Missus.”

“Well, come on. There is one more floor to check.”

They both climb the treacherous stairs to the last floor. It was shaped and arranged completely differently than the other floors. To their right was a sitting area with a couch, two chairs, and a fireplace, all worn and torn. Two plants, not native to Varisa as far as Valtyra knew, were at either corner of the room closest to the entranceway. The fireplace had charred logs of wood and ash covered the inside. To the left was a set of double doors that are closed shut. Across the way from the stairs was another shut door.

Valtyra pointed Bubnug toward the fireplace while she went across the way toward the single door. She opened the door and entered what seemed like another sitting room. A single armed chair sat at one end of the room with a small round table at one side and a lamp sitting on the table. A book sat open on the chair and a bookshelf stood within a step or two of the chair. Again, the bookshelf was full to the brim, but these books were more fictional in nature,

such as *The Tale of Big Red, Myths and Legends of Golarion* and *Verses of the Shackles*. The book on the chair, or what remained of it, was called *The Legendary Pathfinders*.

So, it was a reading room instead of a sitting room. Yet, there was nothing else to be seen, so Valtyra exited the room and moved on to the double doors. Before she opened them, though, she heard a muffled, "Missus?"

She turned around to find that Bubnug had stuck his head into the chimney of the fireplace and his legs dangled in the air. Trying to hold back a smile, Valtyra stepped over to the goblin and asked, "Yes, Bubnug?"

"I found shiny here." he said, as if trying to get his explanation out as quickly as possible. "So, I climb up and reach for it. But," he hesitated as if embarrassed, "I am stuck."

Valtyra's attempts to hold back her laughter almost failed, "Need help?"

"Please?"

She reached for his sides and grabbed on tight, "I am about to pull. Ready?"

"Yes!"

She grunted as she worked to pull the goblin out of the chimney. After a minute of pulling and pushing, Bubnug's head popped out of the chimney and he fell to the ground dazed. And holding a metal box.

"What is that?" She asked.

Bubnug shook his head, "Locked."

"Let's take it down to the others then. Lotho has the key after all."

After almost falling down the stairs both times, Valtyra walked into the dining room where Lotho and Alicia were talking quietly. They quieted when they saw her.

"I have a gift for you." Valtyra said with false cheer as she set the box down on the table.

Everyone crowded around the box and studied it. After a minute, Valtyra said, "So. Are you going to unlock it?"

"With what?" Lotho asked, confused.

"That key we got from Aldern."

“Do you really think it would be that simple?”

As he said it, though, he was pulling the key out of his pocket. He set the key in and turned it. It unlocked with a click and Lotho’s eyes widened. Valtyra could not help the smile on her face as he opened the lid.

Inside was a sack bag full to the brim with platinum pieces and a wooden box. Inside of the box was a few sheets of paper. The first few they pulled out were various legal papers dealing with the townhouse such as deeds and payment information. The last one they pulled was a deed to the Foxglove Manor.

Valtyra pulled it out and started reading, “Know all men and women present and future that we, the members of the Brothers of Seven, upon this day... blah blah blah... Confirm upon Vorel Foxglove provisional ownership of the holding to be known here and henceforth as Foxglove Manor... blah blah blah... Construction of Foxglove Manor, having been finance partially on the holdings and coin of Vorel Foxglove to the amount of six and sixty percent, and partially upon the coffers of the Brothers of the Seven to the amount of the remainder, four and thirty percent, backed by collateral in the form of the Seven’s Sawmill... dah dah dah... with any subsequent repair and maintenance to be the sole responsibility of Vorel Foxglove or his descendants for the aforementioned period of time of one hundred years. Upon the passing of this time... ownership of Foxglove Manor; to include all lands within a mile around and below, immediately and forevermore reverts to the Brothers of Seven...”

Lotho grunted in thought, “Brothers of Seven. That sounds familiar.”

“It was in the note to Aldern, right?” Valtyra asked.

“So, we have confirmation that the Brothers were involved. But, where are they?”

“Is the Seven’s Sawmill a place here in Magnimar?”

“Possibly. But, I am not familiar with Magnimar. We’ll have to ask around. Again.”

“Better than nothing. We at least have a lead now.” Valtyra was about to put the deed back into the box when she found another object inside. She reached in and pulled out a ledger. It was thin and made of black leather with a thick layer of dust on the outside.

She opened it up carefully. Inside were rows and rows of expenses and savings. All of them seemed very mundane and unimportant, until she reached the last page. Nearly a dozen entries, labeled as paid for the last three months, were named “Ilesha’s Trip to Absalom.” Each of them referred to Aldern paying someone named “B-7” 200 gold pieces a week for her trip, dropping off the payment at midnight to a place called “the Seven’s Sawmill.”

Valtyra set the ledger onto the table and, while pointing at the entries, said, "We now have even more proof."

Lotho looked at the entries, "'Iesha's Trip to Absalom.' Nice try, Aldern."

"So," Valtira said, "Let's go see what is at the Seven's Sawmill."

Chapter Forty-Two: The Seven's Sawmill

"Welcome to the cult's home. Don't get revolted by the crazy. They just want to say hi."

Once again, the four heroes got on their horses and started riding around town to find out where the Seven's Sawmill was. This time, they got more concrete information and was pointed right at it.

The Seven's Sawmill was a very old and very stable building that hung over the Yondabakari River. It was also a very simple looking building that had multiple stories. From inside, Valtyra could hear the machines and tools inside rumbling and occasionally sawing. A sign above the only door of the place read in very blocky letters: Seven's Sawmill.

"This is the place." Valtyra said mostly to herself.

"Yeah. And only one door in." Lotho commented.

"They may be expecting us too."

"Well," Lotho said dryly, "At least something is certain about this."

"So, do we just charge in?" Valtyra asked.

"No. This place also has business. Let's go in as businessmen looking for a profit. Get the lay of the land."

Valtyra raised an eyebrow, "I did not expect you to be so cunning."

Lotho smirked, "I never had the chance. It was either genuine cooperation or we charged in. I wanted to try something new."

"Well then." She said and dismounted, "Let's go."

She walked up to the outer walkway which wrapped around the corner and continued down. As she stood in front of the door, she could feel the mist of the waterworks below them working. The handle of the door was slick with the mist and Valtyra pulled on the door. Nothing happened. She pulled again, harder, to no avail.

"It's locked!"

Bubnug walked up next to her, pulled out his tools, and started fiddling at the door. Seconds later, he twisted and pulled out the tools. They were broken. Valtyra bent down to the lock to find that the pieces of his tools were stuck inside the door and could not be pulled out.

"Well," she said putting a hand on the goblin's head, "Let's see if there is another entrance."

She walked around the corner and found a set of stairs that led down to another door. Again, the door was locked, but this time Bubnug was able to unlock the door without breaking even more of his tools and the four of them entered the mill.

The room was a place of mist and noise. Four immense water wheels churned steadily to the group's left while to their right, whirring belts of leather, gears, pulleys and thick ropes spun and churned using the eternal motion of the river below to power the pistons that rumbled along the wall.

The noise hit Valtira as if it was a solid mass causing her to stagger back. When she looked up again, she saw that the three workers inside were looking at them. They were wearing workers uniforms of a cloth shirt and heavy overalls, but Valtira could see the bulge of daggers and other small weapons under the clothes. All of their looks were ones of confusion that turned pleasant.

"Excuse me!" One of them yelled over the machinery, "This place is not safe for you! If you need any assistance, you should talk to the mill manager!"

"Wonderful!" Lotho responded, "If you could give us the name and address of the manager I'm sure we can work something out!"

The worker's smile grew wider, "Of course! Let me grab it for you!"

Valtira watched as all three of them walked over to another wall where piles of stuff were on the floor and in chairs. The back of her neck itched and she scratched at it. The workers reached their stuff and grabbed something from the piles. Her neck itched even more and she realized what it was. Before she could shout a warning, the three workers charged at them with razor blades.

Chapter Forty-Three: Justice Ironbriar

“Money. That’s all that needs to be said.”

Valtyra’s rapiers sprang from their sheaths and crisscrossed to parry the worker’s first attack. She pulled them away, stepped to the side, and swung her left weapon up in a diagonal slice. The worker avoided the attack, but his dodge put him directly in the path of a frost lance from Lotho. It slammed into the man’s cheek and immediately started melting. He did not seem to notice the lance, though, as he pounced right back at the half-elf.

She ducked under his attack and thrust her rapier up as she rose. The weapon did not enter his stomach, like she aimed for, but it sunk into the man’s arm. Without hesitating a second, he grabbed the front of Valtira’s armor. With a grunt of effort, he flung her toward the heavy machinery in the center of the room. She managed to stop herself from getting caught, but she knew that the worker would just keep pressing her until she did.

Her foot found hold in the floorboards and she used that hold to push away from the whirring gears and pulleys. Yet, a razor blade came up to meet her, and she had to send herself to the ground to avoid the blade. A second worker then jumped onto her back and raised his blade up to send back down into her heart. Valtira desperately flung her elbow back and felt flesh and bone as she connected.

The weight on her back fell away and she scrambled to her feet. Fire blazed near her and she turned to see Bubnug parry a razor away and slice at the worker. Blood spilled and the worker staggered back. Valtira lunged forward and felt her rapier sink in.

“One is getting away!” Lotho yelled over the loud machinery.

She turned to see that one of the workers, who was already injured, was heading out the door to climb up the stairs as quickly as he could. Alicia drew her arrow as Valtira pulled a dagger. As if in sync, they both shot or flung their weapons at the man. The arrow hit him in the side and the dagger got his leg, but he kept moving out and was around the corner before the women could try again.

“Shit. More incoming!” Valtira yelled as another worker leapt to cling to her back.

She slammed her elbow back again, but he held on and started biting her neck of all things. They twirled around a bit as the half-elf tried to get him off, but it was not until Bubnug got his blade into the man that he let go. Valtira then spun around and sliced the man. Her weapon sliced his throat open and he was dead within seconds. Clambering of boots on wood pounded upstairs and they traveled to the stairway.

Valtyra and Bubnug rushed to the door just in time to meet the first wave of cultists. The two of them worked well together. One would pin an opponent's weapon against the door frame or wall, and the other would slice at the opponent. There were times when Valtyra had to kick a cultist back and send them falling into the river below.

Slowly, but surely, the assault of rapier, sword cane, magic and arrows pushed the cultists back up the stairs and they started making a fighting retreat. It looked like the group was going to win the fight, and even a couple of the cultists ran away, but they soon found themselves on a narrow balcony facing a noble looking half-elf.

"How dare you intrude on this place?" He yelled.

"I assume you are the leader of this group." Lotho said, "Justice Ironbriar."

The man smirked, "And if I am?"

"Then we must arrest you."

"Like you arrested my subordinates?" He asked, "No. I will send your heads to my lady and watch as she sucks you dry."

Chapter Forty-Four: Battle at the Mill

“Never forget. Souls can be corrupted to the bitter end.”

Ironbriar let out a short cry and charged forward. His curved sword flicked high left to low right, then horizontally at Valtyra’s belly. She leaned away from the first attack and arched her back to avoid the second. As she did, her rapier flashed forward and grazed the man’s clothing without biting into skin. Valtyra then swung inward, trying to get some kind of wound on the man, yet he anticipated her attack and twisted away.

Bubnug ran around Valtyra and slashed from the bottom left to the top right. His flaming blade cut through the Justice’s clothes and into the man’s belly. It was a very shallow wound, but the flames cauterized it near instantaneously. Ironbriar growled in pain and swept his sword at both of them. Crossing both blades in front of her, Valtyra blocked the attack while Bubnug went low again. The blade cut in again and Ironbriar stepped back.

“Targrta Catgas Gacx!”

With the words came a covering of green energy. It enveloped his whole body and when he came at the pair again, his motions were swifter and smoother than anyone could have been able to do, even an elf. As Valtyra blocked his next attack, barely, she thought back to the spell book she grabbed from Thistletop. She recognized the spell he just cast as *Cat’s Grace* which gave the user more dexterity and speed.

“Bubnug! Flank him!” Valtyra said.

She pushed herself forward into Ironbriar to allow Bubnug to move around him. The justice tried to shove the half-elf away, but she held on and Bubnug was able to flank him. They kept him mostly in place as the spell he put on himself started running out. While they did, Alicia and Lotho took the opportunity to pepper the man with long ranged attacks.

Yet, the spell allowed him to avoid all of the ranged attacks, and the melee attacks were parried, blocked, and shoved aside. Not a single attack landed.

Then, the Justice went on the offensive.

He grabbed Valtyra’s blades with his and sent them into the wood of their battleground. As she tried to pull them out, he stepped around her and charged for Alicia and Lotho. The halfling just took a few steps back, but Alicia drew her dagger and advanced.

She ducked under a diagonal slash and stabbed forward. The blade sunk in and she immediately twisted. The man cried out and tried to step back. The archer did not let him as she

followed him. Metal swung again and again and the dagger was too small for Ironbriar to be able to deflect easily.

Valtyra managed to get her rapiers out of the wood, and she charged for the man. Somehow, he still managed to dodge her rapiers. But the joined might of the two women, and then Bubnug later, prevented him from surviving the battle for much longer.

Multiple wounds, along with two serious ones, later the Justice finally fell to the floor.

“My lady.” He muttered, “I had wished to join you at the clock once again. Goodbye.”

Justice Ironbriar went limp.

Chapter Forty-Five: The Bell Tower

“Scarecrows do not only scare crows. I’m terrified of them too.”

The tower in front of the group was one of the most dilapidated and ruined buildings Valtyra had ever seen. It could barely be called a bell tower as the bell at the top of the tower was hanging on by a thread. Walls had holes in them the size of a giant’s fist and the wooden supports underneath were broken. If that was not bad enough, the whole tower was lopsided. As if a child ripped it out and tried to put it back in its place. She was surprised that it was still standing.

“You’d think we would have figured out that the cult’s leader was in that building a long time ago.” She said.

“Never know.” Lotho said, “I once knew a evil mastermind who lived in the most well-maintained manor in the city.”

Valtyra blinked at him, “Really?”

He smirked, “Come on. Let’s get this show on the road.”

He kicked his pony into motion and Alicia followed him without a word. Valtyra muttered something about not getting answers under her breath and followed as well.

The front door of the tower was battered, but shut firmly. Bubnug would have unlocked them, if the locks were still functional. So, Valtyra and Alicia worked to break them down. It took them multiple kicks, punches and shoulder bashes each to finally bust the doors down.

And they found nothing inside.

All four of them stepped into the dark tower. There was not a torch to light the way, and the light coming in from the holes in the wall was not enough to do much more than hint at shapes. Along all of the walls, even at the spots where no wall stood, stairs rose up all the way to the next floor four stories up.

The group stepped toward the center of the tower. As soon as they did, they heard a voice that seemed to radiate from all directions.

“So, you’ve finally made it, Heroes of Sandpoint.”

Valtyra shot her head up and tried to find the source of the voice. Instead, what she found was cult members who were stepping out of the shadows of the stairs. All of them wore robes, hoods, and held razor blades in their hands.

“I wondered when you would make it.”

Valtyra drew her blades, “Who are you?”

“My name is Xanasha, the Mother of the Seven. I invite you to try and get me.”

As if on cue, the cultists all readied their blades and prepared to jump at the group. Valtira held her rapiers at the ready. She heard Bubnug unsheathe his sword cane blade behind her and felt the cold of Lotho’s spells.

They were all ready for a brawl.

Yet, they did not expect the large form that broke through the ceiling and started on a crash course for the group.

Lotho created walls of ice in its way, but it simply punched through each wall. The walls did, however, slow it down enough for the group to leap out of the way. When it landed, it created a crater about five feet deep.

It was human shaped. At least, if one took the human shape and exaggerated it. A hat similar to a scarecrow’s hat was on top of its head and its skin looked as if it was patched with the skin of others. On top of that was a trench coat and ripped pants. It rose to its feet from a crouch and Valtira could see that its motions were mechanical in nature.

“Have fun, heroes.”

Chapter Forty-Six: Scarecrow

“Okay. Quick question... how is this undead creature stronger than me?”

The creature charged right at Valtyra. She was surprised at how fast it was and barely had enough time to step out of the way. Yet, it raised its arm up and as it passed her she was slammed to the ground.

Bubnug leapt into the air and slashed his blazing sword cane at its neck. The tiny length of metal only scratched the surface of the thing's neck and nothing caught on fire. He was determined, though, and went in for another attack. It blocked every attack from the goblin with its palm and arm. Nothing was able to get through and Valtyra wondered if they would be able to damage the thing.

Her answer came when an iceberg descended upon the creature. The tip was as sharp as a razor and the weight behind the ice allowed it to penetrate the thick skin the creature had. Valtyra had no idea how the halfling was able to create the damned thing, but it was able to sink in deep. The creature made a strange screeching noise that was a mix between a bird's caw and the growl of a ghoul. It was an assault on the senses and Valtyra had a hard time getting past it.

She struggled to rise to her feet and pushed forward toward the thing. It seemed happy to keep squealing with the ice in its body so Valtyra was able to actually get in attacking range. Yet, when she got there, the thing recovered and reached out to grab her. Now that she was not held back by the wall of sound, she ducked under its hand and stabbed forward. While her rapier was not thick or heavy, all of its power was focused on its tip. So, when it hit skin it was able to sink in.

Bubnug then came from behind her and thrust his own weapon into the same spot. When the blazing blade was inside, he started slicing at the flesh. The creature yelled out again, but this time Valtyra sent her blade up into its mouth. She did not get far, but her attack achieved her goal of shutting the loud thing up.

It tried to grab at one of them again. Valtyra side stepped away, but received claws to her forearm anyway. The gashes immediately started to ooze blood and she held her other arm against the wounds. Which let her see the creature grab and toss Bubnug away. The goblin sailed through the air and crashed into Lotho. They both fell into a heap on the ground and struggled to rise.

The creature started stomping over to the pair, but Valtyra twisted around and stabbed at the back of the creature's knees. The attacks did nothing and it continued on its path. Lotho struggled to his feet and was lifted up by the creature. However, Lotho seemed to expect it and had planned for it. When the creature pulled him up, he seemed to concentrate. Within a couple

of seconds, the hand that held him completely froze over and then shattered. The halfling fell to the floor.

“Get its neck!”

Valtyra widened her eyes then nodded. As the creature staggered back in pain, she leapt up to its neck and stabbed forward. Her blade sank in deep and she felt resistance as her weapon hit rotten bone and whatever else was inside of it. Its cries of pain gradually died away and then it fell limply to the ground.

“They have killed the Scarecrow my children. End them.”

Chapter Forty-Seven: The Top of the Tower

“The top of any tower is supposed to hold treasure right?’ ‘Or just a long drop.”

All at once, as if they had practiced it hundreds of times, all of the robed cultists leapt off of the stairs to land on the heroes. Valtyra leapt into a roll that let her avoid the razors from three different cultists. She spun on the balls of her foot and held her rapiers so that both swung in diagonal spirals. The weapons clashed against multiple objects and when she finished her attack she found that she only hit other weapons.

The three men on her lunged at once in near perfect synchronicity. One blade cut a thin line across her cheek. One slashed the air near her waist and the third gashed her ribs. She grunted in pain and thrust forward. Her target twisted to the side which put him in the way of her other rapier’s edge. Red spilled down the man’s throat and he fell to the ground trying to halt the bleeding. Rapier met razors as the two cultists remaining attacked again. This time Valtyra twisted, pulling the razors away, and thrust both rapiers to her sides. They both hit flesh and her remaining opponents fell.

The half-elf pulled her weapons out and prepared to leap into the fray going on in the center of the floor. However, something turned her attention to the top of the stairs. In the entryway of the second floor, Valtyra saw a shape slither along the wall of the floor above. Then two green lights flashed across where the shape was. She had the feeling that whatever was up there was calling to her.

Gripping her weapons tighter, Valtyra rushed to the stairs and started climbing up two at a time. As she did, more cultists ran down the stairs to get in her way. Growling at the annoyance, she sheathed a rapier, yanked out a dagger from the belt that wrapped around her shoulder and torso, and threw it. The tiny blade sank to the hilt in the cultist’s shoulder and the man snarled in pain as he stumbled back. He did not have much time to react before another dagger sank into his head.

Valtyra pulled her rapier back out to block a razor that arced down to her head. Without hesitation, the razor then swung away to come back aimed at her now exposed side. She tried to parry it away, but could not do it before it sank into her. Pain burned her body and threatened to send her to her knees.

Instead, she used the pain as a source of power for her anger. The rage coursed throughout her body and she felt as if she was invincible and as if she did not need to think. In fact, not thinking would be so much better. Just let go of her conscious and go to town on these murderers. She gritted her teeth against the instincts though.

Focus on your goal. She told herself, Just as you were taught.

The roaring beast of anger did not die down without a fight. However, she managed to push it back. Bloodlust was not needed here. When she finally got it down, she grinned and lunged forward into the cultist. His face contorted in confusion before her weapon dug in deep.

He fell off of the stairs and Valtira kept moving forward. Metal flashed and sparks flew as she held against the tide of cultists trying to hold the stairs. With every death, the beast inside of her threatened to burst out. The chains of thought she used to contain it held but she would have to end the fight soon if it was to stay that way.

Without really realizing it, she made it to the second floor. It had taken her ten minutes of just fighting to do it, but she arrived. This floor held the four bells that would have rung out the time of day if the tower was still in use. The only other thing in this room was the numerous bedrolls and discarded belongings and a hole where one corner of the floor used to be. On the other side of the hole was scaffolding that Valtira thought would lead further up the tower. Sure enough, when she looked out, wooden platforms rose up and around the tower. There were no more cultists in sight.

Valtira gritted her teeth in determination and ran up the platforms. Each one of them had rotten sections that she avoided as well as creaked with any slight motion. The sounds sent pulses of nervousness up the half-elf's spine and when she made it all the way to the top five minutes later she let out a sigh of relief.

The scaffolding had led to another floor. The only reason she could see what was inside was because of the holes in the roof of the tower. Not that there was much to look at anyway. Besides dust and debris there was only a creature that stood in the center of the room. At least it would have stood there if it had legs.

It looked like a snake that was constantly upright. Plate armor covered what would have been a torso on a human and two arms jutted out from its sides. Its general form resembled a curvy woman from the halfway point up and a snake for the rest. The head was very thin and it was faced away from Valtira. Yet, when Valtira let out her sigh the head turned to glance at the half-elf. Its head was wearing some kind of pointed mask and its eyeholes had green diamond like shapes in them.

"You came here. Alone." The creature whispered. Her voice was a mix of a snake's hiss and a woman's seductive purr, "Wonderful."

Valtira held her rapiers out preparing for a rush. Instead the creature just turned to fully face her. She wished the thing did not. The armor covering what would have been the chest of a woman was shaped into extremely long and pointy cones. It was really disturbing.

"Who are you?" Valtira asked.

“You don’t know?” The thing asked, “I am Xanesha of course!”

Chapter Forty-Eight: Xanesha

"I have nothing to say other than... ew."

Xanesha. The mere mention of that name brought memories of that letter the heroes found under the Misgivings. Which meant that she was the one that ordered Aldern to attack the people of Sandpoint. And that put the Vinder family in the line of fire.

Kathrine. The woman that had her life taken just because she was too close to the first murder the heroes came across. Shayliss's pain at seeing her sister caught up in the machinery of the lumber mill hurt Valtyra. She could remember the moment clearly. And it made her angry.

That beast roiling around in her chest bashed at the cage of control harder and harder. Valtyra was very tempted to let it out. To let it have free reign and tear that wide smirk off of the creepy snake lady's face. It would even feel great to do so. Seeing her blades enter those scales would be wonderful.

Xanesha seemed to notice Valtyra's inner turmoil and slithered closer, "You want to let loose, don't you?" Her voice was a purr. Or at least as much of a purr as a snake could make, "You came up here to kill me. So, why are you hesitating now?"

Valtyra's grip tightened on her rapiers. All she could see was the blood and hear the soft cries.

"Does my presence not anger you?" Xanesha circled the woman, "Does it not awaken the powerful bloodlust within you?" Her head leaned down as if to whisper in Valtyra's ear, "What of those who died? Would fighting not avenge them?"

Kathrine.

Something snapped. The beast broke through.

Pivoting on the balls of her foot, Valtyra spun in a circle and lashed out at the snake woman. Xanesha had anticipated the attack and flexed back from the rapier. As she did, though, Valtyra completed her turn and leapt forward into the snake. Her blades crossed themselves in an X aimed for the creature's body. Xanesha held her polearm in a diagonal guard that blocked both blades.

Valtyra did not pull back. Planting her feet on the floor she continued pushing. The snake hissed in annoyance and shifted her weapon slightly. That motion forced the rapiers from connecting. Valtyra was not expecting it and her momentum made her stumble. Xanesha helped Valtyra fall to the floor and raised her polearm to stab down.

The half-elf rolled to the side and swept her weapon out. She felt the slight resistance of metal hitting scales and while it was not as good of an attack as she wanted the blade did draw blood. Her teeth clenched in sudden ferocity and she got to her feet just to lunge forward with both rapiers.

Xanesha slithered between both blades and swept her polearm in a horizontal arc. Valtira barely had enough time to raise her weapons in a block. The force of the attack caused the half-elf to slide a couple of feet across the floor. She sheathed one of her blades, drew a dagger, and flung it in one motion. The snake dodged to one side and the dagger flew past her body.

Only to sink into her tail pinning her to the floor.

Xanesha let out a high pitch scream of pain and pulled the tiny blade out. Valtira took that time to rush in to deliver a fatal blow both rapiers in hand again. The creature evaded her attack then stabbed the bloody dagger forward. Her shoulder suddenly erupted into agony and stumbled back a couple of steps. The dagger was stuck to the hilt.

She did not have time to pull it out before Xanesha renewed her attack. With the blade stuck in her shoulder, Valtira had a hard time getting her rapiers up in time to block each strike. Cuts and gashes formed on exposed skin. Her armor kept attacks from being lethal, but she was quickly running out of gas.

A strike from the blunt end of the polearm sent Valtira to the floor. She tried to rise to her feet but Xanesha quickly slithered up and raised the polearm to stab down.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Fall

"And what is the natural predator to snakes?"

From the hole in the wall, a battlecry rang out and Valtyra watched what looked like a comet of blue-hot fire leap across her vision and crash into Xanesha. Its momentum continued and threw the snake off of its tail. They sailed for a few feet before they slammed into the ground with the snake on the bottom.

Bubnug, his outline highlighted by the blue flames of his blade, prepared to slash downward with that tiny blade of his. Xanesha barely got armor in the way and the sparks that erupted from the strike were white. Valtyra could practically feel the heat from where she lay. The goblin did not even stop for a second as he continued his assault. Xanesha parried each strike, though it looked like she had to really work to get her weapon in line.

Yet, Bubnug slipped up in his furious attacks and Xanesha took the opportunity it presented her. She trapped the sword cane with the blade of her polearm and used the blunt end to send the goblin flying. To his credit, he took the strike as well as anyone could have, but he was still thrown off of her. The snake rose to her normal position and lunged her whole body at him.

Valtyra sent her last dagger flying. The blade tumble end over end. Its hilt crashed into the snake with jarring force and caused her to hesitate. During that moment of hesitation, both Valtyra and Bubnug got to their feet. The goblin was better off than she was, but they both had to work to make sure they did not stumble. Xanesha recovered from the dagger and slid backward slightly to keep both fighters in her view.

Without having to communicate to each other, the half-elf and goblin lunged forward in perfect synchronicity. Valtyra, with her longer limbs and stronger muscles, reached the snake first. Rapiers flashed as she created a web of slashes and thrusts. Any outside observer would not have been able to see the metal, yet Xanesha slithered in, out, and around the strikes only catching glancing blows on her armor or scales.

After a couple of seconds, Bubnug entered the fray. He was aimed at her side and was more tactical about his attacks. Whenever the snake slid toward him to avoid Valtyra, he would strike in precise motions. If any of them hit, Valtyra was sure that they would be crippling if not outright lethal. But the slippery creature managed to bend her body in such ways as to avoid the attacks from both sides. The thing was, with both Valtyra's and Bubnug's assault, she could only focus on defense. There was no way she would be able to raise her polearm fast enough to attack with how both of the fighters were attacking. As long as they kept it up they would wear her down. And she knew it.

So, she got dirty.

When she was sliding to the side opposite of Bubnug, she shot forward like lightning and clamped her powerful jaws on Valtyra's shin. Blood flowed from the snake's scales as she had to receive a rapier strike, but Valtyra thought that her leg was about to break. The half elf cried out and stabbed down at the snake's body. However, Xanesha pulled suddenly and Valtyra was thrown to her back again.

Air exploded from her lungs and her head crashed against the wood floor. Her vision blurred and she could barely feel it as the snake then shook her around like a dog and his bone before throwing her away. Rain patterned against her face and the wind buffeted her. Before she could get up, though, she felt the weight of the creature on her chest.

Valtyra tried to swing her rapiers at the snake, but the polearm intercepted both. She then bit down on Valtyra's shoulder and her fangs punched through the leather armor.

"You have become a nuisance." Xanesha hissed, "And I do not have the patience to play with you anymore."

Her hand gripped the leather breastpiece and she prepared to lift Valtyra over the edge of the makeshift platform. Something flared up behind the creature and Xanesha cried out. The grip on Valtyra released immediately and the half-elf fell on her butt. She looked up and saw something she never thought she would in her lifetime.

A phoenix. A bird made entirely of flame flapped in the air. It was large, the size of an eagle, and it was hard to see many details through all of the fire. Yet, when it cried out it could have been heard throughout town. And the emotion behind it was clear. The beast was angry.

Valtyra felt immense fear at that cry. It was not the 'get the heck out of here' kind of anger. It was the kind of fear that prey felt in the presence of a predator. Fear that paralyzed one in place trying to decide if they should hide, run, or fight. Something that she only felt once before.

Xanesha was obviously terrified. Valtyra was just staring at the beast with a calm mask hiding the horror. The snake, however, was shaking violently. Her polearm fell out of limp fingers and her armor tinked and scratched rapidly.

The phoenix turned its gaze onto Xanesha. She seemed to freeze in place like a statue. The beast tilted its head back and forth then sailed right for the snake. She tried to escape, but there was no hope for her. Flaming talons grabbed her around her body and took her into the air. Screams echoed throughout the city.

Then silence. A body fell from the bird and hit the ground seconds later.

Chapter Fifty: Memory

“There is nothing stronger.”

Valtyra just stared at the bird of fire. It was a beautiful creature. The wingspan was something out of birds of legend and the victory screech that came from its mouth was one that came from a time where people were near the bottom of the food chain. It inspired fear while sending the message that it was willing to fight again. From below, she could hear screams from the cultists. The half-elf had no idea if they could see the bird or the corpse of their leader but there was definitely something that scared them to death.

Not that she could blame them. Her legs shook and threatened to buckle under her.

The bird ascended high into the air and curved back down. Valtira thought that it was about to make her its next conquest. She gripped her rapier tight and prepared to parry a blazing beak or sharp talons. Yet, it flew right over her head and into the tower. It had to shrink down to a smaller size to do so, but the transition was smooth. Valtira followed its flight and her eyes widened.

The creature hovered over Bubnug’s shoulder for a couple of seconds before it shrunk to land. The goblin was surprised as well yet he raised a hand to pet it. Valtira was about to let out a warning but the creature only cawed quietly and bowed its head. Bubnug rubbed its head and it let out a coo of pleasure.

“Bubnug.” Valtira whispered, “What is that?”

He looked up at her with shocked eyes and shrugged, “No idea.” The creature forced his hand under its neck to scratch, “Just... called for help.”

She blinked, “Called for help?”

He nodded, “Yeah. Wanted to help missus. Could not reach on own.”

The half-elf shook her head, “I thought you said you couldn’t use magic.”

The bird, seeing that Bubnug was done giving it attention, floated off of his shoulder to land on his head. At the strange looks from both Valtira and Bubnug it cawed as if saying ‘what?’ With a small smile, she started looking through the room. At the far wall were seven chests. She tried all of them, but all of them were locked. The goblin immediately went to work on the chests as she continued to scan the room.

Her eyes almost missed a small piece of parchment at the corner of the room. She had to do a double take to make sure she actually saw it. It was folded twice and she unfolded it to start reading.

“My sister--

I trust your little band of murderers is doing well, gathering the greedy souls for our Lord's rise? Has Magnimar proven to be as sinful as you had hoped? It may interest you to know that my plan to nurture greed here in this backwater has blossomed--the quality of greed in a soul is so much more refined when it is given the proper care. Are you still simply carving the Sihedron on them as they expire?”

Memories of the sawmill surfaced and Valtyra had to really fight to keep them back down. When she returned to reality, her jaw hurt from clenching so hard. She shook her head and continued to read.

“How crude! My method of marking is so much more elegant. In any event, I'm sure that your plans for harvesting greed where and when you can find it 'in the wild' are progressing well enough-- I just hope that your raw, ungroomed, and likely inferior victims don't interact poorly when mixed with the purity of my own subjects. If you tire of your little project there, know that you're always welcome to come to Turtleback Ferry and serve as my assistant, little sister! Fort Rannick should be in our control by the time you receive this letter, in any event, so there'll be plenty of room for you if you wish to take me up on my generous offer.”

Valtyra could not finish the rest of the letter. Fort Rannick and Turtleback Ferry. Two names she never wanted to hear again.

Shadows deepened and grew into the shapes of giants. Red eyes opened where their heads would have been and they all looked down at Valtyra. In her hands were two rapiers, one broken and the other worn. She took step after step backwards, holding the weapons out in a feeble guard. Breaths came out heavy. Snow crunched and stone crumbled. Screams echoed throughout the night and all over the grounds blood stained the pure white of snow.

Her back hit a stone wall and the sensation sent a jolt up her spine. She was cornered. If they got the chance, they would crack those clubs and slash those blades into her body. There would be no way to survive. She had to get out. In between their legs. Slice their elbows. SOMETHING!

A green hand appeared out of nowhere and stung Valtyra's cheek. Her mind reeled and it took her a second to figure out what was going on. The hand came back and cracked against her other cheek. Something in her head clicked and she remembered. She was not in that damned courtyard. The tower under her feet creaked and groaned.

“Missus?”

Valtyra looked down to see Bubnug, with the bird still on his head, ready to smack her again. She raised a hand and straightened herself.

“I am fine. Let’s just get what we can and go.”

As they grabbed the massive load of gold, weapons and magical items and stuffed them in whatever bags they had, Valtira thought she could hear distant screams in the night.

Chapter Fifty-One: Suspicion

"It is coming to the end. When loyalty turns to betrayal and when bonds are tested."

The trip back to Magnimar was mostly quiet. Valtyra and Bubnug rode on their horses at one side of the road both contemplative. She was thinking about the letter and its implications. They would eventually have to go to that damned place. Hell, Lotho and Alicia were talking about it even now. Valtyra did not want to go. That place had memories that have sunk into its soil and she did not want to wake them up again. Shayliss had been great at helping her get passed them, but there was still stuff that could ruin her if it came back up.

Bubnug was looking up at her with that worried expression on his face. The little creature had been with her for numerous years yet he was never told Valtyra's past. He just had to watch her toss and turn in bed or see her relive it right in front of her. Yet, he stuck it right next to her. He and Shayliss both.

She shook her head. This was no time to break down. Focus was needed if they wanted to get back safely. They had dealt with the problem in Magnimar yet, as the letter stated, there was more going on. At any point someone could come out and attack.

"But why build up this greed?" Lotho was asking, "It does not make sense."

"It is obviously some kind of power." Alicia responded, "And they are storing it somewhere. We could go there and destroy the supply."

"We would need to know where it was."

"There is Turtleback Ferry." A shiver crawled down Valtyra's spine, "If the letter is right, then we could certainly get some information from there."

"True enough." He nodded, "And they also have control of Fort Rannick. It would be beneficial to retake it. I believe the Black Arrows had control of it before an attack of giants." He turned his head to look up at Valtyra, "You don't know anything about that, do you?"

The half-elf froze as the other two turned to look at her as well. The question was asked innocently, but she could see the thoughts behind the halfling's eyes. He knew something. Probably not the whole truth, but he was putting the pieces together and coming up with conclusions that she did not like.

"Why would I?" Valtyra asked, trying to cover up the momentary pause.

His eyes glanced at the ring on her hand, "The seal on that ring. It is the Black Arrow crest."

Sudden anger clashed with the other emotions roiling in her belly, "So?"

He shrugged, "Either you stole it, it is your's, or it is a loved one's. And while you were a pirate, you are not the type to have stolen something like that. So, you have a personal connection to them."

"You BASTARD!"

Metal shrieked and ice crackled. Valtyra's rapier flashed down towards the halfling with a violent scream roaring from her mouth. An ice shield formed from Lotho's arm and he raised it to defend himself. It would not have mattered. He was too slow. If the blade continued on it would slice right into his head and be a fatal blow. Not even his shield would be able to protect him. And Valtyra saw it in his eyes when he realized it.

But sudden fire exploded in between the two of them.

Rapier clashed against blazing metal and Lotho's ice shield slowly melted into a watery pool below him. Heat nearly sent Valtyra off of Shadowshine and even the horse let out a snort. When she recovered, the half-elf found Bubnug riding between the two of them. His face was contorted in the face of a leader ready to lay down the law and his horse kept looking between each of them as if saying 'I dare you.'

Valtyra gritted her teeth, "Get out of my way."

The goblin shook his head, "You need to calm down, Missus."

"But-"

He narrowed his eyes and she hesitated. Lotho behind Bubnug snorted as if satisfied with the outcome. Yet, Bubnug turned his attention to him next, "What you think you doing?"

The halfling raised his eyebrows, "What do you mean?"

"You know. Inciting violence out of Missus is not good."

"You defend her? Even though you know she is hiding something?"

Valtyra growled and Shadowshine took a step forward, but Strider, Bubnug's horse, whipped his head back around and let out a threatening whinny. Shadowshine backed off, but not without a threat of its own.

"She not." Bubnug said, "Not anything about this."

“And how do you know? You have seen her. You have heard her nighttime screams. About giants and burning buildings. And she wears the ring of a group that was almost killed off by the Kreeg Giant Clan!” Lotho waved his hand at Valtira, “These things cannot be a coincidence! Especially when our next target may be Fort Rannick, the home of the Black Arrows! She has to be hiding something! And I will not tolerate that when lives are at stake!”

Valtira’s teeth gritted together. She wanted to attack. She wanted to launch herself at that halfling and kill him. He dare say that she was in suspicion? He had no idea what she had gone through.

Below her, she could feel Shadowshine moving back and forth as if eager to get a fight started. The fire of the phoenix in front of her face made her hesitate. While she was good, and she taught Bubnug how to fight, the goblin has come a long way. And he had a bird on his side. Even if he ended fighting both of them, he would be able to easily handle it enough to tie them in knots and drag them back to Sandpoint by force.

Instead of attacking, she kicked Shadowshine into motion and raced ahead of the group. As she did, she saw that Alicia had her bow drawn and aimed at her. Yet, as Valtira rode away, she did not feel an arrow dig into her back.

The light from Bubnug’s sword faded away.

Chapter Fifty-Two: Tension

"The rope is frayed. It will soon break."

Standpoint was still in mourning. The deaths of the past few days was still evident as when Valtyra, still furious beyond all limits, rode up to the front gate, no one waiting save for Shayliss. Her red hair was a complete mess, though, and the white cloth dress she wore was covered in spots of dirt. Yet, that face of hers pulled up in a great big smile when she saw the half-elf approaching.

"You're home!" Her tone was one of great relief. However, that changed when she noticed no one else behind Valtyra. "Where are the others?"

Valtyra slid off of Shadowshine and kept the horse's reins in her hand. "They are coming. I rode ahead."

Shayliss's eyes did not miss anything, "It is getting worse, huh?" Valtyra started walking and she followed beside the woman, "Why don't you just tell them?"

The half-elf gritted her teeth, "I can't!"

"Why not?" Shayliss asked, her voice half-pleading. "You are tearing yourself up over this! The more you keep it in, the more pain it will bring you!"

Around them, the town was silent. The occasional citizen passed them by, but everyone looked like they were within their own world. None of them would have heard, or even cared, about the pair's conversation, yet Valtyra took her voice down to a whisper anyway. "I cannot! Even if I wanted to, I can't! You don't."

"I dare you," Shayliss whispered with a hint of a snarl, "to say that I do not understand. See what happens."

Valtyra growled but turned her face away. She could feel the fire rising in the woman just as much as she could feel hers. It was burning and painful. Yet, something pushed that back. A voice inside of Valtyra was saying that Shayliss was just trying to help, that lashing out would not do any good. But that was a snowflake against the blazing fire.

"I know what you are going through now more than ever. Do not insult me by telling me I do not understand." Shayliss's tone turned back to a plea, "Please. Let me help you. Tell them."

Valtyra shook her head. "No."

"Then let me tell them! You don't even need to be in the same room!"

The half-elf gritted her teeth. It was tempting. She could not help but realize that Shayliss was right. Telling the others about her nightmare could relieve tensions. Not only that, but telling Shayliss about it was a great relief. Doing the same with the others would do a lot to start the recovery process.

But, there was something that held her back. A subconscious thought that rejected any idea of revealing secrets that should be buried. It was hard enough to deal with it herself, but letting others know about it could also bring a pain that could not be healed. And, she had to admit, but there was a childish part of her that was determined to fight back against the nightmare by hiding it as far down as possible.

Valtyra continued walking and did not answer Shayliss.

Shayliss stopped following Valtira.

Chapter Fifty-Three: Disappear

“Those who want to go are able to go without ever being found.”

“Blade up!” Bubnug yelled.

On top of Strider he watched over the sparring match between two goblins. One of them held a long glaive in two tiny hands. It was up in the air and ready to descend on its opponent, who held two longswords made for a goblin. They were crossed in an X shape so that the glaive would be caught between them. Yet, the glaive goblin was smart and changed the direction of its swing.

Instead of trying to directly block the attack, the dual-wielding goblin dove forward. Doing so put him too close for the glaive to effectively hit him. Once there, he aimed his cross upward and sent it toward his opponent’s throat. If it was a real fight, it would have been over then. Yet, the dual-wielding goblin stopped his attack right before it would have touched the glaive goblin’s skin.

“Good.” Bubnug nodded, “You are done.”

The two goblins spun and headed for the feast hall. He looked at the list of sparring fighters to find the ones next in line. But fast footsteps sounded from the direction of Sandpoint. Turning around, he saw Shayliss running toward him as fast as possible. Her white dress was splattered in dirt as if she had tripped multiple times in the fresh mud. Yet, when she finally reached Bubnug she stood tall.

“Have you seen Valtira?” She asked trying to control her heavy breath.

The goblin gave her a thoughtful frown, “Not in days. She pushed away when I visited.”

She sighed in worry, “I was afraid of that. She has gone missing.”

Bubnug hesitated, “What?”

“I cannot find her anywhere. Not in her clearing, not in her room and not around town. No one in Sandpoint has seen her either. Lotho and Alicia do not even want to look for her.”

Bubnug frowned, “Why did Missus go?”

Shayliss shrugged, “I don’t know for certain.”

Bubnug had no idea what gave him the impression, but he thought that Shayliss was lying to him. But he had no idea about which part, and he did not want to push her right now. So he nodded and said, "I keep eye out."

The woman let out a sigh of relief, "Alright. Thank you. I will-"

She was interrupted by Bubnug's sudden change of attention. His ears perked up and he turned his head sharply toward the outside of the small base. Some distance away from the base was the road into Sandpoint and through the structures and trees he could barely see shapes moving. The goblin nodded toward one of his lighter armored goblins. The creature nodded and seemed to disappear completely from sight. Minutes later, she returned and saluted, "Horse riders and wheeled tent."

Shayliss raised an eyebrow, "An escorted caravan? That does not seem out of the ordinary."

"They have no food." The rogue goblin replied, "Just a man in colorful cloth."

Shayliss's eyes rose to meet her eyebrow, "A noble? The Lord-Mayor?"

The goblin shrugged.

"Why would he be here? Did you not already help him?" Shayliss asked Bubnug.

"Yes." Bubnug responded, "But we did not talk with him. We left."

"He would not come here just to give you your reward. Not if everything I have heard about him are true."

"He here though."

Shayliss nodded, "At the worst time too." She looked back up at the mounted goblin, "I am going to head back to Sandpoint and let them know."

"I follow after getting team out."

The woman's face seemed to brighten at that, "Thank you."

With that, she turned around and ran back toward Sandpoint.

Chapter Fifty-Four: The Lord-Mayor

“Politicians have arrived. Bow before them or step out of the way.”

By the time Shayliss had returned to Sandpoint, the Lord-Mayor’s wagon was at the gate. The driver of the wagon was having a discussion with the guards while the driving horse stamped anxiously. It looked like it was an uncomfortable discussion too. The driver was worried and the guards held themselves in a way that screamed placation. Shayliss stopped far enough away so that she could listen in.

“I understand, sir!” The guard said, “But you must speak with the mayor first. And she is in a meeting. She personally requested not to be disturbed for the rest of the day.”

A voice from inside the wagon yelled out, “I do not care! It is not her I want to speak to! Why would it matter?”

“All visiting politicians must first meet with Mayor Deverin.” The second guard said, “It is her orders.”

“What don’t you get about the words ‘I don’t care?’ I am the Lord-Mayor! You will obey me!”

Now the guards were getting annoyed, “We obey Mayor Deverin first. If you are going to disturb the peace, then we will have to ask you to leave.”

Shayliss gasped in surprise. She never knew that the guards of Sandpoint would be willing to stand up to the Lord-Mayor of Magnimar. However, if the Lord-Mayor pushed, then they would both be in serious trouble. Even if they were just obeying orders. The Lord-Mayor loved to flaunt his power and was completely willing to send away capable guards for their mouths.

So, she needed to step in.

Shayliss walked up to the wagon and curtsied politely, “Hello, sir!”

Both the driver of the wagon and the two guards turned to blink at her. It was obvious they were not expecting her to blatantly walk up and speak to the Lord-Mayor of Magnimar. The tension between all of them vanished

“I am sure that the Heroes of Sandpoint would be glad to meet with you.” She spun on a heel and waved at the wagon, “Just follow me.”

“What do you think you are doing?”

The girl stopped and turned around to see the Lord-Mayor himself step down from his wagon. He was a large man in every sense of the word: Fat cheeks, fat body, fat limbs and fat ego. A tiny mustache curled up and tiny eyes were narrowed. Thin lips curved down in a frown. Clothes of elegant silk covered his large body and the man just reeked of arrogance.

"I'm sorry?" Shayliss asked.

"I asked 'What do you think you are doing'. So answer me."

She tilted her head, "I thought I was assisting you."

He stepped up until his belly was only inches away from her chest, "I don't need the assistance of a backwater peasant."

A smile that was no way genuine formed on her face, "Backwater peasant?"

"You heard me." The Lord-Mayor said, "Get out of my way."

That smile turned into a toothy grin, "You don't need my help. Yet, you were stopped by the city guards." Shayliss shook her head, "That line of logic is so very hypocritical. But I would not expect anything different from you."

The large man's face gradually reddened, "What did you say?"

She shrugged, "You heard me. Now, if you would like to see the Heroes, please follow me."

She could only get a couple of steps before a hand slammed down on her shoulder.

"I will not stand around while-"

The man was interrupted by Shayliss. Her body twisted around suddenly and her hand grasped his wrist in an iron bound grip. She then sharply broke the man's grip, pulled him forward, and pulled a curved dagger from under her dress. The blade pressed against the Lord-Mayor's neck yet did not draw blood.

Everyone in the immediate area froze in place. Not one muscle twitched.

"I will give you one chance." Shayliss growled, "Follow me and keep your mouth shut. Or I dig in."

"You would dare?" He stuttered.

“Damn right.” She whispered, “I have not had a good day. And I have a feeling that you are about to make it even worse than you already have. Don’t. Push. Me.” With each of her last three words, she twitched the dagger.

The Lord-Mayor gritted his teeth, “Fine. I will follow.”

She nodded and slid the dagger back into its sheath, “Good.”

With that, she spun on her heel again and walked to the Rusty Dragon Inn. The footsteps of the Lord-Mayor followed in her wake.

Chapter Fifty-Five: Message of Danger

“The end is getting close, Heroes.”

“Lord Mayor!” Lotho said with a hint of feigned surprise in his voice, “It is such a surprise to see you!”

Shayliss had led the large man into the Rusty Dragon, where Lotho and Alicia had been sitting. Dozens of tankards were at the other end of the table in mixed conditions of standing up, laying down, and a couple even managed to turn upside down. They were all empty and looked as if they had been discarded immediately after being emptied. In front of the two heroes were books and papers stacked high. The titles of the old books were all on varying subject matters and the covers were different colors. Yet, at a quick glance, they all seem to focused on Thassilonian history and customs.

Both the halfling and human looked as if they had not slept in days. Black bags layers deep hung from under their dull colored and bloodshot eyes. Their hair was in many kinds of messes and a coating of dirt covered their bodies completely.

“You dare meet with me under such filth?” The Lord-Mayor boomed.

Lotho stood up. He was not a tall man, even for his race, yet the look of annoyance he aimed at the Lord-Mayor of Magnimar could have melted steel, “May I remind you that you are the one that came to us for assistance uninvited. Not even a forward letter was sent our way. So sit down, deal with the situation you set up yourself, and let’s talk.”

“No.” The Lord-Mayor growled, “I will not sit so close to you. This whole bar stinks of your smell.”

He turned around to walk back out, but Shayliss stood at the door with arms crossed. As soon as the man came close to her, she bared the dagger up and at him again.

“I knew you would make my day worse,” she muttered. “Turn around and sit back down.”

Behind the Lord-Mayor, Shayliss could see that both Lotho and Alicia’s eyes widened but neither said anything.

“You peasants would dare threaten me?”

“Remember where you stand.” Shayliss lowered her voice, “You are an unofficial and uninvited guest in our home. You put yourself here saying you needed assistance from the Heroes. As a member of the nobility you should act as a noble should. Even if you were just a

'simple peasant' like us you should have the decency to respect those who you ask for a favor." She poked the dagger forward, "So. Sit. Down."

The skin of the man sharply reddened with rage. "Do not think I will forget this."

A bright white smile flashed. "I don't want you to."

Teeth ground together, but the man turned back around and sat down as far away from the two heroes as he could while still being 'polite.' Shayliss stepped toward Lotho and Alicia, who were staring at her.

"What is going on?" Lotho asked.

Shayliss made room for Ameiko to walk around as the bartender took the Lord-Mayor's order. From the expression on her face, Ameiko did not like the man. Yet her voice was calm and professional.

"He was at the North Gate," Shayliss whispered. "Apparently he wants to talk with you."

"About what?"

She shrugged, "No idea. But he did not want to introduce his arrival to Deverin."

"With him, that could mean anything," Lotho sighed. "Why were you threatening him with a dagger?"

"He would not listen to me otherwise." Her voice was unashamed.

"Just like Valtira." Lotho shook his head, "Well, let's at least see what he wants."

As the three of them sat themselves near the Lord-Mayor, who tried to pull away, the door opened again and Bubnug walked in. He saw the group immediately and started walking toward them. Ameiko, delivering the Lord-Mayor's drink, smiled and nodded at the tiny goblin. Lotho and Alicia both held neutral masks while Shayliss looked at him with hope. The Lord-Mayor had the largest reaction as he stared wide eyed and spat in disgust.

"Now you bring in a barbaric freak?" he yelled.

Shayliss leaned in. "May I remind you that this 'barbaric freak' controlled the goblin tribes in Varisia as well as assisted in the death of two people who threatened the destruction of the towns you are supposed to help protect?"

He glanced at her, then subsided by making a large pull from his mug. Bubnug approached the table and gave Shayliss an obvious nod. The tension in her body faded some at that nod. The search party was out there looking for Valtyra.

“Now that we are *all* here,” Lotho said, “why don't you tell us why you have come?”

With a reluctance nearly tangible, the man pulled from his mug again and set it down, “You have saved Magnimar. Which I am grateful for.” He pulled out a bag from one of his pockets and threw it down on the table.

It was a very hefty bag that jingled and clinked with the sound of a lot of coins. Just from the sound, it seemed like there was enough in the bag to buy a house near the size of a mansion.

“But this is not the only reason is it?” Lotho asked.

The Lord-Mayor shook his head. “Of course not. I need your help again.”

Now the man's hesitation seemed more significant than just his selfishness or hating the company around him. Lotho's eyes widened, “Wait. This is about Turtleback Ferry and Fort Rannick isn't it?”

Shayliss gasped. Is that where she went?

He nodded, “The ogre clan near the fort have finally beaten back the walls and taken it over. The Black Arrows have all died. The town of Turtleback Ferry is in danger.”

Chapter Fifty-Six: Turtleback

“Nothing is as it seems.”

Compared to Magnimar, Turtleback Ferry was peaceful. Men and women walked up and down the roads of the small town and conversations buzzed quietly. Water could be heard splashing against land as well as the bells of the ferry. It would have been a lovely place to live in. Yet, as the three heroes and Shayliss made their way through the crowds, they could feel some kind of dark and suffocating energy around the town. It was intangible, yet unmistakable. There was something walking among, or even in, the citizens of Turtleback.

At first, Shayliss thought that it was fear. She rationalized that with the ogres only a few miles outside of town many would be right to be afraid. But that was not it. People were talking and laughing. If the town was covered with fear then they would be rushing to get back into their homes. Silence would blanket the town and its people. However, everything looks normal. As if they did not even know that the ogres were near.

Then she got it. She understood what it was because she felt it herself, even if she did not know what it was at the time: the power of the Sihedron Rune. It was evident when she found her sister's corpse. The remnants of that power covered Valtyra whenever she returned from a quest. Whatever was going on here, it was not just simply ogres taking a fort. There was a force behind it all.

“You feel it too.” Lotho whispered.

Shayliss looked over at the halfling. He had not rested since the Lord-Mayor visited Sandpoint. Those bags were still under his eyes and seemed to get even worse. Now his eyes were completely red save for the irises and pupils. Yet, he seemed to be upright.

She narrowed her eyes in concern, “Yeah. It was at the mill.”

He nodded, “Some of the citizens have the mark on them.”

“They do?”

“Look around.”

She did and found that he was right. None of them were obvious, and some were even well hidden. Yet, the black ink's shape was unmistakable. It appeared on ankles, wrists, forearms and the backs of necks. As if it was a mark of a cult.

“Why would people willingly put that thing on their bodies?”

“Innocent.” He said, “Maybe it is a calling card. Maybe it is a mark of a group in the town. There is no telling. But they are unknowingly being used.”

“How?”

“It has to be Xanesha’s sister. She mentioned in her letter that she was using a method ‘more refined.’ Maybe tattooing them like this is part of her method.”

Shayliss tilted her head, “Method of what?”

“Extracting the greed.” Lotho simply said.

Shayliss nodded as if she understood. She had the feeling that she was going to get nothing else out of him, “Are we just heading for the Fort then?”

“Unless there is a detour.” He said pointedly. Shayliss got his point. He was not going to go on a manhunt for Valtira. No matter what.

She was going to reply when a sound made her turn her head. Behind her, a goblin was suddenly on Bubnug’s horse and whispering something in his ear. The Firelord listened intently and when the report was done the goblin suddenly vanished into the crowd. Shayliss did not even get to see the goblin dismount. One moment, it was on the horse, the next it was moving through the crowd.

Wow. Bubnug’s training was actually working.

“Fighting at fort.” He said, “As well as southeast of it. Both groups fighting ogres.”

Lotho gave Shayliss a meaningful glance, “Alright. We ride for the southeast group first. Lead the way.”

Bubnug nodded and kicked Strider into motion. Maneuvering around the innocent townsfolk, the riders headed out of town.

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Ogres

“These giant beasts are aggressive. It is unknown where they came from or why they attack settlements, but many who face them never return to tell the tale.”

Horse hooves pounded the slightly damp dirt as the four riders raced toward the east. Fort Rannick was to the east and slightly north of town so they were heading for the fighting at the southeast first. Once that problem was taken care of they would move to the fort. The sounds of combat met them before the sight of it. Metal thunked against wood, growls both human and monstrous mixed together in a horrible symphony and the thrum of bowstrings being plucked.

Without a word, Shayliss reached at her side and pulled off a bundle of rope. It looked like just simple rope except that if one focused in enough, they would see tiny lines of light wrapping around each strand. The lines shot up toward the other end of the rope which has been tied to the end of a grappling hook. From her other side she unsheathed an elegant and aesthetically well cut longsword.

With weapon and tool in hand, she started swinging the rope lasso style. As soon as the horses broke through a clearing, without worrying about seeing the battlefield, Shayliss let the grappling hook fly. It soared for a couple of seconds before latching onto a sturdy tree branch. There was no hesitation as the woman from Sandpoint swung off of her horse’s saddle and arced through the air.

Right at the chest of a giant.

It did not see her until it was too late. Her battlecry was something to rival the most seasoned of fighters. The weapon in her hand glinted under the sun’s rays before plunging into the ogre. The beast screamed in agony, but its hand raced up to grab at her. With a tug and a shove, Shayliss launched herself off of the ogre and arced back using that same branch as a focal point. However, the creature’s large fingernails managed to scrape against the woman’s arm.

Flinching at the pain, Shayliss slid along the ground, leaving two long tracks behind her. By then, the other three caught up with her and Lotho dismounted.

“What was that?” He asked.

“You think I just sat around Sandpoint waiting for you to return?” Shayliss answered with a small grin, “I was just getting ready for a moment like this.”

He gave her a suspicious glance, “We will talk about it after this fight.”

With that, he called forth the water still mixed with the soil as well as the trees. It came at his command, streams of liquid swirling and twirling in various helix formations. They all culminated at his hand before engulfing his whole body. Then, like a human water rocket, he blasted forward and slammed hard into the wound that Shayliss already made. The ogre staggered backward at that before then getting assaulted by three rounds of arrows. One came from Alicia behind Shayliss while the other two fired from the two men who were fighting the ogre before the four riders arrived. They seemed skeptical of the help but they did not argue it as they readied another volley of arrows.

Bubnug, his blade unsheathed and blazing, stepped up to Shayliss.

“What is the plan?” She asked him.

He, to Shayliss’s surprise, looked around them for a quick second, “Need to immobilize it. Then it can’t recover.”

The woman’s eyes widened, “Nice. I can get it down if you can keep its attention off of me.”

The goblin nodded.

Shayliss, detaching her grapple from the tree branch by the expediency of breaking the branch off, twirls it around before sending it flying toward the ogre’s leg. She had been aiming for its knee, but her throw was a bit off from the arm wound. Instead, the claws sank into the ogre’s shin. It roared in anger, but it was soon face-to-face with a fire-bird ready to fight.

Now that her hook was in place, Shayliss ran forward and started circling around the ogre. It was not fast, as she had to use her feet, but she managed to get one loop around her foe’s legs before the ogre did something about it. As Shayliss made her second round, it raised a fist and sent it crashing down right at her head. There was no chance for her to survive if it hit. However, Lotho saved her life by sending a shield of ice to deflect the fist. Instead of hitting her, it crashed right behind her sending quakes out from it. Shards of rocks cut her arms and neck up.

After two more attempts like that, Shayliss finally managed to get the rope around the ogre’s legs twice. That was the most she was able to do. By the end, she was hanging on to the very end of her rope.

“Make him fall!” She yelled.

She could not see what was happening above her as she had an ogre in her way. But there was a loud cry from the fire-bird and multiple thrums of bowstrings. The large beast cried out in pain and tried to right itself. There was no chance, though, as its own weight betrayed it.

Like a massive tree cut down, the ogre crashed toward the ground with a large earthquake. After that, it was quick work to kill the ogre. Blades lashed out, arrows sank and magic flashed. The ogre was dead in seconds.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: The Black Arrows

"It is black for a reason. When we are called in, the target will never see what hit them. We are the night. We are the shadows. We are Death."

Shayliss heard footsteps coming closer as she coiled her grappling hook back into its loop. There were stains on its claws but otherwise it was undamaged. Those enhancements she had the mage weave into the rope were working flawlessly. Not even a loose strand poked out of the braid.

"I demand to know who you three are. And why you have a goblin with you." Barked a very gruff male voice.

Calmly, still holding her loop, Shayliss looked up toward the speaker. He was a bulky man with a broad chest and wide limbs made of pure muscle. That muscle was covered with leather armor dyed as dark as the night. It was easy to imagine his dark tan hands breaking her bones without any issue and those images threatened to make her sweat. One brown eye was covered with an eyepatch which wrapped around his head with two strips of leather. On his back was a bow and in his hand pointed at her neck was a dirty and poorly cared for longsword.

Behind him, aiming an old battleaxe and hatchet at Bubnug, was a dark skinned man that had a nearly identical build. Chainmail poked out of leather straps as well as a massive green cloak. A black beard covered his chin but no hair was on his head. Even though he looked exhausted, he held an obviously confident battle stance that would take Bubnug's head off at one twitch.

Every bone in Shayliss's body wanted her to be defiant and snark off. Yet, this was obviously not the time to do so. These men were trained well. They knew what they were doing.

Then she noticed something flash on the chest of the eyepatched man in front of her. It was a metal emblem. A very familiar one at that.

"You are of the Black Arrows." Shayliss gasps.

"That obvious, girl?" The man replied, "You are an observant one."

She gritted her teeth, "We are here looking for-"

"You." Lotho interjected, "The Lord-Mayor of Magnimar sent us to figure out what happened out here."

Pure fury rose in Shayliss but the eyepatched man turned to face Lotho, "What happened?" His tone was a snarl, "Ogres happened, that's what." He turned back to Shayliss, "But that does not answer my goddamned question."

The urge to make sarcastic comments returned in a fierce wave, but Shayliss decided to try once more at diplomacy, "Three of us are Heroes of Sandpoint. The fourth is a citizen of Sandpoint."

The man's eyebrows rose, "The Heroes?" He turned to look at the three heroes, "I had heard some strange rumors about a goblin among humankind. I thought it was all an elaborate farce."

Bubnug's inhuman mouth suddenly curled up, "No. Look up."

Both of the men looked at each other then glanced up swiftly at the trees. Shayliss followed suit and her mouth nearly hit the ground.

Goblins. Dozens of goblins, all wearing the seal of the Firelord, pointed nocked bows downward from their perches. At an instant, they could have pincushioned both men. Some even pointed off near the edge of the clearing and it took Shayliss a few seconds to realize that they were aiming at a third man who had snuck into the treeline.

All three men, including the one at the treeline, froze in place. The thoughts Shayliss just had quickly race across their eyes and the sudden tension was palpable. Muscles flexed from both sides and clinks of metal sounded. Shayliss could even feel the water under her feet start to move.

"Before we all try to kill each other," Shayliss rushed to say, "I would like to add that we are trying to help you reclaim the fort."

All eyes turned on her in an instant.

"You think we want the help of a band of goblins and those who seem to conspire with them?" The eyepatched man asked.

"You do if you want that fort back." Shayliss replies with a small smile, "We have a lot more than just who is here. Not only that, but I know that one ally of ours is already in there fighting."

A skeptical eyebrow crawled up, "Oh?"

Shayliss nodded, "Yes. I know she is because she was one of you."

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Fort Rannick

"The fort may be broken, but it still stands. We just have to take it back."

The fort had been severely damaged in the ogre's attack on it. A gigantic hole was smashed in the south wall, debris piled all over the area ignored for about a month. The towers were unoccupied and various walls of the multi-story fort itself were bashed in. Shadows crossed through these walls, shown by the candles and torches lighting the rooms. But the worst of what could be seen was in the courtyard.

Clear as day, half a dozen ogres roamed the large courtyard. They all had some kind of mutation to them. A couple had an extra arm, one had abnormally small feet and the last had a gigantic head even for an ogre. They all also had some sort of improvised weapon fit for their large size consisting of metal poles, fort foundations and large stone slabs.

However, they were all on alert. Shayliss had half-expected them to just be standing around but the corpses littering the ground changed that. Did Valtyra really kill three ogres in the courtyard all on her own? What was going on inside?

Bubnug stepped up to Shayliss as she crouched at the peak of hill, "Goblins ready."

Shayliss turned to him. The tiny creature's eyes held a small fire behind them and were all focused on the corpses. His fist continuously tightened and loosened on the handle of his sword cane. It was obvious that he was worried about Valtyra but he was trying to keep himself controlled in front of his troops. It was so strange to call them 'troops.'

"Good." She nodded, "You remember the plan?"

"Goblins fight in the yard. Defend it. You enter fort and find Missus."

"I hope you don't mind," Shayliss frowned.

His eyes narrowed and she could see that fire blaze more, but he just gritted his teeth, "I will get into position."

With that he left. Shayliss did not have time to worry about him before the Black Arrow leader walked up to her. He held his bow in hand and newly carved arrows poked out of his quiver. While it was hard to tell, it looked like he was annoyed. In the hour they have traveled together, though, that seemed to be his neutral face.

"When are we going to attack?" He asked with a growl.

She returned his gaze with her own, "When we are ready. Have you never learned to be patient?"

A snarl exited his gritted teeth, "You are lucky that we have the same goal."

Shayliss stood up, "Not even close. Also, we have numbers."

He stepped up to her and looked down upon her with a hateful expression, "You think that you can just waltz in here and-"

He was interrupted by a sudden light from behind Shayliss. She turned around to find the opening volley of flaming arrows arc up into the air to come right back down into the courtyard. Most sank into the dirt without doing much and a couple slammed into ogres. However, the rest landed well enough to set the grass of the courtyard on fire. It blazed fast, orange fire spreading without restraint.

The ogres started moving immediately. Instead of throwing dirt or finding water they started stomping down. Their skin was too thick to immediately catch fire, but they reacted the same. Ogre screams boomed across the sky and nearly blasted Shayliss's ears. While covering her ears, she said to the Black Arrow, "There, you happy?"

In answer, he pulls an arrow out of his quiver and nocked it, "Very."

Chapter Sixty: Gate

"They must not pass!"

The courtyard smelled worse than it looked. Burning orge met with various other smells to create a wall of odor that Shayliss only thought possible in barn fires. While Sandpoint was not quite farmland, she had lived near the stables long enough to get an idea of what that kind of situation would smell like.

So, she was not reacting as badly as Lotho and Alicia while the group of six rushed across the field of battle. The Black Arrow archer and Alicia moved in tandem to make sure no ogre decided to break from the main fight while the rest surrounded them. Fires burned, blood flowed and cries of pain from both the ogres and goblins rose up from all around them.

It was something that Shayliss had not experienced before as a simple peasant. Yet, she was surprised, and a little worried, to find that there was a thrill and excitement to the battle. Was that the kind of thing that Valtira felt all the time?

She shook her head. Valtira's tendency to ramble thoughts was starting to get to her.

"Get that door open!" The Black Arrow archer yelled.

Lotho and the Black Arrow axe-wielder immediately moved toward the front gate of the fort. It was made of intercrossing wooden planks reinforced with steel and barely visible at the top were fastenings with chain links attached. At each side of the gate were wooden crank wheels directly attached to the stone wall. The halfling moved to the left and the human moved to the right. Without a second's hesitation they started rotating the wheels simultaneously. With a loud creak and scrape the gate started to slowly slide up.

The ground behind them shook and rumbled. Shayliss turned around to see two ogres, mostly burned and completely angry running toward her. They were screaming incoherently and held massive weapons in hand. Within seconds they were on top of the group.

Shayliss pulled her grappling hook off of its latch and threw it forward without aiming. The metal sailed through the air and sank shallowly into skin. The ogre did not have to do much except twitch to remove the hook which did not impede its advance at all. However the barrage of arrows that descended upon both of them was not something so easily dealt with.

Arrows sank into blackened skin. Howls of agony rose into the sky and the rumbling motion of that ogre slowed considerably. Yet, that did not stop the second ogre from advancing like a runaway wagon.

With a massive yell it raised its plank of wood about as wide as Shayliss's head to come right back down in a diagonal swing. It was aimed at Alicia and the woman had no chance of avoiding it. The speed of the attack was too fast and she was still focused on the first ogre. She had not seen the attack coming.

Shayliss twirled her grappling hook in two quick circles before flinging it at the attacker. She could not tell if the creature had seen her attack coming or was just lucky, but the hook flew wide of its neck, where she had aimed it. Instead, it fell back down and wrapped itself around the wooden plank as it arched downward. Without hesitating, she let out a yell and pulled as hard as possible.

She was not a strong person. She was not even as strong as Valtira and it consistently showed in her training and in the last few days. Normally, there would have been no way for her to match an ogre one-on-one and win. They were just too large. But thankfully, this time physics were on her side. Her pull against the wooden plank redirected the attack away from Alicia. Not enough that the woman got away completely, she took a glancing blow to her arm, but it reduced the attack from a fatal flattening.

Wood slammed into stone foundation and splintered with a loud crack. Shards of wood flew out in every direction, some the size of fingers, and threatened to skewer whatever got in their way. Two grazed Shayliss's limbs and a third pierced the left side of her belly, through the armored coat. Yet, she only retracted the hook and prepared to throw again. She fought through the pain as the ogre with a smaller wooden plank turned toward her.

It let out a booming roar and leapt at her arms and legs outstretched. Shayliss's eyes widened as she realized what the creature was trying to do. There was nowhere for her to run in time and there was not much room to dodge. Her gaze frantically darted around to find her salvation. Only seconds stood between her and getting pancaked against the stone. If she did not find it she would be...

She found it.

With a cry of fear, she threw her hook straight upward. The shard in her body cut deeper but she gritted her teeth against the pain. The metal prongs of the hook wrapped around her target and set fast. As it did, she ran as fast as she could forward and jumped. The rope pulled taut and her momentum moved from forward motion to upward motion.

The ogre's body barely missed hers as she was flung into the air. But the ogres were smarter than she thought. She was only in the air for a second before a blackened hand reached up and pulled the empty torch scone the grappling hook was attached to down. Rope slackened again and Shayliss started falling to the stone. Her movement carried her toward the ogre as she fell and so with a quick thrust Shayliss sank her blade into flesh.

She continued to fall for a second, but the blade halted her momentum to a stop with her feet about a foot from the ground. Before she could drop the ogre, in a pained panic, flung his limb. The force of it caught Shayliss by surprise and she crashed hard against the wood and steel of the gate.

The world instantly went white. Pain enveloped her and the silence of her condition was a vast contrast to the raging battle happening around her. She tried to send signals to her body to get up, to roll, to do anything. But she felt none of it happening. She was not even sure if her body was responding. It was just white and emptiness around her.

Slowly, senses started returning to her. She first felt hands grabbing at her. Fearing the worst, she flailed trying to get them away. Again, she was not sure if anything was happening. Stone under her moved and her mind went into a panic. Was the world changing around her? Was she about to fall into nothingness?

“...th... gat...” Someone muttered.

The stone under her moved faster and the hands on her tightened. In her fear she continued to try and struggle but it was futile. Now she was almost certain that all she was doing was twitching. Her sight was slowly returning and she could see a roof above her. It was moving as well and she could see the gate open and drifting away. So, it was her that was moving, not the world.

Using that as a focal point, she started piecing the fragments of her thoughts back together. The sounds of combat returned in a flood and she could start smelling the aftermath of it. The pain that had infused her whole body was separating back out into the individual injuries with the addition of a migraine.

“Get that damn gate closed already!”

Shayliss looked up from her position on the floor to see Alicia and the Black Arrow archer holding the ogres off with arrow after arrow. Yet, the creatures continued to push forward. They were staggered by the arrows but not enough to make too much of a difference. Even if Lotho started working the wheels on this side of the gate now, he would not be able to get the gate down before the ogres got in.

Lotho seemed to have planned for that, though. Shayliss could feel the water in the air around her congeal and she watched it form into two razor sharp blades of ice. With a cry he waved his hand and those blades launched forward in two blurs. Metal shrieked and parted. The gate rattled in reaction to the force before it slammed home into its fittings.

Chapter Sixty-One: War Room

“Where else would a war take place?”

As soon as the gate was shut, Lotho was kneeling over Shayliss’s face. His expression was neutral, emotionless, as he looked over her body. Those eyes saw more than it seemed and she could practically see his mind writing down notes.

“Minor wounds.” He muttered, “No obvious breaks.” Even though he was looking at her legs he reached an arm out and quickly snapped his fingers twice. The sound of it was deafening and she wanted to curl into a ball. She even thought she had, but the man continued to mutter, “Little responsiveness. Maybe some head damage.”

“Is it good to do this right now?” Someone asked from the direction of Shayliss’s head, “We need to get away from the gate.”

“We have already moved her too much.” Lotho said in the same tone of voice, “If we kept going, then we could do serious damage. One’d think you knew that as a Black Arrow.”

The earth shook in a rhythmic pattern and a giant’s voice roared, “You dare insult me?”

“Can’t you just play along?” Those words were nearly impossible to get out, but the urge to say something was too strong for Shayliss to ignore. Granted, the words did not bite as hard as she would have liked with a weak voice, but the meaning got across.

“You are just lucky we have the same goal and are of use.”

“So kind.” That was better.

Lotho shook his head, “There is not a good source of water in here. I cannot do enough to completely get rid of the pain.” He reached into his pouch and pulled out a waterskin, “I can only dull it.”

Shayliss gritted her teeth, “Good enough.”

She could not see exactly what the halfling did, but she could feel the refreshing water enter her body. It coursed up from her legs and she could feel her strained muscles relax and her head start to clear. But the relief was very short. It only lasted seconds before it went away. Yet, it was enough for her to get the will to rise. She sat up slowly and shook her head.

“Good enough to fight?” Lotho asked.

She nodded, “Good enough.”

“We need to move” The ranger growled. Without another word, he turned on a heel and walked down the walkway. With hesitation and complaint, Shayliss followed suit.

The inside of the fort was a vast contrast to the outside. Very little moved and the only sound that could be heard was from outside. There were no ogres that could be seen except for the massive amounts of corpses that littered the halls and rooms.

“Gods.” Shayliss muttered, “Did Valtira really do all of this?”

It was hard enough for the group of them to kill one ogre, and they barely survived an encounter with two. Here, though, they were seeing dozens upon dozens of corpses. All of them had long cuts along their flesh and holes that exposed parts of the body that should not be exposed. While it was hard to believe it, only a relatively small but sharp weapon could have made all of those wounds.

“She’d have to be a divine being to do this much damage on her own.” Lotho responded, “Especially in such short time.”

“How?”

“I do not know.” Lotho shrugged, “She has been training to control her anger. But there is now way it could have done all of this.”

“Shh.” The ranger whispered, “We are getting close.”

Shayliss blinked, “How do you know?”

“There is only one room that they pushed for when they attacked last: The War Room.”

“Why there?” Lotho asked, “What importance would a war room have to a group of ogres?”

The man just shrugged. An uneasy feeling sank into Shayliss’s stomach. There was something here that she was missing. Bust she could not place a finger on it. If Valtira was still here, like she was assuming, then why had they not had contact with her? Why would ogres have a need for a fort. Once they destroyed it, they should have moved toward Turtleback as their next stop.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a flash of pain and a raised fist from the ranger. Everyone stopped and Shayliss noticed that they were outside of a large set of double doors. Before they could get ready, though, the doors opened.

“Come in.” The voice that came from inside of the war room was melodic, soft and sensual. It was a voice who knew how to manipulate.

Beyond the door was a group of ten ogres standing on either side of the massive room. They all had improvised weapons aimed at the group and it looked like they were ready to fight. Their bodies made a clear line of sight to the other side of the room where two people were. One sat in a large chair, head on hand leaning against the arm of the chair. Her face had a great smile on it and her eyes were narrowed in pleasure. Hanging on the first's lap was a very familiar form.

It was Valtyra.

Chapter Sixty-Two: Confusion

"You thought you knew her. Do you really?"

Confusion filled the air as everyone seemed to stare at everyone else in the room. All of the ogres held various misshapen forms of grins, growls and snarls. The woman at the makeshift throne had a white-toothed smile and her long elf ears twitched in amusement watching over the newcomers. The heroes, except for Shayliss, readied their own weapons and watched the movements of the ogres. Shayliss stared directly at Valtira, confusion clear on her face. Valtira, did not look back. In fact, it seemed like she did not notice anything about the room at all. Her face was contemplative and smiling. Like a cat on the lap of a favorite owner.

"Look what we have here, my pet." The woman purred, patting Valtira's head, "Guests. Very esteemed guests too." Her smile widened even more, "And I did not even need to find them. They came here like moths to the flame."

Shayliss snapped out of her confusion to growl, "What did you do to her?"

That smile curled down into a playful frown, "What? Who said I did anything to her?" That hand scratched at Valtira's head and all the half-elf did was get more comfortable on that lap, "She is just like all of the others in that town. Willing to cave into her desires."

Shayliss snarled, "What?"

The woman shrugged, "It is obvious what she wanted. In this way, I gave it to her." She looked down at the lazing Valtira, "No longer feeling anger, no longer holding onto a past she could not change, no longer needing to fight. Can you not see how happy she is?"

Valtira was indeed happy, stretching languidly on the woman's leg. It would have been a rather adorable sight if it was not for the woman or the ogres or the blood that was splattered everywhere in the fort. Those thoughts brought even more on and Shayliss had to focus on the woman in order not to blush.

The woman laughed, "You see it now. So why not just walk away?"

"Because we are not here for her." Lotho said before Shayliss could answer.

The woman's attention turned toward the halfling and her head tilted to the side, "Oh?"

The blade in his hand was pointed at one of the ogres to the left, "No. We are taking back the fort. Surrender now."

That laugh returned, louder than previously, “Oh. Oh that is great! I saw the battle at the gate. You think I am afraid of you? I doubt you would even get a couple of steps into the room before-”

She was interrupted by a grappling hook crashing into the stone of the ceiling letting loose chunks of grey. Before anyone could react, Shayliss was sailing through the air toward her with blade ready to cut downward. At the peak of her momentum, Shayliss pulled the grappling hook so she moved straight at the woman.

A flash of steel was the only warning she got. Shayliss pulled her blade down into a guard just in time to block two rapiers. Her forward progress was halted completely and she barely landed on both feet. On instinct, she then swung the grappling hook around, hoping to smack the woman with it. Yet, one of those rapiers swiped downward and sliced at the rope. Because of its enhancement, the rope did not slice in two, but it was taken off of its course and pinked harmlessly off of the chair’s arm.

“Thank you, my pet.” The woman purred. “Kill them all. I have no need for those unwilling to compromise.”

Chapter Sixty-Three: Fight

“Couples fight all of the time. It is a part of being in a relationship. Just never grab the blade and it’ll work out.”

There was barely any time for reaction.

Behind her, Shayliss heard inhuman growls and massive thuds. The ogres must have immediately started attacking the group by the door with their weapons. Since those noises were not followed up by screams of pain or sickening squishes, she had to assume that the others managed to avoid sudden death.

Yet, she did not have the attention to spare to find out.

Valtyra, her eyes glazed over, her face a mask of blankness, moved.

Metal screeched and sparked as both rapiers were thrown to the side. The motion stunned Shayliss for a split second as her strength sent her aiming toward the ground. She recovered fast enough to sidestep from a double downward arc. Both rapiers then curved diagonally toward Shayliss and it was so swift that she barely had the time to parry them away. The assault of metal continued with a horizontal swipe from one blade then a thrust from the second, both attacks again dodged and parried by a hair’s breath.

“Come on Val!” Shayliss hissed as metal grazed her shoulder, “I know you don’t want to do this!”

There was no answer. Metal flashed yet again and Shayliss could feel some of her red hair fall onto bare skin. Another attack came and only the metal plates weaved inside of her armor prevented her side from being sliced open. The ground shook and an order was shouted from the door, but Shayliss ignored it.

“Can’t you remember the times we had?” She pleaded, “The secrets you told me? The ones I told you?”

There! It was faint, but there was a small light in Valtira’s eye. As soon as it appeared, it died back down. Yet, it was a shot of pure hope in Shayliss’s system. If she could keep this up, maybe she could get through to her! The world quaked again and this time was accompanied by a giant’s roar of pain. More orders and splattering of liquid.

Valtyra growled. Her body twisted at the hip and the rapiers came down in a whirlwind of motion. Now, Shayliss’s shameless spying of Valtira’s training sessions paid off. Fighting the rush of emotions those memories invoked in the young girl, she raised her blade to clash against the first rapier. Somehow not missing a beat, she spun her weapon down to block the

next. Instead of raising the blade again, like one might expect, she lowered it even further and felt the jolt of connection with the first rapier's second spin. She kept it up throughout the whirlwind, flashes briefly lighting the immediate area. Shayliss thought that her arm would fall off from each impact yet she held on.

When the attack ended, Valtira stumbled a bit. She had never been able to finish it and land steadily. Shayliss took advantage of that. Grimacing in worry, she lunged forward with her longsword. It was not meant to be a fatal stroke, even though she could have made it so. Instead, it was meant to be something that Valtira should block out of instinct. That way Shayliss could hold her in place to talk more.

It worked for a split second, but Valtira followed the block with a hard shove that sent Shayliss to her back. Armored back met rug covered stone and she let out a gasp of air. She did not have time to recover, though, as metal points threatened to enter her skull. Her head rolled to the side and Shayliss braced her body. As soon as she heard metal hit stone, she pulled her leg back and kicked outward. Boot met flesh and the half-elf was sent flying backward.

"Remember those nightmares?" Shayliss asked as she slowly rose to her feet, "Remember those nights that you could not sleep?"

Almost mirroring her, Valtira was getting to her feet as well. Yet, it was not the quick motion of someone in the middle of combat. It was slow and thoughtful.

"Remember when you told me that you could not get rid of them until you returned here?" Shayliss was standing now and held her blade out in a cautious guard, "And I told you that I would stand by you no matter what?"

Shayliss was ready for another charge. She even expected it to happen. Yet, when Valtira got to her feet again, she did not immediately attack. Instead she just stood there, holding her rapiers in a cautious guard as well. It was working.

"Why do you think I am here now?" Shayliss asked, "Why do you think I worked hard to train myself?" She motioned toward her grappling hook, "I even taught myself how to use a grappling hook like the mercenaries of the Stolen Lands favor. Because I wanted to help you!"

Something was happening behind those beautiful worn eyes. They shifted left, right, up and down like a crazed woman. Thoughts were practically visible flowing throughout her mind. Hope coursed through Shayliss's body. She was finally starting to get through.

"Do not listen to her."

Shayliss shot her gaze toward the woman sitting at the 'throne.' The woman's hand was raised toward Valtira and a soft glow surrounded it.

“Do not believe her lies. She never loved you. Just used you to get at her father.”

Shayliss ground her teeth in anger. Without another thought, she launched herself at the woman. The woman did not attempt to stop Shayliss and Shayliss thought that she had gotten her. Yet, metal crashed again and Valtyra stood in her way again. This time, though, her eyes were not as glazed over. Her face was confused, not sure of what to think.

The ground shook again, but this time it was farther away. As if the impact was in the hallway. Yet, it did not deter either of the combatants still in the room.

“I know you are listening to me.” Shayliss whispered, “I know you believe me. I can help you remember. Help you past the confusion. Just help me kill her.” She nodded toward the woman, who was now smiling at the clashing pair.

For a second, there was nothing but struggling against metal. Then, the glaze returned completely. Valtyra, with a growl, shoved against Shayliss harder than ever.

Chapter Sixty-Four: Touch

"I had longed for it. But it came too late."

Shayliss was shoved until her back met with a bookshelf. There she struggled against the newly angered Valtyra. The sounds of combat flowed from outside the hall, possibly all of the way from the courtyard, but they were so soft that Shayliss did not notice them. The battle with the ogres must have moved outside.

"Val!" Shayliss said, "Don't let that woman tear us apart! We have been through too much!"

The half-elf snarled in answer. Rapiers twisted and thrust toward Shayliss's eyes. In her position, Shayliss could not do much about it. Ducking her head would threaten to send her to the ground again with a simple tug and trip. Dodging to either side would only send one blade through her brain instead of both. Quick reaction saved her by twisting her own blade. That motion sent both rapiers in different trajectories that only grazed her head. One line cut her cheek and up past her temple. The other went down under her ear and nearly nicked the jugular.

"What about Katrine?" Shayliss asked, her voice carefully neutral. It was the only way to not break down at the bloody memory, "It was that snake who had her killed!" She briefly looked at the woman, "And I am sure that this woman is involved! Maybe even the snake's sister!"

That caused Valtyra to hesitate. While the red-haired girl was talking, she had been trying to shift the rapiers closer to vital arteries. However, the mention of Katrine and the snake Xanesha seemed to bring a studder to the half-elf's thoughts. Even though the memories pained her, Shayliss did not hesitate to continue.

"Remember? Remember what you told me then?"

There was an internal struggle within the half-elf. Her eyes shifted back and forth again. Her breath came out in short gasps. Water started forming in her eyelids. Yet, she spoke, obviously wanting to speak while fighting something that wanted her to stay silent.

"To. Let. Go."

A small smile curled up Shayliss's face, "Yes. Because I would become someone who could not learn from the past. Who would always fear the future."

Anger touched Valtyra's expression again and she redoubled on the effort to cut into Shayliss. Her back slammed into the stone again and her breath exhaled in an explosive puff. It was hard for Shayliss to hold back the blades and the occasional rumble from outside did not

help at all. Red blood already flowed from her wounds and she could feel the skin ripping open even more.

“Someone like me.” The half-elf growled.

Shayliss very slowly shook her head and shifted her grip on the longsword, “No! This is your chance to become someone else! You can get through this.”

The pressure on her arms redoubled again and she could not stop the metal from cutting even more. Another half an inch and she would have a sliced artery. The grip on her weapon shifted again.

“You lie!” Valtira yelled and the sheer power of the sentence seemed to resonate in the stone, “I do not need your lies!”

Just a little bit more.

Shayliss’s voice softened in the same degree that the half-elf’s rose, “No. I don’t. I would never lie to you.” The tears flowed freely just as the blood did. She could feel them mixing together as they traveled further down her skin, “I love you too much for that.”

There!

A hand raised up to gently touch Valtira’s cheek. Her skin was warm, near feverish, hot with anger and with something else. Sickness? Could whatever the woman be doing to her make her more susceptible to illness? Yet it was also soft, just as she remembered it. Not travel nor dirt seemed to ruin that. Or maybe it was just her. It was a while since she was able to feel that again. Something she daydreamed about for months.

Valtira completely froze. As if the touch shut down her thoughts. Her mouth hung slightly open and her eyes widened in surprise. The rapiers, held by loose fingers, fell from Shayliss’s neck. The fight and fire within the half-elf faded away into nothingness. Shayliss could feel it in the relaxing muscles of her neck. With it, the confusion in her eyes cleared. Once it did completely, Valtira’s knees nearly buckled. Shayliss dropped her weapon to catch her, but Valtira held her back and steadied herself.

She then looked around, the expression of wonder clear on her face. That gaze then landed on the wounds on either side of Shayliss’s face. Valtira froze again when she saw that.

“Don’t worry about it.” Shayliss whispered, “I am fine.”

The half-elf then looked down at her bloodstained blades and nearly dropped them in shock, “What? What did I...”

Shayliss took a step forward, "Val, I am fine! You are fine!"

Valtyra stepped back and held her hands up, "Don't!"

Shayliss took another step instead, holding her empty hands up, "Val. Please. Don't do this. We can-"

She was interrupted by the other woman suddenly turning and charging out of the room and into the hall. It took Shayliss a second to react and run after the woman.

"Wait! Val!"

It was too late. Valtira had leapt out of the window and slid down the stone wall of the fort. She landed in a roll and rushed out of the courtyard. Bubnug saw this and tried to stop the half-elf, yet he could not in time. Valtira was gone. Fled into the woods.

Shayliss spun back around toward the room, hoping to be able to kill the thing that had ruined Valtira. But she too, was gone. The room was empty.

Gone.

Epilogue

“That was the last time I saw her.”

The fire crackled and popped under the moonlit air. Its light played over the trees and bush that surrounded the clearing the five of them sat under. Shadows danced along their faces and glinted against the eyes of the four who listened with various forms of attention. The fifth did not turn her gaze from the fire, anxiety, nervousness and a multitude of other emotions preventing her from looking at the others.

Her voice was soft, uncertain as she continued, “I had heard rumors of a woman of her description moving north toward Mendev. There were stories as well, but I was not sure which to believe. My hope is that I can find her in Kenebres and talk to her.” She shrugged, “That’s it. That’s why I am here.”

The others sat in silence for a minute, taking in what the fifth had said. The only sound to be heard was the rustling of leaves in the slight breeze and the continual pops of the fire. Finally, one of them spoke up.

“Are you sure that she was spotted moving north?”

The woman who spoke up was of a race Shayliss never knew existed before. Her skin was dark red, like blood which dried up under the sun. That skin was smooth like a human’s until it reached her limbs. There, scales like a dragon’s formed uneven patterns that covered her hands and bare feet. Fingers and toes ended in long, sharp claws that looked as if they could cut paper or steel in similar fashions. What was more interesting than that, or the fact that she chose to wear almost nothing except hide that covered the necessities, was the fact that she was blind. She wore a blindfold made of animal hide and lines of scars could be seen poking out of them. Other than that and the jagged horns poking out of her head, she looked like a human with a sharp jawline and an upturned nose. Two features that were contrasting but also seemed to fit her well.

The fifth shook her head, “No, Moridra. But I have been searching for two years for her and this is the first and only lead I have. I am going to follow it up and find my answers.” She shrugged, “Maybe she wanted to attend Armasse?”

A soft snort came from one of the other forms around the fire. It was an animal, a white wolf to be precise. The beautifully maintained fur that covered its body ruffled slightly as it shifted its head in semi-sleep. If its eyes were open, they would show blue orbs that pierced through the fifth person’s mind and seemed to read what she was thinking. Of course, the beast could not do so, but she kept weary around it anyway.

Next to the beast was its owner. She was taking burrs and splinters out of her longbow with a swordbreaker dagger. The blade smoothed the wood of the bow without issue and the occasional fleck of it fell onto the grass. Her armor was made of leather with bits of chainmail at the most vulnerable places of her body. On her back was a green hooded cloak which shifted under the breeze with a quiver full of handmade arrows underneath. The black and green feathers poked out from underneath the cloak.

As if responding to the wolf, she snorted as well, "I agree, Blueeye."

The fifth person did not turn to look at the pair but asked, "What?"

A smile formed on the woman's face and she said, "That is no way to track prey. You will only find disappointment at the end of the hunt."

Before the anger could settle in the fifth, a hand of pure night touched the huntress's shoulder, "Kaira, please."

Kaira looked up the arm to the face of its owner: a woman of midnight black skin, silver ponytail and bright white wings made of bird feathers. Her red eyes showed rebuke but kindness and under that gaze Kaira fell silent. The woman's armor was of fine plate and chain. Despite the long travel from Numeria, it did not have a speck of dirt nor hint of rust. Not even a scratch showed in it. Attached to a weapons belt at her chest was a holy symbol, the symbol of Iomedae: a longsword pointed downward surrounded by a sunburst. On the other side of that weapons belt was a longsword bearing the same symbol and a tower shield of metal.

"It is obvious this pains her." The woman whispered, "Your words do not help heal her."

The fifth only nodded and muttered, "Thank you, Strune."

The last person at the fire other than the fifth remained silent. Like the fifth, he looked as if he felt awkward around the group but maybe not for the same reasons. His green skin betrayed him as a half-orc, the bastard children of Golarion. He wore only a simple robe of cloth, metal spiked gauntlets and a necklace of white and black beads. No weapon was strapped to him nor did he have a spellbook on him. He did not even have a backpack of supplies except for food. The only thing exceptional about him was the mark on his exposed shoulder: multiple vortexes spiralling toward a central point, as well as the multitude of scars on his exposed limbs the worst being tiny dots outlining his mouth. His name was Snaga, a name not possibly given to him.

As the fifth stared at him from the corner of her eye, she could see those painfully pierced lips moving with the softest motions possible. As if he did not want the others around the fire to know he was muttering to himself. However, the fifth knew what he was doing. The half-orc was a summoner, a mage who could summon a special creature from the other planes

called an eidolon. Snaga was even more special, though, as he could fuse directly with the eidolon, gaining its abilities. At that point, they were essentially one being.

Unease grew in the fifth and she rose to her feet. Muscles strained and bones snapped, "I need to walk a bit."

"Just be careful, dear." Strune said.

The fifth did not make any acknowledgement of the statement. At the sight of her movement, her horse lifted its head from its content grazing. The fifth shook her head at the mare and muttered, "No, Shadowshine."

The black horse gave her a look as if it was trying to tell her that it did not care for her before continuing its grazing. The fifth moved in and out of the many trees until she arrived at the surface of a river. She stepped into it, without care for the soak racing up her leather tights or the metal plates of her armored coat. Her gaze locked onto her reflection, which was just starting to form together again after the ripples broke it apart. The expression on her face was a mix of many things: fear, anxiety, longing, pain and loneliness. Her eyes moved immediately to the two scars on either side of her head.

"I will find you, Valtira." She whispered to the reflection. Her fingers rubbed at the ring on her finger, a ring of sapphire, gold and etchings, "I will find you." Her hand moved to her chest, partially uncovered by the buttons of the shirt she wore. She pulled back the shirt more to reveal the top of a seared on brand. It burned eternally, seeming to not give the red haired woman rest. Even though it has been a year since she got it, she is always reminded of its presence by the pain and nightmares it created.

"Before it is too late."

Shayliss Vinder dove her head into the river to clear her mind before turning on a heel and returning to camp.