

# Heart



of

# The Forge

## Prologue

When the ancestors of the free nations walked the lands of Krynn in the bloom of their youth even then it had been so long since the Dark Queen had led her armies across the face of the world it was considered to be no more than myth and legend. Bedtime stories best told to children for only a child would be so gullible as to believe them. Time weakens the will of the sentry to maintain their vigil. Thews soften and shrivel under the weight of fine wine and ready feasts. The forces of the light have grown soft. Prone to infighting amongst themselves and outright distrust and hostility of their neighbours as alliances of convenience are formed along racial lines. Human, Elf, Dwarf and even Kender all look inwards to their own interests in preserving and expanding their territories and power.

As day passes into night, the forces of darkness and light have taken turns in holding dominion over the mortal realm. While the pantheon of the Gods has remained content to watch from the heavens Takhisis alone has continued to interfere in the affairs of mortals. Whispering promises of power to those she wishes to draw into her service, luring them into temptation mere playful sport for the divine being who commands the chromatic dragons. Far in the north east the forces of the Dark Queen have been quietly marshalling their resources and forming alliances, pacts signed with a knife pressed to the throat of any who might refuse to comply. Gathering their strength while bending new and terrible magics to their will to birth creatures with no equal in history. Her burning desire to possess a world that has against all odds alluded her grasp and defied her forces since time immemorial has left her a twisted and bitter being.

Like a child who refuses to acknowledge when something is wrong, the courts and noble houses have kept their fingers pressed firmly in their ears. What reports that have managed to filter back from the East are brushed off as mere rumours and outright fabrications. War would mean the putting aside of pleasurable pursuits and dusting off arms and armour long relegated to ceremonial service. The world is only beginning to wake up as travellers never return from their destinations and villagers disappear from fields and farmlands. Doors long left open are barred before nightfall. In the coming conflict press-ganged peasants and stoic soldiers alike will bear the terrible brunt of the battlefield where honourable combat only exists in the minds of those that have not seen the slaughter of close combat as hand weapons hack off limbs with all the grace of a blind butcher. The storm is rising. Black clouds have formed on the horizon and the very fate of the world once again hangs in the balance.

Sharpen your swords,  
or pray if you'd rather.  
Kiss them goodbye,  
your mother and father.

There's smoke on the wind,  
the innocent dying.  
Bereft of their mothers,  
the babies are crying.

Fear we all know it,  
however noble of birth.  
Flashing of steel,  
can return to the earth.

The glory imagined,  
no where to be found.  
The crimson is splashing,  
returned to the ground.

My bones lay forgotten,  
none sing of my deeds.  
my remains are now nothing,  
but food for the weeds.

## Chapter 1

Ping!...Ping!...Ping!

Showers of hot sparks erupted from the white hot glowing brick of metal, shooting outwards as they burned brilliantly for a moment before falling away as rapidly cooling specs of dark grey dust.

Ping!...Ping!...Ping!

The hammer continues to rise and fall, striking the steel again and again with forceful measured strokes. The billet stretched out into an elongated rectangle the hot white glow already starting to fade to orange. Hitch Ironmane knew he didn't have long until the steel would fade to a dull red and need to be placed back into the blazing coals of the forge.

"One has to know when to stop..."

He grunted.

"Too many strokes and she'll no longer bend for you but simply fracture and break."

Wiping the sweat from his brow he looked up to see the human youth perched by the forge, rocking back and forth as they pumped the bellows to stoke the coals. She was nineteen years old in the bloom of her youth mere weeks away from turning twenty. Had she grown up in the village where she had been born she would have been married and a mother many times over. She nodded her head with mock seriousness as she worked, looking over she caught the dwarves stern gaze which did not take too kindly to being made fun of. This was one of his favourite lectures that he liked to give her and despite the fact she had heard it many times before she had learnt it did no good to remind him of this fact as:

"Important lessons need to be taught more than once!"

Gripping the red dull ingot in his tongs the dwarf moved over to the forge gently placing it among the coals before shifting it around ever so slightly. Satisfied he nodded to himself before shuffling over to a nearby bucket of water. Lifting the ladle he brought it up to his lips, the rim disappearing under the bushy moustache of his beard before drinking deeply.

"Here girl give me a turn at that while you fill this from the well."

Handing her the heavy wooden bucket they swapped places at the bellows. He took up the pace rocking himself back and forth as she headed out of the workshop. Shivering for a moment as she stepped over the threshold into the chill morning air she made her way along the well worn track down to the stone well. The sun was already beginning to peak over the hills of the small valley this unlikely duo called home, cutting between the trees and filtering through the dense branches and leaves. The soft green grass damp with the morning dew pressed down in patches where she walked, her leather boots leaving oval imprints of her passing. She knew the only reason Hitch had taken over the bellows was because he hated trying to scale back up the slope with a heavy bucket of water, but the cunning old dwarf had always made it seem like he was doing her a favour. She didn't mind though as she enjoyed a break from the oppressive heat to be out in nature. Attaching a hook to the bucket she cranked the handle to lower it down into the inky black depths of the well until she felt the line go slack for a moment as the bucket began to float on the surface of the water. Tipping onto it's side the water began to flood in as the rope became taut again. Her biceps flexed as she took up the strain waiting for it to fill. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she braced her hands on the handle and moved her whole body back and forth. When she had first come to live with him she had longed to bring back the buckets of water and prove herself. At first he had tried to discourage her saying that this was the sort of work fit only for men. It had been a ploy of course which had only hardened her resolve to prove him wrong. In the beginning she had struggled up the hill to return triumphantly to the forge with the wooden bucket filled but a quarter of it's depth, beaming with pride at her accomplishment.

After a few years she could carry it back full to the brim as her strength continued to grow. This had been part of Hitch's plan to build up her muscles and prepare her for the rigours of a full day of forging. Her build was best described as lean, her muscles well defined. Her long brown hair was often tied back in a messy pony tail and a stripe of clothe was usually tied across her forehead to keep the sweat out of her stunning sky blue eyes. Cielo had been a child of no more than six summers when her family had been killed during a hobgoblin attack on her village, burning half of it to the ground before being driven off. She had fled into the nearby woods, her parents screaming for her to go ringing in her ears as her little legs had carried her across the fields before plunging into the tree line beyond. She had no idea how long she had run before she had collapsed onto the forest floor, her breathe coming in gasps as hot tears had streamed down her face. When she had collected herself she looked around only to realise she was totally lost. Her parents had always forbidden her from going into the forest that surrounded their farmlands and even when she had disobeyed and ventured off with the other children of the village they had not gone very far. Soon the sun had set and the little girl in her tattered dress had curled up defeated and full of dread. A sharp sound had jolted her awake, repeating over and over again as it cut through the cold night air to ring off the trees. She couldn't explain why but gathering herself together she had headed off toward the source of that sound until she had come to a break in the trees and looked down into a valley where a warm yellow light spilled out from a stout wooden building like a beacon calling to her. She had startled Hitch almost to death when he caught sight of her in his doorway. He had drawn back his hammer, ready to smote the steel before him when he caught the flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. The pale little human girl with saucer like ice blue eyes had looked for all the world like a spirit of the damned come to claim his soul. Catching himself a moment before he threw his sledge hammer at the apparent apparition he stood in stunned silence. Throwing up her arms she had run toward him and the safety that his embrace promised. His sledge hammer had fallen from his grip as he scooped up the human child and held her to his chest, her face buried into his leather apron.

Anyone who had known Hitch Ironmane, a dwarf that even other dwarves had previously described in their understated style as being "...a wee bit gruff at the best of times..." would have been amazed to see how he had soothed that poor girl whose entire world had been so cruelly snatched away, stroking her hair as he rocked her back and forth until her wracking sobs subsided and her tiny body collapsed into a deep sleep. In the days and weeks that followed the villagers never mounted a search for Cielo, believing her to have been burned up in her hut or carried off to be sold into slavery. They lacked the proper weapons and courage to track down the hobgoblin raiding party and prayed that they would not return as they rebuilt their village and fortified it with defensive wooden walls as best they could. Thus it was that Cielo Truewood a human girl of infinite curiosity and innocent delight had come to live with Hitch Ironmane the Dwarven Blacksmith of distemperate disposition.

Winding her way back up to the workshop Cielo found Hitch reaching into the forge with his tongs to pull the white hot steel out from among the glowing coals.

"Took you long enough young one, come on now grab your hammer and have a go"

Taking her own apron off a wooden peg on the wall she beamed as she snatched up her hammer and joined him at the anvil. They took turns now, their hammers swinging and striking as they shaped the metal drawing it out longer and thinner until Hitch called for her to stop by holding his hammer out sideways. Placing the steel halfway over the edge of the anvil he struck it until the edge pointed toward the ground before flipping it over and continuing to tap away until it was sandwiched over onto itself. They took up their rhythm again striking and squishing the two halves together until the colour began to cool again. Placing it back among the coals Cielo took up the bellows and began to pump them, each stroke sending the flames shooting a little higher as the colour returned to the steel. Hitch stared into the forge watching with the patient eye of a master smith, judging the temperature of the steel by it's hue. Cielo piped up now asking Hitch a question as she usually did while they waited for the metal to heat.

"Why is elven steel so highly prized?"

Hitch bristled at the question, one eyebrow shooting up as he gave her a hard stare.

"Because they say it is. Nothing more. Elves need to make their steel so light because they don't have the strength otherwise to lift it or the backbone to wield it."

Despite her never seeing him reading a book, Hitch had an extensive collection displayed on carved wooden shelves. Flowers and creatures of the forest had danced in the scrollwork of the dark stained timber. Every night after their evening meal Cielo could be found with a book open in her lap as she read by the fireside, drinking in the words on the page as images danced in her head of the brave heroes and amazing arms and armour described within. Oddly enough despite his many and extensive grumblings about the elven race Hitch's library contained volumes covering a wide variety of elven subjects. Cielo had recently been reading about the legendary skill and craftsmanship of elven swords that danced in the hands of their wielders, light as air and sharper than a razor.

"Alright girl she's ready now, on your feet. Lets see how you handle the reigns."

Cielo jumped up and grab the tongs, reaching into the fire to grip the glowing metal. It slipped from her grasp on the first try, Hitch tut tutting in her ear before she pulled it out of the fire and made her way over to the anvil. Keen to prove herself whenever he let her work alone she bashed away with great vigour hammering the metal flat with a flurry of blows that quickly had her arm aching and threatening to stiffen up.

"Too fast! Too Fast! You'll burn yourself out and have nothing left for the rest of the day."

Her smile dropped from her face as she was sure he would be impressed with her ability to work the metal with such vigour.

"Don't worry about me Old Man!"

The insult a term of teasing endearment between them.

"I'll carry your water and your workload!"

She struck the steel again to emphasise her point before stalking back over to the forge, thrusting the metal inside and redoubling her efforts on the bellows. Chuckling to himself he turned to the bucket to help himself to another ladle of water before turning back to Cielo and promptly pouring it all over her head.

"Cool down young one, we have a long day ahead of us yet."

Gasping in shock as the cool water splashed down onto her head running down her neck and back causing her to involuntarily shiver.

"Don't stop pumping yet, the steel's not ready!"

Hitch chuckled as Cielo fumed. Giving her a wink he went back to bucket and drank deeply, smacking his lips with satisfaction before going back to stare into the forge. They would continue like this as they did everyday until it was time for their next meal. A wooden rack placed against a wall near the entrance to the workshop displayed the arms and armour they had already forged for their next trip to market. A heavy war axe glinted in the firelight, it's wide thin blade honed to a razor edge. If you took to a tree with it the blade would bite too deeply and the thin edge would snap clean off. This was designed to slice through the joints of man or beast with a frightening ease. Cielo knew very little of Hitch's early life and adventures but sometimes he would let something slip.

"You'd be surprised how little pressure you need to apply to push that straight through a mans wrist. The hand just pops right off like a cork from a sparkling wine..."

Currently they were working on forging a sword. Hitch never started off with a design in mind, he simply started heating and folding the steel until the shape began to form almost all on it's own. In this way no two pieces were ever the same and his work was prized as much for it's quality and it's uniqueness. As the days passed the steel had taken shape until a truly fearsome weapon had begun to emerge. A thick double sided blade, it's edges running parallel until they sharply met in a diamond shape point. No fuller ran the length, the steel simply sloping from the middle point down and away to it's cutting edge. The cross guard shaped like a crescent moon swept up before turning sharply toward the blade. Cielo had been confused by this addition at first until Hitch had started to tap away with hammer and chisel. The strokes were so gentle and light she was left wondering if he was even making a dent at all as the chisel handle rotated around the hammer following it's path and always finding it's mark. When he was finally done he leaned back to reveal the cross guard had been transformed into the maw of a hissing snake that would catch the sword stokes of it's wielders opponents and hold them in place. The handle had been wrapped in braided copper wire that would soon wear away the skin of a bare palm, topped with a steel ball for the pommel. A simple addition to add balance to the overall weight that could just as easily be used to crush a mans skull, or crack open a nut on a downward stroke.

"Only a knights gauntlet or a workman's hand would be tough enough to hold onto this."

Hitch had commented as he had hefted the finished weapon in a hand so rough Cielo imagined he could pick up burning coals without flinching. He cut through the air with a few strokes left and right. Satisfied he nodded to himself before handing it to Cielo. This was always her favourite part, finally getting to hold the finished weapons they had created. Eyes gleaming she admired the way the light danced off the blade, turning it over as she ran her eyes along it's length. The weight had started to cause her arm to droop forcing her into a two handed grip. Bracing her legs wide she imagined herself facing off against a terrifying creature. She raised the blade over her head waiting for the rush to come before bringing it down in a cutting swing that would have split it's skull in two. Arresting the swing at the point where the blade was parallel to the floor she swung herself around in a spinning arc to slash another invisible enemy in half. Hitch had wisely stepped back already having had a few close calls in the past when she had gotten carried away and misjudged her timing and distance.

"I take that it meets with your approval master smith?"

Hitch asked in a jovial tone. Cielo paused with the blade held up sideways in a parry. Suddenly self conscious she lowered the weapon with a sheepish look on her face. Stepping over she handed it back to Hitch feeling a soreness in her palms where the skin had already been rubbed away slightly by the braided copper wire.

"It will have to do I suppose..."

She joked with a grumbling tone meant to impersonate Hitch's voice and demeanour. On the day they were to set off to market they had risen early before the rising sun. After a hearty breakfast fit to fill their bellies to bursting, as the journey ahead was long and one never knew when they might have a chance to eat again, they had loaded their wares into their caravan taking care to wrap them in oiled leathers. Cielo attached their pair of mules joking that Hitch preferred mules to horses as they were the only thing as stubborn as he was.

"If I ever need to teach a mule how to be led I would only need to tie it to you in the morning and by the afternoon it would have given up."

The hill dwarf had scoffed at the remark, softly chuckling as he shook his head.

"Come one now, let's get a moving. It's a long way between here and Sanction."

## Chapter 2

They were off before the sun had started to peak over the tops of the hills surrounding their valley, fog laying heavily on the dew soaked grass. The mules kept their heads bowed as they clomped along with the slow and steady pace that would see them grinding through the long miles ahead. Cielo and Hitch were rugged up in their leathers and furs, their faces barely poking out of their hoods. Caution dictated they should keep their heads uncovered to be able to better look around their surroundings but they were on familiar ground and the chill of the morning air kept them bundled up. The hooves of the mules were not visible through the fog they stirred up but the sure footed mounts new the way unerringly on the dirt track that led away from the dwarves workshop into the wider forest.

"Just a few more miles and we'll be coming to the main track"

Hitch advised even though they both knew what was coming up. Cielo simply nodded her head, her gloved hands shoved up her opposite sleeves to better ward off the cold. It was the dwarves habit to always keep up a running commentary and go over things just to make sure they were on the same part of the parchment.

"Godsfell Woods... Aptly named. Just look at the size of that fallen tree over there."

Hitch indicated with a gloved hand off to the side in between the densely packed trees lay upon it's side a giant red cedar.

"You'll see no bite of woodsman axe or toothed saw along it's bark and yet something of terrible power and strength smote that mighty tree toppling it over..."

Hitch let his words hang out there for a moment to better impress upon Cielo the magnitude of his statement.

"And now it lays like a slumbering god in these silent woods...Unknown and unnoticed by all but our eyes..."

Hitch trailed off returning his gaze to the mules ahead.

"It was probably a dragon."

Cielo's sudden statement cause Hitch to jump in his seat.

"I'd say it was definitely a green dragon because green dragons live in the forest."

Cielo stated sagely.

"Oh is that so?"

The dwarf asked. Cielo continued on with the complete confidence.

"Oh yes. Green dragons live in the woods because they can hide in the trees."

"Because the forest is green?..."

Hitch asked before continuing on.

"If that were true then red dragons could only live in my roaring hearth, golden dragons in a treasure chest and black dragons in the bottom of an outhouse!"

Hitch roared with laughter throwing back his head at his own wit as Cielo turned away, scrunching up her face and scowling darkly. As his laughter died down he placed his arm around her and drew her closer, patting her on the shoulder encouragingly until she turned to face him.

"Oh come on now little one don't be cross with me. We've got a long journey ahead of us and you can't stay mad at me the whole time. Who'll help me steer the mules?"

Handing over the reigns she eagerly took them and straightened up in her seat, taking on a very serious expression as she gazed out on her surroundings like a guard dog alert for the slightest hint of danger. The darkened sky began to brighten as the sun rose higher in the sky. Soon the fog had burned off and their hoods had been pulled back before taking off their coats altogether. Hitch folds his and put it behind his back. Sighing deeply he wiggled in his seat until he had moulded his back into the coat. Cielo left hers across her lap.

"Why do magic users call themselves 'Wizards' and not 'Mages'?"

Cielo enquired eager to change the subject.

"Why do they call themselves 'Wizards' when they live in towers of 'High Sorcery'? Wouldn't a 'Sorcerer' live in a tower of 'Sorcery'?"

Hitch answering with two questions for Cielo's one before he continued on.

"What they call themselves is irrelevant in the end. Would the bite of a serpent poison you less if it were known by another name? Stay clear of them whenever you can and kill them on sight whenever you cannot."

"Serpents or Wizards?"

Cielo asked throwing in a cheeky grin. Hitch looked at her sideways for a moment, his mouth breaking into a smile before he threw his head back and laughed. .

"Here we are. We want to turn south"

Nodding Cielo clicked her tongue and flicked the reigns urging the mules on. She acted with great confidence when she commanded the animals and they never failed to obey her. While they seemed to have always taken great pleasure in giving Hitch trouble they were sweet and compliant when she was holding the reigns. The trail opened up now wide enough for two caravans to pass each other without fear of one brushing against the other as they passed. Birds could be heard calling to each other and the sound of running water came to them off to from one side. A perfectly pleasant day with fine weather for travelling. A clearing was coming up ahead, an elaborate caravan stopped off to the side of the track.

"Greetings! Greetings! May I have a moment of your time?..."

A tall thin man boomed. Long white robes draped from his shoulders swaying in the breeze. A heavy chain hung from his neck curving down to a large circular medallion engraved with a symmetrical design. His long balding hair was pushed back behind his ears swooping down onto his shoulders, lost in the long grey beard. Cielo tugged on the reigns of the mules and they slowed to a stop. She ignored Hitch as he poked her gently in the ribs trying to signal her to just keep moving.

"Hello my friends. Tired from the road are we?"

It was a good opening question designed to get the other person to engage, likely to receive a response in agreement as anyone who spent more than an hour in the saddle or bouncing on a buck board would be all too keen to agree.

"Oh yes!"

Cried Cielo eager to speak with anyone. The man nodded approvingly before going on.

"Then surely you would be keen for something that could cure your aches and pains?"



Cielo started nodding her head before Hitch called out over shoulder.

"Which god do you follow?"

The man paused for a man looking confused before Hitch continued.

"You are dressed like a cleric after all. Or at least to give the appearance that you are..."

The mans eyes narrowed, his smile dropped.

"I make no claims to be a healer, merely a purveyor of medicinal elixirs that restore the body and sharpen the mind."

He turned his attention back to Cielo hoping to get the sales pitch back on track.

"Care for a taste? It is made from the sweetest of berries harvested in Northern Ergoth..."

Their hands disappeared into the robes emerging with a flourish a bulbous glass vial with a cork stopper, red fluid sloshing back and forth.

"Hold on there girly."

Hitch's firm hand clasped her by the shoulder.

"Keep your lolly water Cleric!"

He emphasised the last word like it was synonymous with something scraped from your shoe after a long day in the fields.

"We have along day ahead of us so WE better be heading off now."

His eyes bored into the side of Cielo's head. Her cheeks flushing red with embarrassment she flicked the reigns and their trusty mules started to trundle off. Hitch looked around as they moved off keeping his eyes peeled for any signs of movement. The potion pedaler remained where they were, arms crossed as they scowled at the pair shrinking into the distance. When they had gotten far enough away he threw up his hands in frustration before storming off into his caravan.

"Who told you to stop!?"

Hitch's voice raised in anger.

"There are a thousand con men and cut throats plying their trade on these forest roads far from the watchful eyes of town guards and decent folk."

Tears started to form in Cielo's eyes but she refused to look at Hitch keeping her swimming gaze straight ahead.

"You just nod, wave and keep going. I'll tell you when or if we are stopping. If someone has slipped a wheel, let them fix it. You're just as likely to get ambushed and bashed on the head then find someone in genuine need of assistance out here!"

Her chin stopped quivering as she reached up to wipe her tears on the back of her sleeve.

"I had it covered...."

"You what?!"

"I had it!"

Tossing the reins to Hitch she whipped her jacket off her lap to show the loaded mini crossbow in her lap, the bolt pointing out to where the stranger would have been standing. The weapon had been a gift from Hitch having been brought back from a distant corner of Krynn long before the girl had even been born. An all steel construction the bow and body were compact and menacing. A knob on the end of the body was twisted to draw back the string along ratcheting teeth. Pressing the trigger would disengage the winder from the teeth, causing it shoot forward before locking back into place to be wound up again. Hunting scenes had been engraved along it's sides. Cielo had spend many hours stalking the woods around their home practicing shooting and loading, imagining herself fighting terrible beasts and bandits alike until her aim had gotten so good their cooking pot never wanted for some good game meat to pad out their stews and fill their bellies.

"Better to not spring a trap then have to fight your way out of one..."

Turning her face to his he began to melt as he always did whenever she was upset.

"I'm sorry little one, I didn't mean to make you cry. Here I'll drive the mules for a while and you keep your eyes peeled ok? I need my Eagle Eye looking out for me."

Happy to be entrusted with such an important task she squared her shoulders, stuck out her chin and took to scanning the woods, the mini steel crossbow cradled in her hands. It was designed to have been shot one handed at close range. Lift your arm, point it at your target and squeeze your fist to release the paddle trigger underneath. The sort of thing which could be quickly produced from flowing robes to strike down an opponent sitting across from you in a tavern before you leapt to your feet and made good your escape. Cielo had taken to cradling it like she had seen Hitch do with his larger wooden crossbow. Hands held waist high, head and shoulders turning to scan together until your target was spotted before raising up and loosing in one fluid motion. She scanned now, her head and shoulders turning side to side until she started to get bored when nothing appeared from behind the trees to be dispatched. The hours rolled on as the sun climbed higher into the sky. Stopping by a stream they watered the mules before stretching out on the soft green grass to enjoy a simple meal of dried fruit and meat. Looking up into the blue sky to gaze at the passing clouds it would have been all to easy to drift off for a nap.

"Alright enough of that, let's get back on the road."

Hitch ordered before slowing rising to his feet loudly moaning and groaning as his aching muscles protested.

"What's the matter Old Man? The mules protest less than that"

Cielo called over her shoulder as she skipped to the wagon.

"That's Venerable Dwarf to you Human Pup!"

Hitch sang out as he hobbled after her. He could have used the rest but they had a schedule to keep. After a few more steps everything popped into place and he was confidently striding up to the wagon where she already sat perched on the side facing him.

"Help me up and slide on over, I'll take those thank you."

Gripping his hand in hers she helped pull Hitch up into the wagon, sliding across as she did so. Taking up the reins he flicked them but the mules refused to move. He whistled and called out but still they refused to budge.

"Come on now sweeties."

Cielo calmly intoned. The mules raised their heads for a moment in acknowledgement before they started off again trudging down the wide dirt track.

"Not one word out of your girlie"

### Chapter 3

Wesley Sweetwater, potion purveyor threw open the curtains of his caravan before stepping inside. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkened interior. Lifting the heavy chain from around his neck he threw it on the workbench next to him, the cheap alloy clinking as it fell into a pile. The image carved on his medallion meant nothing as far as he knew, the design have been taken from something he had seen a child scrawling in the dirt with a stick once. He felt it had looked suitably 'mystical' and decided to copy it, claiming to his customers that it was from a distant shrouded land that few had been to and even fewer had returned to tell tale of. Empty 'potion' bottles were lined up in wooden trays, tapped casks of cheap wine nearby. Mixed with herbs and sugar a fresh batch of elixir could be made to order on the spot. Everyone felt amazing after a few swigs, a warm glow and general sense of well being would come over them. By the time they felt a hangover in the morning William and his caravan would be many miles away on to a new town and a new set of soon to be unsatisfied customers. He had been chased out of Solamnia and drifted south until he had come across Godsfell Woods. Taking up residence along a main track he had hoped to be able to hide out and make enough to get by until rumours of his shoddy goods had died down. His last meal had been a couple of days prior, the human girl and her dwarf guardian were his last chance for enough coins to buy a decent meal somewhere. Frustration and hunger pains gnawed at him as he open drawers and moved his meagre possessions around hoping to find something edible suddenly appear.

"Damn it!"

He kicked at the leg of his workbench managing to crumple his toes through his thin velvet slippers. Hopping around on one foot he groped for his injured foot until he bumped into a wall and toppled over with a crash. Dust flew up in clouds as the glass vials rattled in their wooden shelves threatening to tumble onto the floor and shatter. The rocking of the caravan stopped and the thudding pain in his foot started to subside.

"Thats it! No one is interested in buying this stuff and I'm going to starve to death if it keeps up any longer."

Climbing to this feet he looked around until he grasped a handle and lifted a blade up to his eye line.

"By the gods what I would give to shake that stupid old dwarf by the ankles until his gold fell from his pouches and pockets!"

Shaking the dagger in front of his face he made up his mind there and then. That dwarf must have gold, lots of it. His kind always did. Rummaging around in their mountain mines. His face cracked into a manic grin, the corners of his mouth pulling back to reveal crooked yellow teeth. The hunger pains gnawed at him again causing him to grip his midsection and double over for a moment until they began to subside. Whirling in place he turned and stormed out into the bright daylight.

"Lets get off the road now. Need to get our dinner cooked before the sun sets."

Hitch lead the mules through the long grass at the side of the track. He had been on the look out for the past couple of hours for a concealed spot to set up camp for the night. In a clearing there was a copse of trees like an island in the ocean of waving grass. Stepping down to lead the way and check for any unseen hazards he lead them across the grass and into the tree until they disappeared from view. Tying the mules to branch of a sturdy tree they unhitched the wagon and quickly setup their camp. A hole was dug and a fire lit, the sticks burning down until they were glowing coals. The blackened cast iron pot was hung until small wisps of smoke began to curl. Pieces of hard white fat were dropped until popping and hissing until they rendered into a clear liquid. Fresh red pieces of meat sank beneath the surface, frothing bubbles popping and hissing. Cielo's aim had been true and the meat frying in the pot had started out that day as several squirrels. Water soon followed and spices were stirred through until a hardy stew had begun to form.

Simple trail meals like this were a real treat compared to the cold dried rations they might be forced to subsist off. They ate contently in silence spooning the hot steaming liquid and chunks of meat into their mouths until their bellies were full and their eye lids heavy.

"Grab a stick and push the dirt in on your side."

Cielo did as she was asked, pushing the dirt in to snuff out the fire. This way they avoided the loud hissing noise and billowing white cloud of steam rising up to give away their position. Thick coats and bed rolls would keep them warm while other travellers invited danger with roaring camp fires and posting guards that invariably drifted off before their watch was over. Curling up they soon fell asleep as the sun began to set, it's orange red rays cutting through the leaves to cast long shadows through the forest before the inky blue black of the night time sky chased them away.

"Where are they!"

Williams hissed through his teeth. It had taken him some time to find his horse which had managed to wander off from where he had left it tied up to graze. It had fought him as he desperately tried to drag it back to the caravan and hitch it up. Precious time had been lost before he was able to be underway after his quarry. He had been forced to light a lamp which he held out on a long pole to guide his way along the track until he had seen the wheel ruts leave the road. Dismounting with his dagger in hand he stepped into the long grass and tried to follow along. Twice he had stumbled and nearly dropped the lantern as he had tripped. Confused and disorientated from lack of food he had lost the trail and looked around in desperation, turning this way and that his dagger held out in front of him.

"Hitch! Hitch wake up!"

Cielo frantically whispered in his ear. She had gotten up to relieve herself behind a tree when she saw the lamp light swaying out in the long grass. Hitch came awake in an instant, coming up quickly with his hand on his crossbow. Cielo cradled hers as well.

"Watch where you are pointing that damn thing!"

Hitch whispered as he guided her hand away from him.

"Sorry"

She mouthed as they hunched down and moved toward the tree line. They saw the figure in the lamplight, watching as the flames flickered off the metal of the dagger in their hand.

"Who is it? What do they want?"

She asked.

"I know just as much as you right now girl. Lets wait and see."

Leaning against neighbouring tree trunks they sighted down their weapons. Cielo's shaking hands were sweating despite the cold and she worried it would slip from her grasp. Closing her eyes for a moment she took in a deep breathe and then let it out slowly.

"Neighhhh huh huh huh!"

They turned at the sound of a horse crying out in alarm, the figure in the field whirling as well. Then it appeared behind him, the silhouette of a man sized creature who raised their arm high before bringing it down in a quick slashing motion. The lamp light caught the glimpse of the cruelly curved blade for a moment before it slashed across the mans back. He tensed, his whole body stiffening for a second before toppling forward down into the grass. The lantern flew in an arc through the air, a meteorite entering the atmosphere.

The simple copper frame clanked to the ground, the wire guards protecting the glass from breaking. Another figure stepped forward, picking up the lantern and holding it above their head.

"By Reorx's sacred beard..."

The creature in the lamplight was unlike anything Hitch had ever seen before in all of his years of travelling. A cruel nightmare of the human form bent and twisted, a reptilian head topped a hunched body of thick muscles. Rows of sharp teeth flashed in it's maw as yellow eyes with black slit pupils scanned the darkness beyond.

"Please...no..."

They heard the man begging weakly as the first creature approached. It looked down at it's victim for only a moment before punching it's arm down, driving the point of it's blade through the man and pinning him to the soil below. Placing it's foot on his back it ripped back the blade in a sickening squelch of cracking bones and tearing flesh. Looking over Hitch saw that Cielo had turned away, unable to keep her gaze on the alien beasts. They were so unnatural, so out of place that they could not have come from any corner of Krynn itself. Hitch worried that Cielo would pull the trigger of her crossbow without thinking but couldn't risk trying to get her attention for fear of startling her. The two figures approached each other and for a moment Hitch could only make out what sounded like gargling and hacking, evidently what passed as a language between them before they turned and headed off through the long grass. They watched the swaying light of the lamp grow smaller until they reached the edge of the track and disappeared from view.

"Are they gone now?..."

She asked looking over toward Hitch.

"That they are girl. I can hear them fading into the distance but I don't know which direction they are headed in. We'll be ok now though."

He said more trying to convince himself than the terrified girl with him.

"Now lets just unload that for now"

He pointed his finger toward her weapon.

"And we'll sit up for a little while."

They sat there in the darkness for a long time, listening to the insects and straining to hear if those creatures were still lurking out there. Cielo was not full of her usual theories and ideas now, she simply kept looking back and forth, scanning the darkness before her. Eventually their adrenaline subsided and they were able to drift off to sleep before the sun started to peer over the horizon, it's golden morning glow chasing away the darkness and the nightmare creatures that lurked within it.

## Chapter 4

"Now I wouldn't normally be doing this..."

Hitch said as he opened up a section of the caravan.

"Armour is too heavy to be wearing all the time on the road..."

Flicking a catch he swung open a door to display the wares inside.

"But now we no be having a choice."

He took out a mail shirt and held it up to Cielo for size. She placed her arms through the holes and lifted it over her head, struggling to get it up high enough. A leather belt was wrapped around her waist to cinch in the mail shirt and a short sword in its scabbard was clipped onto one side. He then handed her a buckler instructing her to keep it on the side of her body facing the edge of the forest. She could hunker down behind that and should be safe for the most part from any kind of surprise attack that came their way. Cielo climbed up with some difficulty under the increase burden and nestled into her seat. Hitch could be heard clanking and cursing before appearing with a double bladed axe, helmet, mail shirt, greaves and vambraces.

"Hate to get this dirty before we sell it off... Try not to get any blood on it then hey."

Patting her on the leg she whipped up the mules and they began off down the track they had seen the nightmare creatures disappearing along only a few short hours earlier.

"Why don't we turn back?"

She had asked after they had been travelling down the road for a few minutes.

"We need to sell what we have to get supplies for the following year. Plus it has been so terribly long since I have tasted a good stout..."

He solemnly stated.

"We have good steel and stout hearts, let them come. There isn't a creature under these skies that can live when it's tasted this..."

He held up his axe for effect. The light glinted off the razor keen edge and Cielo started to feel more confident. She squared her shoulders and felt the comforting weight of the buckler by her side. She imagined for a moment ducking behind its hardened surface as arrows wicked and glanced off. She turned back to Hitch and gave him a thumbs up, the greatest vote of confidence she could bestow on him.

"...I know she is not one of our kind Reorx..."

Hitch started to pray in his mind.

"...But grant her your divine protection for few of our race have ever held so true to your values as she..."

With that he wiped a tear that had begun to form in the corner of his eye, hoping that she had not noticed and took to scanning the road ahead as he cradled his crossbow across his lap. It was constructed of ironbark, so tough it could blunt an axe or sword swung against it. Felling the tree and preparing the timbre had taken time and patience as the cutting tools were resharpened again and again. No carvings adorned its length as they would have taken too long to create. Oils had been rubbed into the grain until they had looked like smooth glass under the fire light. The bow and trigger mechanism was cast from spring steel.

The heavily braided raw hide bow string had been lovingly soaked in bees wax to prevent moisture from soaking in and ruining it. The bolts were short, fat and sharp. A foolish man would have been tempted to make the comparison to Hitch's physique. A circle of iron lay on one side of the wood, a square cut hole in the middle to accommodate a hand crank that would wind the cord back into the cocking position for firing. Hitch's bulging biceps made light work of the task and he could loose a couple of shots per minute. He preferred to leave the weapon uncocked, all the better to prolong the life span of the braided bow string. He knew it could quickly be brought to bare if need be.

"What's that up ahead?"

Hitch asked Cielo. Her keen young eyes could make out a caravan approaching them from a distance. It's wooden boards were colourfully painted, the pair sitting up the front were costumed in loud flowing silks, their faces painted a riot of colours.

"Morning!"

They cheerfully called out, waving as they came abreast.

"Hold up there."

Hitch instructed, his palm held up flat. Cielo drew up the mules and they met the confused gaze of the harlequins across from them.

"There are nightmares stalking men in these woods."

Hitch began.

"You'd be well advised to turn around and go back the way you came."

He pointed down the trail the strangers had just come from.

"I say are you doing some kind of monologue? Like an audition?"

One of the pair asked.

"Because we aren't really in the market for any new talent right now..."

Hitch's eyes bulged for a moment, his nostrils flaring.

"Are we in a bakery? Then why do you confuse me for a cream puff such as yourself!"

Hitch cursed at the colourful duo who wrinkled their noses at being spoken to so plainly.

"You know there is no need to take that kind of tone."

Already regretting his decision to stop and try to warn his fellow travellers about their impending doom Hitch did his level best to try and contain his rising anger.

"My tone?. My tone?! Last night we saw men who wear the skins of reptilian beasts ambush and butcher a man like a hog before the festival!"

Hitch's tone finally conveyed the gravity of the situation in which they found themselves. Clutching their hands to their chests and looking about themselves nervously towards the woods that lined either side of the track.

"Then we thank you for your warning and will head off at once."

Cielo held up her hand her trembling finger pointing down the track in front of them causing the others to turn in their seats and look back.

"Hitch!"

She cried out in alarm. The beasts had emerged from the trees lining the path, standing boldly in line across the hard packed dirt. It was somehow more shocking to see them in the daylight, all the more terrifying to know then that they were not some figment of the darkness that would disappear with the dawn. Dark cloaks swept down from their shoulders. Hitch began to lift the crossbow from his lap, the hand crank sliding out from it's hidden place to be clicked into it's square socket without even looking down. One of the creatures held up it's sword, licking the dull spine of the steel without breaking eye contact.

"Wings....they've got bloody wings..."

He realised as they suddenly burst into action sprinting towards them.

"Aaarghhh!!! Eeehhhhh!!!!"

One of the painted pair shrilly screamed over their shoulder at the nightmares rushing toward them. Trashing their reigns their horses suddenly shot forward, kicking up clods of dirt as they desperately tried to race away. Their caravan was overloaded however with costumes, props and enough makeup to supply a royal court for a year of social engagements. Their horses strained, hooves slipping. The creatures were on them in a moment ripping the pair down from their seat into the dirt. Falling on them like hunger maddened wolves with snapping jaws that ripped delicate flesh like tissue paper sending blood spurting like berries flattening under a hammer blow. Unable to turn Cielo and Hitch had no choice but to charge the remaining attackers that blocked their path. They parted before the charging mules, taloned hands reaching up to grasp for the pair. Hitch hadn't been able to load his crossbow in time so simply spun it around and used the butt of the weapon to cave in the snarling face of his attacker. The hardwood meeting little resistance as cartilage bent and skin split to blood gushing effect. Cielo lifted her buckler up leaning away from the creature. It's claw appeared over the edge of the shield pulling it down to reveal it's bestial face. It's look of triumph turned to confusion as Cielo lifted the mini crossbow to it's eye level depressing the paddle trigger at almost point blank range. The small bolt pulped the creatures eye, the steel point passing through the brain matter to pierce the back of it's skull and emerge on the other side. It's grip on her buckler went slack as it fell away and disappeared from view.

"Faster girl! Faster!"

She needed no such encouragement as she cracked the reigns. The mules were just as scared by these strange new creatures and pumped their legs as hard as they could to get away. Clods of dirt flung up as their shod hooves dug deeply into the ground for purchase. Hitch cranked the handle of his crossbow clicking the latch into place. Turning in his seat he looked behind them but could only see the side of the trail as they sped along. Standing on the seat he climbed up onto the flat roof of the caravan for a better view. Cielo turned for a second to see him disappearing from sight before turning back to watch the trail ahead. She didn't know what the plan was other than her instinct to put as much distance between herself and them as possible. When Hitch had built the caravan he had placed boards horizontally along each edge, half of their width sticking up to create a small wall all the way around. It had been a design feature to help keep any luggage strapped on the top of the caravan in place but it now served as an impromptu crow's nest of sorts as he sighted down the crossbow. The creatures looked up from their victims, gore splattering their faces and necks to spy their comrades laying limply in the road with the caravan rapidly shrinking in the distance. Shrieking their rage they were up on their clawed feet sprinting just as the mules had started to slow unable to keep up such a frantic sprinting pace.

"...By Reorx why are we slowing!..."

Hitch thought to himself as he felt their pace begin to slacken. Unable to leave his post to see what the problem was he had to trust her to solve it. Sighting down the crossbow he watched as the first beast pelted into range.



Hitch took a deep breathe holding the crossbow steady as his target sprinted towards them. The winged creatures pursuing them were named by their creators "Draconians". Neither their name nor their reputation had travelled so far west this early in the conflict that would grow to be known as the War of the Lance. The process of their creation was far from an exact and measured thing, the resulting temperaments varying as widely as the breeds of canine or feline alike. These draconians had been sent ahead in small hand picked bands to act as terror troops behind the lines to slack their thirst for slaughter as they pleased ahead of the marching columns to follow in their wake. Far from the bustling cities and even the quaint villages that dotted the countryside near their valley home Hitch and Cielo had been sheltered from news and rumours that flowed like life blood along the trading lanes. Hitch did not need to know the name of his enemy, of the thing of slashing claws and gnashing teeth that closed the distance with every stride as their mules already began to tire. He had travelled to many of the darker corners of Krynn and seen creatures unrecorded in even the greatest of libraries and collections of volume espousing the completeness of their knowledge. Everything that drew breathe could bleed, every skin could be pierced by sharpened steel or speeding iron. So it was with a grim determination and the hint of a satisfied smile playing on his lips that Hitch squeezed the trigger of his crossbow with a firm measured pressure that would not pull the point away to the side causing a shot to veer wide of it's target.

"Damn!"

Hitch roared as the draconian leapt high into the air, wings snapping open to catch an oncoming wind. It sailed upward for a moment gazing skyward until it's head snapped down to lock onto it's prey. Drawing in it's wing slightly it sped towards the top of the caravan. No time to reload Hitch held up his crossbow sideways in a quarter staff block. The draconian crashed into the hard wood the momentum carrying Hitch backwards. Cielo jumped at the thunderous crashing noise right behind her spinning in her seat to see the draconian fangs bared roaring in hateful rage in Hitch's face as he desperately tried to hold it back with his crossbow. Before she could even think her hand was already raised pointing at the gaping maw. A metallic click, the twang of the string and all in a flash the delicate bolt disappeared into the slavering void. The tip pierced the back of the throat, the soft flesh parting as it bored in between two vertebrae. The spinal cord severed the draconian slumped forward onto Hitch, only it's mouth spasming as it struggled to perform the simple task of breathing. He struggled for a moment under the weight panicking that he wouldn't lift it until he rolled over onto his side and the burden came with him, flopping awkwardly limbs askew. The jostling ride shook and bounced the beast on the edge of the caravan until a swift kick from Hitch sent it past the tipping point. It fell for a moment with none of the grace or artifice it had shown in it's soaring leap and swooping dive impacting into the dirt with a force that drove the air from it's lungs and sent a cloud of dust shooting skyward in it's wake.

"You know I had that under control..."

Hitch gasped in between breathes as he struggled to recover from the exertion of the life and death struggle from mere moments before.

"Better you be keeping your eyes on the road for a turn off..."

He panted.

"You're welcome!"

Cielo called back over her shoulder. She spotted a fork in the road up ahead. The branching line had no signpost to mark it's way with the overgrown appearance of a path infrequently travelled and fallen into disuse. Taking the turn at a trot they quickly disappeared from view as the trees gathered close to line the path their branches forming an archway overhead.

## Chapter 5

"If I remember my old maps right the ruin of a city name 'Aym' should be coming into view over the next rise."

They had travelled for nearly a mile along the twisting path until they found themselves emerging out onto open grassy plains. Hitch had stayed turned around as Cielo had steered, laying his crossbow across the roof of the caravan, a second bolt between his teeth to reload in a hurry. Cielo had managed to reload hers as well, taking the reins between her teeth as she twisted the knurled knob on the end to pull back the string and lock it into place.

"Pretty sure we've lost them now but don't ease up on them mules just yet."

They crested the rise and the city came into view. The rolling plowed fields of farmlands had turned to grass, the farmers cottages crumbling in thick moss that seemed to be squeezing them until the roofs had broken and caved in. The edges of the forest had crept in unevenly a silent army besieging the abandoned settlement. As they got closer they noticed no gates barred the entrance, fragments of timbre still clung to the rusting hinges. The stone wall surrounding the city had crumbled, grassy fingers reaching up from the ground. Flowers sprouted in the cracks and gaps worn in the mortar.

"Almost there. Let's get inside and find somewhere to hide."

The caravan jostled over the uneven ground, the cobblestones lifting up in places where tree roots had grown underneath snaking along in the dark fertile soil. The decayed buildings which lined the streets were like broken skulls, empty doorframes and windows leering like hollow eye sockets and gaping mouths. The wind roared through them giving voice to unearthly moans.

"Where do we go now?"

Cielo asked with a waiver in her voice, her nerves already on edge as she kept looking around in all directions.

"Turn down there, looks like stables."

They trotted down a laneway toward a large stone structure which seemed to have withstood the test of time better than it's neighbours. It was two storeys tall with empty window frames on the second floor and large heavy wooden doors still in place on the ground. Pulling up to the building Hitch and Cielo jumped off and quickly ran over. Gripping the heavy iron rings that still hung in place they heaved until the doors gave way and opened up before leading the mules and their caravan inside.

"There...we should be safe here."

Hitch said as they bolted the doors from the inside.

"Quick now! Grab my tools."

Boards were stripped internally and placed across the empty windows before being hammered into place, heavy barrels rolled over to be propped up against the boards for extra protection. Sweat poured from their brows as they rushed back and forth, terror giving them incredible strength and stamina. With the last board hammered into place they collapsed against each other sinking down onto the dusty floor as they caught their breath.

"There...huh huh...that will keep...those damn things out of here..."

Hitch was bright red his cheeks flushed like ripe tomatoes still fresh on the vine. Cielo worried that he would keel over in a minute and she would be left alone to stand against those things out there.

Hurrying off she came back with a skin of water which he greedily gulped from before catching himself and passing it back to her. The sweat that had soaked their clothes had started to evaporate causing them to shiver as their temperature rapidly dropped in the cool stone building.

"I see a hearth over there. Why don't you light us a fire for our evening meal."

Cielo paused for a moment looking confused.

"We're done hiding now little one. We've found a good place to defend here."

Soon the glow of a small fire filled the stables as Cielo made herself busy with the pots and pans. Tea was brewed and a hearty soup prepared. The mules came over and sat down by the fire to warm themselves as Hitch and Cielo enjoyed their meal and for a moment revelled in the simple comforts of hot meals in their belly and warming flames kissing their faces.

"What do we do now?"

Cielo asked looking up from her soup bowl with a sudden expression of great concern.

"We hunker down here for the night. Those things might not have even bothered to follow us to this cursed place."

The last two words caused her eyebrows to shoot up in shock. Hitch stumbled as he tried to recover.

"What I mean... as in by that I... don't worry I'm too tired to know what I am saying..."

"Have you ever heard about this place before?"

"Rumours. But rumours always persist no matter how out of date or inaccurate they are."

Cielo cocked her head to the side indicating with a rolling of her wrist that he was to continue with his line of thought.

"The people of this place worshipped a God that rose up and swallowed the unfaithful."

Cielo looked more confused then when she had begun her line of questioning and now regretted having gone down this cryptic path.

"Towns are raised up and walked out on throughout history though for all kinds of reasons, none of which have anything to do with the Gods the people that lived there prayed too."

Hitch did his best to try and reassure the girl.

"Lets try and bed down for a while. We'll need to be well rested for tomorrow."

Weapons within easy reach they laid down on their sides, their backs touching as they faced away from one another. They listened for the sound of something moving outside, trying to pick up on anything while praying they heard nothing.

"Don't worry little one. We're all right now."

Hitch whispered over his shoulder to her.

"A minotaur at full charge couldn't batter down those doors."

He tried to comfort her.

"Have you ever seen a Minotaur?"

She asked. Glad for the distraction.

"That I have. A great column of them, stripped to the waist, iron collars around their necks linked to the one in front and behind by heavy chains."

Cielo could picture them in her mind, heads bowed as they shuffled along.

"Now I don't right know if you could have called them a group or a pack but I was warned there is something you should never call a group of minotaurs..."

"What's that?"

"A Herd. Any reference to cattle is a great insult to a Minotaur. They look down on cattle the same way elves look down on humans."

"Or dwarves look down on gnomes and gully dwarves?"

Cielo cut in.

"That is very different!"

Hitch whispered too loudly, pausing for a moment to check if something had heard him. Cielo smiled to herself. She had learned early on that it was quite the sore point for Hitch if any comparison was made between dwarves and their smaller more eccentric cousins.

"Get some rest now. We will need it come the morning."

She covered her mouth to stifle a laugh before stretching out wondering how she was ever going to get to sleep as the energy drained from her limbs and her eyelids grew heavier and heavier. As her eyelids closed another much larger began to slowly crack open. Scaled skin parted to reveal the glossy globe of an eyeball tall enough to come up to a mans waist with a vertical slash of a pupil dissecting it in half. The blood red orb fading to orange around it's outer edge seemed to glow with it's own internal light. Deep within it's hibernating slumber it had detected the faint vibrations of something moving in the city above which had long been devoid of life. The maw parted just wide enough to allow it's forked tongue to extrude slick with saliva. It swayed to and fro as it tasted the stale fetid air that had not been stirred by even the passage of a scavenging rat as all living creatures instinctively knew to avoid it's nest. Cords of muscles thicker then the mast of a sailing ship began to uncoil, rippling beneath the black scaled skin. In undulating waves it moved forward through the circular archway that marked the entrance to it's nest, it's flanks almost scrapping against the precisely placed stones that had worn smooth down the years before it had come to know this place as it's home.

In the years that had followed the Cataclysm when men had turned their backs on the Gods and no longer passed along their teachings to their children until their grandchildren had thought of them as nothing more then fanciful bedtime tales the people of Aym had taken to the worship of a snake. It had not begun as such. The creature had come to reside in the city after being left behind by a travelling troupe of performers. The city fathers had an enclosure build so that the people of Aym could come and see. Soon vendors began to setup their stalls and tax collectors were charging admission. Live rabbits were sold at higher prices then the butchers charged for skinned ones and with great relish and delight people took to throwing the rabbits into the enclosure where it would be quickly hunted down and devoured. Children would turn away as it struck with lightning speed, peeking through their fingers as the fluffy creature disappeared into the distended jaws. As the years passed the snake grew larger and larger until it's proportions were monstrous to behold and a generation did not exist that could remember a time before it came to dwell amongst them. Mystical powers were attributed to it. It's feedings became known as offerings. Conmen tired by even the idea of an honest days work appeared to declare themselves it's priests, all knowing of the origin of it's birth and the blessings it could grant upon the favoured. A temple was erected in the centre of the city, concentric circles of paving stones laid one upon the other as a stack of platters decreasing in diameter with each level.

Diamond shaped tiles were inlaid along each riser to give the impression that the serpent itself were wound around it. The upper most layer was topped with a domed building, it's singular entrance wider than four men standing shoulder to shoulder was carved into the shape of a gaping maw. Red stained glass windows glittered as baleful eyes, bathing the inner sanctum in blood soaked beams of light. Creature and coffers swelled as the penitents appeared to place their offerings before the stoney faced priests. Peeking between the iron bars of it's enclosure the giant snake swayed back and forth as it took the measure of it's prey who quickly averted their gaze lest they offend it's divine sensibilities. When the cold winds of bitter harvests blew in the face of the generous donations even the most faithful began to question their devotion when left staring at empty cupboards and their hollow cheeked children. The most vocal of these doubters were stolen from their beds in the middle of the night, dragged off to be devoured by the ravenous reptile. Their sudden departures did not quell other voices joining an ever growing din of dissenters. When the angry mob appeared at the foot of the stone steps the priests did the unthinkable. Swinging open the huge iron gate that had held it in captivity it emerged from it's prison into the daylight. The sun shimmered from it's black scales as glossy as spilled ink. Rising up it glowered at the sea of humanity arrayed before it while in the deepest part of it's ancient reptilian brain it screamed.

"PREY!"

The people of Aym died that day. They died under the crushing weight of stampeding feet. They died as fangs longer than their forearms pierced clean through their bodies. They died as they burst like over ripe fruit beneath a pounding pestle trapped in the crushing coils of their living god. The survivors scattered as the field mouse before the farm cat in abject terror, racing from the city with the clothes upon their backs and precious little else. They stood on the plains staring back at their former home, flashes of the terrible attack playing in their minds eye. Unable to bring themselves to take a step toward the city gates to try and collect something with which to start over they had turned upon their heels to trudge along the great wide road that was once jammed with the traffic of merchants coming to market. Having struck and bitten, coiled and constricted, sucked down and swallowed a dozen or more of it's victims until no part of it's length was not distended the serpent slowly slithered along until it found a gaping portal that led into the sewer system beneath the city where it would come to make it's nest. The priests had thrown down their robes garbing themselves in the clothes of common travellers as they made their escape laden down with as many copper and steel pieces as they could carry to start new lives in distant corners of Krynn. As the years passed the forest grew closer and closer to reclaim the land abandoned by men. The buildings rotted under the deluges of rain, timbers cracking under the strain of the weight they fought to still support. The serpent slumbered as all apex predators do until it sensed the presence of a wandering woodland creature or a party of adventurers seeking to pick through the ruins in hopes of finding treasures which had long been carried away. Despite it's massive size it remembered well the inherited instinct of the ambush predator, pressing itself down, shaping itself to fit it's environment until it's meal wandered into striking distance. The animals were easy. Deer and horses, sheep and cows. Born wild and free or on the run from a farmers herd it did not matter. They came to graze on the lush green grasses and drink from the wide deep puddles where water had pooled in sunken cobblestone streets. The adventurers had camped beside blazing fires under starry skies. Their lives all ended the same. The blissful ignorance, a second of terrifying realisation and then the numbing pain as they stared wide awed unbelieving at the fangs punched through their bodies by a creature of impossible and terrifying dimensions that looked upon them with murderous triumph in the final moments of their lives.

## Chapter 6

"Hitch?...Hitch!"

Cielo woke with a start as thin slivers of sunlight sliced through a boarded up window to paint bars like a prison cell on the floor. She could not feel the press of Hitch behind her and sat up whirling around to try and find him. His helmeted head poked around a door frame as he pressed a finger to his lips before disappearing again. Wrapping her fingers around the hilt of her thick bladed short sword she sprang up and crept forward on the balls of her feet. Holding the point forward she realised she had left her buckler on the floor but didn't turn to go back after it. Coming to the edge of the door she tensed herself to spring through and confront her enemies when she nearly ran face first into Hitch.

"Damn it girl what are you doing?! You nearly ran me through with that thing."

He looked down at the blade in her hands, his were full of two plates laden down with dried meat and fruit from their provisions.

"Nothing here worth eating not that I would expect it. I've had to dip into our provisions again."

Cielo chuckled to herself noting that when she was preparing their meals water had to be boiled and meats fried while Hitch simply dumped the contents of some jars and pouches onto empty plates. Hitch waited for a moment for her to thank him before grunting to himself and following after her. Over their simple breakfast he outlined their next move. They would look around the city for anything they might find useful on their trip ahead. While other people might refer to this as "looting" Hitch preferred the term "scrounging". A cheeky person might have been tempted to observe that Kender often spouted similar beliefs. After they had gathered what they could they would head for the Southern Dargaard Mountains. It would be a hard march through tough terrain. Nothing would be likely to follow them though and soon enough they would be on the warm grassy high plains beyond. Cielo brightened at the thought of the hot meals waiting in a country inn with warm beds and fire places to curl up next to.

"Wait!"

Hitch hissed in her ear gripping her shoulder and pulling her back. She had been seconds away from opening the front door of the stables when a shadow had fallen across the front of the entire building blocking out the sun. They heard something scraping along the broken cobblestones outside, shuffling along in intervals of movement. They crept towards the cracks in the walls looking out to see a shifting sea of black scales bunching and releasing as it slowly undulated past their field of view. They both turned and looked at each other confused, neither saying a word before turning back to stare at the mass passing by.

"Reorx...."

Hitch whispered before breaking away from his vantage point before guiding Cielo back to the other room.

"If I didn't know any better I'd say that was a giant snake that just slithered past."

Hitch commented incredulously.

"I don't know better but I know what a snake looks like!"

Cielo trembled with fear.

"Probably only comes out in the daytime to sun itself."

Hitch muttered to himself. Cursing under his breath he turned away for a moment.

This trip had seemed to be cursed from the start. They had barely survived encountering these "Dragon Men" twice now and right as they were about to make good their escape they nearly stumble into a serpent which could have swallowed an oxen whole.

"Hitch!...Hitch!"

Cielo roused Hitch from his pondering.

"Not to worry. I have a plan but your not going to like it..."

Returning to the wagon Hitch had pulled out a length of rope, a pick axe and a cured ham he had been saving. Cielo looked confused as he passed her the ham before pressing the rope through a hole near the bottom of the pick axe handle.

"Uh.. What are we doing now?"

She said looking down at the delicious ham with obvious intent.

"Go on then cut me a thick slice too."

He said exasperated that she could be thinking about her stomach at a time like this. She quickly cut away the thick smokey skin getting to the pink salty flesh underneath. They munched as quickly as they could not stopping to savour potentially their last meal while Hitch tried to explain.

"We're going fishing."

Cielo's mouth kept moving up and down as she cocked her head to the side to contemplate the Dwarf before her. She was now convinced had started to go quite mad. Hitch paused for a moment savouring her confusion at his cryptic comment.

"We take this 'hook' here"

He said indicating the pick axe and mimed pressing it through the cured ham.

"Tying off our line to one of these beams we will trick the snake into swallowing the ham and hook whole, trapping it while we make good our escape."

He pumped his eyebrows up and down for two beats proudly beaming at his cunning plan. Taking the ham out of her hands and not waiting for her to protest or beg for another slice he pushed the pick axe through the flesh, bursting out the other side. Handing the ham back to Cielo he picked up the rope and flung it over an overhead beam before tying it off against a post. Scooping up her buckler Cielo followed Hitch to the front door. The sun was shining brightly again as the serpent had slithered off down the road. Flinging open the door they blinked for a moment in the harsh morning light before spotting a trio of the "Dragon Men" rapidly approaching them at a run.

"Back!"

Hitch roared the flat of his palm striking Cielo sending her rolling backwards as the hooked ham rolled away across the floor. The wooden beam slammed back into place in it's iron bracket a second before the creatures outside slammed into it causing the door to bow and flex as it loudly creaked threatening to splinter. Hefting his double headed war axe in his hands he wound back preparing for a mighty strike. Cielo sat on the floor looking at the flexing door unable to move.

"Get my crossbow girl!"

Hitch thundered not taking his eyes off the door to see if she had even heard or responded to his command. Clambering to her feet she raced toward the heavy wooden weapon, hefting it in her arms as the door gave way.

"Snap!"

The upright planks of the door exploded inward as one of the creatures stumbled a few steps over the threshold.

"Thunk!"

Hitch swung the axe with practiced ease, the razor sharp steel catching it in its open screaming maw, cutting through the tendons which held the lower jaw in place before burying itself halfway into the base of its spine. It coughed for a second, gouts of thick black blood washing over the polished steel. Kicking it hard in the groin with a steel capped boot Hitch was able to wrench the blade free. Springing back he steadied himself for his next strike as Cielo fumbled with the crossbow behind him.

"Anytime now!"

Hitch thundered as the remaining two kicked away the last pieces of the door holding onto the wooden frame and stepped inside. They started to circle either side of the dwarf, ignoring the girl as they raised their weapons and called to each other in their guttural tongue. Hitch didn't need a translator to know they were getting ready to strike together and took the initiative. Diving forward he rolled between them with the energy and speed of a combat veteran. Both hands were gripping onto the haft, the thumbs facing each other. He took the impact on his knuckles, adrenalin dulling the pain as he kept rolling up onto his feet and slashed through the back of the knee joint of one of them before it could even turn. It screamed as it collapsed to the ground. Turning to face the final opponent he was not quick enough to stop the slashing sword cut through the air.

"Dingggg!"

The blade rang off his helmet, smashing him aside to flop unconscious onto the ground.

"Nooooo!!"

Cielo screamed at the top of her lungs. Throwing down the crossbow she charged the hideous beast before her. Her legs pumped as she drew her short sword, her eyes goggling in a berserker fury as she sucked in air through her snarling teeth. The beast spun to meet her drawing back its blade as she leapt through the air.

"Dieee!"

She hissed as she stuck her arm out stiff, the blade sinking bursting through its grey skin to sink through meat and organs as it erupted through its back. Her full weight slammed into it carrying it off its feet already dead as it crashed into the floor. She rode it all the way down, yanking out her sword before slashing at its face. The blade dug in and twisted out of her grip before she raised her buckler and brought the edge down to crunch into its face.

"Die!Die!Die!"

She screamed lost in a feral rage as the edge of the shield struck again and again until her arms grew tired and her breath ragged. She was sick of being afraid. Sick of running and feeling like she couldn't do anything. Seeing her beloved Hitch struck down had caused her to snap. Crawling off the creature she ran over to Hitch tears flooding down her face. She fell down beside him and shook him as she shouted in his face to wake up.

"I'm...not... deaf you know..."



He struggled to be heard as he tried to fight her off, flailing at her as she continued to shake him.

"Hitch!"

She cried throwing her arms around him to squeeze him tightly. He lay there for a moment as the bright spots stopped dancing in his vision, patting her on the back.

"I'm all right...I'm all right...Thank Reorx my helmet held."

As his vision cleared he noticed the black blood splashed across her face, the brown hair which wasn't plastered across her forehead stuck out like a riot of an exploded birds nest.

"Got the third one then?"

He asked. She nodded her head solemnly, her body shuddering.

"You ran straight into danger without a thought about whether or not you would live and die and managed to come out the other side..."

She nodded again before he slapped her on the shoulder.

"Then welcome to the life of being a soldier little one."

Easing himself up into a sitting position he looked around to see the corpses of the three creatures scatter around, pools of black blood forming and expanding out.

"Well now that we've gotten that out of the way what do you say we go and kill a serpent the size of a ship."

Getting to their feet they limped toward the front door, stopping to pick up the ham on it's improvised hook. Stepping to the threshold they covered their eyes as they peeked their heads around the frame to catch a glimpse outside. Seeing no signs of their quarry they tossed the pick axe out into the street before retreating back inside.

"When is this thing coming back?"

Hitch asked as the sun beat down on them. They were laying on the wooden floor of the second storey, their crossbows loaded looking down onto the street below where they had left their ham bait. The giant black serpent had not turned back and seemingly wandered off uninterested by the life and death struggle that had ensued shortly after it had departed. They had discussed simply loading up their wagon and trying to make a break for the city gates, but there was no way of telling how fast the creature was.

"We used to do this when we would go hunting for wolves"

Hitch recalled.

"You'd take a lamb and tie it to a tree before hiding up in the branches to wait for those furry devils."

Hitch patted his crossbow, turning to smile at Cielo he saw her expression of shock.

"What about the poor lamb?"

She asked, her tone full of concern.

"Well sometimes we would get the wolf before it could hurt the lamb and other times..."

He let his voice trail off shrugging his shoulders, the corners of his mouth turning downwards. The expression was exaggerated by the thick moustache of his beard. It was said that a dwarf shrugged more with his mouth than his shoulder a fact that Cielo could certainly attest to.

"You know I didn't see this kind of concern before when I would serve you well done lamb chops straight from the skillet with plenty of mint jelly and roasted vegetables! You might say you 'wolfed' it down hey? hahahah"

Hitch chuckled before they turned back to the bait outside.

"We have to trap this thing or kill it before we can leave."

Hitch solemnly repeated. He had said the same thing when they had first taken up their ambush position. Supplies were starting to run low and the sooner they were away from this accursed city the better. Hitch turned for a moment to look at Cielo before realising that she was no longer laying beside him. Turning back to the street he saw her appear down below. Raising her sword and shield over her head she brought them together, the ring of metal on metal cracking sharply.

"Ding!....Ding!....Ding!...."

The final strike echoed off the crumbling buildings before fading away. Hitch was horrified by what he was seeing. He was up on his feet now, moving in slow motion as though his body were suddenly made out of heavy lead. Turning he raced across the room before hitting the stairs. He tripped and almost fell down them completely before catching the hand rail and managing to right himself. He heard the sword and shield clang together three more times as he raced across the ground floor to the half open door that led out onto the street. Leaping before the threshold his shoulder crashed into the door, flinging it open as he shot out on the street his crossbow cradled against his chest. His eyes took a second to adjust as the sun beat down on him. Cielo was looking up over his shoulder, her eyes widening for a moment before she pushed off on one foot and started running away from the stable. Without pausing he threw himself sideways, following her as the head of the serpent came into view. The giant black head passed by, its jaw open wide as its foot long fangs flashed in the sunlight. The head alone was the size of their wagon and rocketed past them as it tried to strike, snapping onto empty air where Cielo had been seconds earlier.

"Run! RUN!"

Hitch roared as the snake recovered turning as its head lifted up off the ground to tower above them, its blood red eyes burning with murderous lust. Hitch fired his crossbow from the hip the bolt cutting through the air towards the snake's head. It bobbed with unnatural speed for something of its size, its whole body shifting for a moment as it flicked itself out of the way as the bolt arced off and away over the buildings behind it. Cielo grabbed Hitch by the shoulder pulling him after her as she ducked into a nearby building. They did not look back as they ran, jumping and dodging through what appeared to have once been a shop of some kind before hitting the rear down at a running kick. The wood splintered and shot out on the street, the duo right behind it. They heard over their shoulder crashing sounds as wood snapped and glass shattered, the snake in hot pursuit as it tried to jam itself into the building to snap at them. They rounded the corner seeing the entrance to the stables right up ahead as the snake burst through the roof of the building to their left, a plume of dust shooting up into the sky as debris fell back down through the hole it had punched in the roof. Their legs pumped as they covered the distance to the entrance, the snake wheeling around to try and spot its prey. They were mere feet from the open doorway, before a huge shadow appeared on the side of the building blotting out the sun. Diving together they arced through the doorway as the head of the serpent, its mouth open wide to strike slammed into the building. Rolling over they looked back to see the gaping mouth filling the doorway, its pink forked tongue flickering out. Two huge gleaming white fangs had burst through the wall on either side of the door. They stared in amazement for a second before they realised.

"The fangs!"

They shouted in unison as they struggled to their feet. Casting aside his now empty crossbow Hitch hefted his battle axe running forward as he brought it down with all his might onto a glistening white fang. The edge of the axe struck, glancing away as a chunk of the fang chipped off and flew past almost hitting Hitch right in the eye. He thought that would be just his luck, blinded and poisoned at the same time by a stray fragment of tooth. Turning he saw Cielo had started tugging on the rope they had secured to a heavy support beam. He wondered for a second what she was doing as the rope slipped from underneath the bottom of the snake's jaw until the baited pick axe came into view.

"Brilliant girl!"

He snatched up the rope just below the pick axe and started spinning it around faster and faster. They would have one shot at this and he had to get it right. The forked tongue continued to flick, dust fell from the ceiling as the snake rocked its head back and forth, desperately thrashing as it struggled to free itself. Hitch let go out of the rope, the pick axe shooting forward as the fangs pulled back through the wall to reveal fist sized holes punched clean through. The jaws began to snap shut as the hooked ham disappeared into the shadows of the rapidly closing maw. Swallowing on instinct the sharp metal object was sucked down deeper into the snake, scraping along the insides of its throat. It pulled itself back rapidly, the rope trailing from its mouth as it whipped its head side to side. The body convulsed as it tried to hack up the foreign object only for it to get sucked down further and further. The rope snapped taut, the support beam jumped for a second, shuddering as it threatened to snap free from its moorings.

"Cut the line! Cut it!"

Hitch called out to Cielo. She did not hesitate or pause to question the instruction. The corners of her mouth turned down, her nostrils flaring as she drew back her short sword and swung with all her strength where the rope was wrapped around the beam. It rattled and shook as the snake kept flinging itself around outside. Hitch caught a flash of light glint off the edge of the sword as it sailed through the air striking the rope true. The fibres burst apart, the end of the rope whipping into a slack wave as it rocketed out the door to disappear into the bright midday sun.

"You did it! Good girl!"

They hugged each other, jumping up and down in place. They shouted their joy to the rafters, shaking their fists as they danced around. Soon they slowed, their shouts dying down as they started to walk toward the door. Outside they could clearly see the giant black noodle thrashing around in a great heap. The chisel and pick had reaped a terrible toll on the insides of the snake. As it had thrashed and struggled to free itself the hardened steel edges had dug and gouged channels in its soft pink flesh until rivers of its own blood spurted down its gullet. So there under a blazing sun in the ancient ruins of the land locked city it had come to know as its only home a divine serpentine had drowned upon its own gore. They watched as the great thick coils stopped spasming and finally lay still.

"Should we take some kind of trophy?"

Cielo asked as she continued to stare in amazement at the sheer size of the creature.

"What would we take? What could we? The fangs might still contain poison enough to kill a thousand men. It has enough skin to make sails for the greatest warship but we don't have enough salt to spare for a even a belt. Best to leave it here where the vultures and crows will grow tired on a diet of its flesh."

Cielo's shoulders slumped with disappointment at Hitch's decision. How would anyone ever believe their story is she didn't have some kind of proof to show them? Why didn't Hitch understand this? How could he just walk away? Could she somehow sneak off and cut away a piece of it? Her train of thought was interrupted as he wrapped his arm around her.

"I'm proud of you girl. We have faced impossible odds today and by the grace and blessing of Reorx himself we have prevailed in the greatest traditions of the mightiest of the dwarven heroes of myth and legend."

Cielo beamed, her heart ready to burst from her chest as she swelled up with pride at her own bravery and the high praise bestowed by Hitch.

"Just one other thing though..."

She turned to face him seeing his expression had grown serious.

"If you ever pull a kender brained scheme like that again, running into the street to use yourself as bait I'll kill you myself."

Patting her on the shoulder he turned and left her standing there as he went back into the stable to pack their supplies and get ready to leave. As they were packing up their caravan and readying the mules Hitch called out.

"Damn!"

Cielo popped up from the other side of the caravan with a quizzical look on her face.

"I just realised we could have used one of those damn creatures over there as bait instead of wasting a good ham like that..."

Cielo smiled as she finished tightening a strap. It was funny the things you thought about after surviving a life and death situation like that. The mules hesitated at first as they crossed the threshold out into the bright sunlight, turning their heads from side to side to try and vainly shield their adjusting eyes. With flicks of the reins and clicks of her tongue she kept them moving when they started to falter. At first she had wanted to make them gallop, to try and put as much distance between themselves and this terrible place but Hitch had advised against it. They would be travelling far that day and he hoped that nightfall would see them bedding down in the high country. The sturdy beasts of burden would need to conserve their strength. Cielo sat up straight and puffed out her chest, her chin held high as she scowled at the broken buildings tense and alert for the slightest sign of movement. Her expression conveyed far more courage than she felt in that moment. The adrenalin had started to wear off and she found herself beginning to shake. The full impact of what they had just been through began to hit her and she felt herself starting to be overwhelmed.

"The dead can do us no harm now."

Cielo jumped in her seat at the sound of Hitch's voice despite his reassuring tone.

"But we did almost die! When you took that blow to the helmet and fell to the floor I thought you.. I thought I had lost..."

She trailed off as she turned away from him trying to wipe away the tears she didn't want him to see.

"Then I shall have to draw you a map so that you will always find your way back to me."

She turned back only enough to give him a thoroughly unimpressed sideways glance, a inditement of his terrible sense of humour. When they emerged from the broken remains of the city gate they felt like they had broken the surface after a deep dive underwater and could finally breathe again. Leaving what remained of the road they cut through the long grass following the alongside the crumbling city wall until it finally ended to reveal the Southern Dargaard Mountains that lay ahead.

## Chapter 7

Leaving the ruined city behind they climbed up into the foothills, the mountains looming ahead as the city shrunk further and further into the distance. They paused at sunset watching the great orange orb cast it's final long shadows across the vast plains the rolled out below them. They gave a shudder when thinking about what had happened down among those crumbling walls just a few hours earlier. The sky turned a deep blood red as the sun dipped lower and lower below the horizon. Normally they would have already stopped and made camp for the night, their mouths watering at the smells of roasted meat. They pushed on through for a few hours more wanting to put as much distance as possible between them and that cursed place they had left behind. As the sky faded from navy blue to black, the stars twinkling in the heavens the mules finally stopped in mute protest, refusing to go any further. Dismounting they led them to a small copse of trees and tied them up, making sure they had their fill of water and grain before looking to see what they had left for themselves. Their rations were starting to run low and Hitch knew the foraging would be more scarce the further they ascended. They would need to push hard tomorrow if they were going to make it over the mountains into the plains beyond. Sitting in silence while they munched on their meagre meal of dried fruits and nuts they heard something off in the near distance.

"Ohhhheeeeeeeee...."

The wailing moan trailed off. Cielo and Hitch froze for a moment before fumbling for their weapons. They turned around trying to ascertain where the sound had come from.

"Ehhhhhhhharghhhhhh...."

They started to head toward the source of the noise, ducking low and holding their crossbows at the ready. Edging up to some bushes they readied themselves for anything. Pushing some branches aside Hitch noticed an odd rock formation. A very large boulder had been placed near a dark gaping entrance cut into the side of the hill. The entrance had carved support beams on either side holding up a cross piece.

"It's the wind..."

Hitch chuckled to himself. Cielo turned to face him as he went on.

"Just the wind. Nothing to fear. Coming out of that entrance up ahead."

"What do you think it is?"

"Possibly a mine entrance of some kind."

"I don't want to find out"

Cielo declared as she gripped her weapon tightly.

"With the way this weather is rolling in we might not have much of a choice"

He pointed up to the sky where large dark clouds raced along, blotting out the stars as lighting flashed inside the puffy pillows of water vapour. Her fear forgotten at the thought of having to sleep outside in the pouring rain they made their way back to the wagon to fetch their hands weapons and secure some additional armour.

"I'll take this in a tunnel fight over almost anything else."

Hitch whispered as he tapped a finger onto the flat of his axe blade. It seemed to glow in the soft white light of Solinari. Cielo pushed her arm through the straps of her buckler, flexing her bicep to ensure it was in place before drawing her short sword and nodding her head to Hitch to lead the way.

They had managed to light a torch with steel and flint. The old rags at the end of the stick leapt to life as they ignited. Holding it out in front of him, making sure to hold it as high as possible out of his direct line of sight Hitch and Cielo made their way into the carved stone entrance. Squeezing through the gap where they boulder had shifted away from the entrance it had been intended to seal they stepped over the threshold as the rain started to pour down. They made their way along the tunnel, weapons at the ready. The passage was lined either side with large rectangular stones the size of loaves of bread which were perfectly laid on top of each other, the joints so smooth and close they could detect no mortar had been used or needed. An archway appeared ahead, the light of the torch unable to illuminate the darkness beyond. Stepping closer they realised a long set of steps disappeared down into the pitch black depths. Hitch held up his arm signalling not to proceed. Handing the torch to Cielo he fumbled in his pouches until his hand emerged holding a small square of some kind. Cielo tried to lean in closer to find out what he was doing and almost touched him on the top of the head with the burning tip of the torch.

"Damn it girl! Just wait a second."

Taking her wrist he pushed it up as high as his arm could reach and gave it a little shake to indicate she should hold it in place. Stooping down he fumbled for the square he had dropped until he stood up and plucked Cielo's crossbow from the hook on her belt.

"This here..."

He held up the square.

"Is a piece of an old map I haven't had a use for since long before you were born."

He stuck it onto the end of a bolt before clamping it between his teeth while he wound back the action. Hearing the click he took the bolt and tried to hold the tip up to the torch, Cielo pulling away before he waved his hand towards himself. Unsure of what was going on she dutifully lowered the flame until the parchment caught.

"And this..."

Hitch pointed the crossbow down to the distant bottom of the stairs.

"Is why you should avoid going underground whenever you can."

The paddle trigger clicked, the bow limbs jumped and the burning tipped bolt shot down into the darkness like a shooting star.

"WHOOSH!"

The burning paper was a foot from the floor when the world below caught on fire. The air burst into a bright blue flame that rolled out in all directions as a clear lake when a stone is dropped into it. A wall of hot air shot up the stairs in an instant to buffet weakly against the pair who raised their arms to shield their eyes as they turned their heads away on instinct. They looked back down and the bottom of the stairs was pitch black again no sign was left that moments earlier an azure inferno had seemed to consume the entire floor beyond.

"Call me a kender...What was that!?!"

Cielo practically shouted.

"Heavy air..."

Hitch stated matter of factly. He was going to leave it at that before he caught the expression on her face, the same exasperated one that she would give usually followed by a comment to the effect that his answers were as short as his legs. Taking the torch from her he began to descend the steps as he continued his lecture.

"A gnome tried to explain it to me once. They said there are many different types of air which while we cannot see we can feel them as the wind. Some of this air is heavy though how such a thing can be true I do not know and it sinks to the floor. Now in caves and mines where there is precious little breeze at the best of times this air sits in a pool as it were waiting for the touch of a spark to burst into flame. Worse still awaits the unwary you breathe in this heavy air that poisons the body and brings low the most able of men."

Cielo considered his lecture for a moment before responding.

"You were talking to a Gnome?"

She asked in mock surprise.

"You know damn well NO ONE ever talks to a gnome they simply talk AT anyone within earshot."

While descending the stairs Hitch noted the brass rings wider than a clenched fist that stuck out from the wall periodically and mused they must have been part of a hand rail at one time. Whether they supported wooden rails turned round on a lathe or links of chain no trace now remained. This would indicate that whoever had built this structure had abandoned it quite some time ago.

"...from one ruin to another..."

Hitch thought to himself as they approached the final few steps. He paused to hold the torch out in front of himself at head height waving it back and forth slowly.

"What in Krynn are you looking for?"

Cielo asked as she tried to peer past him.

"Perhaps there are some man made traps to go with the naturally occurring ones? Do me a favour and take a step down I want to test a theory..."

Cielo shoved Hitch playfully from behind and he almost toppled off.

"Hammer and Tongs girl!"

A most powerful of profanity for any who have made their living striking hot steel. Arms waving in circles Hitch managed to right his balance before Cielo leapt past him sailing through the air to land at the bottom of the steps. He flinched before freezing in place hoping a trapdoor would not suddenly give way and swallow her whole into the darkness beneath. Shrugging her shoulders she snatched the torch from his hand before she turned on her heel and headed off down the corridor.

"Trip wires are no ebony vipers but they hold surprises just as deadly for the unwary!"

Hitch called to her back before he hurried to catch up as he found himself being left behind in the enveloping darkness. The walls of this corridor differed from anything they had encountered earlier. While the stone was laid with the same great craftsmanship of a master mason, shallow recesses had been chiselled into the stone, wider than they were tall. Into these recesses decorative mosaics had been inlaid to give the impression that one were looking out of a window at some beautiful and majestic vista. They stopped to stare in wide eyes admiration at the scenes of rolling farmlands, sweeping valleys and wind swept snow capped peaks.

"Who would make something like this?"

Cielo asked.

"Mountain dwarves."

Hitch answered solemnly.

"Confining themselves to living underground for the most part this would have been the only way they could have seen the outside world and remember what it had been like."

Hitch rubbed a thumb across one corner of a mosaic, cutting a channel through the dust that had been gathering for untold years.

"Where did everyone go then?"

Cielo's asked with a wary tone afraid of a sinister answer.

"Many places were abandoned in the Cataclysm. Those terrible earthquakes would have shaken anyone dwelling here like dice in a cup."

They started to continue further down the corridor when Hitch remarked.

"It reminds me of the old joke that during an earthquake every coffin must sound like a dried seed pod."

Cielo stopped and turned to Hitch before he held up his hands and mimed as though he was holding something horizontally between them before shaking them in time back and forth.

"Chika-chika-chika"

The sound hissed between his teeth before he burst out laughing at his own dark humour. Taking back the torch he started off down the corridor leaving Cielo stunned and horrified for a moment with the mental image of dancing bones in her brain before she hurried after him. They could no longer hear the rain outside so deep were they now underground. Moving forward they came upon recesses cut deep into either side of the corridor that ran from floor to ceiling. They crept forward expecting something to jump out at them. Readying their weapons they leapt forward as one, each turning in the air to face their assigned recess where they almost struck down the figures standing before them. Halting their killing strokes at the last moment they realised their opponents were statues. They had been elaborately carved with the keen eye and steady hand of dwarven craftsmen. Leggings peeked out from beneath long mail shirts to be tucked into boots that gave the appearance of the soft leather they sought to recreate. Deer horn handles protruded from scabbards held by thick wide belts which threatened to be overhung by the long braided beards of the solemn stoic guardians that had kept their eternal watch. Traces of paint could be seen where once thick bright coats of colour had been liberally applied from helmeted head to toe. When the collection of artists that had breathed them into life had finally stepped back to admire their creations anyone would have been hard pressed to tell them apart from a living breathing dwarf at more than twenty paces.

"Truly amazing..."

Cielo said as she studied the statue before her.

"You'll get no argument from me little one."

Hitch spoke with a great deal of pride for even though his was a fractious people who held grudges as a dragon hoards coins in it's lair the one thing all dwarves could agreed on was their superior skill in any craft they turned their hands to,

"About the only time you won't argue..."

Cielo flashed him a cheeky grin. He cocked one eyebrow trying his best to stare her down, a task made all the more awkward by the fact that he had to look up at her in order to do it.



"Now if you've finished practicing your award winning charm how about we find out where this corridor leads hey?"

Simply nodding her head in agreement she fell in behind Hitch as they continued on leaving the eternal guardians alone in the darkness. Living eyes might never look upon them again yet continue their silent vigil they would.

"Looks like a big chamber coming up."

Hitch called over his shoulder. A few more steps and they were at the threshold. Hitch held up his axe to signal Cielo should come to a halt. They paused to listen hearing nothing but the sounds of their own breathing.

"We go on three....two....one!"

They burst into the chamber weapons at the ready the torch held high casting flickering shadows against the walls. They were in a domed chamber with a ceiling so high the light from the torch could not penetrate it. Corridors led away in other directions, at least they would have if their entrances were not blocked by fallen rubble. Recesses cut into the circular wall taller than a human held statues of stern dwarven warriors. Dressed in full suits of armour adorned with elaborate carvings and details that made the guardians they had left back in the corridor look like the work of an amateur apprentice by comparison. Horned and riveted helmets sat on their heads, while swords, spears and axes were held at rest. Hitch turned in place holding up his torch to examine each of the guardians in turn. The torch light cast them in deep shadows, their features appearing cruel and menacing. Cielo could very well imagine them stepping forward from their recesses, raising their weapons to cut them down. She backed away from Hitch moving toward the door when she heard the popping hiss of the torch dying out.

"No! NOO!"

Cielo screamed as Hitch whirled around catching her wrist and pulling her close.

"Easy girl! Easy... Open your eyes now. It's ok"

Slowly opening her eyes she saw the entire chamber was now cast in a soft green illumination. Looking up she found where the source of this strange new light was coming from.

"Glow moss."

Hitch said.

"I have not seen it in many years. It is quite rare. But the moss will glow with a light of it's own. Gnomes have been trying to replicate it for centuries. Look at the statues now."

Turning she saw the statues cast in the green glow appeared calm and serene.

"Elders..."

Was all Cielo could manage to whisper in awe.

"They are that girl. Dwarven elders left to guard this place for Reorx knows how long."

The recess directly opposite the tunnel entrance was not like the others. It was wider and shorter, the figure sitting on a throne with a huge smithing hammer resting against one leg. The hammer head was turned sideways, the handle pointing up to the domed ceiling.

"Reorx!"

Hitch exclaimed in awe as he identified the idol of his God before him. Dropping to one knee he bowed his head. Cielo raced over to join him.

"Oh great father..."

Hitch began his words failing him. Tears began to form in his eyes as he felt Cielo's arm wrap around his shoulder.

"I would tell you what we have been through but you already know. I would tell you what we need but a good dwarf never admits to needing anything."

Rising to his feet he walked toward the sitting idol, his hand disappearing into his clothing to emerge holding a thin silver ingot. He placed the small metal bar onto the idol's knee, letting his hand linger for a moment.

"What is a smith who does not have metal to work..."

He paused for a moment staring at his offering.

"Alright enough of that then. Lets build a fire and get something cooking already."

They then proceeded to argue about the fate of their loyal mules. Hitch refusing to bring them into this most sacred of shrines where they would be free to leave their droppings. Cielo countering passionately about leaving them outside in such terrible weather. Hitch ended the matter telling her that mules had done so long before dwarf or human had ridden them or hitched them to a caravan and somehow they had gotten along just fine and could do so for another night. After they gotten a fire started their thoughts soon turned to what they would have for dinner, their stomachs dissatisfied with the meagre rations they had consumed earlier. They returned to the caravan where they gathered their supplies, checking on their mounts who sat with heads bowed under the protection of the trees they were tied to. Upon their return water was brought to the boil, spices tossed in as the aromatic smells filled the air. Hitch unwrapped a waxed paper package, pulling out some small smooth brown bricks that looked for all the world like bars of soap. Dropping them into the water they soon began to dissolve into beef stew.

"What I wouldn't give for some buttered bread right now..."

Hitch said as he closed his eyes and savoured the smell of their meal.

"Don't forget a good mug of buttermilk!"

Cielo joined in. Their eyes met sharing a knowing nod.

"Hitch...why don't people believe in the Gods?..."

Cielo's question caught him off guard for a moment.

"Well..."

Hitch paused for a moment as he gathered his thoughts.

"If you drop a bucket into a well and it never comes up with water would you believe that wells never contain any?"

He put the question to his young charge. She looked to the floor for a moment her brows knitting together.

"No...because wells have water?..."

Cielo was confused for a moment thinking back to the well near their home and the plentiful buckets of cool fresh water she withdrew everyday. Some days she had wished it would run dry if only so she could take a break from heaving and pulling on that rope.

"Yes! You know water is in the well because you have seen it! No one has seen the 'waters' though since the Cataclysm and must rely on the written words of those long dead that water ever existed in those wells.

This is like the existence of the Gods. Our temples like this one here that we sit in are the 'wells' which remain dotted across Krynn. Our prayers being answered is the water we draw from them. I have faith that one day the waters will return. Just because our prayers are not answered does not mean they are not heard."

Turning his head he looked up to the great idol of Reorx looming above them.

"When we are children we ask our parents for everything until we are adults and must do everything for ourselves. The races of Krynn are now grown and must look after themselves until their parents return. Even when they are not around, we know that our parents still love us."

Cielo nodded her understanding, here eyes wide with the revelation.

"I wish our parents would return soon then..."

She remarked as a look of sadness crossed over her face. The memory of her own parents had already begun to fade, their faces blurring in her minds eye. It saddened her that one day she might not be able to recall what they looked like at all.

"Here...eat this."

Hitch handed her a bowl of the hot steaming stew. Suddenly she remembered how hungry she was dipping in her spoon and blowing until it was cool enough to taste. Filling their bellies they were soon stretched out on the stone floor warm by the fires glow and snoring their heads off as the troubles of the past few days melted away.

## Chapter 8

They awoke that morning on the floor of the temple much restored and ready to set off on the next leg of their journey. Packing up their gear they turned and bowed at the waist, one arm clamped across their chest as a sign of respect before turning and heading out into the early morning light. Their mules hawed and honked with delight to see them again still tied under the thick heavy branches which had sheltered them through the night. Loading their gear back onto the caravan Hitch began strapping in the mules when he caught Cielo out of the corner of his eye staring up at the Southern Dargaard Mountain range. The mountains looked like giant flakes of flint, the ridges lines knapped by primordial giants into jagged edges that swept down to the valley floor below. Snow dusted along the ridge lines like a fine confectioner sugar. She did not know how they could possibly climb those dizzying heights let alone with a caravan and mules.

"If you don't mind now..."

Cielo turned to see Hitch standing there with a disapproving look on his face. It took her a moment to catch his meaning before she hurried stowing the last of their gear and climbed up beside him.

"Come on now. Come on."

Hitch urged the mules into action. They bowed their heads and strained for a moment the iron rimmed wooden wheels squeaking in protest as they began to turn. The clouds had cleared and the early morning sun beat down as they headed off on their journey through the rolling grassy hills towards the mountains. Cresting a steep hill they paused for a moment to look out on the valley before them. It's soft green sides swept up to the left and right, before harsh grey rocky ridges ripped through. A river flowed between the mountain ridge lines, snaking it's way up toward a scooping v-shape cut in the mountain chain.

"We'll follow that river until we reach the other end of the valley."

Hitch advised before urging the mules on again. They trotted down the slope blazing a trail through the long waving grass before coming upon a track that ran parallel to the river.

"What have you got there?"

Hitch asked as he nodded toward Cielo's cupped hands. Since they had started off she had busied herself with a small carving knife and a piece of wood, gently shaving away thin strips until the desire shaped had begun to form.

"I'm trying to make a little statue of Reorx so that he can look after us no matter where we go."

She said in a cheerful tone. Hitch smiled proudly. She was very self aware unlike alot of humans her age and he had often been touched by the thought and consideration that went into things she had done over the years.

"Let me know when it's done, I'm keen to have a look."

Hitch encouraged her as she continued to cut into the wood.

"I once heard the legend of a stone mason who was so obsessed with proving his loyalty and devotion to his God that he took to carving idols out of the finest marble over and over again. Each one more life like and perfect then the last. The mason believed that if he could only capture the image of their God so clearly that they appeared to be alive the God would inhabit the stone and walk among men again. In other versions of the tale it is a painter trying to capture the image of a beautiful woman they hope will step off the canvas and into their arms. Such a thing would truly be magic and the painter would have commissions to last a hundred lifetimes!"

Hitch quietly chuckled while shaking his head at the thought of a man chained to his easel while a line of customers trailed out from his cottage.

"Hitch how does a wizard cast spells?"

The question caught Hitch by surprise but Cielo was always full of questions that leaped out at the oddest of moments.

"How do you sing?"

Cielo scowled for a moment annoyed that Hitch was trying to avoid answering before he continued.

"As you draw in your breathe the wizard draws to him the power of his patron God. As you hold your throat and lips to create a certain sound the wizard crooks their fingers and combines their ingredients..."

Hitch paused to draw in a deep breathe before going on, relishing the dramatic moment and the rapt attention of his one person audience.

"In the end it is breath pushed between lips that causes music or magic to come forth. Breath that gives birth to song's so sweet and uplifting that they can raise a wounded man from the battlefield to charge head long into an enemy that had moments before filled him with pitiless dread. Breath that sees lightning arc from finger tips to strike men down in a blinding instant, the smell of their own roasting flesh filling their nostrils."

"Have you seen such things before for yourself?"

"Who I? A humble hill dwarf blacksmith?"

Hitch paused for a moment taking his eyes off the road to try and peek over her shoulder. She caught him and gave a mock scowl before turning to look out onto her side as they rolled through the countryside. She breathed in the fresh mountain air sweet with the flowers that bloomed in colourful blankets across the sides of the hills. It was so grand and majestic a place she imagined herself and Hitch moving their forge there.

"It would be easier to bring water from the river then hiking back and forth to the well each day."

She commented. Hitch was confused for a moment.

"What would be? If we lived here?"

She nodded cheerfully.

"Just look at this place!"

She cried joyfully spreading her arms wide, the whittling knife still clutched in her hand almost slashing Hitch across the face.

"Look what your doing girl!"

He cried as he swatted her hand away from his face.

"What lot of good I'd be as a blind black smith!"

He grumbled. The corners of her mouth turned down for a moment before she put the whittling knife away and leaned into Hitch's shoulder, her arms wrapping around his bicep. It was hard for him to stay mad at her for long as she very well knew especially when she snuggled into him.

He rested his head to the side on top of hers and they continued along like this in the warm sunshine without a care in the world, allowing themselves to imagine what life would be like in the picturesque valley.

"Look over there!"

Hitch pointed. Cielo raised up her head and spotted a village coming into view up ahead. The tops of grey buildings poked up through the trees. Following the track alongside the river they curved to the left away from the village until they came across a gap in the trees. A path forked off through the thick trunks of the alpine giants, the village laying ahead.

"Looks promising and we are badly in need of supplies."

Turning the wagon they headed down the path toward the village. Getting closer they saw the grey building were made from irregular shaped stones of a wide variety of shades of grey stacked expertly together like a jigsaw puzzle. Thick beams of wood exposed at the corners, cross pieces connecting horizontally to support the upper floor. The roofs curved sharply up to a point like the blade of a hollow ground axe designed to allow the heavy snow fall to cascade off and prevent it crushing the home underneath it's weight.

"Looks like dwarven craftsmanship..."

Hitch muttered for a moment before his suspicions were confirmed when a stout dwarven woman clutching a basket full of bread crossed in front of their path. She paused for a moment to look at the intruders before hurrying off. Paying no mind as people were often in a hurry they closed until they caught the sounds and the smells of the village. People chattered, feet clomped, freshly baked bread and spit fired meats wafted to their hungry nostrils. Practically drooling they whipped up their mules eyes peeled for the food shops. Coming around the corner of an outlying building they found themselves staring down the main street. Wooden signs hung from wrought iron brackets displaying the name of the businesses with simple painted pictures to illustrate. At a glance Hitch spotted at least three signs with mugs of ale, two with loaves of bread and one with a needle and bobbin. The large lead lined windows of diamond shaped glass were crammed with displays of the wares for sale within. People stopped in the street and popped out of open upper floor windows to stare at the new arrivals. They were dressed in heavy traditional clothing, women wore dresses that came down to the ankle and covered down to the forearms, bright stitching of geometric designs adorning them. The men wore long sleeve tunics tucked into stout work pants of sturdy material and design.

"I don't think they get many new people around here..."

Cielo muttered her stomach twisting with anxiety.

"Dwarves are always suspicious of new people."

Hitch reassured Cielo as he patted her on the leg.

"It is what has kept us alive for so long."

Pulling to the side of the street they tied their mules to a nearby lamp post. They were about to step into a butcher shop when a very officious dwarf came huffing up to them. A vest strained against his generous paunch, small rounded glasses perched upon his nose.

"You can't do that!!"

The figure cried as it staggered to a stop.

"See the butcher?!"

Hitch asked as he hooked his thumb toward the open door. The official looked confused for a moment before going on.

"Those animals!"

He cried thrusting a finger at the mules.

"They can't be left there on the street like that, what if they... make a mess."

Hitch paused for a moment looking terribly annoyed at the blustering wind bag before him.

"We'll only be a moment..."

The official quickly cut him off.

"I'm sorry but our town ordinances are very clear in this matter. All animals must be housed in a stable as soon as they arrive!"

Hitch squared off with the red cheeked dwarf.

"Very generous of you to be calling this village a town..."

Hansel Brightspark's eyes blazed for a moment in disbelief. Clearly this was a person that was used to being listened to and obeyed without question.

"And I bet you're the owner of the only stable in town as well."

A crowd had begun to form of disapproving faces. Seeing the mood of the people Hitch changed tack.

"Very well then... lead the way to the stables."

The plump official straightened up, tugging at the hem of the vest before pointing off down the main road and giving directions in a clipped precise manner. When they arrived at the stables Hitch was upset to find out they did not offer day rates and they were forced to hand over a fee for an overnight visit despite his reassurances they were going to be back on the road before sunset. Stalking away with their pouches a little lighter they headed back into the town proper to gather their supplies. After a stop at a bakery where they purchased sticky buns and warm frothy cups of sweetened milk their mood brightened instantly. Stopping at various merchants their packs were soon loaded up with wax paper wrapped packages of cured meats, dried fruits, various kinds of cheese and some thick fresh steaks that they would be cooking tonight for their dinner. They had originally been planning on taking their time to peruse the various shops and samples the wares of the many eateries on offer but their run in with the official had Hitch eager to leave before they came up with another law or regulation to further gouge them for the terrible crime of being a travelled passing through. Many a remote town or village helped to keep their coffers swollen with the taxes and fees levied on those who made the mistake of stopping.

"Ah... now lets step inside here for a moment."

Hitch said with great relish as he clapped his hands together. Stepping into the tavern Cielo had to duck her head to avoid hitting it on the darkly stained heavy wooden beams of the ceiling. The crowd of lively dwarves barely looked up from their mugs, their cheeks flushed red with drink before continuing with their conversations. Hitch made his way to bar getting the attention of the bar maid before ordering two mugs of ale. Cielo looked shocked for a moment as the bar maid handed over two pewter steins, their handles carved from the antler of some mountain creature.

"Over there quick grab that table."

Hitch called out over the dull roar of the voices around them. Cielo made her way over to a vacant table by the wall and quickly sat down. She nodded at the dwarves that turned to stare at her.

"I... I've never drunk ale before..."

Cielo stammered as Hitch set her stein down before her.

"And you won't have to..."

Hitch said cheerfully with a wink before throwing back his head and drinking deeply. Lowering his stein he wiped the foam from his beard before loudly smacking his lips.

"This just saves me another trip up to the bar."

Winking he swapped his empty stein for hers before raising it to his lips for a sip before thinking better of it and placing it back down between them on the table.

"This is the one benefit of living in a village I miss. Dip your finger in and give it a try."

Cielo reached over hooking her finger into the foam from the top of the untouched mug. Popping it into her mouth she grimaced for a moment at the bitter taste of the ale, her lips pursing as she tried to her best to pretend to enjoy it.

"Smooth!"

She gasped as it hit the back of her throat setting off a coughing fit.

"Tastes terrible doesn't it?"

Hitch asked with a broad grin on his face. Cielo's coughing had drawn the attention of the other patrons who nudged each other and snickered at the human girl who had no business in their opinion trying to drink good dwarven ale. They assured each other with the false certainty that fires everyone when they are full of drink that a human palate was simply not sophisticated enough to appreciate the full bodied flavours. The truth was dwarven ale was much like dwarven spirits, they were an acquired taste which one picked up because they had no other choice. A dwarven tavern in these parts would no more stock a human ale as it would an elven wine or a kender liqueur, whose recipe is always an original creation of borrowed ingredients the top-knotted distiller cannot recall coming into their possession. Raising his mug he slowly sipped as he looked around the room and Hitch did not like what he saw. The mood of the drunken dwarves was turning ugly as they each tried out do the other with increasingly louder recountings of jokes and old wives tales regarding the many perceived and down right untrue failings of humans.

"Come on we better get you out of here."

Hitch placed his half finished mug down.

"Whats wrong?"

She asked as her eyes darted around the room.

"Nothing as long as we get out of here right now!"

They rose from their seats and were making a rapid bee line for the front door when it was suddenly blocked by a line of backlit figures.

"There they are! Get them!"

Figures moved through the doorway towards them, official looking dwarves in matching elaborate uniforms who passed for the Town Guard quickly surrounded them. The central figure stepped into the room, the same self important official Hansel Brightspark that had accosted them in the street regarding their mules.



## Chapter 9

They were hustled down the street as the sun was beginning to set in full view of everyone in town. Hitch and Cielo struggled against their captors to no avail shouting and demanding to know what was going on. The answer became all too clear when they were led through the open doors of the stable to see their hand forged wares laid out on display.

"What do we have here?"

Hansel asked rhetorically with triumph.

"Looks like these two are smuggling weapons to the east..."

They paused to let the allegation sink in.

"I'm a smith you idiot!."

Hitch growled.

"So you admit these are yours?!"

The official practically spat.

"I forged them!"

Hitch struggled against his captors knowing that whatever he said it would be twisted and used against them.

"So you come to our town...your caravan loaded with dwarven weapons destined for foreign enemies..."

He turned to face Cielo.

"In the company of a....human!"

The word fell from his mouth with bitter disgust.

"Whack!"

He struck her across the face, the backhanded blow catching her off guard. She scrunched up her nose willing herself not to cry even as her face began to redden and swell.

"BASTARD!!"

Hitch roared causing the official to stumble back for a moment.

"Fatherless sons of whore mothers!..."

Hitch redoubled his efforts twisting and turning in his captors grip. He lifted his legs letting his weight carry him to the floor. His captors bumped into each other over the top of him for a moment before he sprang up, pushing off the floor as hard as he could to bring the top of his head up in the jaw of one of the dwarves above him.

"CRACK!"

The dwarf's jaw broke, letting go of his grip as he fell backwards clutching for his face. Wasting no time Hitch grabbed the second by the lapels of his uniform and dragged him forward, his face swinging downward in a murderous arc. Hitch's forehead connected with the dwarf's nose, splattering blood and pulping flesh and cartilage underneath.

One of Cielo's captors let go of her arm, drawing a heavy wooden club from his belt as he rushed forward. The remaining dwarf attempting to catch her loose arm at the elbow to draw them both behind her back but wasn't quick enough and soon found her free hand clenched into a blurring fist rocketing towards his face. The blow caught him right under his eye loosening some teeth beneath the tenderised meat of his cheek. Hitch spun around as the third guard ran forward, their club swinging down in an arc toward his head in an attempt to dash out his brains. Dodging to the side he clamped his fists together swinging them like battering ram into his attackers ribs. The air blew out of their lungs as they collapsed onto the floor gasping for breath.

"Help! HELP!!"

Hansel was out on the street shrilly calling for reinforcements. Cielo stamped on the foot of the remaining guard causing him to let go for a moment. Trying to copy Hitch she grabbed the dwarf by the lapel. She was too tall though and her forehead crashed into his knocking them both backwards as stars flashed in her vision. She stumbled back into the caravan as Hitch raced forward slamming his fist around in a hook shot to catch the guard squarely in the jaw. Their head snapped to the side for a second, their whole body going limp to crumple down onto the floor.

"Stop them! Stop them!"

Hansel hysterically shrieked as he stabbed his finger back into the stable. Stumbling over to Cielo Hitch had just enough time to pull her towards him as the room began to fill up with the angry faces of the remaining town guard and assorted residents who stared in disbelief at the bodies laid strewn about the two strangers.

"Alright...we surrender..."

Hitch puffed in between ragged breaths. Seeing the state of their friends for the town guards the fight was far from over. Hands shot forward gripping wrists and twisting arms behind their backs while iron shackles were secured in place. They thought they were going to be led away until the first one stepped forward and smashed his fist into Hitch's face. He did his best to turn away from the blow before a shower of shots caught him in the stomach doubling him. They struck him in the side of the head, knuckles flattening the delicate cartilage of his ears against his skull. Cielo arched her back as best she could keeping her head out of striking distance. They hooked shots into her guts and when this failed to bring her low they hammered her thighs until her legs buckled. Gasping for air the red faced guards stood back satisfied they had taken their pound of flesh in recompense. They were marched off to the local barracks, practically carried between the guards standing either side to support them as they stumbled along. Led down a set of stairs into a basement they were thrown into individual cells, the iron gates slamming shut. They lay there like that for untold hours in the dark, listening to the movement of others above them until even those sounds faded away as the guards went about their rounds, safe in the belief that their captives could not escape. Cielo stretched out on the cell floor, her head throbbing from where she had struck the dwarf. Hitch's arms had been clamped behind him with iron shackles which the guards had left in place when they had slung him into his cell. Unable to get comfortable on his sides he had propped himself up in the corner and fallen asleep with his chin resting on his stomach.

"Everyone rise."

The audience in the packed courtroom rose in unison. Lines had formed out the door early in the morning hours before the court would be in session. Everyone was keen to get a look at the strangers and be part of the action. Clever vendors had taken advantage of the situation and had walked up and down the queue offering hot drinks and pastries for sale. One industrious dwarf had constructed an outhouse on top of a wagon for paying members of the public to relieve themselves before rejoining the queue. Cielo and Hitch had been roused from their cells with buckets of water tossed between the bars to shock them awake. Looking like drowned rats of ill reputed character they had been led over to the courthouse.

"The court of the village of Fernweh is now in session, the honourable judge Arnold Harebottom presiding. Be seated."

Chairs scrapped as everyone sat down in unison. The official, whom they had overheard earlier referred to as Hansel Brightspark, rose and walked in front of the court.

"Your honour the good people of Fernweh have endured and overcome the invasion of weapon smugglers within their midst..."

Pausing for dramatic effect he continued.

"This 'dwarf' and his human master were seen entering the town the previous day. Sensing they were of a low character I took it upon myself to investigate the reason for their being here. You could only imagine my shock and dismay when I learned of the cache of high quality dwarven weapons in their possession."

The audience gasped and began muttering among themselves.

"There can be only one reason..."

They stuck their finger up into the air.

"...for such goods to be travelling so far to the east."

They had paced to one side of the courtroom before spinning in place to head back across the floor.

"And that is to sell these good dwarven wares into the hands of the lesser races so that they might be used against us!"

The volume of their whispering shot up until the judge was forced to strike his metal hammer against a small hanging bell, the ringing sound silencing everyone in an instant.

"I just give thanks that we have foiled their plot in time before good dwarven lives were put at risk..."

Hitch started to rise.

"I was taking my goods to market...I'm a blacksmith."

The Judge cut him off.

"That you made the goods in question is not up for debate by this court, but what you intended to do with them which is plain enough for everyone to see."

"Every 'Good Dwarf'?"

Hitch asked unable to hide the sarcasm in his tone.

For a moment the right honourable Harebottom turned from pink to purple before hissing through his gritted teeth.

"Good Dwarves like the people of Fernweh are the only reason why the dwarven race as a whole has continued to endure despite our cousins of the lower hills and plains doing their best to consort with the lesser races of Krynn!"

Now it was Cielo's turn to leap to her feet, her heart filled with righteous rage.

"What would any of you here know about being a Good Dwarf. My Hitch has taught me the ways of the forge, as they are of Reorx. We have fought through Dragon Men and Giant Serpents. We have communed with Reorx in his holy shrine. I was proud to think myself a dwarf in spirit until I found myself among the likes of you!"

Slamming his hammer against the bench top the judge leapt to his feet as he thundered.

"Silence human! You will not pollute this court with your filthy human lies! You are both sentenced to serve in the Klaffend-Kummer silver mines until it is deemed you have repaid your debt to society."

Hands clamped onto shoulders and arms squeezing and twisting their struggling captives as they were propelled from the courtroom to the thunderous jeering of those assembled.

A popular joke among hill dwarves was that wire was invented by two of Fernweh's founding fathers fighting over a copper coin. Always on the hunt for cost cutting measures regarding anything which may dare to eat into their already eye watering profits, the council had taken the step of exclusively employing penal labour in a move that amounted to slavery by any other name. Travellers hoping to resupply as they passed through might soon find their visit extended indefinitely upon being arrested on trumped up charges for committing crimes both real and imagined. The Klaffend-Kummer silver mine was located less than a days march from the village of Fernweh in the Southern Dargaard Mountains and was owned and operated for the sole enrichment of their ruling council. The back breaking labour was performed in cramped humid conditions deep below the surface of a world that had long forgotten about those unfortunate souls that found themselves scraping and chipping away at stone so dense it would bend iron like a reed before an afternoon breeze. In places the tunnels were so tight that the only way to make any progress was with hardened steel chisels and short handled sledge hammers. Bereft of any eye protection as such things cost money and could potentially be lost in the darkened conditions the miners learned to squeeze their eyes shut as the hammer struck the chisel sending razor sharp shards exploding outwards in all directions. Often new comers would miss their cries echoing along the roughly hewed shafts as unrelenting metal met soon to be fractured phalanges. What stale air there was to breathe was filled with dust and particles that blackened the lungs stealing years of life that might otherwise have been lived.

Punishing a person to a term of service within the mines was tantamount to a death sentence. The common folk of Fernweh were kept in the dark about the true fate of those who found themselves led to the gaping maw of the mines to have tools pressed into their hands, whips cracking menacingly to herd them onto into darkness often lit by little else than short round candles and sputtering tins of cooking grease. They were unlikely to care though as only outsiders ever found themselves imposed with such sentences and part of the profits were used each year to finance a great feast to celebrate the anniversary of the villages founding. Stuffed to the brim with roasted meats, fluffy bread and creamy cheeses, spirits soaring as red flushed faces drank ale from steep steins before rising on unsteady feet to blurt out their praises to those who made it all possible. Despite the fact that the members of the council were elected officials once a dwarf had secured their seat they were all but guaranteed of keeping it for life before passing it down like a birth right to their sons and in some cases even daughters. They held tightly to the reins of power as they always did with the same tried and true method employed by their forebearers.

Point to the strangers,  
Decry the dangers.  
Hand out the rocks,  
Tally the ballot box.

The "Club a Kender" policy had proven a real hit as it were with the voters in the last election, ensuring the same familiar faces sat on the council for another year. Life was good for those born and raised within the pristine alpine village, but appearances could be as deceiving as the people in power. The streets were kept clean during the day and the town guard patrolled the lamp lit lanes at night. Children slept soundly in their beds and a dwarf could pull on his pants with pride, kissing his wife goodbye before heading off to another working day. Criticisms of the council were few and far between, whispered among friends who looked around nervously to ensure no one had overheard them.

## Chapter 10

Cielo sat with her head in her hands crying as she contemplated spending the rest of her life in the dark and dangerous confines of a mine. Her body wracked with sobs, aching all over from where the guards have beaten her as she sat on the floor of her cell. Their guards had departed shortly after they had been dragged back from their show trial. She wiped at her eyes in a silence which should have been filled with familiar sound of Hitch's voice offering words of comfort when she noticed him sitting there with his shackled hands in front of his face. She saw something thin and metallic running from his mouth to the lock at his wrist. Head and hands bobbed and weaved ever so slightly, Hitch almost going cross eyed as he stared down at the restraints which suddenly clicked and gave away the shackles peeling from his wrists.

"Click!"

The small metallic sound of tumblers falling away caused Cielo's eyes to goggle. She burst up onto her feet.

"There are some who say I was a Kender in a previous life..."

Hitch said as he stepped toward his cell door, his hands wrapping around the external lock.

"But I have just spent too much time around them."

He inserted a tension wrench, the small flat piece of metal twisted up ever so gently with the slight application of pressure. A second piece of metal with a wavy end was inserted with his other hand which began to rock around and around in small circles.

"You talk too much and listen too little girly..."

Hitch lectured as his hands worked in small deft movements.

"I keep a set of lock picks in the lining of my vest. but I couldn't reach them last night with my hands tied behind my back...there!"

The lock popped open, the iron gate swinging outward on it's hinges. Hitch rapidly walked over to Cielo's cell and started to work.

"So I kept quiet and listened to what has been going on around here..."

He knelt down now peering into the lock which was proving to be a bit more uncooperative than his own had been.

"We'll be out of here quicker than a...oh for the love of Reorx!"

The second lock clicked, Cielo leaping past the swinging gate to throw her arms around Hitch almost bowling him off his feet. He crushed her to his chest for a moment before patting her on the back to signal she should let go now.

"What about weapons?"

Cielo asked as she quickly scanned around.

"Well we do have this to start with."

Hitch held up the heavy iron shackle and chain still attached to one of his wrists. He held the opposite cuff in the palm of his hand, the metal band wrapping around his fingers as an improvised knuckle duster.

"Now stick close right behind me and follow my lead ok."

Cielo nodded sure in the knowledge that Hitch would get them out of there. Creeping up the stairs they came to the heavy wooden door that barred their way. Gently placing his hand on the handle Hitch turned and it gave way without resistance. In their arrogance the guards had failed to lock the door as no one had ever escaped their cells before. Peering through the gap they saw a dwarf leaning back on a stool his head resting on the wall behind him as his feet were propped up on the long counter in front. They did not appear to be moving save for the steady rise and fall of their breathing.

"Fast asleep..."

Hitch whispered to himself. Tensing he gently pushed the door slowly open looking around the edge as he did so. They were in the main foyer of the barracks, the great double doors of the entrance open wide letting in the freeze mountain air. The bright mid morning sun streamed through the windows and the distant sounds of the day to day life of the village filtered through. Hitch looked over his shoulder and whispered to Cielo.

"I can't hear anyone else around but we have to be sure."

The guard awoke in mid air with a sickening startle as the stairs rushed up to smash into his face, flattening his features and splitting skin. A hitch pitched scream was followed by a thunderous crash as the limp body cascaded down the stairs as limp limbs whipped around and smacking stairs. Having gently carried the dwarf and his stool to the top of the stairs Hitch and Cielo had heaved as one launching the hapless guard in an curving course that found him cover half the downward distance of the stairs before making contact face first. Retreating behind the inwardly opening door they did not have to wait long before they heard the clomping of rapidly approaching booted feet.

"For flints sake what in the name of Reorx's rear is going on!!!"

The commanding voice bellowed as the group drew closer. Cielo's muscles tensed as she drew back the heavy wooden stool.

"Brugen!"

The trio of guards cried seeing their comrade's twisted form crumpled at the bottom of the stairs. They started to charge forward stopping dead in their tracks as the door slammed shut behind them. Cielo could think of nothing clever to say, no great catch phrase or play on words. She was just filled with a blinding rage remembering how they had beaten her. She simply swung the stool into the nearest dwarf, twisting her torso as she threw her weight into it. Raising their arms the rim of the seat caught them flush, bones snapping loudly as they dropped to the ground screaming. Hitch now stepped forward extending his arm into a jab. The improvised iron knuckle dusters smashed into a uniformed chest, cracking ribs as the air was driven from their lungs. Tumbling backwards they were caught by the third guard who fell backwards crashing down the stairs to join Brugen at the bottom. The guard with the broken arms had fainted from the pain at the top of the stairs. Hitch dragged them back onto the landing before popping the brass buttons of their uniform tunic. Throwing it on over his own clothes he was happy to see it's previous portly owner had left him with plenty of room.

"This won't hold up for long but it'll have to do."

Flinging open the door they found no one else in sight. Swinging the main doors shut they found an iron latch which they locked into place. Heading down a nearby corridor they found rooms filled with desks, stools and shelves overflowing with scrolls and books. Opening a desk drawer Hitch pulled out a bottle of dwarven spirits with triumph. Cielo looked confused as he took a long pull before pouring out the remaining contents on a shelf, drenching the volumes in the volatile spirit. Scooping up flint and steel from the corner of the desk where it had been left next to an unlit lamp sparks were sent arcing through the air.

"Whoosh!"

A ball of flame erupted causing Hitch to throw himself backwards to avoid having his eyebrows and beard singed off. They dashed from the room as the flames took hold licking towards the ceiling as the parchment bonfire blazed. Opening a rear door they found themselves on a balcony that looked out on the forest beyond. It was a view they would have stopped to admire if they weren't running for their lives. They clambered over the hand rail almost slipping and falling as they slid down support beams to the ground. Glass cracked above them as the heat grew more and more intense, smoke billowing out the broken window. They made a dash for the tree-line throwing themselves through the undergrowth sure that at any moment unseen eyes would spot them and raise the alarm.

"Fire! FIRE!"

They heard the cry going up as the villagers raced toward the building. Taking advantage of the distraction they worked their way around the edge of the town until they could see the stables straight ahead. They knelt down for a moment to catch their breathe and see if anyone was hanging around.

"What about the guards we left in the basement?"

Cielo asked. Concern creasing her face at the thought of them being roasted alive. Hitch shot her a confused expression.

"You didn't seem all the concerned when you were beating their brains out?"

Cielo paused for a second. She didn't know what had made her think about them. They had certainly shown them no mercy when they had cuffed and beaten them.

"Lets go!"

Hitch hissed interrupting her train of thought. With that they were on their feet running for the stable doors.

They found their mules in stalls, their caravan pushed into a corner. The harnesses and straps were hung up on the wall. They flung open the gates to the stalls but the mules would not budge at first having spent the time eating oats and chunks of sweet fruits cut up for them. Cielo walked around to face one of the mules. She cupped her hands either side of it's face, raising it's eyes up to meet hers, her expression conveying how much she was not in the mood to play any games. It followed her out of the stall without any resistance it's friend following close behind. They fumbled with the harnesses their hands shaking with adrenalin as they expected someone to come through the door at any minute.

"Here mines done tie it on."

Cielo tossed the leads to Hitch as she went to the back of the caravan and pulled out her crossbow. She yanked back the cord and loaded a bolt, another bolt clamped between her teeth. She stalked over to the big doors that led outside and saw the street empty. The smoke was thick above the roof tops, the burning scent of soot and ash on the wind.

"What do you think your doing!?"

The voice spat as a thick hand grabbed Cielo and spun her around. The owner of the stables scowled at her for a moment before his mouth popped open in pain as he stumbled backwards, a small bolt stuck out of his foot. Looking down she saw she had fired the weapon without even realising, the range so close she could not miss. Racing back to the caravan she jumped up, fumbling to lock the string back and load another bolt. Hitch leapt up beside her as he cracked the reins. The mules headed off at a trot through the heavy wooden frame of the stable entrance. They turned down a side street heading for the edges of the village where they worked their way along narrow lanes, side streets and alleyways. Villagers flitted past in the distance as they raced toward the fire until even the stragglers had caught up with the others.

Emerging onto the main street they turned and headed out of the village at a leisurely pace designed to draw no attention from any potential onlookers. Cielo fidgeted nervously in her seat desperate to turn and check they were not being chased but afraid someone would spot her, sure that an angry mob would be surging toward them any minute.

"Please hurry Hitch. Hurry! Their going to catch us!"

Cielo cried as she gripped his shoulder.

"Caught! Ha!"

He scoffed.

"There are many things my people can do well but running any kind of distance isn't one of them. Besides didn't you notice in the barn that our mules were the only mounts in residence?"

Hitch started to relax as she loosened her grip.

"Makes you wonder what happened to all the animals that have been there before? I mean surely there must have been or else why did they have a barn and a law that insisted we use it? At any rate I can't help but feel relieved we didn't end up having any of those meat pies from the bakery then."

Suddenly Cielo felt a wave of nausea coming over here which wasn't helped any by the rocking motion of the caravan as it made it's way back onto the main road.

"If you're alright just tap your foot once for yes and twice for no! Hahaha"



## Chapter 11

Lines of dwarves formed before the burning building passing buckets of water hand over hand to their neighbour. The tossed contents of each was but a dew drop on a campfire as the flames burned hot enough to push the crowd back, the delicate skin on their faces reddening and threatening to blister. Frantic members of the crowd shouted that others could still be trapped inside and volunteers were quickly called for. Stepping forward each one was quickly dressed in additional layers of donated clothing. Eyes holes were cut into sacks pulled over their heads before water was poured onto them until they were soaked to the skin. Tightly gripping shovels, laden down under the burden of their impromptu protection they took deep breathes and strode into the inferno to look for their friends. It had been many years since the people of Fernweh had to fight a fire of any significance and their knowledge was dangerously limited and based on gut instinct. Within moments of entering the burning building the heat was so intense the water from the outer layers of their clothing had evaporated. The moisture trapped deeper within the layers of fabric sediment began to boil and turn to steam. Unable to escape the heat rapidly rose. Sharp searing pain raced across their skin causing them to throw down their shovels as they turned on their heels and raced outside to throw themselves onto the ground. Members of the crowd stepped forward to peel away the layers before sharply pulling their hands away blowing on their singed finger tips. Buckets of water were poured onto them as everyone assembled was amazed to see the steam rising off them. The cooling layers were cut away to reveal dwarves inside whose skin had been scalded bright pink to the point of a severe sunburn that would leave them wincing for weeks to come. Doors and windows yawned open like the maws of terrible demons of the abyss to present nightmare vistas of the roaring infernos within. Smoke billowed thick and black into the sky before dispersing into a heavy grey cloud that threatened to blot out the sky and choke the lungs. Embers leapt away from the building to dance along in the wind, sizzling zephyr's drifting away to land onto nearby rooftops and be sucked under eaves on air currents as the barracks burned, the wood blackening and cracking until it could no longer hold it's own weight and began to crumple in on itself.

The smell of cinders followed Hitch and Cielo on the wind as they fled the village, unaware if anyone was following them or even knew if they were still alive. Fortunately the mules were well fed and rested, able to keep up a steady pace throughout the day. They wanted to put as many miles as they could between them and their potential pursuers before bedding down for the night. During their first stop while Cielo tended to the mules Hitch had gone through the caravan and found all of their possessions and wares had been put back into the various compartments. Greed and dwarven efficiency had worked in their favour. While Hitch and Cielo had laid in the cells the authorities had already entered into an agreement where the confiscated goods would be shipped back west where the travellers had come from and sold at market, the proceeds to be divided up. Thus had many a purveyor of fine goods found themselves parted from their wares to slave in the mines to further line the city councils pockets.

"Thanks be to you Reorx it is all still here..."

Hitch closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief, the thought of being parted from the weapons and armour he had strived so hard to create too much to take. While Cielo had been busy looking over her shoulder to see if they were being pursued Hitch had kept his eyes on the road ahead longing to check the compartments but knowing they could not afford to stop right away. Quickly arming themselves they mounted up and started up again down the track.

"You know trips to market are not usually this exciting..."

Hitch tried to make light of their conversation. Cielo kept a firm grip on her crossbow while scanning around.

"We seem to keep running from one disaster to another. I'm sorry I have put you through this young one."

Cielo turned to meet his gaze, her eyes were starting to fill with tears but she still managed to bring up the corners of her mouth in a half hearted smile. She snuggled in close burying her head and let herself cry, the stress and fear pouring from her.

The sun shone warmly as they made their way through the winding valley. The forest opened up on one side and they could see huge fields sweeping down and away, blankets of grass and grain waving in the breeze. An undulating ocean with as many blades of grass as there were stars in the night sky. They drank in the fresh clear air and relished the simple joy of just being alive.

"We'll need to make camp and soon."

Hitch commented as he scanned around for places to pull off the track. The open fields to one side offered no where to hide. Their wheel ruts would be a dead giveaway and there were no trees to conceal the caravan and mules behind.

"I don't want to stop."

Cielo looked at Hitch very seriously her tone stern.

"We might not have an option. The mules are ready to drop."

The flanks of their faithful mounts were drenched in sweat, their heads drooping low as they trudged along. Scanning the other side of the track did not present a much better option either. No caves dotted the rocky slopes to offer protection from the elements and even freshly rested the mules might not have had the strength to drag the caravan up the incline.

"Which side will we stop on?"

Cielo asked nervously as she looked back over her shoulder. Hitch paused for a moment before announcing.

"Both."

The mules practically collapsed after being led over to a grassy field and unhitched from their harnesses. They sucked down water from the bowl offered to them before flopping down on the ground to catch their breathe. Cielo fed them some of her dried fruits to lift their spirits and give them some much needed energy. After they were taken care of Cielo and Hitch headed over to the other side of the track. Digging their heels into the dark grey soil they clambered up higher and higher until they had found a small plateau to make their camp. They gathered stones and stacked them into a small wall facing the track they could hide behind. The stones would double as ammunition if they needed to hurl them down into any incoming attackers. The sun was setting fast behind a mountain chain as they laid out their bed rolls and ate the dry rations they had purchased in the dwarven village.

"They won't come for us..."

Hitch tried to reassure Cielo.

"Even if they tried they are on foot and dwarves are terrible at chasing after things..."

He mimed a waddling run that didn't draw or any laughter or even a smile.

"Tomorrow we will be through the pass and leave this all behind us. You bed down now and I'll keep watch."

She stretched out on her bed roll and was soon asleep. She slept fitfully throughout the night, waking with a start before trying to drift back off again. Each time she looked she could see Hitch laying on his stomach looking down his crossbow at the track below. If anyone had tried to follow them he would pick them off before they had a chance to even react. The truth was that Hitch had fallen asleep soon after Cielo had. He was confident that even if someone had come

across them he would be roused by the sound of them going through the caravan and disturbing the mules. He was badly in need of rest himself and did not know what the following day would bring them. He would need to be alert and ready to react at a moments notice.

The stars travelled across the night sky, the moons rising and falling in turn. An owl watched on a silent sentinel staring with saucer like eyes from the high branch of a tree until they had caught sight of a field mouse and quietly closed in for the kill. They dropped from the branch as a stone before opening their wings wide, holding them in place as they silently sailed along. The ears of the mouse twitched for moment, flicking in one direction and then the other unable to detect the raptor rapidly closing. The owls eyes never left their mark until the final moment. Talons slipped through fur and skin the silence broken by the beating of wings lifting the predator high up into the air to alight upon it's perch again. The world continued to turn as life played out it's course all around the slumbering pair regardless of whether or not they might notice it or even be able to see it. They were up and away before the rising of the sun, rubbing sleep from their eyes, grateful that all they had to do was sit there while the mules followed the path. As the song bird sang they chewed on their dried rations without any energy, sipping from their water skins and wishing it was piping hot tar bean tea. The fields disappeared as the terrain grew steeper on either side, looming over them like giants while the path seemed to narrow. They followed it's winding course until they crested a small rise to be greeted by a panoramic vista that stretched out before them. They stared in amazement as they could see from horizon to horizon, the rolling green pastures and grass lands a patch work of interlocking squares. It seemed to go on forever. The faint purple peaks of a mountain range could be spotted far in the distance beyond the rolling plains. The path they rolled along widened, their eyes following it towards a distant town. They breathed a sigh of relief, certain now that the worst of their journey was behind them. Hitch wrapped an arm around Cielo's shoulders, squeezing her tight against him.

"Do you know where we are?"

Cielo asked filled with excitement at the prospect of the town in the distance.

"I'm sure we'll find someone along the way that can tell us."

They did not have to wait long before they came across a shepherd moving their herd over the track onto an untouched pasture. Dressed in simple pants and tunic of a heavy sturdy material topped with a vest that appeared to be lined with wool that matched the colour of their flock. The man stopped to observe these new comers without saying a word. Cielo was the first to break the silence, piping up cheerfully before flashing one of her winning smiles. The dour demeanour of the shepherd changed in an instant. They were only too happy to inform them that off in the distance was the town of Pinehurst.

"There is everything there that a traveller might need on their way through..."

The shepherd had begun.

"From a stable where your mules can be looked at to the inns where you can purchase a meal or a room with a bath..."

He let that last word hang out there looking the pair up and down a final time before waving goodbye as they trudged off after their flock. As they neared the town of Pinehurst the dirt path began to widen, the wagon wheel ruts levelling out until they were back on cobblestones again. The paved path seemed to shrink every year as poor weather eroded away the cobblestones until they came loose and were kicked off into the long grass to be forgotten about or taken away by industrious local farmers to build projects on their properties. Every year without fail the city planners would argue, their budgeted funds never seeming to be enough to do anything to tackle the problem while their festivals were never short on casks of ale and plump animals for the spit. The buildings were made of brick overlaid with plaster yellowed and cracking, the windows filled with simple panes of glass and the doors planks of wood with cast iron brackets. The roofs were pitched at a more moderate angle than those of the dwarven village back in the mountains, overlapping wooden slats nailed down. Every house was assured of having at least one spot in the roof that let the rain in, the head of the household exclaiming they would do something about it as soon as the weather cleared again. No walls surrounded the

village. Not a single stone was placed upon another or a wooden palisade to speak of to hold back a raiding party. It was entirely possible the good people of Pinehurst never had need to worry about such things.

"Smell those cooking fires..."

Hitch breathed in deeply, sucking in the wondrous aromas of frying meat and eggs on the wind as the people of the town awoke and set to their wood fired stoves to prepare hearty meals for the day ahead. Cielo joined in too and soon they both realised how hungry they were as their bellies set to rumbling in protest.

"Smells amazing!"

Cielo declared as she stood up in her seat throwing her arms up in the air in excitement as she began to sing an old song that Hitch had taught her when he would make her breakfast.

"I want sizzling sausage and pancakes with syrups. So stoke up your fires or you'll taste my stirrups!"

She rocked for a moment and nearly lost her balance before Hitch grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back down into her seat.

"Come now girl. You'll scare these people to death roaring in here like an invading army. Now sit down before you hurt yourself."

Crossing her arms she scowled in protest at this dampening of her good mood while the mules marched on toward the town of Pinehurst.

## Chapter 12

"Good shot!"

The young man called out as the arrow cut through the air, arcing towards the straw target before burying itself until only the feather fletching was visible. Cielo looked very serious as she withdrew another arrow from its quiver, nocking it in place before turning her head sideways to look at her target. Keeping her posture straight her hands came into view as she pulled back on the bowstring as the hand holding the bow pushed forward. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and it swayed in the gentle breeze for a moment before she loosed another shot keeping her eyes on the target until the arrow struck true. She had been a natural with the bow taking to it with great relish under the tutelage of a local boy named "Turf" who frequently found any excuse to be around her. He was younger than her by a year but was solidly built with the tanned muscular frame of someone who was not afraid of labouring in the fields under a hot summer sun. A shock of blonde hair erupted from his head no more than a few inches in length. Despite his mother's best efforts that had never been able to tame his mane, much like the young man himself as his father had liked to joke. Initially they were not going to stay for long in the town of Pinehurst, but some of the more senior folks had pointed out that they were without a blacksmith and someone of Hitch's skills were sorely needed for a number of repairs that had piled up in the rural community and projects that could be commissioned. Hitch had been resistant at first, eager to be back on the road with his wares until the subject of payment had been raised. It was decided then that they would stay for a while so that Cielo could rest up and be ready for the next leg of their journey. The old blacksmith's shop was cleaned out and made ready and soon the town rung again to the sound of the smith's hammer on the anvil. The weapons and armour meant for market were tucked away out of sight, Hitch was sure that the good folks of Pinehurst would not have enough steel pieces to match his prices or the ability to avoid the temptation of trying to steal some either.

"Your turn now."

Cielo handed the sturdy long bow to Turf, it was almost as tall as they were. While archery was considered a good sport to occupy your time the practical people here only practiced with proper hunting equipment. They walked to the target to retrieve the arrows, pulling them from the straw before returning to the stick they had placed on the ground to mark their spot.

"I've taken many a deer with this."

Turf bragged as he loosed a shaft. It sailed through the air striking the target fair in the middle. As he nocked another arrow Cielo commented.

"And I've killed a dragon man with my cross bow."

Fingers slipping the bow string shot forward flinging the arrow off wildly to the side. He turned to look at her with great skepticism.

"Liar! You're just saying that to throw me off."

Cielo's eyes flared with anger for a moment. This was the first time she had revealed anything of her travels with Hitch, he had warned her to keep these things to herself. The humans of the plains might have been friends with the dwarves in the mountains or secretly aligned with the dragon men that had stalked the forests. She had taken his warning to heart but had forgotten herself in the heat of the moment.

"What would you know?! You have never been anywhere..."

Cielo turned away crossing her arms over her chest. Turf took out another arrow holding it nocked by his waist as he looked at the target trying to pose as heroically as possible.

"If I hit the centre I win a kiss from a Princess."

Cielo looked back over her shoulder at him as he tried his best not to notice her. He raised the bow up into his eyeline. Slowly breathing out he waited until all the air had left his lungs. In the moment before he would naturally want to draw back in his breathe he fired, his body remaining still his hand the only part in motion as it let go of the bow string. Their heads moved in unison tracking the arc of the arrow. The moment stretching out as Cielo prayed it would miss it's mark. Reorx left her in that moment as the shaft found it's target thudding into the smallest circle painted in the middle of the straw. Turf broke out in a broad smile leaning on the bow as he stared at his handy work with a look of great satisfaction on his face. He refused to acknowledge Cielo was even there.

"Well?..."

She asked her body tensing with anxiety. She was unsure of how she felt right now other than awkward.

"Well what?"

Turf asked innocently as he turned towards her.

"You hit the mark aren't you going to try and collect your kiss from the Princess."

Taking a half step backwards he replied.

"I would if but one were before me. You see Princesses are beautiful and you are..."

He let his sentence trail off as he turned to run, Cielo springing into action a half second later to take off after him running. His laughter died as he looked over his shoulder to see a very determined young woman, her face scrunched up in outrage hot on his heels. Panic gripped him for a moment as he redoubled his efforts to pump his arms and legs harder until his breathing became ragged. His foot catching on an uneven piece of ground he fell, twisting in the air as his bow left his hand and the arrows sprayed out of his quiver. Cielo leaped like a striking cat sailing through the air, her hands gripping his shoulders a moment before them came crashing down onto the soft grassy field.

"Ooofff!"

The air blasted out of his lungs as her weight dropped onto him.

"What were you going to say?!"

She demanded as she shook him by the shoulders.

"Say it!"

His hands came up the fingers digging into her ribs. She started to squirm away doing her best to hold her grip and composure.

"Say what?"

He asked innocently as he dug his fingers in deeper. She burst out laughing her hands flashing from his shoulders to his forearms trying to make him stop. The struggled for a moment longer, her face flushing red. He threw up his arms signalling his defeat. Sitting up they found themselves face to face, trying to recover their breathe.

"You win."

Turf said before darting forward to gently kiss her on the lips. She flinched pulling back for a moment. He suddenly felt like he had made a terrible mistake but she just patted him on the shoulder and quickly sprang to her feet.

He leapt back up as well and they quickly gathered up the bow and arrows before heading off back to town. They didn't have much to say to each other as they trudged through the high grasses doing their best to avoid making eye contact.

"Next time we play for something else."

Cielo said while keeping her gaze straight ahead.

"Agreed..."

Turf quickly replied. Parting ways near the edge of the town Cielo headed to her new home at the blacksmith shop to check up on Hitch.

"Nice of you to join me..."

Hitch called out as she came into view. He bowed as though he were addressing royalty.

"You said I could go practice archery..."

Cielo looked up in exasperation until she saw the gleaming mirth in Hitch's expression. She grabbed her gloves and apron before joining Hitch by the forge. She sat on a stool nearby and watched as he pulled a piece of glowing iron from the forge and started working the shape with his hammer.

"While you've been off running around I've been making these all morning."

He held it up to her for a moment before going back to hammering it into a curving shape.

"Everyone near and far needs horseshoes..."

The work was easy and boring for someone used to crafting weapons of exquisite appearance and strength but the coppers had been piling up. Hitch missed his forge though, the setup here was barely adequate at best he would often grumble and didn't allow him to produce his finest work.

"Been talk to that boy again...sod is it?"

Hitch cocked an eyebrow as he glanced at her over the glowing iron.

"Turf! And you very well know it!"

She decried in exasperation at another one of his jokes at her friends expense. She didn't know why but she felt very defensive of him and always rose to the bait when Hitch would joke about the boys name or appearance.

"And yes we had an archery competition today where there was a prize at stake."

Hitch continued to gently tap the piece of iron as it started to fade to a dull red.

"Oh aye...and what was the prize then? You have no money!"

Hitch chuckled to himself thinking about what they could possibly trade, mud pies? The thought set him to chuckling some more.

"A kiss..."

Hitch missed the iron, the heavy hammer striking the anvil a glancing blow that caused him to trip part way over. He recovered his balance turning to flick the iron from his tongs into the forge where it landed sending up a blooming shower of sparks.

"Kissing!"

He whirled back to her. Coming around the anvil to stand in front of her.

She wasn't too surprised by his reaction as he had always been protective of her.

"It was just a little peck!"

She teased turning her head to the side and swinging her feet back and forth like an innocent child without a care in the world. He stopped in front of her his hands balled into fists on his hips.

"And I liked it!"

She cried joyfully as she leapt to her feet and took off running around behind the forge.

"That's it!"

He thundered as he took off after her.

"We're leaving tomorrow where we can find a nice tower to lock you in..."

He jogged around the forge as she skipped ahead.

"Maybe a moat as well for good measure..."

He stopped and reversed course hoping to catch her off guard. She was too quick though and sprang back keeping an equal distance between them.

"Bah! I'm too old to go chasing you around."

He had already started to feel puffed and leaned on the anvil for a moment to catch his breathe. He had been working for hours now and the hot air of a forge always seemed to tax the lungs. He turned at the movement in the corner of his eyes to see Cielo was already outside climbing along the low stone wall at the back of their yard. He stopped to watch her as she stepped carefully along the uneven stones her arms out by her side for balance. She paused for a moment before turning on the ball of one foot gracefully swinging herself around to face the direction she had just come from. She looked so care free, the problems of the world could never touch her as she skipped and jumped along that wall while the sun beamed down on her. Hitch smiled to himself, his heart fit to burst as he couldn't recall what his life had been like before she had come into it or what he would do if they ever parted. Wiping the corner of his eye which had started to moisten he turned back to the forge and the horse shoes waiting to be shaped.



## Chapter 13

"Everyday there is more talk of war brewing in the east..."

One of the men gathered in a circle said grimly over his tankard of ale before taking a sip. The people of Pinehurst had turned out for an annual feast, stalls setup along the main road where wares were displayed and food cooked while squealing children chased each other around. The men were gathered nearby keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings while talking amongst themselves about the more serious business to hand despite the light mood of the day.

"What do you make of all this Hitch?"

The dwarf looked up at the expectant faces of the men gathered around him. He wiped the back of his hand across his face, smacking his lips with satisfaction as he had just polished off another tankard. He knew what they wanted to hear, that everything would be ok. Just like children being tucked in by their mothers at night. They knew he had travelled far across Krynn and hoped that he might have a greater understanding of the events going on in the wider world.

"Hard to say..."

He paused while trying to find the words.

"I put no stock in rumours though. I trust what I see with my own two eyes."

His response was short on actual information and long on stoic platitudes. He had hoped this would cause a round of nodding and grumbled agreement before they moved onto something else allowing him to slip away for another tankard of ale. Outside of his one stein in Fernweh, which hardly counted in his mind it had been so long since he had enjoyed a good brew and he had made a habit of visiting the local tavern everyday after he had finished work. Nothing seemed to soothe the sore joints and aching muscles better. A deep red hue with a thick creamy head of foam it was unlike anything he had encountered before and knew he must somehow get his hands on the recipe before they were back on the road.

"Well we need to build something don't we?"

One of the other men suggested.

"Maybe a wall of some kind around the main buildings for protection?"

Another waved his hand in a dismissing gesture before replying.

"What are walls without weapons to defend them?"

The others nodded in agreement.

"Weapons?! We're farmers, butchers and bakers."

The two men squared off against each other now closing the distance between them. Hitch took this as his cue slipping between two men as they all rushed in to separate the pair. He hadn't seen Cielo in a while and was wondering where the girl had snuck off to when he caught sight of the beer garden and made a bee line for it. Cielo and Turf were busy munching on small joints of meat they had purchased, relishing the spiced succulent flesh as it's juices ran down their fingers. Compared to some of the meals they had in their short lives they felt like royalty right now. Everywhere around them was music and raised voices. Enticing food smells wafting by as people seemed to be in constant motion carrying trays or chasing after wayward children.

"I've been working on something I want to show you."

Turf announced as he licked and sucked at this fingers.

"Will you come with me?"

Cielo nodded lifting herself up from her seated position to follow him.

"I have to be home before dark though, Hitch made me take an oath."

Turf looked back at her over his shoulder.

"Sounds serious..."

He playfully mocked. Cielo was having none of it.

"An oath is a very serious thing to a dwarf."

Cielo forcefully announced.

"But you aren't a dwarf!"

Turf cried out in exasperation.

"I am raised as one. I follow the dwarf ways. You wouldn't understand".

Turf shot back

"Because I'm human?! Like you!"

Cielo stopped walking now waiting for Turf to realise his error and turn around to face her. She stood with her hands balled on her hips, a scowl on her face. She reached inside her tunic for a moment to pull out a wooden figure on a leather thong. She held it out for him to see.

"I made this. This is Reorx the dwarven god, my god, of the forge."

Turf started to walk over reaching up his hand to grip the figure. Cielo snatched it away.

"Don't touch it!"

She snapped.

"I don't expect you to understand but this is important to me..."

Tears started to form in the corners of her eyes. Making fun of this was the same as making fun of the dwarf who had taken her in and saved her life. The only family she had known for so long that her birth parents were fading memories she found harder and harder to recall. Turf didn't know what to do, he just stood there with his arms by his sides hoping she would say something and they could move past this. He reached up a hand to touch her on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry ok... I didn't know...I just wanted to show you this fort I built."

Cielo wiped the tears from her eyes as her expression changed.

"A fort? Like a real one?"

She imagined a fortification made of many stones stacked upon each other, the walls rising up taller then two men.

"Where is it?"

She asked.

"Not far. Come on we'll be back before dark I promise."

She nodded before they headed off again the sounds of the feast growing more distant. They headed towards the river before turning to follow it's banks back toward the Southern Dargaard mountain range. Cielo shivered down her spine seeing those peaks again and kept her eyes focused on where she was stepping. Soon the sounds of the feast had faded completely to be replaced with the calls of birds and the whispering of trees as their leaves rubbed together in the soft breeze.

"I've been working on this for a while...no one else has been here..."

Turf called back over his shoulder.

"It's coming up around the bend here"

The river flowed slowly beside as they made their way under the branches of ancient trees, dry leaves crunching underfoot until they spotted it through a gap in the tree line up ahead. The river was wider here a small grassy island rising up in the middle upon which sat the remains of a small crumbling tower covered in moss, vines snaking their way up it's sides like veins running under the skin. Three floors in total if one was to count the roof top with it's barely there battlements.

"I keep a fishing boat over here for crossing."

A small wooden raft was hung up from a low branch to keep it out of the water when it was not in use. They lifted it off it's hook placing it in the stream. Gallantly Turf helped Cielo to hop on with wobbling legs before they pushed off. Turf pulled out an oar and within a few minutes they were on the banks of the little island.

"I've been fixing this up ever since I found it. Most people go way down stream if they want to fish."

Cielo looked up in amazement.

"I bet this was where a wizard lived!"

She shouted excitedly before hunching over and lifting her hands up high, splaying the fingers as she readied herself to caste a spell.

"Watch your step little boy or I'll turn you into a toad!"

She shrilly cried as she stabbed her fingers at Turf. He dodged to the side before lifting his arm to raise an imaginary shield.

"My shield can stop any magic!"

He cried batting the air left and right. The circled each other as they made whooshing and zinging noises until they tired of the game.

"There's more inside. This way."

They moved around the tower until a wooden door came into view. The timber's were dark grey with damp, the iron hinges deeply pitted. Turf pulled on the ring shaped door handle to yank the door open. The stone floor was arranged in a pattern of concentric circles with a circular stone in the middle. Cielo stepped closer and could make out what appeared to be a crescent moon faintly carved, worn away with the footfalls of time. A staircase curved up along the side of the opposite wall made of heavy slabs laid on top of each other worn in the middle more then the

edges. Cielo approached and found the back of the staircase was simply a flat wall no door leading to a space under the stairs.

The ceiling of the ground floor was a good six feet above their heads the thick wooden beams curved upward at the middle point before thickening on the opposite side. Though darkly stained with damp and wood smoke they had cleared been carved at some point. The designs were lost in the shadows, faded from the warping rot. She looked around for a moment searching for something.

"No torches I'm afraid."

Turf answered seeming to read her mind.

"Haven't you ever stayed here overnight?"

She asked puzzled. How could someone not? The thrill of having such a private and mysterious sanctuary. Turf looked sheepish for a moment before replying.

"I've never stayed away from home overnight..."

He looked away for a moment slightly embarrassed before trying to recover.

"Come, let me show you."

He walked over to the bottom of the stairs before starting his ascent. Windows must have been open on the upper floor as the wall of the staircase was illuminated in a soft light. Hot on his heels she followed eager to see what treasures the tower had in stall next. She swept her gaze around the floor as it came into view, a large window on the opposite wall where the sun was streaming through. She paused for a moment before she stepped out on the floor remembering how damp the beams had looked from the underside.

"It's ok...I'm up here all the time."

Turf reassured her as he stepped out onto the floor, the boards groaning slightly as they took his weight.

"See!"

He happily announced as though the fact that he had not immediately fallen to his death as proof of the floors sturdiness. Reluctantly she took her first steps her concerns fading as she noticed what was hanging on the walls.

"That's not the bow we usually practice with..."

She pointed to a recurve bow hanging on the wall. It was made from a bright yellow timber, the bow arms curving down before flicking back up. The ends were capped with a shiny metal the looked like it was freshly polished. Stepping closer she noticed the precision with which the thin leather thong was wrapped around the handle, each strand butting up against the next without appearing to overlap at any point. The bow string was braided of a fine smooth brown fibre as thin as a human hair that seemed to change tone every so slightly with each strand.

"How did you get this?"

She asked over her shoulder, unable to take her eyes off the bow.

"I found it..."

She turned to face him expecting him to continue. He appeared uneasy for a moment, wanting to hold this part back before continuing.

"There is a small tomb on this island, tucked away on the opposite side from where he came ashore..."

Cielo's eyes widened in surprise. She crossed the space between them taking his hand in hers.

"Show me."

Coming around the curve of the tower the back of rectangular building as tall as a single storey home came into view. It had been constructed from a pure white stone unlike anything available for hundred of miles in any direction. Tarnished with age and fallen into even more disrepair than the two which stood beside it that had clearly been made from different materials in a different age. On three sides large perfectly circular holes had been cut, clear glass discs a foot thick inserted and secured with means unknown to modern builders. Cielo wiped at the glass with the hem of her sleeve trying to clean away a spot to look in but only managing to smear the dirt and spattered mud. The roof swept down from a bevelled centre line of interlock copper tiles cut into the shapes of poison ivy leaves that had grown green patina over time to resemble the real world plant their design was modelled after. Walking around to the front Cielo saw the intricately carved entryway, a recessed border of frolicking figures. Lean and lithe with pointed ears they appeared to dance and frolic ready to come out from the stone and scampering between her feet. The entrance had been filled with columns so smooth they felt almost soft to the touch, carved vines and blooming flowers encircled them reaching upwards for the sky.

"This was your handy work I take it?"

Cielo pointed to the gaping hole that had been smashed through the columns, all the more ugly and terrible for the incredible artistry that had been destroyed.

"Had to get in there somehow..."

He said defensively.

"Couldn't figure out away to open the stupid thing."

Ducking low they squeezed through the gap to step inside with Cielo leading the way. A muted glow from the windows filled the space with a soft light that seemed to appear from nowhere and everywhere at once. At the end of the chamber they could see a large object waist high, long enough to touch either side of the walls. Stepping closer Cielo noticed a pair of sparkling silver rods protruding from the pristine white walls. She lifted her hand and pointed as she turned her head to face Turf and unspoken question on her lips.

"Yeah. That's where the bow was hanging from."

As they approached the waist high bench a pale woman lay perfectly still in repose, her hands gently crossed together on top of her chest.

"It's a statue."

Turf announced. The unexpected sound of his voice causing Cielo to jump straight up in the air before backhanding him across his bicep.

"For flints sake you kender brained clod! I thought she had come to life on me!"

Turf winced rubbing his shoulder as he took a step sideways away from her. Composing herself with a deep breathe she closed until she was leaning over the pale woman. They had been carved from a single piece of white marble, the skill of the artist so incredible they had managed to pick out the veins running along the backs of his subjects hands. The billowing dressed flowed

and folded back onto itself as through it were silk. They had even included long stemmed roses scattered around the body with sharpened thorns protruding. It was the face of this woman that drew Cielo in the most, so soft and serene, their eye lids closed in eternal slumber. The tips of their pointed ears protruded from the wavy mane that spilled outward.

"An elf!"

Cielo whispered to herself. After all the reading she had done on this race, their weapons and their ways she now stood before the grave of an ancient elven maiden whose very story had been lost in the mist of time even from the long lived memories and histories of her own people. How had they come to reside here? How long had they lived? Had they known true love as she herself had hoped to know one day? Uncounted questions formed in her mind for which there was no answer and this in of itself was perhaps the saddest thing of all. She ran her hand gently along one side of the face, letting it linger on top of the hands that would remain crossed over the chest in eternal protection.

"May Reorx wing you to your rest."

She didn't know what else to say. Hitch had not been much for religious rites and the proper way to honour the dead as they had never had to bury anyone themselves. The tears falling from her eyes soaked into the porous white marble beneath her.

"Come on Turf. Let's get out of here."

They stepped back out into the warm sunlight grateful to be back among the land of the living. She took his hand as they walked together back around to the entrance of the tower, stealing glances at the young man beside her.

"Thank you for sharing that with me. It's an amazing place here."

Turf meet her gaze his face breaking into a smile.

"You can see why I keep it to myself and also why I've never stayed here overnight."

He hooked his thumb to indicate where they had just come from.

"Freaks me out just thinking about that back there."

The tomb of the youthful elven maiden had been constructed at great expense. Vast sums were secured for not only the craft that was employed in it's construction but the silence of the craftsmen themselves. Poison had taken her from the mortal world far too soon, the victim of a jealous wife whose husband she had been having an affair with. Unable to openly mourn her loss while maintaining the veneer of matrimony the high born noble wished to present to the outside world he had her remains removed to the outskirts of his lands, the river being a natural border of his estates boundaries. Their love had not been a torrid thing driven by their desires. Their connection had been instant. Their conversations easy and natural. His heart raced whenever she was near and he felt he would surely faint the first time she had boldly stolen a kiss. They had only been left alone for a moment but before he knew what was happening her lips had been pressed to his and the course of their lives changed forever. Any in his orbit could not help but notice the changes in his mood and mannerisms. Smiles came readily and he now moved with energy of a man half his age. Soon the rumours started as members of court whispered that infidelity follows in the footsteps of older men when vigour and vitality returns. The maiden had been found in her chambers, tainted wine pooling round the broken glass goblet, a note forged in her hand decrying she could no longer bear the burden of living. It didn't make sense. They had been planning on running away together. He had promised her with a love sick conviction that the grandest titles of the land meant nothing in comparison to simply being known as her husband. He had retrieved from his families treasury an artefact of rare and incalculable value, it's true origins and purpose poorly understood. The "Tear of Takhisis" was a stunning pear shaped diamond of intense greenish blue hue suspended in a wire frame from a silver chain. For most the diamond is a rare example of the type of precious stone which forms beneath the earth's crust over millions of years and incalculable tons of pressure. The truth is that the diamond was formed

from a single tear shed by the Goddess Takhisis who cherished her beautiful feminine form when she would appear on the mortal plane. Early in her existence she had witnessed the terrible ravages of time upon one of her most faithful of followers seeing them go from the blushing bloom of their youth turn to the wizened fruit too far from the orchard. In that one singular moment she had felt an emotion that she would later be told was "pity."

When the precious stone was pressed to the breast of her follower they had returned to the prime of their life. It did not prevent their death when later they fell in battle from a mortal wound however. Passing through many hands down the centuries it's effects had been inadvertently hidden as the stone was not worn in contact with the skin, being kept on display above the fine garments of it's owners. When it fell into the hands of the elves their long lived natures prevented it's powers from being readily apparent. Prized for it's rare colour and clarity it had been consigned to the deepest parts of treasure troves where it had been reserved for the most auspicious of occasions until finally it had been all but forgotten. When the noble had laid it on his beloved's chest it seemed to have no effect at all. While it did not return her to life it prevented her body from ever succumbing to corruption or decay. In the dead of night the funeral procession passed through the cities walls without fanfare. The sun was dawning when they had arrived at their destination, the noble accompanied by his personal retainers had interred the maiden within her tomb, reverently bearing her inside before gently placing her into the sarcophagus. Her bow had been hung on the wall above her resting place. Cut from a holly tree whose tightly interlocking grain ensured it would bend but never break. The bow string had been braided from her own hair in a long lost tradition designed to imbue the bow with the spirit of the owner. Each year on her birthday he would ride out alone to see her, his wife choosing to pretend she was not aware of his destination or purpose. His wife's final act of revenge had been upon his own passing many years later when he was laid to rest in his families crypt, far from the beloved he had wished to spent his eternity with. So it was that she had slept down the long centuries, alone and forgotten until two human youths whose life spans were but the burning of a candle in comparison had passed over the threshold of her tomb and stood within mere inches of the uncorrupted form of the elven maiden Crystal Whitewood.

## Chapter 14

"HUMAN FILTH OF THE BACKWARD PLAINS!..."

A deep rasping voice boomed.

"I BRING YOU WELCOME NEWS FROM THE EAST..."

The crowd turned as one to see the figure of a Draconian standing before them. They were on the outskirts of the village their voice raised so that they could be heard. They were surrounded by others of their kind with clawed hands and feet, their faces twisted into snarling reptilian visages. Breast plates and thigh guards hung from their hunched loping forms. Curved swords and saw tooth axes brandished as they began their approach. Behind them other figures shuffled along clad in black cloth, marching in unison with spears held erect.

"WE GIVE YOU THE CHANCE TO FORFEIT YOUR LIVES IN THE SERVICE OF OUR GLORIOUS QUEEN!"

The figures raised up their shields and crashed them against the haft of their spears as the Draconians hissed and roared their approval from inhuman throats like a nest of disturbed vipers. The villagers froze in place unable to move at the nightmare which had appeared before them. Hitch peaked over the top of the waist high fence which had been erected around the beer garden, his eyes popping wide.

"...the Dragon men..."

He thought. The same ones they had fled from in the forest and fought to the death in the ruins beyond the mountains. He looked around frantically trying to spot Cielo. Rolling off his bench he crawled under it making his way for the back of the tent. An older villager standing nearest the draconians stuttered.

"Whose Qua...Que...Queen do you serve?..."

The draconian stepped forward from it's comrades closing on the human.

"TAR-KEY-SIS!.....WHAP!"

The back of his clenched fist slammed into the old mans face sending them flying back to collapse on the ground like a rag doll. Hitch peeked out the bottom of the tent. Seeing the street empty he took off running down the laneway between two houses. Tripping and stumbling he had to stop and steady himself a couple of times as he fought the effects of too many fine ales.

"FOR TOO LONG THE WEALTH OF KRYNN HAS BEEN HOARDED IN THE WEST..."

Holding up a claw they gestured to the mountain range in the distance.

"WHILE YOU HAVE STRUGGLED TO SURVIVE ON THE PLAINS..."

Their gaze bore into every set of humans eyes until they were forced to look away from the terrible demonic countenance before them.

"DO THEIR ARMIES PATROL YOUR HIGHWAYS?..."

Stepping forward they placed a hooked finger under the chin of a young woman, lifting her tear streaked face up.

"ARE YOUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE?..."

A men stepped forward to try and snatch her away from the beast.



"WHAA-CRACK!"

A whip flicked out from the assembled draconians catching the man upon his face, ripping and lacerating the delicate skin. Their hands flew up to their face screaming in agony as they pitched forward and collapsed onto the ground.

"YOU MUST HAVE KNOWN WE WERE COMING..."

They stepped past the frightened woman who dashed over to the side of the injured man to tend to him. The lead draconian turned back to his assembled band.

"BECAUSE THEY HAVE PUT ON A FEAST FOR US!!"

They roared their approval as one, fists pumping the air before they rushed forward. Villagers were shoved to the ground, kicked and cursed as they past. Kegs of ale were seized and animals roasting on the spit taken up and carried away.

"OUR THANKS TO OUR GENEROUS HOSTS!"

They made their way towards the town hall with their assorted loot. Throwing open the doors they stormed inside to the sound of splintering wooden furniture and raucous laughing. The villagers gathered together unsure of what to do next. They whispered amongst themselves, some calling for the men to take action while others pleaded for caution.

"They will be gone in the morning."

A village elder said with far more confidence in their tone than they actually felt.

"Until then everybody hurry home and bar your doors!"

As though they had woken from a trance everyone took off running, scattering in all directions as they headed home before they could draw any more attention from the invaders. A group of men stayed behind for a moment exchanging determined looks and muttered words before heading off together. They moved through the backstreets looking over their shoulders as they hurried along. Rounding a corner they rushed over to their destination.

"Hitch?!"

One of the group exclaimed as they burst through the door of the blacksmith's workshop to find him hurrying to strap on his armour. They stared open mouthed at the dwarf totally transformed from the humble blacksmith that had come to their village a few weeks earlier compared to the determined warrior that stood before them. He had just finished loading his crossbow and whipped up the weapon to point it straight at them.

"Reorx!"

He spat his cheeks flushed red.

"I almost killed you where you stand boy. Make care before bursting in on a dwarf like that."

They held up their hands and slowly moved inside before closing the door.

"You've seen the creatures that came to the village?"

One of them tentatively asked.

"Aye! Not for the first time either."

The news slapped them in the face leaving them shocked and surprised.

"Where?! What are they...How do you... What are we..."

They shot their questions at him like a group of children harassing their parents for treats.

"Quiet! All of you."

He scolded them to silence.

"Where is my daughter? Has anyone seen where she wandered off to?"

The assembled group answered him with shrugs of their shoulders before one piped up.

"But what about the army?!"

Hitch flashed him a look of cold fury, stepping toward the man who just spoke.

"My DAUGHTER!"

He boomed in their face, causing them to stumble back for a moment. They held their arms up palms out.

"I saw her heading through the southern fields with young Turf a while ago."

Someone in the back of the group called out.

"Right then! I'm off to fetch that my daughter and woe betide Turf if he is with her."

He went to push his way through the group of men before one of them held out a hand to block his path.

"But what about the village Hitch? We have been invaded!"

Hitch's blood was boiling now. Every moment delayed was another moment his precious Cielo might fall into the hands of those creatures out there to make cruel sport of her as a show of force to the rest of the village. Reversing his grip on his crossbow he cracked the man in the knee driving him to the ground. Gripping a fist full of hair he whipped out his dagger and held it up to the mans eye line.

"ENOUGH! My DAUGHTER is out there with those beasts! MY DAUGHTER!!"

Shoving the man to the floor he stepped over the top of him and headed out through the open door of his shop. Looking up and down the street to make sure it was clear he headed off at a brisk jog for the nearest edge of the village. Once he was clear and away in the surrounding fields he moved in a wide circle until he was on the southern edge. He had not spent anytime exploring their surroundings like Cielo had and knew precious little about what lay ahead other than his little girl was somewhere out there. He looked back over his shoulder for a second, seeing the sun getting low in the sky the boom laughter and shouting of the invaders as they drank themselves into a stupor. Taking a deep breathe he turned and plunged on through the fields.

"Paddle faster! I can see the sun setting!"

Cielo half rose in the boat, the elven bow slung across her back as she looked over Turf's head to see the sun had turned to a golden orange that filtered through the surrounding trees. At her insistence they had brought the weapon along for "safe keeping". They were not taking the boat to the other bank to reverse their course and walk all the way home and were instead moving down the river with the current until they were close enough to put in to shore for a straight shot to the village where she hoped she wouldn't get into too much trouble with Hitch. Turf strained at the oars huffing and puffing his muscles burning as he tried his best to focus on the task at hand with Cielo fretting in the background.

"How much further?"

Cielo demanded impatiently.

"...just as fast if you dived in and swam..."

Turf muttered as he paused for a moment to catch his breathe before pulling the oars back with a big heave. He wasn't entirely sure where they should stop just as long as they were past the forest on the shoreline they should be ok. He kept rowing until the trees were disappearing behind Cielo before paddling over to the shore. Jumping out in the knee deep water he pulled the boat the rest of the way before helping Cielo ashore. She promptly clambered up the bank leaving Turf behind as she stood up to get her bearings. She could see the wood smoke rising in the distance.

"Hey! Wait!"

Turf cried as Cielo took off at a brisk run. Leaving the prow of the row boat stuck in the muddy bank he started sprinting to catch up his knees pumping high. Exhausted from the rowing he was quickly out of breathe and falling behind. Cielo forged ahead cutting a path through the long waving grass before a shape launched itself up out of the long thin stalks, it's arms wrapping around her neck dragging her down to the ground out of sight. Turf's eyes popped in shock and horror as he closed the distance the seconds stretching out, his body feeling like it was moving in slow motion. He feared the beast must be tearing her apart even as he approached, each second another slash of horrible claws gouging at her soft skin. He saw her pinned to the ground, the figure holding her wrists as it roared something at her. Leaping through the air he tackled the creature his body crumpling painfully against it's rock hard skin.

"Damn it boy! Get off me!"

Hitch roared as he lay on his back trying to fight of the madly flailing youth. He drove his armoured gauntlet into the boys side, taking a measure of satisfaction as the air burst from his lungs, his body going limp. Cielo was quickly on her feet separating the two of them. Hitch managed to sit upright while Turf lay on the ground holding his side and moaning.

"What did you do to him?"

Cielo demanded of the dwarf.

"I'm fine by the way despite your man's best efforts to use his head as a battering ram."

Hitch retorted protesting his innocence while trying not to smirk.

"Don't try and turns things around girlie. You were supposed to be home by now, but it's lucky that you weren't."

She paused for a moment puzzled by the remark.

"See down there by the town hall"

Hitch pointed to the building in the centre of the village. Lights burned brightly in the windows with several figures standing around outside. The trio lay in the long grass peering out between the stalks on the edge of an elevated field. The figures were too far away in the fading light to make out.

"Dragon men..."

Hitch let the word hang out there as Cielo sucked in her breathe.

"These one are different though. Turns out they can speak common."

Cielo turned to look at Hitch before looking back to the town hall.

"What are 'Dragon men'?"

Turf asked thinking this was some kind of joke until he saw the look of fear and hate spread across Cielo's face.

"Basically boy evil is real and it's come to your small village."

Hitch stated.

"Do you think they will leave in the morning?"

Cielo asked hopefully.

"Only with alot of people dead or enslaved..."

Hitch noted grimly. He could feel the young humans staring at him, silently begging him to tell them that he had a plan and everything was going to be ok.

"So we only have some farmers....with bows for hunting small game...not a sword or spear between them...but many a pitch fork to angrily wave in the air..."

He lowered his head shaking it ever so slightly side to side. He cursed the strands of fate that kept seeming to conspire against him. He wanted to run, just take his Cielo and go. Let these people stand or fall on their own. The history of Krynn was written in the ashes of the villages raised to the ground by many an army invading or retreating. What was one more on the pyre of another generals ambitions doomed to be forgotten in ages to come.

"Hitch..."

Cielo rested her hand palm down on the back of his. Her soft skin caressed the thick coarse hair on the back of his hand. Looking up he met her gaze, huge doe eyes glistening with tears in the fading light that made her pupils seem impossibly large. His heart broke in that moment to see her caring so much for the fate of others despite everything they had been through. How could he look her in the eye again if he didn't stand up now.

"We're gonna need horses and a wagon."

Cielo and Turf sucked in their breath clamping their hands together in excitement.

"Pipe down the pair of you before they hear us!"

He hissed. They crawled backwards until the stalks completely blocked their view before turning and making their way off into the darkness.

"Hold it...almost there...you've got to be very delicate to get this just right..."

Cielo was straining on the string of the bow as Hitch fiddled with a handkerchief he had tied onto the end of an arrow. He had placed a copper piece into the cloth bundle, holding it slightly off to the side to not interfere with the string seating in the nock. They were standing on the back of a horse drawn cart parked behind one of the buildings near the town hall. Cielo pointed the arrow toward the sky, the tip covered in strips of fabric that had been soaked much to Hitch's disgust in good dwarven spirits. Turf stood poised with flint and steel.

"Light it boy!"

The steel raked across the flint a shower of sparks arcing toward the tip of the arrow that blazed to life. A second later Cielo let go of the bow string, the arrow rocketing high into the sky. The copper piece kept the handkerchief pulled back into a streamlined shape until the arrow reached the top of the arc before falling away allowing it to open like a blossoming flower and slow the descent of the brightly burning arrow.

"The horses!"

Hitch cried slapping Turf on the back as he leapt over and grabbed the reigns flicking them hard. The horses leapt forward almost knocking Cielo and Hitch off their feet in the back of the wagon as it raced around the corner. Cielo plucked another arrow from her quiver as Hitch levelled his fearsome crossbow laying it across the side boards for support. The guards outside the town hall stared up at the sky in confused amazement for a moment until they heard the thundering of hooves and saw the horses burst out of the darkness. Bolt and arrow flew through the air striking the guard nearest them as they raced on past. They stumbled backwards for a moment before collapsing back against the wall the sliding down to the ground.

"Attack! Attack!"

The other guard frantically shouted as they ran over to see where the wagon had disappeared to, catching sight of it as it vanished into the gloom. The humans and draconians remaining in the town hall burst out onto the street on shaky legs, wildly waving their weapons. Seeing their comrade dead on the ground near the entrance they fanned out into a semi circle unsure of what to do next until they heard the voice of a young man cry.

"Woah!!"

The horses skittered along the ground as they tried to come to a halt. Cielo was pitched off her feet crashing down onto the wooden boards the wind knocked out of her. Hitch flashed Turf a murderous look for a split second before sighting down his crossbow and squeezing off a shot. They had circled the village to appear across a different road than the one they had thundered down on their first attack run but it was a good deal further away. The bolt went high striking the crossbeam over the entrance, sinking into the wood mere inches above the lead draconians head. Before he could curse his aim Turf had whipped up the horses and they were off and racing around the perimeter once more. The draconians eyes blazed with hateful fury before he grabbed a torch out of it's bracket and roared.

"BURN IT! BURN IT ALL FOR OUR DARK QUEEN!"

The torch pitched end over end landing onto a thatched roof. The straw dampened by recent rains popped and sizzled until it caught. White smoke billowing as the embers caught licking out until tongues of flame burst into life. Other torches were picked up and thrown some of their pitchers so drunk and uncoordinated they fell uselessly in alleyways or fell short of the nearby buildings altogether. Enough made their mark though and soon the area was brightly lit with blazing roofs. An arrow shot out from the darkness taking a black clad human in the throat. They raked their fingers uselessly against the shaft sticking out of their neck as they collapsed gurgling to the ground. Cielo and Hitch had jumped from the wagon now approaching on foot they had sighted them down a street. Hugging the shadow cast by an awning Cielo had loosed her shot.

"Where are they!"

One of them demanded as they turned in all directions. The wagon thundered by on the other side of town and they looked that way as Hitch and Cielo sprinted across the road and headed down an alleyway.

"Grab up those torches and burn this place!!"

The lead draconian screamed as they themselves continued to stand behind the shield of the soldiers arrayed out in front of them. As one of them ran over to a torch laying on the ground the door of the nearby bakery flew open. Leaping from the darkened doorway Simon the Baker wielding a long handled paddle wooden paddle, normally used to move his loaves in and out of his wood fired oven sprang into action. He swung the paddle through the air with all his might, screaming his righteous rage as he angled the flat of the paddle sideways, the thin edge smashing into the soldiers collar bone. It snapped loud enough for anyone nearby to hear as they screamed in pain for a moment before collapsing unconscious.

"Kill him!"

The commanders voice wavered for a moment before every door in the village burst open as one. Kitchen knives, table legs and every assortment of improvised weapons were clamped in balled fists as the good people of Pinehurst roared their battle cries, their legs pumping as fast as they could. Cielo and Hitch paused for a moment to look at each other narrowly avoiding being run over by the horde of villagers streaming past. They raced on after them coming around a corner just in time to see the lines clash together. The Dark Queens soldiers were outnumbered and caught off guard not expecting anyone here to resist them but they were still soldiers all the same. Spears stabbed out and swords swung in whistling arcs some dodged or parried while others found their mark sinking into flesh. A draconian sword caught one poor villager in a vicious downward swing splitting their head open like a ripe melon. The momentum of their charge stalled and they were almost going to break until a heavy clay pot was pitched out of the crowd smashing into the bestial snout of a draconian dropping it to it's knees before others tackled it to the ground, their kitchen knives sinking into it's stinking flesh in a wild frenzy. As the blood pumped out in gushing geysers their attackers failed to notice something odd was occurring. The draconian's body began to rapidly stiffen, it's skin colour turning light grey as it hardened into stone. A peasant stabbed downwards the tip of their knife snapping off as they pitched forward scraping elbows and skinning their forearms on the concrete carcass. The lead draconian backed up toward the entrance fumbling for it's barbed whip. Cielo took aim with her bow shooting over the heads of the crowd. The arrow shot flat and fast whipping over their heads to sink deep into the draconians shoulder. It hissed in agony as it stumbled backwards it's whip still held in it's other hand. It managed to make it's way through the doorway as clay pots smashed all around it, it's remaining comrades were quickly overwhelmed as they were clubbed and stabbed into submission.

"No wait!"

Hitch cried out as the first villager stepped over the threshold of the town hall a split second before a thunderous crack was heard. They spun back around to the mob, a chunk of their flesh torn from their chest. Blood poured freely from the open wound soaking their clothes as they collapsed onto their knees. The whip cracked twice more as others tried their luck poking their heads around the doorframe only to dodge back in the nick of time narrowly avoiding the whips terrible kiss. The braided length the whip was studded with metal spikes, the tip was threaded through an eye hole punched through flat rectangles of steel. Their edges cut an ground into jagged peaks to better hook into flesh and rip it free in bloody chunks of gore. The mob circled around the town hall cutting off any avenues of escape.

"Lets rush it! It can't take us all at once!"

Someone cried out to cheers from the crowd but no one stepped forward to be the first through the door.

"Wait..."

Hitch called out, the crowd stopping to turn and look at him.

He passed his crossbow to Turf, unclipping his battle axe as he stepped forward.

"Now hear me foul reptile..."

Hitch bellowed.

"Your whip might be studded with steel that would flay a man bare..."

He took another step forward.

"But you now face a dwarven blacksmith in armoured helm and heavy chain mail."

He waved his hand down along his body from top to bottom. The top of the steel helmet was a polished dome. Four strips of metal for additional protection were riveted in place meeting at the centre where a spike protruded. The visor was flipped up internally on hinges that only allowed a portion of the plate to protrude like a hand shading the eyes from the sun. Bands of steel wrapped horizontally around the back of his head from ear to ear, each strip slightly longer than the one it was secured to above to form a flexible second skin. The mail shirt ran down the length of his arms and continued on halfway down his thighs, a split in the middle at the groin allowing for freedom of movement in the legs. A layer of large thick rings were laid over a second finer mesh.

"I'll split you like wood for the cooking fire with this axe..."

He held the weapon up in his eye line as he pulled down the visor of his helmet into place, presenting the grim engraved visage of a scowling dwarf. Pain clearly racked the draconian's face, blood oozing from the arrow still embedded in it's shoulder.

"Fools!"

It spat.

"You are all dead already!"

It roared.

"Once we do not return... the armies of the Dark Queen will come here..."

It was breathing heavily now, struggling to stay on it's feet.

"Unless..."

It let the word hang in the air for a moment as the flames continued to crackle, buildings burning down to their foundations. The beast was trying to gauge Hitch's response behind the cold steel mask. The villagers gather close behind turned staring at each other unsure of what to do next.

"No deal demon lizard!"

Raising his axe high above his head Hitch charged forward, the villagers half a second behind him as they rushed through the doorway hot on his heels.

## Chapter 15

"Whoosh!"

Flames shot into the sky as the funeral pyre was ignited the smell of burning hair curling the nose while the villagers were puzzled about why they could smell something akin to bacon sizzling as well. The minions of the Dark Queen had been stripped of their arms and armour, the bodies piled into a pit on top of each other before being set alight. Skin blackened and burnt away leaving the corpses looking like they were screaming eternally from their mortal wounds. Women turned their children away from the sight, making their excuses they hurried off.

"This is only the beginning..."

Hitch's solemn words caught the men off guard, their faces of grim satisfaction turning to confusion. He did not need to look up from the burning bodies to know he had their attention.

"When this lot doesn't report back they will send others to find them..."

He looked to Cielo who stood resolutely looking at the flames her youthful face set hard by the trials she had been through.

"So?... We'll get rid of them too!"

One of the men spoke up full of bravado.

"I don't recall having seen you lead the charge into the town hall last night?"

Hitch cocked an eyebrow at the man who shifted uncomfortably in place.

"Last night we got lucky. We caught them drunk and off guard and even then they managed to fight back and too many good folk here will never see the sun rise again."

Hitch turned away from the burning bodies stepping toward his audience.

"They were a scouting party. They disappear all the time. Their superiors will probably think they have deserted."

Another of the men piped up.

"That is what you want to believe. That they will not be missed. That there will be no consequences for our actions here. That your little farming world can keep on turning..."

Hitch was tiring of the interruptions of these country rubes and their ability to never fail to share an opinion no matter how little they might actually know about a topic.

"Your actions!"

One of them stepped forward to point an accusing finger at Hitch and Cielo.

"You were the ones who started this all last night! If we had left them alone...."

Hitch's eyes flared as he roared striding forward toward his accuser.

"THEN YOU'RE THROATS WOULD HAVE BEEN CUT COME THE MORNING! You're woman and children taken away in chains! This one..."

Hitch pointed back at Cielo.

"Pleaded with me to stay and fight to protect a town full of people she barely knows!"



His stubby finger waved across all those assembled.

"So feel free to fall to your knees and kiss the ground she walks upon or press your lips to the seat of my trousers!"

The man tensed for a moment ready to spring at the dwarf he looked down upon before his judgement got the better of him. Waving his hand in a dismissive gesture he turned and stalked off. After a few awkward moments someone else spoke.

"So what do we do then?..."

Their tone was calm and inquisitive. Hitch turned his gaze to the new man, blowing out a big breathe that puffed his cheeks while he tried to think.

"You can't stay here...You have no defences and not enough time to build any..."

Hitch had been no stranger to digging moats and raising ramparts in his younger days campaigning across Krynn in whatever petty war or border dispute he had stumbled into.

"You have some weapons and armour now...but only enough to equip a handful of men..."

Hitch was referencing what they had taken from the dead soldiers, leaving out his own arms and armour bound for market.

"You could take to the hills and hide out..."

A voice rose in the crowd.

"Why do you say you so much Hitch? Aren't you going to lead us?"

His head snapped up from his musing to regard the men assembled before him. He could see that they were scared, facing so dire a situation they could never have imagined. They felt the burden upon their shoulders knowing that when they returned to their homes their wives and children would turn to them for answers about what they would do next.

"Well... I .... didn't...wouldn't...."

Hitch stumbled over his words. He had been trying his best since they had left his forge to avoid any conflict but it had followed them anyway. All he wanted was to get Cielo away from this place but Reorx only knew where they might wind up with armies and beasts now stalking the land. Looking into the faces of them men before him he noticed them nodding their heads when he met their gaze, confirming they would follow where he would lead.

"There is only one real course of action left to us then."

Hitch solemnly stated.

"We take the war to them!"

He raised his fist into the airt, everyone around him bursting into roars of approval. Cielo stood forward to place her hand on Hitch's shoulder while she pumped her fist into the air as she screamed to the sky above. So it was that on that day a dwarven blacksmith became the leader of a human resistance against one of the greatest threats Krynn had ever known. Runners were sent ahead to the nearest town of Wildpoint to the north to see if the armies of the Dark Queen had reached them yet. Women and children packed up their meagre belongings and headed south west until they reached the Lockspring river before heading upstream until they could find a place in foothills of the Southern Dargaard mountains. There would be game in the forests and fish in the river enough to last them until the men returned. Hitch tried to convince Cielo to go with them. They would need someone like her to watch over them and help hunt for food. One stern look from the fiery human girl was all he needed to know it was a lost cause.

There were many tearful farewells before the women and children headed off with their wagons laden down with all they could carry. Lips and bodies pressed together, powerful oaths sworn that they would be reunited soon safe and well. Daughters bawled as they begged their fathers not to leave them while sons sat stoney faced wiping tears from the corners of their eyes, promising they would look after their mothers and sisters with their very lives. They waited until the line of wagons had faded far into the distance before they gathered together and got to work. Small fruit trees were dug up and laid onto large pieces of clothe. Care was taken to keep alot of dirt packed around the roots which were moistened before being wrapped up. Long stalks of grass were cut and bundled together. Squares of fishing nets were sewn onto heavy canvas backpacks. Racks groaned under the weight of strips of meat being smoked for rations. As the sun began to set on the village they gathered around a cooking fire to fill their bellies in preparation of the long days ahead of endless marching. They turned their heads at the creaking sound of the caravan that Hitch and Cielo had first arrived in pulled close enough to the fire to be seen.

"As you all know I am a blacksmith..."

Hitch paused for a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing.

"Originally when we left our home forge we were headed to Sanction where our craft would fetch a high price."

He rested a palm flat on the side of the caravan before continuing.

"Despite everything that has happened to us I kept hoping that we would still make it there and in the end all of this would still be worthwhile."

Flicking a latch he held his hand on the edge of a swing open panel.

"But now I see there is no market. There is no grand pay day. We are all now in this together."

He lifted the lid to display the weapons they had created over the long months of autumn and winter for the spring. The dancing flames sparkled off the polished steel, the eyes of all who saw them popped open in shock and awe. They scrambled to their feet and rushed forward to claim swords, axes and spears. They hefted the weapons in their hands marvelling at their balanced weight. They cut the air around them, the blades whistling. They studied them under the firelight noting the folded patterns in the steel, the runes engraved.

"Been holding out on us old man?"

One of them chuckled in jest.

"We've never seen anything like these..."

Another spoke in awed tones almost to themselves unable to take their eyes off the weapon in their hands.

"Well now they are yours. From here on out. Hopefully many years from now they will hang above the mantles of your fireplaces and your grandchildren will pester you about them with incessant questions and demands to hold them. You'll chuckle to yourself and think..."

At this point someone jumped up from the spot by the fire and shouted.

"That old dwarf is still causing me grief!"

Even Hitch joined in their laughter slapping the sides of the caravan. It felt good to ease the tension he knew they would all be feeling. Around the campfire with full bellies they would be confident and bold. They would boast about the number of enemies they would kill and the women that would fall at their feet as their exploits became so grand they would rival those of Huma himself. Hitch knew all too well what was waiting for them out there on the plains. Many of them would not live past the next few days, their wives and children praying for them to return while they already laid cold in a distant field. He glanced over at Cielo on the other side of the caravan smiling and calling out to the others. He waved his hand toward the fire indicating she should join them. Springing away she practically skipped around the fire making a bee line for the open spot right next to Turf. He handed her a plate and they exchanged smiling glances before she started spooning the meal into her mouth. He had to admit to himself that she was becoming a woman now despite her terrible table manners and most unladylike eating habits.

"Now that we've gathered our supplies what's our plan for tomorrow?"

One of the men had come over to stand by him.

"We'll have to leave early. I don't dare wait much longer knowing that sooner rather than later someone is going to come looking for what remains in the bonfire we burnt this morning."

Hitch met the gaze of the other man.

"We'll head down the main road towards Haltigoth and lay an ambush for them there. It's a main port city and is the most likely staging point for their armies."

The man nodded along in agreement. Everything Hitch was saying sounded reasonable.

"You sound like you've done this before."

The man paused hoping that the mysterious dwarf would be forthcoming with some fantastic tales of adventures past. He just nodded to himself for a moment before replying.

"Oh once or twice..."

He replied in a casual understated tone.

"Have you killed many people before...well before all of this?"

The man asked nervously. Hitch got the distinct impression that the man was fishing for some tall tales of gory death to help reassure him that Hitch could lead them through this great trial ahead. His expression turning very cold and serious Hitch remarked.

"I hurt someone's feelings pretty badly"

Hitch patted the man on the arm before turning to walk over and find his place by the fire with the others. They would have a long day of marching ahead of them and they all needed their rest. Accepting his portion he happily dug into the beef stew. The meat was tender and fell apart in his mouth almost before he began to chew. The aromatic vegetables complimented the generous amount of red wine that had been added. Finishing his bowl he belched loudly with great satisfaction before stretching out on the grass to gaze up at the stars and slowly drift off to sleep to the sounds of the crackling wood and low muttered conversations.

## Chapter 16

"How much further damn you!"

Torgar the Draconian roared back over his shoulder as he stalked forward along the wide dirt track. They had been roused at dawn and ordered on the march. A raiding party had not returned and they were to bring the lazy dogs back to be flogged for dragging their heels.

"...probably still asleep in warm beds with maidens piled either side of them..."

He thought bitterly to himself as he continued to trudge along. A voice finally piped up behind him.

"Not too much further we should be there before high noon."

A balding human consulted a map while trying to keep pace with the others on foot, absently looking up as they did their mental calculations. The former book keeper had been pressed into service as a map reader for the armies of the Dark Queen and had soon learned to never speak unless they were spoken to and to only offer good news even if they had to make it up. Summary beatings and whippings were common place for those who displeased their masters. A human might even be executed on the spot, their killer fearing no repercussion. So it was that Harold Kettle Pot found himself praying that they would reach their destination before the sun baked straight down on them. The column of roughly two dozen fighters marched two abreast. Goblins and humans rubbed shoulders trailing after the lone Draconian that could be spared to lead them.

"Deep breathes now..."

Hitch whispered to Cielo as she drew back on her bow. They were crouched behind a line of their canvas backpacks. Small fruit trees rose up out of the open mouths of the packs, clumps of long grass woven and threaded through the fish netting on the back to provide a mobile screen of cover. They would not pass inspection up close, but they were laying in wait twenty paces from the track and their targets were grimly staring ahead as they marched.

"Line them up..."

She stared down the length of the arrow taking aim at her target. Her shot would be the signal to the rest to fire. She focused on the Draconian leading them. She shivered at the sight of it's cruel eyes as it's head snaked side to side taking in it's surroundings. She followed it's pace lining up the arrow one stride ahead so that they would step right into it's flight path. Her arms began to quiver under the strain of holding the string taut.

"Loose!"

Hitch commanded. Her fingers popped apart as the arrow leapt forward slicing through the air. The Draconian had stopped just as Hitch had given the order, the humans behind him not noticing until one of them crashed straight into their back almost bowling them over as another dodged around their side to place themselves unwittingly between the Draconian and the ambush.

"Thunk!"

The arrow punched through the side of the humans head, bursting out the other side in a spray of gore and brain matter. Like cutting a puppets strings the human dropped instantly falling limply to the hard packed dirt. Torgar turned ready to batter the offending human that had run into him to the ground when he felt the hot spray of blood across his face. For a moment the pair stood stunned looking at each other before a volley of arrows cut through the air into their ranks. Shafts sunk into exposed thighs, calves and shoulders. Goblin and human alike dropped to the ground screaming as they clutched at their wounds.

"AMBUSH!"

Torgar roared as he reached to his side with practiced ease his arm coming up in an instant to brandish his saw tooth axe. Those still standing in the column quickly formed up to face the new threat, locking together their assortment of shields. Harold ran in a blind panic along the line of soldiers, his hands waving above his head until he was plucked off his feet by Torgar who hefted him onto his shoulder, the poor humans legs and ample rump now acting as an improvised shield. He took off at a ran straight at the line of humans. They reach for their arrows to make their follow up shots before they saw the terrifying beast bolting towards them and lost their nerve. They fumbled their bows, arrows unable to find their nocks. He covered the ground quickly his feet pumping as his breath hissed between his fangs.

"Arghhh!"

Harold cried out in agony as an arrow sunk deep into the meat of his rear end. Before he could comprehend what was going on he found himself flying through the air before crashing into someone and falling into a heap. Torgar was onto his next opponent an instant later as he cut an x across his opponent with two wicked slashes that ripped chunks of flesh from their shoulders and chest, blood spurting as they fell screaming desperately clutching at their wounds. Kicking them viciously over onto their back the draconian took off running past the line of ambushers. The surviving humans and goblins were hot on his heels, teeth bared and curses screamed as they ran. Throwing down their bows the farmers took up their spears and swords sprinting into the fray. Steel rang and sunk into flesh on both sides as they hacked and slashed at one another. Hitch caught a sword on the underside of his axe head before pulling the blade forward out of his opponents hand. Stabbing the axe forward in a two handed grip, the blade held at the horizontal skipped across the side of a goblins face opening up the skin to expose the yellow fangs underneath. It stumbled backwards for a second clutching at the gaping wound as Hitch stepped forward swinging the axe in a wide arc that caught the goblin in the throat. Blood gushed out of the open wound as the head lolled to the side barely held in place by strips of skin and tenuous tendon. Turning he roared to Cielo.

"Don't let that thing escape!"

Cielo nodded before turning around to see the draconian reach the top of a small rise. It's wings flared for moment as the winds whipped up. She pulled back on the bow string, her eyes never leaving the snarling beast. Bending at the knees it looked like it was about to leap out into the air. Her fingers popped open releasing the bow string. Time seemed to stand still for a moment as the draconian rose up into the air, the arrow whipping ahead to close the distance. As it rose into the air the shaft sink deep into it's thigh. Throwing its head back it roared in agony as the wind carried it away, gliding away over the tops of the long grassy fields. Turning back she saw the farmers clubbing and hacking the last of the enemy troops to the ground. They stumbled back from their bloody work, faces drenched with sweat as they spat curses at the freshly minted corpses at their feet. Some of their friends were among the dead as well, pools of blood mixing with the soil where their bodies had been mortally wounded.

"Did you get it!"

Hitch came panting over to Cielo.

"Well I kind of got it..."

Cielo said quietly as she stared off into the distance. Hitch paused looking confused.

"It opened it's wings and the wind carried it away. I got it in the leg."

Hitch tried to hide the disappointment on his face. He knew she had done her best in a situation most young women should never have to find themselves in.

"Well that's still pretty good."

Cielo turned to face Hitch her eyes down cast.

"I was aiming for it's head."

Stripping what they could from the bodies of friend and foe alike they quickly said their goodbyes to their fallen comrades before securing their backpacks and heading off. The question was raised if they should go after the draconian and it was quickly decided against. Even if they had been tracking a wounded deer by the blood trails alone it would have taken hours to run it to ground. Now they were dealing with a quarry that had taken to the winds, their blood left in dribs and drabs over a much greater distance. Even with access to the best hounds that money could buy it would have proven quite the challenge. They had to assume the beast would make it back to camp and the alarm, reinforcements coming back with greater numbers then they would ever be able to handle. They needed to put as much distance between themselves and this place as they could. After hours of hard marching Hitch finally called a rest. They dropped where they stood, their legs burning and cramping. Stretching out they gulped down air and fumbled weakly for something in their packs to eat. Hitch shrugged off his pack but kept on his feet knowing that if he sat down right now he might never get up again. Reaching into a pouch on his belt he pulled out some strips of dried meat. Cielo gratefully accepting her share and started munching away in between swallows of water.

"We're like mice in the field waiting on the owl to strike..."

Hitch commented as he looked out on the rolling hills of grassland stretching out to the horizon. Here and there huge lone trees stood their billowing canopies offering shade to weary travellers and wandering cattle. Hitch wondered why they alone had survived like islands in the vast ocean. As he looked out on the horizon he saw something moving across the sky towards them.

"Is that a hawk?"

He muttered to himself the others oblivious to anything going on around them. As the object approached he noted the wings were constantly beating unlike those of a hawk that rode the thermal winds. The hair stood up on his arms, cold fear gripping his heart as realised with horror that he was not seeing a hawk close by but something else entirely approaching from a much greater distance.

"Dragon!"

It had been so many centuries since a Dragon had last been spotted by mortals eyes on Krynn that even Hitch's great great grandfather had never seen one. At this time you would sooner expect a God to appear before you then you would to see a Dragon taking wing. Hitch's library had contained volumes that spoke of the third dragon war. Of the defeat of Takhisis and the banishment of the dragons from the lands of men never to return. He had shuddered at the sight of the illuminated images of the great beasts in flight, flames pouring from their mouths as water from a bucket to fall upon the screaming armies below. Nothing could have prepared him though for the sight of that creature rapidly closing towards them.

"Spread out! Hide! Use your packs!"

Hitch sputtered in alarm. Everyone snapped up into a seated position to look at the dwarf. They shifted their gaze to where his outstretched hand was pointing before they erupted in a riot of panic. Grabbing up their backpacks with their wilting fruit trees installed they took off running in every direction heading down into seams where the hills met before throwing themselves onto the ground to cower beneath their camouflage. Others headed straight for the nearest tall tree, scrabbling up the trunk into the branches. Hitch frantically looked around for Cielo spotting Turf pulling her up into cover of the foliage. The last time Hitch had climbed a tree he had still been a boy and he wasn't about to try and found out if he still had the ability to do so now. Taking off at a run he moved away from everyone else up onto the top of hill.

Finding the soil to be soft and loose he started scooping out huge clumps of dirt with his hands throwing them between his legs like a dog getting ready to bury a prized bone. Every few scoops he'd look up and see the dragon becoming larger and larger as it approached.

"How much bigger could that thing get!?"

He asked no one as he scooped faster and faster. Cielo and Turf climbed high into the branches peeking through the leaves at the approaching beast. They shivered as they gripped onto the branches their arms and legs wrapped around them tightly.

"By Reorx I'm as dirty as a gully dwarf"

Hitch mused as he flung the last of the dirt out of his improvised burrow. It was hardly an apt comparison as gully dwarves were famous for avoiding baths as though they were operating under the misconception that soapy water and acid were interchangeable terms. Diving into the burrow he pulled his backpack down on in beside him leaving only a few inches between the ground and the top of the fruit tree to peer out. His old dwarven instincts to tunnel into the earth kicking in Hitch felt an immediate sense of relief. In his mind there was no way he would be spotted now. If only he could say the same for his travelling companions.

"Flomp. Flomp. Flomp."

Huge leathery wings beat directly over head as the dragon circled it's silhouette cast as a great black shadow on the waving grass below. Everybody tensed. Closing their eyes they kept their heads bowed afraid to look up in case the dragon sensed it was being watched and turned it's terrible gaze to meet theirs. The silhouette seemed to pause in one spot, the beating of the wings growing louder and louder as the dragon lowered down for a landing. The very earth shook as the dragon tucked in it's wings and dropped the last few feet to the ground. A figure was perched on the dragons back, sitting up straight in an oversized saddle. It swung one leg over the dragons back, sliding down it's side to drop to the ground with practiced ease. From his vantage point Hitch could see the dragons scales were a brilliant red like an exotic ergothian bird. It's head snaked from side to side the eyes closed as it stretched out it's muscles before the eyelids popped open to reveal huge blue saucers. Tucked in the relative safety of his burrow Hitch still felt his bowels loosen as fear gripped him like he had never known on a hundred battlefields from his adventures as a youth. Here before him was a creature of myth and legend so terrifying that only the mightiest of heroes wielding the greatest weapons ever forged had finally been able to defeat them and here was one alive and breathing before him in all it's horrifying majesty. Taller then a two storey home and four times as long he could not wrap his mind around the sheer scale of the creature that had appeared before them. The rider arched their back placing their hands on their hips before letting out a loud groan of satisfaction. They were dressed in black leggings and tunic. Golden vambraces were clamped onto their forearms, a heavy wide bladed sword hung from their belt in well oiled scabbard. Moving along the side of the red dragon they patted it's flanks before starting to walk up the hill to the large tree where Cielo and Turf were hiding.

"Oh no Cielo..."

Hitch whispered to himself as he realised the pair might be spotted at any moment. Dragon or rider had only to look up and they might spot them clinging to the branches above like grilled meat on a stick that seemed to be sold by vendors at every town across Krynn. Easing his crossbow out of his backpack he slowly started to wind the string back each click of the ratcheting gears causing him to wince. He knew it would be a futile gesture, he could not hope to kill the creature before him but perhaps he could buy her some time if she was spotted. Cielo and Turf peered over the edge of their branches down at the red dragon beneath them nails digging into their perches. Their eyes tracked the black clad figure as it approached before it stopped at the base of the tree. They wondered what they were doing for a moment until they heard the faint sound of what they thought was running water until they realised the rider was relieving themselves, tossing their head back their heads closed with a look of satisfaction on their face. Soon the sound ceased and the figure headed back to the red dragon resting comfortably. Climbing back up onto the dragon they opened a side panel of their saddle and withdrew something that clinked.

Pulling the heavy mail shirt over their head they adjusted it in place before adding a sleeveless tunic then reattaching their sword belt over the top. Properly dressed they muttered something to themselves that no one could hear before climbing up into their saddle, wiggling as they adjusted themselves back into the groove in the leather padding formed by many hours of flight time. Gripping the reigns in their hands they shouted a word of command. The red dragon rose onto it's hind legs stretching out it's huge wings before raising them up to point at the sky. Crouching low it coiled the muscles of it's legs before leaping straight up into the air as it pushed down with it's wings raising a cloud of dust as twigs and dried leaves flew in all directions. Wings rapidly beating the red dragon rose higher and higher into the air until it bowed it's head and started moving forwards. Everyone lay frozen as the beating of those wings grew fainter and fainter as dragon and rider continued on their journey. Everyone started coming out of their hiding places, Cielo and Turf swinging down from the tree. They were all surprised to see a fruit tree at the top of a nearby hill shoot up and away landing nearby before a very dusty and dirty dwarf emerged slapping at his clothes which only seemed to create more clouds of dirt then it brushed away.

"The mole-man emerges!"

Someone called out causing everyone to burst into laughter. Hitch scowled at everyone assembled before he allowed himself to smile.



## Chapter 17

No one needed any encouragement to get up and start marching again. They headed off at a brisk pace eating up the miles as they talked and hypothesised endlessly about the dragon and rider they had seen and what it meant to the enemy army as a whole.

"Dragon men and Dragon Dragons!"

Had been excitedly proclaimed more than once with a sense of dread. What else were they going to encounter before this was all over? How could they possibly hope to make any difference against an enemy so powerful the last time they were defeated was at the legendary hands of Huma himself!

"That Dragon wasn't looking for us was it?"

Cielo asked Hitch as they marched along side by side.

"No little one, they wouldn't send out such a creature to hunt the likes of us."

Hitch tried his best to reassure her.

"Pay no attention to what the others are saying. They may be knowing what they are talking about at the best of times when they are discussing the crops they plant."

"No dragon was sent out to look for a little group like us..."

He paused for a moment his ears pricking up as the sound came to him again.

"Hooowlllll...."

The cry of the dog carried on the wind. Hitch held up his hands for silence and the group paused to wonder what was going on.

"Hooowwwlllll...."

It came again louder and longer than before.

"The dragon wasn't looking for us but those dogs are!"

Hitch called out to the group as they looked around. Someone noticed the movement in the distance and saw the human like figures running alongside the dogs as their muzzles went side to side tacking the scent.

"Quick young one get out your tinder box."

Hitch instructed Cielo as he whipped out his knife and cut a thick bundle of the long grass. He quickly wrapped it into a knot while he ordered the others to head south as fast as they could. They paused for a moment before he roared at them to move. Holding out the knotted grass he instructed Cielo to set the spark to it. She flicked her hands together again and again as sparks rained down on the dry stalks until the grass began to burn. Holding it up to his lips Hitch blew until the spark caught and burst into flame. Heaving it as far as she could in the direction of their pursuers he and Cielo took off running after the others. The flames spread rapidly seeming to leap and skip out in all directions as the air filled with thick smoke. Hitch was falling behind the others but Cielo refused to leave his side as they pumped their legs and did their best to not choke on the smokey air they were sucking in. The wind turned for a moment offering them some relief as it blew into their faces and carried the smoke away from them.

"We've...got to get...to a river..."

Hitch panted as he ran along.

"Tell...the others..."

He ordered. Cielo nodded before taking off to catch up with the main group her face set in a determined scowl as she pushed herself despite the burning sensation in her lungs. Hitch saw her up ahead calling and waving to the others. She managed to round them up like a sheep dog before they changed tack heading off in a different direction. Hitch assumed that someone in the group must be familiar with the area and he managed to intercept them and fall into line at the back of the pack. Risking a look behind he saw the wall of flames spreading out further and further until he could not take it all in. The trackers of the Dark Queen were not fools having plied their trade hunting game and runaway slaves long before war had returned to Krynn. They knew fires did not spring to life from nowhere. They raced to try and move around the spreading flames before their path of pursuit was cut off. Used to covering long distances on foot their stamina and endurance was impressive. The winds picked up whipping the flames higher and faster along the plains.

"Keep going! Keep going!"

Hitch mentally screamed at himself as he felt his legs starting to buckle. He had been a much younger dwarf the last time he had to run any kind of distance like this and it was his iron will alone that was keeping one foot moving in front of the other. The figures ahead were starting to get lost in the smokey haze and he kept running in what he thought was the right direction. Suddenly Cielo burst through the haze heading towards him. Gripping his hand in her own she turned and raced back after the others half dragging him along with her. Tears started to well in his eyes which he would later claim if anyone had asked were down to the damnable smoke but the sight of his adopted daughter risking her own life to return for him filled him with pride.

"Water!"

A voice up ahead cried before the sounds of splashing came to their ears. Within the next few strides they were through the long grass and out into the open to see the river that stretched out before them. Clambering down the banks they waded out into the water with the others.

"Alright...ok...."

Hitch gasped for air as he tried to speak knowing that their time was potentially very short.

"Ditch those trees they'll only weigh us down in the water."

Everyone promptly turned to their neighbour and helped pull the fruit trees out of their packs, casting them aside.

"Dogs cant track your smell in the water so we're going to go down river as far as we can before coming out on the opposite bank and pushing on. That will hold up the trackers as the scour the banks looking for our scent. Ok?"

Everyone nodded and promptly turned and started wading out into the water. In the middle of the river they were up to their armpits, heads tilted back as they bounced on their tip toes along with the current.

"The indignity..."

Hitch muttered to himself as he was held up in between Cielo and Turf, their arms wrapped around his waist to hold him aloft in the current. Smoke periodically billowed over them with the changing tides of the wind. The crackling sound of the flames grew closer and closer until the riverbank itself was a blazing inferno before burning down to the damp clay and fizzling out. The fire rapidly moved along the riverbank ahead of them until they found themselves arriving just as it had burnt itself out. Fortunately no embers were able to make it over the water and land on the other side to start the fire anew. The cool waters felt great against their skin, they relaxed as they moved with the current the strength returning to their taxed limbs.

"Lets get up on the other side and get moving."

Hitch called out and the group reluctantly moved over to the other bank. Stepping out of the water they suddenly felt like they were wearing full plate armour, the transition from floating along to standing up while wringing wet so jarring. Grumbling they made their way up the muddy banks onto the pristine grassland beyond. Looking back they saw the blackened ground stretching out as far as the eye could see in all directions, smoking tendrils still rising like ghosts from a graveyard at midnight.

"It will take a few hours for that ground to be cool enough to move across without burning straight through the soles of their shoes."

They peered into the smoke looking for their pursuers but could see nothing, each praying silently they had simply given up the chase and moved on. Wearily they turned and began to march on. They needed to put alot of miles between themselves and the river before they would be able to safely bed down for the night.

"Marching is all we seem to do..."

Someone grumbled. The sentiment quickly taken up by others. Humans Hitch had learned many years ago were always quick to point out how they were being done wrong.

"A good dwarf never complains..."

Cielo cheerfully began to lecture the assembled men as they kept marching.

"...or allows any hardship to affect them..."

Hitch beamed with pride as she went on.

"A good dwarf takes everything in their stride and all they ask is for more."

Eyes rolled and heads were shook in disagreement until one finally summoned up the courage to speak.

"Maybe you didn't notice but we are not dwarves and neither are you girly!"

Cielo's cheeks flushed hot at the perceived insult, her fists balling in anger as they went on.

"Our feet hurt and our backs ache worse then right after the summer harvest and we are still so many miles and days away from being able to see our loved ones again..."

The grumbles of agreement increased in volume until Hitch feared he would have a mutiny on his hands. Taking a deep breathe he spoke.

"There are plenty of people in the graveyard that would happily switch places with anyone of you in a heart beat."

The group fell silent for a minute.

"And if you don't knock this off you'll find yourself there soon enough!"

They all fell silent again as they continued to walk on, the sun already starting to dip toward the horizon as they kept their ears open for the sounds of howling dogs on the wind.

## Chapter 18

They arrived at the port city of Haltigoth three days later. The tracker teams had not been able to pick up their scent, their dogs noses so full of ash and smoke they couldn't have sniffed out a pork chop right in front of their faces. Approaching along the beach at night they had found a rotted and abandoned jetty. Ducking underneath they stashed their gear up in the support beams above the water line. They retained their daggers and whatever other weapons they could keep concealed about their bodies. Solinari was a thin crescent sliver in the sky barely casting any light for the town watch to see by. Creeping along a sea wall slick with algae they came upon a gaping storm drain. As the fumes wafted out their noses crinkled in unison.

"Are we really going in there?"

Everyone assembled nodded their agreement with the question.

"You've been away from your farms for too long if this offends your senses. Breathe deep lads the air is full of vitamins."

Hitch stepped forward quickly disappearing into the inky blackness of the tunnel, his boots making squelching sounds in the foul water. They paused for a moment looking to each other before they heard the clicking of metal being struck together. The sparks from the tinder flashed brilliantly for a moment illuminating Hitch. Something was tucked under his arm sticking straight out, his hands pressed together. After much muttering and cursing to himself the improvised torch burst into life. He had taken a small plank from under the abandoned pier where they had stashed their gear wrapping a torn piece of sailing cloth around it. Lifting the low green flame above his head he waved to the others to join him. Cielo and Turf stepped forward first. Coming to a t-intersection that branched left or right Hitch paused to lift the torch above his head and try to peer down each branch of the path.

"All roads lead into the city I suppose..."

He muttered to himself before taking the right fork and striding forward. Those at the back of the line were quickly cast into darkness as the torch disappeared down the tunnel and looked over their shoulders into the inky blackness imagining the nightmare horrors that were coming up right behind them. Moving along the tunnel they came to a section that appeared to have little recesses built into either side of the tunnel wall. Approaching slowly Hitch found they were entrances to small square rooms.

"Wait here a moment lads."

He said before stepping over the threshold before they had a chance to protest plunging them into almost total darkness. Waving the torch around the room he found the mouldy remains of a straw mattress pressed into one corner. Chains were bolted to the wall that lead down to manacles still securing a former guest in place.

"Here take this."

Hitch said as he passed a new flaming torch to Turf, stepping past into the room opposite. Grateful for the light he held it up high so everyone could see. The grip of the torch felt good in his hand, smooth and dry he was confident it would not slip.

"Bones!"

Turf spat in horror as he jumped back almost dropping the torch in the process. Hitch had bound some rags around the thigh bone of the skeleton he had found chained to the wall and pressed them into service as a make shift torch.

"Quiet damn you!"

Hitch scolded as he came back into view.

"Looks like some prison cells. Nothing much down here except for your new friend Sparky"

He laughed as he pointed to the torch that Turf held out at arms length like a stick dipped in manure. Turning he headed down along the tunnel past the remaining cells before taking a left at the next fork. Turf herded the others past him. Pausing for a moment he peered into the darkness beyond the torch light, sure that he had heard something moving. Shaking his head he hurried to catch up with the others.

"Hey do you know where you are going or are you just guessing at this point?"

Someone called out from the group. No one knew how long they had been travelling for. They were cold, tired, sick of the reeking smells and the gnawing feeling they were never going to see the sky again.

"Of course I don't know where I'm going! I've never been here before."

Hitch replied before flashing them a broad smile.

"All we need to do is keep heading up hill. Dirty water flows downwards and we want to go where it has been."

Hitch did his best to keep a mental map as they turned this way and that. They had not double backed on their path so far but he knew that tensions were high and it might just be his companions breaking point. Doing his best to keep a positive attitude he was secretly worried too and doubted how much longer his light would hold out for. He had searched the rooms they had come across as quickly as he could, always hunting for fuel for their torches. It reminded him of his old adventuring days and he wished he had more time to make a thorough exploration of the place. Holding up his clenched fist the group came to a halt.

"Kah-Loo-Ah-Nah"

They froze as they heard the rhythmic chanting somewhere in the distance.

"Kah-Loo-Ah-Nah"

The hair stood up on the back of their necks, goose bumps pricking their skin. The tunnel ahead curved to the right, water flowing past in the channel beside the walkway. Hitch contemplated going back for a moment but knew that they must press on if they wanted to see the surface soon. Slowly they started creeping forward.

"Tar-Nah-Gesh"

The voices kept chanting repeating the new phrase over and over. Light danced on the wall up ahead and they quickly smothered their torches.

"Tar-Nah-Gesh"

Hitch's heart was hammering in his chest but he set his face in a determined expression and kept moving forward.

"She-Ash-Targ!"

Their voices started to rise higher and higher as they started to reach the crescendo of their ritual.

"She-Ash-Targ!"

A crack in the opposite wall came into view as they followed the curve of the path. As they approached it grew wider and wider to reveal a room beyond. Blazing torches hung in sconces on the walls their flames flickering and dancing. Black robed figures swayed side to side as they stood in a circle gazing down at something in the centre of their midst.

"Doo-Nuh-Rock!"

Hitch kept moving past the awful sight freezing as the sound of the chanting suddenly stopped. Turning back he saw the others were frozen in place unable to look away as a reptilian hand lifted a curved dagger slowly into the air.

"AAAARRRGHHHHHHH!!!"

A scream ripped the air causing everyone to jump and knock into each other as the sound continued to echo off the walls and fade into the distance. Fumbling with his torch Hitch ran ahead as he pulled out his flint and steel striking them together. Showers of sparks flew at the torch head but winked out harmlessly without catching. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he frantically worked. Black smoke rose up from the sacrificed victims body slowly billowing in a thick cloud, the edges deep blue and purple. Cielo shook with fear and reached for Turf to hold her unable to look away. Dumping the flint and steel on the ground Hitch's hand went into one of his pockets to pull out a piece of filthy rag he had found in his searches. Winding it quickly around the torch he plopped onto the ground, pressing his heels together to hold the torch in place. The black smoke shifted seeming to take on the outline of a figure whose back was to their audience, the assembled draconians falling to their knees out of sight. Redoubling his efforts Hitch struck the flint and steel together harder and faster heedless of the noise until a spark finally took hold. Not even daring to move he remained frozen in place, seconds seeming to drag out to minutes as the flame took hold. Fumbling he got to his feet almost dropping his tinder gear in the process before he started to wave the torch back and forth. The smoke coalesced into the solid form of a woman, their long black hair flowing down their back. The group caught the sight of the waving torch in their vision turning to see Hitch frantically signalling to them to keep moving. Lifting their feet to take that first steps they saw the woman in black whip around to face them, her pale oval face in sharp contrast to the darkness of her clothing that seemed like she had been dipped in pitch. Her slanted eyes bulged, her mouth opening to reveal sharp fangs as her hair shifted around her like she was underwater.

"CEASE THEM!!!"

The figure cried as the draconians leaped to their feet to stare in disbelief at the intruders.

"RUN DAMN YOU!"

Hitch roared his voice snapping them out of their trance. Turning he took off running up the tunnel the others quickly gaining on him. The Draconians burst from the room unsure of which direction to take. The lady in black remained trapped in the circle of salt that had been poured around the altar. They shrieked their frustration throwing themselves against an invisible barrier like a gold fish trapped in a glass bowl. The creature of the abyss had modelled it's appearance on this plane of existence as a homage to it's dark queen. Calling forth such a demon was fraught with danger and now the magic using draconian found itself backing against a wall frantically fumbling for spell components to try and ward it off in the event it was able to break the enchantments which contained it.

"Keep going! Don't stop!"

Hitch called breathlessly as he sprinted head long into the darkness holding his torch as high as he could. Coming to a side tunnel that branched off to the left he took it without hesitation as it lead them further away from the chamber. Pausing on the corner he waited for the others to pass him, handing his torch to Cielo to take the lead as he drew his daggers and took up the rear guard. Their lungs burned. Their hearts pounded in their chests as cries of the creature echoed behind them waiting any second for the lizard men to burst out and block their path ahead.

"Here! Here! Look!"

Cielo cried as she spotted a slit of the night sky ahead. Coming to the end of a tunnel they found iron brackets bolted to the wall to form a ladder. A stream of water poured down beside it. Waving the others ahead they began to frantically climb up to the next level where they were greeted with a round tunnel mouth only a few feet long beyond which was open ground and clear skies. They rushed forward bursting out onto the abandoned side street. Hands reached down to pull the next person the last few feet up onto the ledge.

"Where's Hitch!?"

Cielo cried out as the last person started to climb the ladder. Looking up she saw faces looking down, hands eagerly reaching out to help pull her up when she got into range. She looked back down the tunnel praying to see Hitch appear from the darkness.

"Come on! Come on! There's no time!"

Someone pleaded to her from above. Others had already started to stray from the sewer entrance and were looking around frantically expecting to see a town watch come storming around the corner any minute. They hissed at each other arguing they should leave right now. They all had wives and children to return to they reasoned. Bracing herself Cielo took off running with the torch back down the tunnel.

"Leave them lets go!"

Someone called out. They got to their feet and started heading away from the sewer entrance until the wheels of a nearby wagon started to squeal in protest. Having been left out in the weather for too long the swollen timbers and rusty iron brackets had almost rendered it immobile. Turf was straining to move it along. Puzzled the others did not know what he was trying to achieve but raced over to help. Broken barrels rattled in the flat bed of the wagon as they propelled it to the gaping black maw of the tunnel that looked like it would vomit forth the foulest creatures of the abyss any minute. Sprinting forward Cielo saw something hunched over in the torch light up ahead. Skidding to a halt she reached down and hooked an arm under Hitch. He was breathing heavily, his daggers still gripped in his balled fists.

"Come on Hitch! Please!"

She begged as she squatted down using her legs to help lift him off the floor. Her muscles burned, her shoulder threatening to pop out of its socket for a moment until she felt her burden lighten as Hitch started to rise under his own power. They clung to each other, stumbling toward the end of the tunnel.

"Turf! Help!"

The wagon almost in place Turf raced around to look down spotting Cielo and Hitch. Hearing the sound of running feet getting closer she turned and brandished the burning torch, pulling a thick bladed knife from her belt. Hitch turned to order her to go on ahead but found himself being lifted into the air. Turf reached down and gripping Hitch by the back of his collar managed to haul him up onto the landing with a side splitting effort. Falling into a heap he had time to spin himself around before he saw Turf reaching back down over the lip out of sight.

"There! Get her!"

A raspy voice screeched. Hitch's blood froze in his veins as he dived for the edge, looking down to see Cielo. Turning she sprung up into the air clearing the first few rungs her outstretched hand reaching for Turf's. His hand clamped around her wrist as he hauled backwards like they were back in the row boat on the river. As she came into view Hitch gripped onto her free arm and helped lift her clear. Throwing themselves backwards they pulled her clear a split second ahead of the on-rushing draconians. Unaware of the wall directly behind their quarry they slammed into the stone wall.

Jaws broke and teeth crunched as they fell to the ground bleeding and screeching in agony. Stumbling clear of the entrance Hitch and Turf pushed the wagon into place, wedging it into the tunnel mouth. Torches were thrown into the back before they turned to make good their escape, the dried timbers of the abandoned wagon catching to create a roaring inferno. The draconians rose unsteadily to their feet the fire burning brightly above them. Embers floated down as timbers cracked and split in the intense heat. Enraged and in agony they lifted their wounded brothers and began making their way back through the darkness. It swallowed them as though it were a portal to another dimension, creatures of the abyss returning to it's stygian folds. They shuddered at the thought of returning to report their failure and conspired to claim that their injuries were the result of a hard fought battle. The bodies of their victims having been thrown into the churning waters of the channels what was left of their remains to be belched out into the ocean days or weeks from now.

"Urgh...argh... noooooooooo!!!"

The dying screams of the summoner as the demon broke from their containment settled the matter. No need for a cover story when your commanding officer wasn't left alive to hear it. When they reached the surface again they would report for reassignment.



## Chapter 19

"Another round!"

Hitch boomed as the barmaids came to clear away their empty mugs. Soon trays arrived with fresh mugs full of foaming ale spilling down over the sides. Gratefully they lifted the mugs to their lips and drank deeply, feeling the tension and fear wash away. Deciding the best way to hide was to do so in plain sight the group had headed into a tavern. What was another group of thirsty travellers drinking away their worries. Taking over a large corner booth Hitch had gone to the bar and slapped down enough steel coins to quickly see their table bursting with plates of roasted meat, sharp cheese and slices of bread. They ate with ravenous abandon after so many simple meals on the grassy plains washing it all down with gulps of bitter ale. Even Cielo had been permitted to have a couple of mugs of ale and was soon feeling very light headed and leaden bellied. Looking around the table Hitch couldn't help but notice "his men" as he come to think of them kept looking around nervously, the haunted looks in their eyes which had already seen more than any human in a half dozen generations had. They did their best to smile back when their eyes met his, lifting their mugs in salute. He would give them a smile with a wink or nod of his head in encouragement. The tavern was busy, the other patrons making enough noise to put a battlefield to shame. Cielo was snuggled in against him the heavy meal and ale causing her to drift off.

"You came back for me..."

He whispered to himself.

"Back through that terrible darkness..."

Tears welled up in his eyes and he did not care who saw them. The image flashed in his mind of those horrific creatures in their black robes swarming at her like rabid rats, lifted to safety with mere seconds to spare.

"If something had happened to you...there would have been no containing my rage. I would have split the very mountains, scorched the lands and travelled to the abyss itself to claim the head of the Dark Queen."

He started to shake now, the wracking sobs overtaking him. Looking up he saw the solemn looks and red rimmed eyes of the others who had been reliving their own inner traumas.

"We need to go and find our families."

One of the men said looking very solemnly at Hitch.

"I agree with you lad. We've pushed this as far as I care to risk it and it's time we cut our losses and beat feet out of here."

There was a visible release of tension as the group was unsure how Hitch was going to react. The thought of their families, the uncertainty of what they would be going through after everything the group had faced haunted them in their quieter moments. Cielo began to rouse now yawning as she stretched her arms up above her head.

"Back to the land of living hey?"

Hitch asked playfully as he squeezed her closer for a moment. She looked around the table with bleary eyes before blinking and rubbing them clear. Rising on unsteady legs she offered her excuses as she headed off to find somewhere to relieve herself. Turf and Hitch shared a look before Turf eased himself out of the booth and followed along after her. Cities could be rough places and it seemed the more "civilised" a place was the more ruthless the cut throat element it attracted. Squeezing through the crowd he struggled to keep sight of her before suddenly bumping into her back. A large man stood blocking their path.

"Why hello there my lovely..."

He slurred as he looked her up and down. His red face beaded with sweat showing he was probably two dozen tankards into a heavy drinking session. Reaching up a hand he tried to stroke the side of her face. Cielo slapped the hand away with a quick hard stroke faster than his eyes could follow.

"Oh!... We got a firey one here lads... Is this cute little boy meant to be your boyfriend?"

He looked past Cielo to see Turf standing staring back shooting daggers, his body tensing.

"We should slap a dress on him and have him serve the ale along with the other wenches!"

The loud mouths friends started laughing like braying scavenger animals waiting to strike.

"He'd earn his weight in tips and a marriage proposal or two before the end of the night!"

One of the others piped up following the lead of the hulking brute who he now looked to for approval. The sound caught Hitch's attention. The crowd had formed into a circle hanging back to see what was about to happen. Swearing an powerful oath he stood up on his seat before vaulting onto the table. Plates broke and beer mugs flew as he rushed to cover the distance before his comrades realised what he was doing. How he now longed for his axe that had been left stashed back under the pier. He could feel this group like young pines with a few quick stokes of that keen edge. Sprinting across the wooden plank floor, sucking in huge gulps of air he sounded like a gnomish steam engine under full power. Leaping he tucked in his head turning himself into a flying battering ram.

"Ooofff!"

The mans breathe burst out of his lungs as he pitched forward onto the floor. Too drunk to react in time the world rushed up at his face seconds before it crunched into the beer stained boards. Light burst in front of their eyes as their nose was pulped into a bloody ruin. They caught a glimpse of a dwarf eyes filled with rage, their teeth flashing in a feral grin before Hitch turned throwing his body into a powerful hook that struck a second man in the knee causing him to collapse to the floor screaming in agony.

"Swish!"

Taking advantage of the confusion Cielo's hand whipped up in a blinding flash, the knife cutting a channel across the lead brutes face. He clamped his hands over the wound stumbling back a few steps before Cielo's foot came rocketing upwards in a vicious kick that caught him flush on the crotch. Crumpling to the ground his bellows muffled by the blood gushing from the gash in his face. Turf pulled out his knives too and the pair stood back to back thrusting and jabbing to keep their attackers back. They circled like wolves ducking forward and pulling back trying to find a weak point to bring through their defences. Hearts thumping adrenalin racing through their veins they slashed back and forth their whistling blades warding off the grasping hands. Their knives drew blood slashing across fingers and knuckles that quickly withdrew with howls of pain and hateful curses.

"Grab him! HOLD HIM!"

Someone bellowed as Hitch was grabbed from behind and lifted into the air writhing in place as the human did their best to pin his arms back.

"Bastard whore sons!"

Hitch roared turning purple as he struggled to free himself. A man stepped forward winding back his arm to deliver the thunderous blow that would carve in the dwarves ribs. Hitch saw the look of cruel triumph on their face as they relished the moment, the fist arcing towards him in slow motion.

"Crash!"

Pieces of wood exploded out in all directions as the bar stool broke across the would be attackers back. The John Henry Tanner stood there with their eyes still squeezed shut for a moment holding the backing of the chair above the crumpled body down onto the ground. Hitch stopped struggling to look on in amazement for a moment before he found himself falling to the fall. A second later a boot came crashing into his back sending him tumbling across the floor. He arched his back his hand coming around reflexively to try and touch where the boot had struck. White hot pain shot through him and for a moment he could not even bring himself to breathe.

"Dad! No!"

Cielo screamed as she raced off through the crowd wildly slashing with her knife to clear a path before throwing herself on top of Hitch, eyes flicking in every direction for danger. Turf realised half a second too late that Cielo was no longer covering his back turning just in time to see the fist that came smashing into his face. For a moment he seemed to float in the air, a trail of blood shooting out from his face as the ceiling raced downwards towards his feet before everything went black.

"Town guard! Make way! MAKE WAY!"

Helmeted men in matching tunics worn over light mail shirts appeared in the doorway moving through the crowd they pushed back with their small rounded shields. Any patron that had the misfortune of blocking their path was pushed, kicked and backhanded out of the way, their teeth loosened and their heads spinning for their troubles. Cielo saw the guards approaching and started hauling on Hitch's arm to try and bring him to his feet. The dwarf let out a short sharp gasp as he rose. Soon they were hobbling to the exit like uncoordinated contestants in a three legged race. Bursting out of the warm and well lit tavern they found themselves in a darkened alley with the others right behind them. They stumbled down the alleyway tripping over the debris they could not see as their eyes were still adjusting. Coming out onto a main street they took off running trying to put as much distance between themselves and the prison cells waiting for them if the town guard caught up. Crossing the street they headed down another alleyway before turning back in the direction they had come up another main street. They quickly found themselves totally lost and were sure if the town guards had still been trying to pursue them they would have been too. Gasping for air and ready to collapse they paused for a moment to lean up against the wall of a building peeking around the corner praying to not see any movement on the street. A cat sauntered over the road, it's tail cocked straight up in the air. Dogs held a conversation in the distance before someone stuck their head out of a window to bellow at them to be quiet.

"Look...over...there..."

Hitch breathlessly pants as he pointed to a low brick wall topped by a black wrought iron fence. Their gaze followed the fence along until they spotted a pair of gates loosely chained.

"It could be a park of some kind?"

Someone piped up hopefully.

"Or a graveyard!"

Another interjected.

"Whatever it is it's off the street and away from those guards."

Cielo firmly stated before helping Hitch to his feet and leading the way over. One at a time they squeezed through the gate wincing as the rusty hinges creaked and squealed in protest like a banshee's sighs until they were all through.

They padded along the soft low cut grass moving from under the cover of stout trees to dash across the moonlit ground. Moving from shadowed patch to patch as though they were being stalked by an eagle on the wing. Pushing through some bushes they came across a semi circles of trees surrounding a water fountain. A wide circle of white marble glowed eerily in the silver light of Solinari, it's water appearing almost black. A statue of a robed woman stood on a plinth in the middle of the water rising up above it's surface. The figure of the woman had turned their head upwards to the sky almost as though they were basking in the glow of the moon, their arms outstretched at their sides. Stepping closer Cielo could see down into the water and noticed the bottom of the fountain seemed to sparkle like twinkling stars.

"Coins."

Was the one word answer Hitch gave to the question before Cielo could voice it. She found herself reflexively reaching out a hand to scoop up all of the treasure in front of her before his hand caught her wrist.

"No one threw those coins in there for you! I wouldn't touch anything given in offering to another. The Gods are no better then petulant children at times and while they may ignore the cries of the faithful, surely a terrible punishment awaits any who would take the alms they had been offered."

Cielo flinched taking a step backwards as she looked up at the statue expecting it's eyes to flare open in shocked outrage at their intrusion.

"Forgive me...whoever you are."

Cielo quietly whispered before she hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do next she simply bowed quickly at the waist before busying herself with trying to find a place to sleep. They came across a flower garden nearby, neat rows of raised garden beds filled with roses. Their petals shut to the night air they still gave off the hint of their perfume. The group stretched out on their sides on the soft green grass placing their backs to the thick wooden slats that made up the raised flower beds. Finally able to allow themselves to relax their bodies seemed to melt into place the adrenalin and stress flowing out of them into the soil beneath. Eyelids heavy as lead ingots collapsed shut and blissfully dreamless sleep overtook them. Hitch led Cielo moved away from the others who had already begun the chorus of snoring and farting to be expected from a group of men full of meat and ale.

"Let's stay up for a minute and make sure everything is safe."

Hitch sat down on a stone bench carved with climbing vines, sighing in relief as the weight came off his feet. The ale was wearing off now and he felt where the bruise was sure to be forming over his kidneys. Cielo plopped down beside him, resting her head on his shoulder.

"You handled yourself well in there."

Cielo couldn't help but notice the pride in his tone.

"Better then you it seems old man..."

She teased as she tried to lift the corner of his tunic to inspect his injury. He swatted her hand away with a gentle pat.

"I'm far too old for bar room brawls, town watch cells and hang overs like temple bells."

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"So I couldn't help but notice that you called me 'Dad' before in there..."

Cielo blushed at the memory.

"You may only be a human"

He joked.

"But I am proud to be your father."

She threw her arms around him, squeezing him tight until his battered ribs throbbed in protest. He pried himself loose from her iron like grip for a moment to tilt her head up to his. Wiping the tears from her face as his own streamed down his cheeks into his beard.

"I love you dad."

"I love you daughter...with all my heart."

They wrapped their arms around each other and stayed like that as Solinari sank into the sky and Lunitari came into ascendance.

"Tomorrow we will look for a ship to take us away from this place."

Hitch whispered in Cielo's ear.

"The lads need to look upon their loved ones again."

Cielo nodded in agreement.

"And we need to get some sleep young lady. The sun will be up before you know it."

Hitch eased himself down onto the grass, stretching out on his side. Cielo lay down facing him, her head snuggled into his chest. Wrapping his arms around her they drifted off to sleep never feeling so safe and content in all of their lives as the Lady of the Garden stood watch.

The Lady of the Garden had been a priestess in another age. A person of great piety and patience. There had been an easy life. Born into a wealthy solamnic household they had been lavished with the finest clothes and taught by the wisest of tutors. Blessed with delicate desirable features they had gone from being a beautiful child to a stunning young woman who became the object of many a mans matrimonial overtures and outright carnal desires. Whether or not they noticed the attentions being paid to them which made them the envy of every young woman it was to matters of religious instruction they applied themselves with great passion and solemn dedication. It is easy to have faith when the winds of good fortune have filled your sails. Easy to preach with self righteous conviction when the blessings of your birth are mistaken for a worshippers windfall. Long hours were spent in quiet contemplation in the family chapel studying religious texts, nodding with solemn seriousness before pausing to make notes for their next sermon. At first her congregation was her fathers dinner guests who would politely nod along. Servants were press-ganged into gatherings in kitchens and quarters. As her confidence grew she left the grounds of her fathers estate to walk among the commoners. Her father had hoped that the experience would be enough of a shock to her senses that she would either cloister herself in a convent for the rest of her days or turn her attentions to the scions of other noble knightly houses he would wish to align himself with. The girl showed more grit and grace then others would have given her credit for. It was no easy thing to go from perfumed pillows to horse dung dwellings. She held her head high and forced her nose not to crinkle at the smells that assaulted it. Her expression remained serene and divine as she waved her hands in the ritual gestures of blessing. She was invited into their homes, the sick and the dying presented to her in the hopes that she might heal them.

Dutifully she knelt by their bedsides clasping her hands as she repeated the words that had long been written down. Those that recovered were hailed as proof of her divine providence. Inevitably when others passed away it was simply the will of the Gods, their time having come. The dead did not rest in peace through as others whispered that their passing was a sign that they had not truly been one of the faithful to begin with. Her fame and her ministry grew until a plague had risen that cut through the commoners as wheat before the scythe. The food was hoarded, the gates barred as the peasants were turned away out of fear that they might spread

the epidemic amongst those of noble rank and birth. The Lady chose to remain among her people. She could no more hold back the plague with her prayer than a child might turn the tide of an ocean with their hands. Soon even she began to sicken. Her faith did not fail her even as her skin erupted in painful blackened boils, her lungs filling with fluid making it hard for her to breathe. Those born into beauty can never truly appreciate the gifts they have been granted until they are taken away as time and disease will erode the face of mountains and maidens alike. Late one night when she could no longer stand the pain that wracked her body she travelled away from the village to the peace of a nearby grove where she hoped none would hear her words. Standing under the full moon of Solinari their once pure white robes shone brightly in the silver moonlight. Holding their arms out wide they tilted their head to face the heavenly body above them. Tears flowed down their cheeks as they beseeched the Gods to restore their body as they could no longer stand to go on living as they were. Faces would light up whenever she entered a room, people pleased just to be in her presence. Now they turned away, unable to hide their disgust at her now contorted features. Had she not been their most righteous of servants? Had she not restored the faith of the people and given her followers onto their worship? Her prayers were heard and for the first time they were truly answered but would come only at a terrible cost. A great sense of calm washed over them as their wounds began to heal. Their muscles no longer ached, their joints moved with ease. Their skin smoothed out until not even the faintest of blemish could have been detected. It was then that she noticed she could not take a step for her feet were frozen in place. A cold sensation travelled up her legs locking them into position. Her beautiful body now newly restored was transforming into unadulterated alabaster as pure and smooth as ever she had been in life. She did not panic. She did not cry out for mercy. She held herself in place until a statue more perfect than anything ever crafted by the hands of men was all that remained.

When the statue was found it was reverently placed within the chapel she had built to minister to her flock. The following day each man that had carried the statue awoke to find themselves completely restored. The villagers queued from dawn until dusk to kneel before their Lady and place their hands upon her feet. When word had reached her father of the fantastical tale he would not believe it until he had seen it with his own eyes. Leaving his armed escort posted outside the chapel he entered alone to find his daughter frozen in repose. He knew in a way that only a parent can that what stood before him was once the little girl that had raced through his chambers, heedless of upsetting the sensibilities of the Lords and Ladies present as she giggled with glee at the top of her lungs. Falling to his knees he weeped hot bitter tears for the loss that tore at his heart and stole the breath from his lungs in wailing sobs. She remained in that chapel at her fathers wishes so that she might continue to serve the people she can given her life to protect. Her powers of healing fading with the faith of the people down through the years until she was thought of as nothing more than an amazing example of an unknown artisans craft. The chapel now no longer stands having been burnt to the ground by a raiding party that carried the statue away as mere plunder to be sold and resold until it found it's way into the hands of a collector who instructed it be installed in their private garden, a perfect addition to the wishing well already in place. So it was that in death she was granted the ability she had sought in life to heal the sick and ease the suffering of those less fortunate than herself, Saint Pieux Maladroit.

## Chapter 20

"Turf! Turf! Has anyone seen him!?"

Cielo was frantically looking in all directions as she shoved the others awake. She was answered with groans and moans as they rolled over trying to block out the noise and go back to sleep. The morning sun was already baking them where they lay like loaves of bread in an oven.

"TURF!"

Cielo screamed before Hitch grabbed her ordering her to be quiet.

"You'll bring half the city down on us girl! If he was here the lad would have responded to you by now. Pull yourself together."

The others were rising to their feet now, running fingers through their hair as they stretched and yawned. It was quickly established that no one had seen him after the brawl and he was most likely caught up by the town guards. Accusations and raised voices shortly followed as everyone tried to blame the other for the young man being left behind.

"How did YOU forget about your sweetheart Cielo!?"

Someone accused their tone dripping with sarcastic venom. Cielo whirled on her tormentor who quickly ducked behind the others as Hitch pulled her back like a dog straining at the leash to attack. Before things could escalate further Hitch lead them out of the gardens and back into the city proper. The streets were full of people moving in all directions as they went about their daily lives. Horses drew wagons laden down with goods from bolts of cloth to barrels of ale. The group was almost split up several times and took to hugging the walls wherever they went in a single file, the hands of each man on the shoulders of the man in front. They looked a most peculiar sight to the citizens who speculated the dwarf leading the column was a slave trader on his way to market with his flesh. The smell of hot fresh bread halted them in their tracks and they turned to find themselves staring into the window of a bakery. Inspecting his pouch Hitch found alot less steel coins then he remembered starting with the previous evening. Their breakfast was a simple affair of a small loaf each which they quickly pulled apart with their teeth. Each swallow of the light fluffy dough easing the cramps of nausea of their previous nights excesses.

"Where does the town guard keep their prisoners?"

Hitch asked the baker behind the counter after handing over his steel pieces. The man looked concerned for a moment before he went on.

"Our friend had too much to drink last night and found himself a guest of your fine town."

The baker appeared confused for a moment.

"Well I hope you all said your farewells last night. They don't keep anyone in the cells for terribly long now, they just get turned over to the army."

Cielo overhearing what the baker had said pushed her way to counter beside Hitch.

"What do they do to them?!"

She asked imagining some kind of horrible fate like being used as target practice on the archery range. The baker turned to Cielo curious about the sudden interest in what he had assumed was common knowledge.

"Why they take those boys and make them into men. The town guard has found a unique way of easing over crowding in their prisons and that is to hand everyone over to the Dragon Highlords army as part of a recruitment drive. Pretty soon we will run out of able bodied men in this city as wives worry every time their husbands go out for a pint that they might never return."

Cielo appeared confused at first until Hitch gave the baker a nod of understanding before leading her outside. A line of annoyed customers were starting to form behind them.

"Worthless human maggots of Krynn..."

Torgar began his speech as he walked down the line of the latest collection of human flotsam the town guard had delivered to the barracks.

"You have been chosen to serve in the glorious army of our most sacred and unholy Dark Queen, blessed be her name."

The ragged collection of men tried their best to stand to attention facing forward. Some were still so drunk from the night before they swayed on their feet, struggling to stay upright. Others stared with fascination at their shoes or off into the military encampment.

"Some of you will not survive the training..."

Torgar paused for effect as a wicked grin played across his cruel reptilian features.

"Because I will personally butcher you for sport..."

Stopping suddenly he turned to balefully stare directly at a man who could not meet his gaze.

"Or because the supply train is late and I am hungry..."

He hissed the last word, dragging it out. No one present thought he was joking for a second and knew without needing to be told that this abomination before them would happily pan fry them like a beef steak. Turf kept his gaze straight ahead his head throbbing from the clobbering he had received the night before. The gravity of his situation was sinking in and his mind raced to try and figure out how he had ended up here. Had the others left him behind? Had they been killed or captured too? He tried to look around the camp without turning his head but could only see rows and rows of canvas tents laid out before them, clusters of soldiers gathered around pots and pans over cooking fires. The smell of frying meat and tar bean tea wafted over and suddenly his stomach felt very empty.

"I will now leave you in the sadistic hands of Janix"

A human man stepped forward stripped to the waist puffing out his muscular chest matted with a thick layer of fur like chest hair. He wore his hair close cropped but an observant person could see that his hair line had retreated from his forehead like game before the hunting party.

"Around the outside of this camp is a oval track..."

The man boomed, his arm sticking straight out.

"It runs around the length of this camp which was formerly a racing track for dogs, horses and Minotaurs."

No one knew if the last part was meant to be a joke. Janix quickly moved on.

"You will run around this track until you are told to stop. Anyone who slows down or stops will be beaten. Anyone who collapses will be beaten. Anyone who dies without my permission will be revived by our Dark Clerics, beaten to death and then revived to be beaten more."



The group stood rooted to the spot unsure of what to do next.

"Run damn you! Run!"

Janix stepped forward now his other hand coming up quickly to show a long thin rod he had held down by his side. It whipped through the air cracking against the man nearest to him who screamed in agony as their knees buckled.

"Whip! Whap! Whop!"

Janix's slashed at the prone man as he vainly tried to roll away from the stinging rattan rod. The others took off running toward the track ducking under the guard rail before starting their circuit.

"Get up dog! We've only just started!"

Janix kicked the man hard in the ribs causing him to roll over onto his back. The man kept rolling scrambling to his feet. As he tried to take off after the others Janix stepped forward and struck him across the buttocks with a vicious stroke that sent him leaping into the air. Half running and hobbling the man quickly caught up to the others pain and adrenalin pushing him onwards.

"Faster! Faster! The Dark Queen demands much from her soldiers!"

Janix watched as they came around the track. They kept their eyes forward as they ran past not daring to slow their stride for fear of drawing his attention. Horribly beating a recruit at the start of the process always helped to make the others so much more compliant. Even if no one had done anything wrong he had to make an example out of someone. Soldiers had begun to gather at the starting line now placing bets on who would be the first to collapse. Janix was creative and took pride in his work and it was always entertaining to see what he would cook up for the next recruit that displeased him.

"Five steel coins on the pretty blonde boy!"

Someone called out in reference to Turf. Odds were quickly given and money exchanged. As he came around for the second lap they jeered and hollered at him. One soldier even waved a rag like a high born lady with her favour trying to attract the attention of a solamnic knight.

"Oh you hoo!"

The soldier called out in a high falsetto to a chorus of raucous laughter. Turf's face hardened as he focused on his breathing and keeping his legs pumping. The pack was starting to thin out as others began to slow and fall behind. They tried their best to keep moving forward fearing the stinging crack of Janix's cane more than their own burning lungs and seizing muscles. Coming up on their third loop Turf noticed some of the soldiers standing near the guard rail appeared to be tossing something out onto the track. Coming closer he waited until the last moment before jumping into the air and sailing over the unseen obstruction.

"How graceful you are blondie! Did they take you from a dancing show!"

They hooted and cat called unsure of the reason for his acrobatic display until a runner behind him stood on a small sphere of spiked metal. Screaming they fell forward face first skidding to a halt in front of a thoroughly delighted Janix who acted like a child just presented with a present.

"Up! Up!"

He punctuated each word with a whipping strike of his cane. The poor person on the ground held up an arm to ward off the blows while trying to hold up their foot for Janix to see. Janix paused mid stroke his arm pulled back ready to strike when he noticed the blood pouring from the sole of the mans foot.

"Oh I see...what do we have here..."

Janix bent down and for a moment the wretch thought he would have some sympathy from his cruel task master. Janix plucked the spiked ball from his flesh before promptly standing up and whipping him across chins.

"No excuses! In battle you will keep fighting even when you are wounded."

He struck the man again before he somehow managed to get to his feet and keep hobbling around the track.

"Faster dog!"

Janix called and while the man was out of striking distance he picked up the pace like the cane was mere seconds from striking him again. The recruits were all red faced now, pouring with sweat and struggling to breathe as they came around the track again. They veered over to the far side away from the guard rail and the jeering soldiers.

"The last one across the line loses!"

Janix called as they huffed and puffed past. They didn't know what was going to happen to the loser but none of them imagined it was anything they wanted to volunteer for. The soldiers roared and cheered at the announcement knowing that something gruesomely entertaining was about to happen. This crop of recruits had proven to be hardier than other recent lots where some had not even completed a single lap before falling prey to Janix's unique and unpleasant attentions. Coming around the other side of the track Turf was confident that he wouldn't be the last one across the line. He was young and in good condition from his days spent working on the family farm. An older man ran beside Turf breathing very hard and clearly on the brink of collapse. He shot a baleful glance at the young man who didn't seem to be showing the strain at all. Suddenly filled with resentment the older man balled his fist pulling it back across his chest before swinging it across to try and connect with Turf's face. Trying to strike someone while running is no easy feat in balancing and the man over extended, the force of his strike carrying him forward where he tripped and stumbled into Turf. The pair went tumbling to the ground skidding painfully along the patchy grass. Turf tried to rise but felt a hand gripping his ankle. Looking back the man was desperately trying to cling to him while pulling him in closer.

"Come...here...boy!"

The man huffed struggling to catch his breathe as he tried to drag the kicking and squirming Turf closer. The runners who had fallen behind had spotted them now and were redoubling their efforts knowing that if they could just get past the struggling pair on the ground they would be safe from probably quite literal elimination.

"Get!Off!ME!"

Turf frantically kicked at his opponent punctuating each word as he lashed out with his foot. He grabbed at clumps of grass feeling them rip up and come loose. Suddenly a moment of clarity washed over him and he knew what he had to do. Going limp he allowed himself to get pulled forward. The older man was caught off guard almost tumbling backwards as the boy went from frantically struggling to no longer resisting. As he righted himself he had a split second to see Turf sitting up as his rapidly approaching fist filling his field of vision.

"Crunch!"

The tensed knuckles crumpled cartilage and split skin causing a fountain of blood to erupt from the mans nose. He let go of Turf his hands flying up to his face as tipped over sideways. Scrambling to his feet he saw the last of the runners passing him and took off after them. His lungs burned, his vision blurred as his legs pumped hurtling him toward the finishing line.

## Chapter 21

"Thank Reorx he made it!"

Cielo cried from their vantage point. They had snuck into an abandoned building which overlooked the old race track and had seen what Turf had been enduring so far. Hitch was wondering when the nail marks would heal in his forearm where Cielo had dug in her fingers seeing Turf being tripped and stumbling to the ground. He had practically had to slap his hand over her mouth to silence her cry of triumph when Turf had made it over the finish line. They watched as the soldiers had dragged the man with the broken nose before Janix.

"In the army of the Dark Queen there is no place for last place..."

The saying was a favourite one of Janix's that he like to trot out several times a day.

"Now you serve to help train your betters"

He addressed the man who remained down cast before him. Throwing back his arms and turning to the crowd Janix announced.

"With a live target for the archery range."

The mans head whipped up as the crowd roared, live targets apparently being a fan favourite. An iron collar was snapped into place as the man was dragged across the parade ground.

"Where are they taking him?"

Cielo whispered.

"How should I know girlie watch and we'll both find out."

Hitch snapped back. They did not have to wait long. The man was brought to a large thick wooden pole which had been driven into the ground. Suspicious reddy brown patches in the hard packed dirt surrounded it. Kicking and cursing the man was brought to the pole before his collar was attached to an anchored chain. One of the guards struck the man hard in the stomach doubling him over before they released him and stepped back. Someone handed Janix a curved black bow and a handful of arrows with barbed hunting tips. Stepping to within 20 paces he stopped and drove the arrows into the dirt point first by his feet.

"On your feet!"

Janix called to the man who began to rise.

"Bring me the blonde boy."

Cielo and Hitch both tensed unsure of what was about to happen next to Turf, who was pushed and prodded forward before reluctantly walking the last few steps to stand in front of Janix. The grinning task master handed him the bow. Turf looked confused at first looking back and forth between the tethered man and Janix before he leaned forward and whispered.

"That iron collar could just as easily be around your neck if that man had his way."

Turf's face hardened as he pulled an arrow from the ground and took aim at the man who promptly started shuffling side to side, feigning to one side and then the other.

"Oh Turf... please don't do this..."

Cielo was almost on the verge of tears.

"He's got no choice."

Hitch said solemnly.

Turf loosed the first arrow the barbed head slicing through the air. The man dodged to one side the arrow burying itself in the wooden pillar behind him. Plucking up another arrow before anyone could protest Turf fired again the arrow sticking into the dirt at the mans feet. Turf jumped as he reached for the third arrow as Janix boomed.

"A man who cannot shoot is just as useless to me as the man who falls behind..."

The meaning was all too clear. Turf stood with the bow lowered, the arrow nocked on the string. He lifted his chin slightly and stared straight at the man who tried to watch where his eyes were looking. Turf's hands were up in an instant, drawing back the bowstring on the rise the fingers loosing the shaft before it had even seemed to get to his eye level. The move had caught the man by surprise, a split second delay preventing him from dodging out of the way in time. The arrow struck him in the pelvis punching through flesh and muscle.

"YEAARRRGHHH!!!"

The man let out a blood curdling scream as he collapsed backwards onto the wooden pillar, leaning against it to help keep themselves upright. Blood pumped from the wound running down his thigh to soak his calf. His face was already turning white.

"FINISH HIM! FINISH HIM! FINISH HIM!"

The crowd chanted as Turf looked to Janix who kept his gaze on the bleeding man, betraying no emotion. Turf reached for another arrow plucking it from the dirt. His heart was thumping in his chest. He could feel his pulse in his ears as the roar of the crowd threatened to deafen him. Raising the bow he kept his eyes locked on the target and felt no pity or compassion as he was swept up in the blood lust of the mob. His target could hardly move the distance was so short. It was an easy shot he had many a thousand times over in the fields of his home with Cielo. The thought of her gave him pause for a moment, her face appearing before him. He wondered what she would think before pushing her out of his mind. She had left him behind. She was the reason along with the others why he was here. Releasing the arrow he watched it sailing through the air sure from the second he launched it that it would hit his target true.

"Oh!"

Cielo turned away as the arrow sank into the man outstretched hand, the palm held out flat to vainly try and ward off the shot. The skin burst apart where the iron touched it shattering the delicate bones beneath as it continued on pinning his hand to his chest.

"Yeah! Woot!"

The crowd roared their cheers of approval as the man collapsed to the ground blood freely pumping down his leg. Pale and gasping for air he soon fell silent and was forgotten by the crowd as bets were paid and stories told about previous inductions of unwilling candidates. Turf was not allowed to savour his victory for long. The bow he had been holding was soon plucked from his hand and Janix was again yelling orders. The soldiers returned to their cooking fires, dice games and seemingly endless capacity to sleep. They shared the latest rumours about when they would be moving out and what their next target would be. A story was currently doing the rounds about a band of Solamnic knights that had ambushed and wiped out a patrol in Pinehurst and devastated another that had been sent to investigate. The farmers of the grassy plains were flocking to their banner and soon they would march on Haltigoth itself. Each teller of the tale would assure their listeners of the reliability of their highly placed sources. Gossip is the lifeblood of any army and the veterans would chuckle to themselves and go about their business knowing that what they would face on the field almost never reflected the reports that came in. So they sharpened their swords and strung their bows sure in the knowledge that everything bleeds.

"We've got to get him out of there!"

Cielo pled her case after they had joined up with the others and filled them in on what they had witnessed. Hitch had tried to keep things calm and professional reporting on the size and layout of the encampment. Movement of the guards and possible escape routes if they managed to get Turf out of there. Cielo kept interrupting with snippets of what Turf had been forced to endure and more than once Hitch had to hold up his hands to stop her ramblings.

"There is no way we can take them on in a straight fight. We are dealing with a small army."

Hitch was thinking out loud.

"If we started a fire on the other side of town it might not draw enough of them away and Turf might be one of the group pressed into battling the blaze..."

He started to pace back and forth.

"When they march out onto the plains we could try and shadow them... camps in the field have sentry's and we wouldn't even know where to start looking inside the camp..."

Cielo's hopes kept getting raised and dashed with each idea that was proposed and quickly dismissed by Hitch.

"There must be something! We have to do something!"

Cielo cried as she rung her hands. It was dawning on her now how much Turf really meant to her now that she was facing the possibility of not seeing him again. She could only imagine what laid in store for him the following day and shuddered at the thought that he might not live through it.

"We will do something little one. We will. This is a problem I just can't seem to crack right now."

They all bowed their heads for a moment busying themselves with studying their shoes while they try to desperately think of something. They thought of fanciful ideas like appearing at the town gates at the head of an army of shining knights. Of swooping in on a dragon like the one they had seen on the grassy plains. Others thought of their loved ones and prayed that where ever they were they were warm and safe with full bellies. A dark thought crept in their minds though none would dare to speak it out loud. Why couldn't they just leave? It seemed like Turf was as good as dead now and if he managed to live he would be fighting under the banner of their hated enemy who they have lost almost everything trying to resist against. The next time they might see him could be on a distant battlefield. Would he recognise them? Would he show them mercy or quarter? The thought of their friend, face streaked with blood screaming as he charged at them with murderous intent was too terrible to bare.

"Chickens!"

Someone cried as they jumped to their feet a finger pointed into the air. Everyone flinched for a second as they turned their attention to the speaker Girth Hayward.

"Hitch you said you can't seem to crack the problem and that got me thinking about cracking eggs and how eggs can be cracked..."

Hitch propped up his face with his fist looking intently at the person as they suddenly hurried along with their explanation.

"You can crack the egg from the outside when you want to have breakfast OR if it has a baby chick which cracks it from the inside..."

Finishing their proposal they stood there with a big smile on their face expecting the room to suddenly burst into applause and were thoroughly confused when they did not.

"How do we get inside the camp to crack it? Hitch already said it was crawling with soldiers and guards. We'd never get in."

They held up their hands to ward off any more detractors before they could explain further.

"The only people allowed in the camp are soldiers. So we'll join up and then bust Turf out at night."

Cielo turned to look expectantly at Hitch.

"Don't even think about it young lady there is no way you are coming with us into a place like that. A young woman and her virtue would soon be parted"

"Well I won't be much safer out here by myself while you all go in there will I?!"

She retorted.

"Hitch it's a bit late to stop including her considering everything we have been through."

Michael Weaver piped up but was soon silenced by a withering glare from the dwarf.

"Are we really going to do this?"

George Cooper asked daring to voice what others were thinking.

"We are going into the Dragons Den here. There is no guarantee that any of us will make it out alive. Our families left never knowing our fate..."

Everyone turned to them now wearing solemn expressions.

"I agree. The risk is great and the reward is just one man. How can we ask everyone to risk their lives. Would he do the same for us?"

Cielo was quick to come to his defence reminding them how he alone had jumped back down into that sewer to help pull Hitch to safety. Voices started to be raised again and Hitch stepped into the middle of the crowd and held up his hands.

"I will go...I will not think any less of any man who does not...I alone owe the boy that much."

He said with a heavy heart. They were so close to putting this all behind them. How easy it would be to sneak off in the night. Let the knights of the northern plains and gnomes in their mountain stand against this rising tide of darkness. Let them clash with ringing steel as limbs are hacked off in fountains of blood. Let the teenage boys dreaming of vain glory lay screaming for their mothers as their guts spill out into the dirt. Let the bellies of the crows grow fat on the dead as their pouches are pilfered but unscrupulous men as he had seen before on a hundred battlefields in the days of his youth.

"...Because if you want something done right you get a dwarf..."

He thought to himself before chuckling under his breath as he walked away from the others.

## Chapter 22

"Well if any of you had any second thoughts about this...it's too late now."

They turned the corner marching two abreast with Hitch at the head of their little column. They had returned to the abandoned pier and retrieved their gear. Donning helmets, strapping on shields and hoisting spears on their shoulders they set off to the front gate with the air of someone returning to their home after a long absence. Knives tucked into their boots and belts, swords slapping on their thighs they had asked for directions of the guards at the gate where their little mercenary band might sign up to join in the fun. They had been given directions to the old race track which Hitch had made a show of going over with them twice before heading off through town. Hitch had reminded them that as worthless cutthroats they should...

"Sneer at the men and leer at the women."

Cielo had been quite confused by this and simply did her level best to appear as tough as possible as she marched along with the others, her artifice bow strung across her back a quiver of arrows at her waist. Her long hair was tied back into a pony tail and she wore her usual light tunic and pants. The tall and imposing building used by the town guard loomed ahead. The light coloured stone blocks used in its construction had darkened on the lower level with rising mold, the splattered mud of passing wagons and the soot from household hearths. The two upper levels had mostly escaped the fate of the ground floor but the salt air had rotted away at the mortar in the joints and the local pigeon population had evidently been contracted to coat the exterior in a protective layer of their own droppings. A line had already started to form of various individuals and groups wanting to sell their swords in the service of the Dark Queen and lining their own empty pockets and pouches. Scanning the group as they approached Hitch thought to himself that someone must have tilted Krynn at an angle and all the scum had managed to tumble down into this port city. They wore a wide variety of armour from basic and utilitarian to elaborately decorated. Swords and knives of every length and curve hung from their belts. Spears rested on shoulders threatening to poke out the eye on the man or beast behind them while the leather sheaths of battle axes chafed against sweating skin. Outcast dwarves and elves mixed with humans of every region that Hitch was familiar with. A minotaur was led by a chain linked to a heavy iron collar around its neck. They shuffled slowly forward in the queue spitting into the dirt beside them as they tried to estimate how much longer they would have to wait. Would they get an advance on their wages before the sun rose over the buildings and started to bake them alive when they should be sitting in a nice cool tavern. Hitch could almost feel the collective groan of his companions.

"Come on then lets join the line before it gets any longer."

Turf had been experiencing a much harder morning than his companions. While they had been gathering their equipment and steeling their nerves for what lay ahead he had been kicked awake by the ever present task master Janix. New recruits or "pond scum" as they were affectionately referred to had not yet earned such luxuries as tents and blankets and been forced to sleep under the stars. Thoughts of personal space and modesty quickly abandoned as the temperature dropped. Men who had only met mere hours earlier found themselves huddled together. Turf had drifted off to sleep wrapped up in another mans arms like he was a cherished stuffed toy from the mans childhood. Focusing on the comforting warmth his body gave into the exhaustion of a day spent literally fighting for his life.

"Sorry to disturb you all..."

Janix had bellowed as he moved along the line of bodies stopping to kick at stomachs and backs.

"But we are all very hungry and waiting on our cooks!"

Rising to their feet they stretched their aching limbs and rubbed the sleep from their eyes as they stumbled along like a herd of animals being led to the markets. They were divided up into groups and were soon splitting wood, stoking fires and chopping the ingredients under the gaze of the burly cooks who looked like they only took this job as something to fill time when there was no one to torture in a dungeon. The aroma of the hot food soon had their stomachs growling. Their hopes of sating this hunger though were cruelly dashed when they were informed they would be bringing this food to the officers mess tent to serve them.

"The scum gets what sinks to the bottom of the pond..."

Janix had announced with a cruel grin relishing the anguished faces of the starving men. Everyone that is except for Turf who kept his face a blank neutral mask his eyes staring off into a distance only he could see. A pattern was beginning to form and Turf was quickly realising that if you hoped or desired for something they would take it away from you, anything to remind you of your place around here. They shuffled along carrying large iron cauldrons between them supported on thick wooden poles. The officers greeted them with jeers and hurled insults as they entered the tent and through the food service until the last of them was finally able to leave. Returning to the field kitchen with hopes of even getting a hunk of bread and a mug of tar bean tea they were ordered to start running laps of the racing track.

"Everyone wants big muscles to swing their swords and pose for barmaids. You will spend far more time marching then you ever will fighting."

Janix's lecture fell on deaf ears as the group huffed and puffed their way around the track. Some of the soldiers spared a glance their way but for most the appeal had worn off as they were no longer "fresh fish" with some already hardening up to the gruelling training regime.

"Wooh-Crack!"

A whip crack burst over their heads as Janix expertly flicked his wrist, the whip almost an extension of his hand. The sudden bursting snap of the whip crack louder then tempered steel hammers being struck together. The group jumped for a moment, stumbling and bumping into each other before recovering their rhythm and pushing themselves faster. Janix watched the group hoping for a straggler. It had been weeks since he had been able to sentence someone to a good flogging. He had beaten the last man so badly his shoulder had ached for days. He couldn't recall what had happened to the man but doubtless the bloody pulp that had remained after he finally stopped hitting him more then likely been fed to their fighting dogs. They needed to get a taste for human flesh if they were going to be of any use on the battlefield. His eyes were open but he did not see what was happening right in front of him as the mental image played in his minds eye of the terrified man quivering and shaking as his lash struck the soft white flesh until he had turned pink and then red where it split and the blood flowed freely. The messenger had to grab Janix by the shoulder and shake him to get his attention.

"Sir we have a fresh crop of mercenaries that have just come in. Torgar wants you to put them through their paces."

Janix turned to smile at the man before lifting his knee up and striking him squarely in the groin. The man made a whimpering squeal as he collapsed to the ground, curling up like a leaf on the autumn forest floor.

"Don't ever touch me again."

Janix placed the sole of his boot against the mans unprotected neck whose hands were otherwise occupied with cradling his mashed manhood. As he pressed his foot down he saw the man instantly start to buck and spasm as they desperately tried to get away. They shook their head from side to side to no avail even going so far as to take a hand away from their crotch to gouge their fingers into the ankles of the sadistic trainer as their face turned a deep purple and their vision began to blacken. Seeing the group approaching he lifted his foot and stepped forward to meet them.



"Fresh grist for the mill..."

Janix appeared thoroughly unimpressed as he looked the nearest candidates up and down.

"Every sell sword with strength enough to lift a weapon and two feet to propel him forward has managed to wander into my camp at some stage looking for some quick grog money."

The volunteers looked amongst themselves and back to the bald headed man in front of them, each wondering when someone would step forward and let the wind out of his belly with a quick sword thrust. They didn't follow orders like regular army or militia units. You pointed them at the enemy like a pack of baying dogs and you let them go. Often used as a useful distraction during sieges they would be slipped in through the sewer system or over an unguarded piece of wall where they could sow terror and chaos to draw more forces away from the main fight to hunt them down.

"Point me to where I can pitch my tent you bald headed goon..."

A senior man stepped out of the pack and walked towards Janix.

"The ogre piss that passes for wine around here is playing merry hell with my head and I have no patience for little boys that want to play soldier."

Voices in the crowd raised in agreement as they stamped their feet and started to jostle each other. They were hot and tired from standing outside in the sun and no doubt were nursing hang overs almost to a man. A minotaur from earlier came to stand beside the senior man used to acting as his muscle. The hulking beast didn't speak as they blew their breathe loudly out of their muzzle, nostrils flaring as they bunched their hands into fists muscles rippling and flexing along their arms up to their shoulders. Far from being intimidated Janix's eyes lit up, his teeth flashing in a brilliant grin as he stepped forward to address the minotaur directly.

"I'm surprised you could stop grazing for a minute in order to pay attention to what was going on around you."

The minotaur's eyes bulged as their brows furrowed.

"Do you see the field over there?"

Janix pointed to a patch of grass off to the side causing the minotaur to turn it's head to follow his line of direction.

"We're running low on crops and I'll need you to pull a plow for us."

The MMinotaur's chest starting rising and falling faster and faster as they sucked in great gulps of air trying in vain to calm their nerves. Unfazed by the boiling cauldron of rage about to explode in front of him Janix continued.

"Can you reply in common or can you just moo?"

The minotaur's jaw clenched as the senior man placed a restraining hand on one of the bulging biceps vainly trying to calm the creature.

"Luckily if you get thirsty..."

Janix's hand shifted ever so slightly to the diary cows in the next field over.

"We can milk your fat mother."

Janix ducked as the Minotaur swung it's great arm around in a back handed blow that would have cracked the skull of an armoured knight through the steel plating. Stepping to the side as he rose Janix rotated his hips throwing his whole body into a left hook that caught the minotaur in it's side. Ribs cracked loud enough to be mistaken for the snapping of dry branches. Knee buckling it stumbled for a moment before trying to right itself. Everyone quickly shuffled back out of the range of the combatants. Blinded by berserker rage it dug it's hooves deeply into the ground, legs pistoning to launch itself forward. Clods of dirt and grass kicked up as it quickly closed the distance. They expected Janix to try and run, to turn tail in a vain attempt to escape only to be trampled into the dirt, screams escaping his lungs as his limbs snapped like twigs. It did not happen. Remaining calm in the face of certain death, his nerves steeled by countless combats he leapt off to the side of the charging beast his outstretched hands wrapping around one of the curving horns. As powerfully as he was built the Minotaur's neck muscles could not support the weight of a grown man. Lifting his legs high into the air Janix dragged the beast down, it's head suddenly snapping back to the side as it's forward charge was suddenly halted. Muscles ripped and tore, tendons threatening to pop off from the bones they were anchored to as blinding pain shot like lightning through it's entire body. The crowd went silent for a moment as man and minotaur lay unmoving. Rising to his feet with ease Janix dusted himself off before raking his gaze across everyone assembled.

"Knees to the breeze Kender Kissers! Run I say! RUN! RUN!"

The mercenaries took off running as one awkwardly jogging along as their gear jangled and slapped against their chest and thighs. The minotaur lay there in the dirt trapped in their twisted shape. Tears streamed from their big brown eyes, strings of drool hanging from the corners of their mouth as they fought for each painful breath. Draconians gathered around it like carrion bird waiting for a herd animal to succumb to it's sickness. It waited for the thrust of a blade that never came and soon found itself rising from the ground as firm scaly talons gripped and heaved. They passed through rows of small personal tents made from canvas greying with age and spattered with mud toward their destination. A large black tent appeared, the opening lined with runes hand stitched in a silver thread. The symbols were unfamiliar to the minotaur and caused his eyes to water and his head to buzz if he tried to stare too long at them. Black robed figures appeared, their faces hidden in the shadows of their cowls. He feebly mumbled before his body finally slipped into unconsciousness.

"We make terrible steaks..."

The mercenaries did not have to endure the endless laps that Turf and his comrades had been subjected to the day before. After watching them huff and puff around the track a couple of times they had all been gathered together.

"Drop your gear and strip to your waist."

Metal clanged as swords, spears and axes hit the dirt and bounced off one another. Sweat stained shirts and tunics dropped on top. Cielo paused unsure if as the only woman she was expected to comply as well. Hitch moved in front of her, crossing his arms over his chest with a nothing to see here expression on his face. She willed herself to disappear before Janix's eyes like the conjurer that had visited their village when she was just a small child.

"Everyone that is except our Lovely Lady Archer..."

Cielo winced at Janix's obvious reference to herself. Placing a hand on Hitch's shoulder she walked around the dwarf and made her way to stand near Janix as the eyes of everyone present followed her. She paid them no mind keeping her chin held high as she strode over. She certainly wasn't dressed in the usual manner of a lady sporting tan trousers and a sleeveless tunic to match, her hair tied back in a practical ponytail. Janix cast an appreciative glance toward Cielo's lithe youthful figure which made Hitch's blood boil. He cursed himself mentally knowing he should have pushed harder to make her stay behind. An image flashed in his mind for a moment of Janix wrapping his arms around her and he found himself ready to charge through the pack despite the beating he had just witnessed the minotaur endure.

"Match up!"

Janix loudly announced as another group of people were herded over to join them by some Draconians who appeared all too eager for the chance to use the whips and cudgels that hung from their heavy leather belts. These humans kept their shirts on having not been ordered to strip and possessing little in the way of gear.

"You lot line up over there and face this way."

Dutifully they shuffled along until they were roughly in a line before turning to face the mercenary group.

"Time for you sell swords to prove your worth. Assembled before you are the most useless pieces of gully dwarf grunge the city guard could scrape together. The side with the last man standing wins hot meals and dry beds."

The two sides eyed each other off with contempt and bitter hatred. Turf's men were already starving having eaten very little and been drilled to exhaustion throughout the day. The mercenaries for the most part had been expected to collect their grog money and shuffle off to nurse their hang overs in the nearest tavern while awaiting their orders to march out. Now they found themselves practically being held as prisoners with the prospect of falling asleep on rough ground with empty bellies. Hitch's gaze met Turf's and the young man looked right through him like he did not exist.

"Well what are you elven maidens waiting for...FIGHT!"

Leaping forward the two packs streamed toward one another. The ground shook under their thundering feet, dust kicking up into the air as the distance was quickly covered. Men leapt into the air at the last moment flying forward with knees and elbows extended, colliding together they cracked ribs, broke jaws and pulped noses. Hitch took Turf to the ground in a diving tackle wrapping his arms around the young man's waist. As they collapsed down onto the dirt Hitch quickly scrambled up Turf's torso to protect him from the melee whirling around them only to be greeted with a fist to the jaw. The blow stunned Hitch for a moment who responded in kind, his fist hammering into Turf's face causing it to fly backwards and bounce off the ground beneath him.

"Damn it boy listen!!"

Hitch spat trying to make himself heard over the din. Turf swung blindly, a hook shot that Hitch easily caught with an extended forearm. Hitch grabbed him by the front of his tunic and brought his face up to his.

"We're here to rescue you!!"

Turf stared for a moment almost unwilling to believe what he was hearing. His friends had not forgotten him after all and his waking nightmare would soon be over. Before he could react Hitch rolled over onto his back pulling Turf on top of him.

"We gotta make this look good."

Before he could figure out what Hitch meant he felt the dwarf's feet pressed flat against his chest. Hitch sucked in a deep breathe before kicking out with both legs at the same time launching Turf through the air like a boulder from a catapult. He crashed into another man standing side on to him that had just gotten to his feet with a triumphant look on his face after having just choked out his opponent. Turf's head whipped back, the back of his head cracking the man across the jaw with the force of a pit fighter's fist. His head whipped to the side, his legs going limp as he and Turf crashed to the ground unconscious.

## Chapter 23

"Two against one!"

Janix commented as he pulled Cielo over to press her against his side. She squirmed trying to break free of his grip but was worried about distracting Hitch who was already busy turning in a circle, his hands outstretched ready to snatch at punches or launch into a grapple. The two humans facing him were battered and bloody, lips split and eyes already starting to swell from punches and kicks. Despite this they grinned wolfishly thinking the dwarf before them would be easy pickings with their obvious advantage of size and reach. Hitch had not yet met a man he could not cut down to size when even in his advancing years.

"You can't win old man..."

One of them mocked. Hitch ignored what they were saying and just kept moving, his hands never staying still as they flowed in little circles. He gazed off into the distance between his opponents, waiting for one of them to make the first move.

"Looks like he already took too many blows to the head..."

The second commented.

"Can't even look right at us..."

The second turned to the first for a look of confirmation. It was the opening Hitch was waiting for. He sprang forward landing on his right foot near one human before pushing off sideways to bring him in front of the other. The feint took them both by surprise each panicking and fumbling for a moment. Strong squat fingers closed with the strength of a steel trap clamping down on a hand before viciously twisting it back towards its owner. Screaming in pain they dropped to their knees their face contorted in agony. Placing his free hand under the mans elbow he lifted him up and towards the second human diving towards him. Hitch was pitched backwards offering no resistance as he maintained his grip on the folded hand. They crash into the ground with a loud popping sound as the mans elbow caught up in the weight of the falling bodies dislocated with shocking ease. Eyes bulging he held up the mangled limb bent at an unnatural angle staring with wide eyed disbelief. Hitch tried to wiggle free but found himself pinned to the ground with one hand as the remaining human raised his fist and smashed it into the dwarves face. He turns his head with the blow but the force of it still left his head ringing and his vision swimming.

"Come on Hitch! Get up!"

Cielo cried out as she struggled to break free from Janix's embrace. She saw the fist raise up for the second time as if in slow motion before coming back down in a whistling arc toward Hitch's face. The man's sneer of triumph suddenly changed, his eyes and mouth popping open in agony and shock like he had just touched a scolding hot pan. Hitch had turned his head at the last second into the blow, catching a line of knuckles across his thick dwarven forehead. The humans hand had shattered like glass, the delicate bones dislocating and snapping like dried twigs. The force of the blow snapped Hitch's head back for a moment, stunning him as the man rolled away cradling his hand.

"Hitch!...Hitch!...Hitch!...."

Cielo starting the chant slowly at first but quickly gathering pace. Other voices joined with hers.

"Hitch!Hitch!Hitch!"

The dwarf began to rise onto his feet, raising his balled fists up in front of his face. The man turned back to see Hitch stepping towards him.

"It's not over yet boy!"

The dwarf roared as he kept relentlessly advancing. Whirling around the man looked to someone, anyone in his desperation that would come to his aid but only found faces howling for his blood as they cheered on their new champion. The agony of his throbbing hand almost took his breathe away as he dug in his heels and turned to face Hitch.

"I heard that Gully Dwarves were tough..."

Hitch's eyes flared for a moment.

"You can beat them like a field mule and they just keep coming..."

Hitch hawked and spat blood onto the dirt between them.

"Because Gully Dwarves are too stupid to know when they have lost..."

Hitch paused for a moment in his advance, flashing his opponent a grin akin to a deep sea predator readying itself to pounce on it's prey.

"Is that the best you can do boy?..."

Knowing his gambit had failed the human rushed toward Hitch. Holding his crumpled hand across his chest he swung wildly with the other, the blow sailing over Hitch's ducking head. Before he could press the opening the mans hand came back in a vicious backhand arc, every bit of hateful desperate energy focused into that moment. Clamping his hands together Hitch swung them like a hammer from his forge up to meet the incoming blow. Hot steel gave way under the hammer blow turning it aside. The shock of the blow radiating up the man's arm, electric sparks shooting through his elbow.

"Boom!"

A thunderous cross snaps the mans jaw to the side sending him stumbling backwards.

"Boom!"

Stepping forward Hitch bobs down for a moment, striking with the other hand in another cross as he rises up. The blow lands flush on the side of the mans face sending him sprawling onto the ground. The dust settles for a moment as the mans goes limp.

"HITCH!HITCH!HITCH!"

The crowd is roaring in triumph, both sides lost in the moment of seeing such a display. They rush forward to lift him up onto their shoulders carrying him around in circles as they cheer. Looking around over the heads of everyone assembled for perhaps the first time in his life Hitch spots Janix and Cielo. Tired and beaten as he is his blood boils as he does his best to look away and pretend he was searching for something else. He can't let Janix know how much she means to him as there are men who only take something when they know how much it means to another. Soon they were struggling back into their gear before being broken up into different groups and lead away to various parts of the camp. Cielo found herself on the archery range under the watchful eyes of Janix as she demonstrated her proficiency with her bow. Hitch had plucked a hammer out of a smiths hand before ordering the human to work the bellows while he showed them how things were done in the proper dwarven manner. Soon a small crowd had gathered around to watch as it was a foolish head strong human that refused to heed the wisdom of a dwarven smith when it was being offered. The farmers found themselves in the very surreal position of being armed with wooden swords and being provided instruction by draconians who might very well have been the same ones that tracked them for days across the vast grassy plains. They kept their heads bowed, followed the orders they had been given and did their best to look away as others who spoke up or tried to show their instructors up were quickly and brutally dealt with.

"I see him. Here he comes. Just relax everyone."

They sat around in their little groups cross legged on the ground as they ate their rations and slurped ladles of water of questionable origin from wooden buckets that had seen better days. Turf casually made his way over to his comrades before plopping down and burying his head between his knees. Every fibre of his being wanted to scream with joy and throw his arms around them all, so relived was he to see them again. They spoke in low whispers avoiding eye contact as they did so. Turf quickly filled them in regarding the layout of the training camp and the routines he had observed so far. Concerned with deserters the gates were barred at night with guards fixed in place as others took turns wandering the grounds. His report finished they then filled in Turf with what their plan was to break him and now themselves out.

"We've come in to get you out and the exit has already been sealed behind us..."

One of them stated before allowing his gaze to meet Turf's for a moment.

"I never thought I would see any of you again..."

Turf turned away to hide his face, pretending to wipe something away as he composed himself.

"Whose idea was it anyway?"

The answer when it came stunned him having expected it to be Cielo.

"Hitch couldn't stand owing you anything..."

They chuckled for a moment before covering their mouths and pretending they were all suddenly caught with a coughing fit until one of the guards came over to enquiry what was going on.

"Has one of you brought the plague in here?!"

The guard asked as he pulled a piece of clothe across his face with one hand and held his spear out at length with the other to ward them way as though they might spring up as one and start shambling toward him.

"Just choking on the wind we keep passing thanks to these gourmet rations you feed us."

One of them answered sarcastically before the guard retorted.

"Well I better go and check what's keeping the milk and honey then shall I my lords and ladies?"

As the guard stalked away they allowed themselves a few more muffled chuckles before returning to the business at hand. They agreed where and when they would meet before bellowing voices informed them that their meal was over whether or not they had actually managed to finish eating it.

"Forced march! Forced march! Everyone assemble at the southern gate."

They all looked at each other as they realised they had no idea how far they would be going and whether or not they would even make it back to the camp tonight. No one was sure of where Cielo had disappeared to and no one would be able to get word to Hitch either.

## Chapter 24

"Stick together! Stick together!"

A draconian cried out in common in harsh raspy tones setting the pace as hundreds of feet crash down to the ground in rhythmic unison as they marched out along the wide dirt packed road, the port city sinking behind them in the distance. Turf sucked in big breathes through his mouth to fill his lungs. The smell of all the sweaty bodies packed in so tightly around him meant if he tried breathing through his nose he might run the risk of passing out from the smell alone. His throat was already dry with thirst and the dust being kicked up all around him, his calves rock hard and burning. Still he kept moving forward focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. Just the next step. He let his mind go blank and worried about nothing more then pressing his foot to the ground and lifting it back off again.

"Please help yourself. You look like you are going to throw yourself at it."

Janix addressed Cielo with an unrecognisably warm and friendly tone usually reserved for Dragon Highlords and the most dangerous of the black robe magic users. Having been spared the marching orders of the others she had found herself being led away to a section of the camp reserved for the higher ranking officers with plush tents, personal banners and attending guards posted at the entrances. Janix had dismissed his guards with a wave of his hand and for a moment Cielo had caught the glance shared between them, a nod with a knowing wink. Lifting the flap of the tent for her she stepped over the threshold and saw the candle lit table laid out before them. Trays of steaming hot roasted meat, platters of cheese and exotic fruit of shapes and colours she had never encountered before. Metal pitchers beaded with condensation that ran down onto the table clothe to soak into the fabric. Stepping forward she placed her hands on either side of one.

"It's cold!"

She remarked in a startled tone, unsure of how anything in this weather could be so cool to the touch. She turned to look at Janix her expression asking for an explanation.

"Many things are possible for those who serve and please the Dark Queen."

Janix stepped forward smoothly lifting the pitcher and pouring some of the contents into a goblet he offered to Cielo. She took it in her hands and lifted it cautiously to her lips. The cool liquid flowed over her tongue, the white wine sharp and crisp. She sucked in her cheeks swallowing it down. Her throat warming as a wave of relaxation rolled from her shoulders down her back. She looked up at him and couldn't think of anything to say.

"...You can really taste the... flavour."

He chuckled with amusement at what he might describe to her face as "unique and charming phrasing". Holding out an open palm he directed her to a place which had been set at the table. The smell of food reached her nose again and her rumbling stomach needed no further prompting. Snatching up a knife and fork she set to the task at hand pinning the slices of meat to her plate with her fork before raking her knife across to cut them into bite sized pieces. She crammed fork fulls of steaming meat doused in generous amounts of gravy into her mouth, chewing and slurping as excess gravy always somehow managed to escape and run down the corners of her mouth to be wiped away with the backs of her palms. Janix was used to the life of a soldier and seeing the men acting little better than farm animals at the trough when their meals were ready but Cielo's dining habits gave him pause to stop and watch.

"Drink it while it's still cold."

He pushed her goblet across the table to her if only to get her to pause for a minute from her gorging. Bringing the goblet to her lips she swallowed a sip at first before emptying the remainder in a long pull that left her feeling light headed.

Slouching back in her high chair she rested her hands over her stomach and closed her eyes letting the warming feeling of the wine wash over her as her belly tried to make room for what felt like half a suckling pig.

"A break... when do we get a break..."

The man next to Turf panted as he tried to keep in lock step with the others. They were already a couple of hours into their march, the sun having set on the horizon and they were still on the move for a destination unknown, sweating profusely despite the rapidly cooling night air. The man was answered by insults hurled by those around him. They were all in pain. Joints aching. Throats drier than they ever thought they could be.

"...just focus on the next step..."

Was the mantra that Turf kept repeating to himself. He felt just as bad as every man around him but he refused to let it show, taking pride in it, feeding off it to fuel himself. He sneered at the complaining man before looking forward squaring his shoulders and sucking in a big breathe like he was about to just start marching and none of this had already happened.

"A young woman like you is not safe out there in the company of those animals."

Cielo startled at Janix's words having already started to drift off. She sat bolt upright wiping at her face.

"Rank has it's privileges...take this tent for example..."

Janix waved his hand around the space in a sweeping gesture.

"Good food...good company...and bedding better than the cold hard ground waiting for the recruits upon their return."

The hackles raised on the back of her neck as a wave of fear washed over her. The way he had referred to the bedding. Looking over she noticed the spacious expanse of furs and silks that would have otherwise been so appealing to dive into and roll around. Her bow and arrows had been left near the entrance when they walked in, no daggers hung from her belt or remained hidden in her boots. The cutlery on the table could do some damage she supposed but she had seen this man cripple a minotaur with his bare hands. She thought after everything she has seen that even a sword might glance off his impressive muscles. Looking around frantically she noticed something sitting on the table beside the lit candles.

"Can you close the tent flap?... So the others cannot see us."

His eyes flared with hungry lust as he realised his quarry would not resist his advances. Cheeks flushing hot and loins burning he hurried over to the tent flap turning his back on her. Reaching across the table she scooped up the items as the tent flap dropped into place. She saw Janix turn to face her for a moment his hands already lifting the tunic up over his head to reveal his scarred and heavily muscled torso.

"Do you like what you see?..."

He asked her with a smug confidence as he stepped forward.

"Many a maiden and wench alike has had the privilege you are about to experience."

He was within a few feet of her now almost able to reach out and touch her when she turned her head to the side and pressing her lips together blew out the candles on table. In his haste Janix had not paid attention to Cielo's hands resting in her lap that were gripping something very tightly while shielding it from his sight.



"Schink!"

Squeezing her eyes shut Cielo held up her hands running a small blade along a flint. A brilliant shower of sparks shot out like an exploding clod of dirt. The burning metal struck like a hundred tiny comets burning into the soft flesh of Janix's eyes and face. His hands flew up to claw at his face the blinding agony causing him to twist and stumble in the pitch darkness. Cielo fell to the ground directly in front of her rolling to the side until she crashed into the wall of the tent.

"Bitch! Whore! I'll cut out your heart while you still draw breath!"

Janix continued to bellow a litany of vile graphic threats as her hands found the hem of the tent. Prizing it up she managed to squeeze through the gap and was up and running, dodging between rows of tents as she tried to find her bearings.

"What do you think you're doing with that?"

The voice behind Hitch asked as he finished tightening the strap of a heavy steel helm into place. Turning around he hefted an axe in one hand, a round shield already secured to the forearm of the other. Volunteering as a smith had given him access to the location of the armoury where he had been helping himself to repair some of the finer examples of the war gear the Dark Queens army had availed themselves of.

"Taking back what belongs to my kith and kin lad."

His own arms and armour having been taken from him for "safe keeping" Hitch had been forced to come and scrounge for what he could and had stumbled across the mother lode of examples of the dwarven art. He did not doubt for a moment that his battle plate and helm were treasured heirlooms from a family with a long and storied history. Even the axe, simple in design and appearance was a truly balanced weapon that seem to sing through the air it's edge capable of passing through a man like a hand waved through smoke. Hitch was all too keen to now put that theory to the test with the person who had dared to interrupt him.

"Get her!... Find her!..."

Hitch knew with a terrible certainty that the "her" the voices referred to could only be his Cielo. Bursting into a blur of movement he swung the axe into a downward arc. The man foolishly held his hands up out of instinct in an attempt to ward off the blow which saw his fingers leap from his palms as the edge of the axe passed through the delicate bones before sinking into the face beneath. Blood burst around the edges of the blade running in torrents down the twitching form of the mans body. Levering the handle up the blade came free, the body collapsing to the ground. Stepping over it he lifted the edge of the tent flap and strode out into the night to find his daughter.

"...Where is it? Where... Oh that's it!..."

Cielo spotted the large field kitchen tent up ahead and pumped her legs harder. A soldier appeared in front of her at the intersection of four tents. Without breaking her stride she leapt into the air holding her right knee out the calf tucked underneath. As the soldier turned at the sound of her approach he had enough time to register something rapidly approaching his face, growing wider and wider in his vision until the knee struck with a sickening crunch pulping the mans nose as a blinding flash appeared before darkness swallowed him whole. Sailing over the top she landed hard tumbling and rolling before she sprang back up to her feet and kept running. The evening meals having already been served the cooking staff had already retired for the night with as much of the officer rations as they felt they could comfortably steal without anyone noticing. Feeling around the entrance she found one of the oil lamps secured by a hook. Setting to work with her flint and steel it quickly burst into light before being followed by a second and third.

"Gotcha!"

The soldier announced from the entrance of the tent. Cielo whirled to face them while frantically looking around for a knife or cleaver. She knew she had to act quickly before he called the rest of the camp down upon her.

"He wants you alive..."

The man was clearly referring to Janix as he stalked forward another step. Why was he not calling for backup? Did he want to take her in by himself in the hopes of not having to share the reward he expected?

"Don't even think about it"

His sword sliced through the air striking the cast iron pan she had been reaching for. Sparks flew as it skittered away across the workbench Cielo flinching at the noise as she pulled her hand back in the nick of time. Stepping backwards she pressed her back up against a huge support pole. Then the strangest thing happened. The soldier watched the young woman's look of fear vanish from her eyes in an instant as his vision suddenly started spinning around and around in a manner that normally would have left them nauseous. They would never experience nausea again however as their head was separated from their body with the clean stroke of a dwarven axe they had never seen coming, wielded by an opponent who wasn't so foolish as to announce his approach by calling out to someone they had caught completely unawares.

"Dad!"

Cielo cried out as Hitch stepped over the headless corpse. Stepping toward a collection of wooden barrels Hitch spotted the specially marked one he was looking for and brought his axe down on top of the lid snapping it loose. Cooking oil sloshed down over the sides as they beat a hasty retreat to the entrance of the tent. Moments later a lit oil lamp was sailing through the air. They did not stay to see the ignition as the glass housing the flaming wick shattered touching off the cooking oil in a volcanic explosion that sent burning oil geysering up into the roof of the tent. The two remaining lamps were pitched at random out into the camp to land on random tents quickly engulfing them and whatever unfortunate individual that was inside.

"Quick in here!"

Hitch grabbed Cielo by the wrist dragging her into a tent chosen at random. Leaping into the darkness they crashed down onto the hard packed dirt. Looking around they quickly realise they were all alone.

"What are we doin..."

Cielo tried to ask before Hitch silenced her with an upheld palm. They lay there breathing hard as the camp erupted around them, the surrounding tents emptying out as the soldiers rushed toward the raging inferno. Silhouettes stormed past, voices raised in confusion as questions are shouted by the rank and file and orders roared by the officers as they struggle to mount some kind of response. Flammable materials are dragged clear of the blaze, shovels are issued and soon clumps of dirt are flying through the air to try and smother flames that seem to burn with an unnatural hunger. Men fall back overcome by the smoke, unable to endure the blistering heat as the firefighting efforts are taken in turns. As the heat intensifies other barrels of cooking oil expand until the seams give way, fresh fuel bursting and spraying in all directions as it catches and ignites. In amongst all of this chaos and confusion with all eyes turned toward the fire no one noticed the two figures step out from a tent among a field of identical ones and make their way to the nearest gate now left unmanned.

## Chapter 25

"Fire! FIRE! Run you dogs!! GO!"

Men already pushed to their limits by hours of exhausted marching now broke out into a run, knees lifting and arms swinging. Officers ran alongside the formation shouting curses and insults as they brandished whips and clubs. In the distance the night sky turned orange, smoke and flame billowing high into the air backlighting the silhouettes of buildings. Even though they were miles away the smell of burning wood and stranger still fried food from the cooking oil reached them.

"Back to camp while there is still one to save!"

As they ran those among them with breathe enough to speak asked aloud if the town itself were under attack. Stripped of arms and armour for the training exercise they worried about the very real possibility of running straight into an army laying in wait amongst the tall waving grass of the plains. They huddled closer together the ones left on the outside of the formations continuing to glance sideways at the country side streaming past. The dancing flames casting long shadows that preyed on the fears of overtired men and their active imaginations. They feared that at any moment Solamnic Knights would leap from the grass and come storming into their lines, polished swords flashing as they set about their butchers work. Turf worked his way to the outside of the group, the others freely allowing him to pass from the safety of the pack so that they might squeeze in a bit closer. Soon he started to slow his pace and fell behind the others. No one called words of encouragement to him to try and keep pace. Pressed close enough to the outside of the pack the outriding officers failed to notice the one body in a sea of bodies slower then the tide. The city grew larger and larger in their vision until soon a man could not take it all in without panning his head to from one side to the other. Seeing his chance was about to slip away Turf drifted off further to the side until he was almost within the tall waving grass before he allowed himself to trip and fall to the ground screaming as the it rushed up to meet him.

"NO! NOOO!!! IT'S GOT MEEEEEE!!!"

He screamed in abject terror as he pulled up his legs to bunch them beneath himself, his toes digging into the dirt. As the last of the formation turned at the sound of his screams he leapt up throwing himself backwards as though something of terrible inhuman strength had seized him.

"HEEEELPPPP!!!"

Turf cried as he disappeared into the long grass. The night. The heat. The flames of a burning city all played on the minds of those present giving his performance a credence it would not have had otherwise. Far from rushing to investigate and help save their comrade the men broke in a wild frenzy screaming about the terrors waiting for them in the long grass as they lapped around the sides of formation pushing themselves to run harder and leave others in the rear to be picked off by the unseen phantoms stalking them. Panic spread like a crashing wave along the formation moving from the back to the front. Men punched and elbowed each other out of the way, knocking each other over to be trampled by the men following behind. Officers that tried to restore any semblance of order were soon relived of their weapons which were quickly turned upon them. Revenge for previous beatings and lashings carried out in the open where no one would see as each was blinded by his own panic.

"By the gods..."

Turf breathed as he slowly rose to his feet to see the vista spread out before him. Where before there had been hard packed dirt now bloodied and broken bodies paved the roads. Twisted limbs reached skyward as blood caked mouths hoarsely whispered for mothers long forgotten and unseen to appear by their sides in their final moments. Among the long grass others rose slowly to their feet as Turf imagined the dead rising from their graves in the stories told around the campfire in the days of his childhood when men took cruel delight in filling young minds with nightmarish thoughts before ordering them off to their bedrolls to toss and turn as they jumped at ever noise and imagined terror.

The silhouettes stumbled out into the road to move among the dead and dying. They swatted aside the hands that reached for them seeking comfort in their final moments, dipping into pockets and pouches. Tunics and shirts were torn down from the collar to see if they concealed necklaces or charms. Though it had not been their plan the survivors were taking advantage of the situation to desert the pitiless employ of the Dark Queen's army. Fearing he would be targeted next for the crime of simply being a witness to these proceedings Turf ducked back down among the tall grass until he heard the last of them shuffling off. He allowed himself time to catch his breath, stretching out on his back he looked up to the night sky above. Uncountable numbers of stars shone and twinkled. His heart beat slowed, the pain and fatigue leaving him limbs. He knew at some point he would have to get up and push on before he ran the risk of drifting off into deepest slumber. Let that horrible town with it's cawing seabirds, rotten fish winds and terror filled tunnels burn until it collapsed down into self and only a cinder filled pit remained.

"Quick! Quick! It awakens.."

The minotaur heard the voice calling insistently nearby as it's eye lids fluttered open. It stared up at the ceiling as flickering oil lamps cast their light to dance along the mosaic vista above. The temple had long been forgotten by the people of Haltigoth having been built in ages past before slowly being covered over by successive generations of buildings, each raised upon the covered rubble of the last until many feet of variously coloured sediment had been layered like the marble chocolate cake of a dreaming god. The servants of the Dark Queen had followed the rumours, agents sent in secret to libraries and archives throughout the land until it's location had been discovered. Work crews had been sent into the sewer system supervised by pale creatures in flowing black robes who had directed where to dig until the entrance had once again been uncovered. Seals broken and stones turned aside they paused to breathe air that had last filled the lungs of magic users in ages past savouring the taste of the very history of the place. The workers had entered with wide eyed awe casting their head lamps around at the ancient carvings of serpentine dragons spiralling along columns, eldritch engraved wards and in the centre of the main room before a stone altar of black marble inlaid with bands of gold a pit that loomed as the open mouth of a deep sea predator. The workers realised too late that their work was not yet complete when they turned to leave and saw the line of hooded figures standing unmoving in their path. The good people of Halitgoth never heard their cries of terror and agony as their silence and sacrifice were taken as a terrible offering to consecrate the temple anew. Lightning arced from crooked stabbing fingers, limbs were snapped by giant invisible hands and those that managed to run did not make it more than a few feet before they burst into flame. The fat beneath their skin super heating in an instant to burst through as sizzling fuel for the candle they had become as they tripped and fell into the pit in their blind agonising panic, tumbling end over end until they were mere distant motes of light.

"Whe....Ho...Hunnnnnhhhh"

Trying to find it's voice it stumbled over it's words before letting out a long bellow. More figures appeared within it's eye line peering down at his face and along his body. He was unsure about what they were checking for as his eyes were drawn back to the mosaic. He found his eyes drawn first to the pale face of the woman looking down at a form being cradled in it's arms. The eyes appeared to be polished obsidian that made them glisten with life. Sensuous lips slightly parted to reveal the tips of ivory fangs. Her dark hair flowed in all directions in waves as though she were underwater. Her nude form reclined on a couch, an arm cradling the infant in it's swaddling clothe.

"We are her children..."

The voice startled the inotaur from his reverie, a hand quickly placed onto his chest in a calming gesture.

"Do not fear for you are safe here among us. You have been chosen by her."

The minotaur turned to consider the figure addressing them, the usually stoic expression dropped betraying it's confusion.

"You have been brought to this temple, your body broken..."

They remembered the agonising pain they had endured at the hands of the human.

"Our Clerics prayed to our Dark Queen to bestow her blessings upon you..."

They realised they were now longer in pain. Flexing they felt their muscles rippling full and hard under skin pulled taught. Their chest rose as they sucked in a deep breathe, incense filling their nostrils.

"She has seen fit to restore that which was broken blessing it with her immeasurable powers to make you stronger then you have ever known. Rise Blessed One."

The minotaur lifted themselves up off the smooth stone slab into a sitting position before swinging their legs over the side. They reached a hand back and felt how warm the stone was and could not be sure it was entirely due to the heat of their body being transferred or if something else warmed it from within. Pushing off from the slab their hooves clicked on the inlaid stone tiles. Drawing themselves up to their full height they towered over the figures around them. Pure raw power coursed through their veins, the hairs standing up on the back of their neck. They felt like they could have gripped the very columns that supported this place and pulled them toppling to the ground if they so desired. While the other figures shuffled wearily the one who had been addressing them stepped closer.

"Your Queen has anointed you to be her Champion in her hour of greatest need..."

The minotaur looked down and saw the cowl of the man's robe had fallen back to reveal the violet eyes that burned with their own inner light.

"Will you heed your mothers call Blessed One?..."

The maternal request struck a chord deep within it's heart. They had been separated from their own mother at such a young age, torn from her warm loving embrace lest he grow weak and soft. Little warmth or comfort had he known since as he endured the painful trials and harsh living conditions of his people designed to turn him into a bull worthy of the terrifying blood soaked reputation of the countless generations which had come before him. Now here at long last was the mother he had been searching for ever since he had been ripped from the embrace of the one that had birthed him. He offered his outstretched hand, the palm turned upward. The figure laid his own gently on top. It seemed like that of an infant in comparison. As their skin connected the pact was sealed. A great wave moved through the minotaur starting in their feet to spread rapidly through their calves. The shivered as their loins tingled, the rolling wave of powering running up along their spine until it reached the base of their skull. Closing their eyes their mouth yawned open as they tilted their head back. Breathing deeply they savoured the air in their lungs as a pipe smoker having taken their first long drag of their dried herbs. Releasing their breathe slowly they opened their eyes and the world was not the same as it had been before. Phantom humanoid shapes phased in and out at the edges of their vision. The writing carved into the walls of the temple suddenly made sense. Had they been under the open sky they would have been able to see Nuitari in all of it's majesty.

"Damn you all to Abyss! Where are you lot taking me!!"

Janix burst into the room accompanied by an armed escort of Draconians. At a wave of the high priest they bowed in revered obedience before backing out of the chamber never turning to present their backs until they had crossed over the threshold.

"So this is why I am here?"

Janix commented as he gestured toward the minotaur.

"You have healed my steed so that I may ride off in pursuit after that little bitch that nearly blinded me."

Stepping forward with his usual customary arrogance he waved his hand gesturing for the inotaur to lower itself down.

"Bend the knee boy I'll have to ride you bareback until we get to the surface where I can scrounge up a saddle..."

It did not move, it did not speak, it simply held it's ground and stared with impassive eyes at the man-thing which had so grievously injured it before. Janix bristled at the beast not playing along with his jest when he could have ordered it to lick his boots lest he punish it worse then before.

"That's quite enough Janix..."

He whirled to face the hooded figure. He was used to giving the orders and not receiving them. True there were many within the camp he would have to report to if they so required. That was why he had chosen to lead the training of the new recruits where he was left alone to terrorise the fresh meat so long as he produced the required results.

"You have not been brought here to 'inspect your new mount' as you so eloquently put it."

Janix appeared confused and enraged on the verge of seizing this book worm by the throat, the speed of his departure dictating how savage the beating which would ensue.

"The Dark Queen has restored your sight so that you might better see how you have displeased her and the punishment which awaits all who have failed her."

Janix spun at the sound of a hoof clicking down onto the stone floor behind him. Huge hands shot forward to seize his arms at the elbows, lifting him into the air as easily as he himself might have a newborn babe.

"Unhand me you farmyard fool!"

Janix bellowed into the minotaur's face.

"Cattle Clod! Braindead Bull!"

The minotaur tilted it's head to the side for a moment to contemplate it's prey before it spun him around to face him. Forcing his elbows behind his back until the almost touched he began to lift him into the air. Janix strained to arch his back trying to ease the pressure on his shoulders screaming as they threatened to pop from their sockets.

"Dahh... Damn... Youuu arrrghhhh"

Janix screamed as the pressure increased. Drawing him in closer until his face almost touched his own muzzle the minotaur flexed his chest muscles torquing the elbows higher and closer together. A high pitch squeal ripped from Janix's throat as both shoulders dislocated at the same time, tendons snapping off from their anchoring points on the bone as muscles fibres ripped like cheap cloth. Releasing his grip on him Janix fell to the ground unable to arrest his fall he collapsed smashing his knees before toppling to the side where his head whipped down into the ground with a sickening crunch.

"Yes! Yes! Be her instrument of judgement!"

The figure cried as it stabbed a finger toward the crumpled form on the ground between them. Stepping forward the sound of his hoof clicking on the tile suddenly roused Janix who tried to wiggle away for a second before a hoof caught him in the chest with a vicious kick that lacerated his flesh, the cloven edge snapping the ribs underneath driving them into his lungs and other organs. Janix barked up a glob of blood. The minotaur loomed over him, a leg rearing back to deliver another kick. The broken body did not move anymore. Its chest no longer rising or falling. More blood ran from its open mouth, the gathering pool widening until even that trickle stopped.

"Excellent! Excellent! Truly she works through you Blessed One."

The honorific felt good to his ears. Blessed One. The man moved closer drawing the minotaur in who stooped to hear as though they were entering into a conspiracy of some kind.

"War rages above us even as we speak..."

The inotaur's eyes flitted to the mosaic in the ceiling expecting it to rumble and shake. The temple remained a calm and cool oasis unaffected by the chaos raging above as it had through the Cataclysm which had entombed it underground centuries before.

"Agents of the Light have moved against our army assassinating officers, setting fires to food stores and summoning creatures of unknown and terrible origin as they are too cowardly themselves to attack our soldiers as they returned to the city unarmed from their march."

Honour in combat was a corner stone of a inotaur's upbringing drummed into them from the time they are weened from their mothers. Blowing a loud breathe out of his nose he turned back to the hooded man.

"Return to the surface you will know the way as though you had walked it a hundred times before. Find the agents of the Light and bring them here to our most holy of places so that our Dark Queen may have her revenge!"

Reflected fire blazed in the minotaur's eyes as it drew itself up to his full height knuckles cracking as its muscles bunched and tensed. Turning like an automaton it strode from the temple with quick determined strides breaking into a run as it passed over the threshold. Hooded figures pressed themselves against the walls of the passages as he passed each exclaiming the same two words in his wake.

"Blessed One!"

He felt himself growing stronger each time he heard it.

"Blessed One!"

The anger burning in his heart a little hotter."

"Blessed One!"

Bursting onto the surface streets as a whale breaches the water he skittered to a halt for a moment to survey the pandemonium around him. People ran in all directions carrying bundles of their meagre possessions or buckets of water to be thrown ineffectively onto the thirsting flames. They cowered in fear when they saw him, steering in wide berths around his gigantic form. Smoke choked the air as ash and cinders swirled as snow in a blizzard. Unknowing of the force that compelled him the minotaur turned seemingly at random and took off running down a street, its arms pumping by its sides as its cloven hooves clacked a rapid fire drum beat along the cobblestones.

## Chapter 26

"Here! Here!"

Hitch grabbed Cielo by her arm dragging her into the open doorway of a home, one in a line they had been running along seemingly chosen at random. Slamming the door shut he threw the bolt into place and whirled back to take in their surroundings. Cielo was already tensed and ready, brandishing a dagger.

"Wait here."

Hitch called as he bolted up the stairs. Cielo stood looking at the ceiling turning her head to track the noise Hitch was making as he quickly tossed the rooms to make sure they were alone. Stopping at the top of the stairs he sucked great gulps of air into his lungs as he slowly started to descend, his fist balled around the corners of some blankets he was dragging behind himself down the stairs. Cielo rushed over and helped him over to a chair. The adrenalin of the moment was quickly wearing off leaving his body to suffer the slings and arrows of age and exhaustion.

"I'll be alright in a minute...check the kitchen...I'd kill for a cup of tar bean tea."

Cielo stopped to fuss over him, trying to pull the blankets up over his legs. He swatted her hands away.

"I'm no wizened ancestor propped up by the fireplace. These blankets are to disguise us not warm these bones."

Cielo turned rolling her eyes as she made her way across the living room floor.

"No lights!"

Hitch called out as Cielo patted the walls searching for something to ignite. The flickering flames outside provided some light to try and work by. Squatting down she crawled across the floor towards a small wooden barrel. Twisting it around in place she angled it in the light to try and read what had been burned into the side.

"Pickles..."

She called out to Hitch as she made a horrified face while sticking out her tongue. She felt the warmth of the blackened pot bellied stove before she made out it's silhouette. Cracking the handle she risked sneaking a peek and saw the coals had burned down to a dull red. Keeping the door only partway open she reached for small pieces of wood from the pile beside the stove and tossed them in, causing embers to swirl before the door was locked back into place. Waiting for the kettle to boil she peered into the darkness of drawers running her hand over the items within. She scanned the clay pots arranged along the shelves lifting them up and gently shaking each in turn until she came across one heavier than the rest. It's contents clacked together when she shook it. Lifting the lid she pulled out a small leather pouch, hefting it in her hands. For a moment she thought she had found the meagre savings of the household and felt a twinge of guilt until she opened the pouch and poured the contents into her palm. Small glass spheres rolled and clacked against each other. Marbles of colourful patterns and various sizes. They looked like little worlds onto themselves. She marvelled at their designs and pondered how they ever managed to trap the colourful streaks inside. She placed the marbles back into their pouch, slipping it into her pocket to admire later as she restored the jar to it's place on the shelf. Soon steam was rising from the open mouth of the kettle and before long Hitch and Cielo were sitting in the living room, sipping their hot drinks as though the city outside was not being consumed. Cielo was the first to break the silence.

"Hitch are we the bad guys?"

Hitch paused for a moment his hands wrapped around his mug.



"Why do you ask sweetheart?"

Cielo was ready with her response.

"Because this is the second city we have burned to the ground."

Hitch took a moment to smile to himself before his features hardened.

"The people in the first city wanted to sell you into slavery for the crime of being born human. If we had not managed to escape right now you would be eating black bread for your dinner and sleeping on the bare ground in filthy rags they would not replace even once they had rotted from your body."

Hitch's words painted a vivid picture in her minds eye as he continued.

"That man that was paying you alot of attention before we got split up, did he try something with you?"

Cielo stared at her feet unable to answer. She had been so lucky in her escape it did not seem possible that she had some how managed to best that brutal man. Hitch was on his feet in an instant his hands extended out. She placed her hands in his.

"Well the soldiers of this town don't care about what would have happened to you, only that they did not get to take part themselves."

Cielo looked up to meet his gaze with tears in her eyes.

"As you felt no guilt when you killed game for the cooking pot back at home, feel no guilt in what we have had to do to survive out here in the wilds of 'civilised' lands. This is the truth that I tried to shield you from. The more I tried to keep you safe the more you rebelled with thoughts of all the many adventures you had read about in my library. You never read about anything quite like this did you?"

Cielo shook her head as she recalled the tales of high adventures presented in the many leather bound volumes she had spent long nights pouring over by the light of their fireplace.

"Click...Clock...Click....Clock...."

They froze at the sound of the hooves slowly clacking their way along the sidewalk. The horned silhouette of a figure strode along the far wall as though a demon had escaped from the abyss.

"Minotaur..."

Hitch whispered in Cielo's ear. Pressing themselves flat to the floor they crawled towards the kitchen.

"Click...Clock...Click....Clock...."

The sound of the hooves grew more distant as the beast crossed to the other side of the street. They dared to sneak over to the nearest window slowly rising to a kneeling position they peeked over the window sill as the Blessed One, backlit by the raging fires raised it's head to draw in a huge whiff of the smoke filled air. It paused for a moment to contemplate the scents as a noble lord with a goblet of fine elven wine.

"Did I hear you mention pickles before?"

Hitch asked Cielo who turned to him with a quizzical expression. How could he be thinking about his stomach at a time like this? She pointed to the small wooden barrel under the bench. Dropping back down he shuffled over. Gripping the handle he lifted the wooden lid. The pickles bobbed on the surface of the briny fluid. The pungent smell of vinegar and sulphur filled his nostrils with great satisfaction. Scooping out a pickle he started to happily munch away as he took the blankets and pushed them down into the barrel. Pickles and brine flowed up and over the sides to spill out onto the kitchen floor causing Cielo to skitter backwards.

"No point trying to avoid it cause you're just about to wear it."

Hitch continued to chew as he spoke.

"The smell of the brine will help cover our scent."

Cielo hissed her interjection:

"It would cover the smell of a goblin fart in a closed tent!"

Hitch shot back.

"I'd rather face a hundred flatulent foes than the Bovine Beast out there!"

He wrapped the soaking blanket around her neck and shoulders the cool liquid seeping through her clothes causing her to shiver. As he wrapped his own blanket over his armour he reached for another pickle stuffing it into his mouth as he took off crawling across the floor again.

"Where are we going now!?"

Cielo hissed at the wiggling dwarven butt before her.

"The same place you should always go in a fight... We take the high ground."

Suddenly Hitch stopped moving and Cielo crawled straight into him, the top of her head butting against the seat of his pants. She stumbled back for a moment and was about to call out to Hitch to get moving when she noticed something terrible in the corner of her eye.

"Huff....huff...huff..."

The Blessed One's face was pressed sideways up against the window pane, the monstrous proportions of it's face filling the frame. Bursts of hot air shot from it's wide nostrils to fog the glass as blood red eyes bore through it's prey. No one moved for a moment until Hitch was suddenly on his feet bellowing.

"The stairs! Go!"

In half a second Cielo was on her feet in hot pursuit across the living room floor. Glass shattered behind them as huge fists balled and punched through the shattering panes spreading wood and glass everywhere. Hitch stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned waving for Cielo to take the lead. She sprang up the stairs two at a time heading for the rear rooms. The building shook as the minotaur, far too wide to fit through the frame took out it's frustrations by ramming itself violently into the side of the structure. Hitch gripped the hand rail as he hauled himself up the stairs hand over hand as he pumped his knees up high to clear each foot for the next step. Suddenly seeming to remember that doors existed the minotaur charged out and around in a wide loop to approach the door head on at full pelt. Lowering it's head at the last second it snapped the door from it's frame with the iron hinges still attached. The door shot across the room to smash into the modest dining room table shattering it to pieces.

"Go!GO!"

Hitch roared as Cielo sprang from her perch squatting on the second storey windowsill. As her legs uncoiled she rocketed out into the air seeming to fly for a moment across the narrow alleyway below before landing on the roof of the adjacent building. The minotaur thundered up the stairs in hot pursuit, hooves cracking steps causing it to trip and stumble fingers crawling at the wall and handrail to recover it's balance. Hitch hauled himself onto the windowsill as the thunderous crashing grew louder behind him.

"Get back girl!"

Hitch shouted as he brandished his axe. She could see something moving in the darkness behind him. Spreading his arms wide Hitch leapt out into the moonlight. Time seemed to slow as his hands came forward to grip the axe which he stuck straight out, the blade held vertically. Huge hands burst from the blackness behind him to claw at empty air. Without the axe Hitch would have never made the gap. The sharp corner of the bottom edge acting like a hook that dug deep into the wooden roof. Hitch swung downward into the side of the building the soles of his feet taking the jarring impact. He could practically feel the hot snorting breathe of the minotaur as it strained to stick it's head out of the window. His hands began to slip down the haft of the handle. One hand let go of the axe for a moment, reaching up for the lip of the roof. The grip of his remaining hand slipped and for a horrifying moment he felt himself beginning to plummet to the ground below before Cielo appeared her arms shooting down to grip his flailing hand. Bending at the knees she braced her back and with a face reddening effort that threatened to tear her shoulders from their sockets she managed to pull his hand up high enough to grip onto the edge of the roof. His other hand quickly followed shortly before he threw his foot over and was able to scramble to his feet. Turning to retrieve his axe he saw the Minotaur still staring. It was not straining as before, the raging frenzy was gone and in it's place was a mask of cold composure. Slowly it withdrew back into the shadows of the room.

"Death comes for you..."

The calm eloquent delivery sent shivers up their spines. Cielo gripped Hitch's arm to pull him away and he did not resist. The minotaur stepped backwards mirroring their own movements while never taking his gaze from them. His terrible violet eyes glowed as he stepped further and further backwards into the darkness. Cielo and Hitch matched the same slow pace as they retreated across the rooftop, Cielo looking over her shoulder trying to plot their escape route. The minotaur was mid stride when his back bumped into the wall behind him. He paused for a moment, his glowing eyes continuing to bore into them before he broke for the doorway at a sprint.

"RUN!"

Hitch and Cielo shouted in unison as they turned and started sprinting across the connected rooftops. The Minotaur took the stairs at a flying leap sailing over the first few steps before landing on an extended cloven hoof. The timbres of the simple dwelling had been made to handle the weight of it's human residents only. Several boards had already cracked with sections snapping off as the beast had made it's frantic ascent in pursuit of it's prey. The falling weight of the descent was the final straw. The board parted in half as though it had never been a solid piece. It's leg sank up to it's thigh the jagged edges of the board gouging channels into it's flesh as it arrested it's fall. The forward momentum swung the upper half of it's body forward in a hammer blow that shattered the remaining steps to pieces dropping it down onto the floor underneath the staircase. Hitch and Cielo turned at the booming crash and expected to see it coming streaming around the corner at full pelt any second. They skittered to a halt on the edge of the rooftop turning to lower themselves down. They hung for a second before letting go dropping to the hard stones below. Cielo's legs took the impact but she was still driven to a squatting position her bottom almost striking the floor. Due to his short stature Hitch had further to fall. Landing awkwardly he pitched to the side crashing into Cielo. They quickly scrambled to their feet scraping their hands and knees. A narrow alleyway loomed ahead, a gaping maw of darkness that under usual circumstances would test the will of most men. With a raging minotaur potentially seconds behind them it was as safe and inviting as their own beds. Leaping forward they covered the short distance until they were plunged into deep shadow, their legs continuing to pump as they put as much distance between themselves and the beast hunting them.

## Chapter 27

"Huff....huff....huff..."

Turf stumbled to a halt beneath the abandoned pier they had first gathered under only a few days before as he sucked in great gulps of air. He had been running for what seemed like hours through the long grass of the plains as he worked his way around the outer walls. The long grass forced him to lift his knees high with each stride and he soon found his thighs were burning. The thought of being left behind or worst still others placing themselves in danger by lingering in hopes of his return kept him pushing through the pain. His palm slipped off the damp slick support beam, too exhausted to hold himself up he sank to the ground his hands and knees digging into the soft wet sand. Closing his eyes he squeezed his hands into fists feeling the wet sand pass between his fingers.

"...Cielo..."

He spoke her name in his mind as she appeared before him. Her smiling face, the bright blue eyes and her long brown hair swirling in the breeze. He felt his skin prickling as it cooled under the kiss of wind coming up from the waters edge.

"...Cielo..."

Her face contorts in anger as she lashes out at an unseen enemy with her sword, her face twisted into a snarl. Feeling so utterly helpless he can feel the tears starting to form in the corners of his eyes. He knows now with a brilliant clarity that he has started to fall in love with someone he might never see again. Even as he knelt in the sand she could be far from the city, fleeing in a direction unknown. How would he ever find her? A man could spend his life wandering Krynne and never come upon the person they were looking for. Worse yet she might be laying dead or dying, crying out in pain while his arms should be wrapped around her in comfort. The first night in the camp it was only the thought of her that had kept him going, the chance however slim that he would see her. All too soon she had been taken away again as he had been forced out of the city on the march and she had been lead away by the cruel and pitiless Janix. Had he hurt her? Had he done worse? Turf raged at how powerless he felt in that moment, the thought of not knowing where she was the cruelest of punishments the world could devise. He beat his fists into the sand, sprinkling grain geysers rising with each hammering blow.

"Cccieelloooooo!!!"

He screamed with a primal rage at the chaotic vista before him heedless of who might hear. Fires still burnt brightly in the distance illuminating the silhouettes of buildings. Figures scurried around the docks as supplies were rapidly loaded, sailors making ready to cast off. A panicked horde of townspeople could storm a ship in their haste to make good their escape and sink the vessel with their numbers alone. Turf rose to his feet and was about to take off running when a hand seized him by his bicep.

"Turf!"

The voice cried out in relief as he felt himself being whipped around and pressed into a bear hug. Palms were clapped to his back and his hair tussled. He struggled for a moment before realising he was surrounded by his comrades from good old Pinehurst. A smile broke on his face as he wiped the tears from his eyes and returned their hugs with joy swelling his heart. Holding up his hands he called for silence.

"Those boats are our only hope of getting out of here and they look set to push off any minute. I don't know where Hitch and Cielo are but they are sure to be around here somewhere. Lets get moving we dont have anytime to lose."

Surrounded by his friends the odds were suddenly a little more in his favour, the chances of finding Cielo and Hitch a little greater and somehow they would make it out of here in one piece.

"Stop!"

Hitch hissed as he held up his arm to bar her path. Cocking his ear at the entrance of an alleyway onto the street he paused to listen for the sound of thundering hooves. They had been making their way through the city towards the docks weaving a path through the cramped laneways and alleys their broad bovine pursuer could not have hoped to have followed them along. They had tripped and stumbled their way through the poorly lit and often pitch black paths over broken boxes, glass bottles and passed out forms that muttered and cursed at the intrusion of their rest before returning to it. The air was still heavy with smoke and soot. The roaring inferno was consuming the city, rapidly spreading through the densely packed wooden housing of the outlying slums they were making their way through. Cielo broke the silence.

"There's something I don't understand about your plan..."

Cielo asked.

"What plan might that be, we've had several since we first got here."

He did not meet her gaze as he kept scanning.

"The minotaur was tracking our scent."

She paused for a moment.

"Aye..."

Hitch was unsure of where she was going with this.

"So we changed our scent to smell like pickles."

Her voice rose at the end as she seemingly enjoyed saying the word.

"True enough."

He agreed growing increasingly confused.

"So why doesn't the minotaur just sniff for pickles?..."

He could see her staring intently at him in his peripheral vision.

"Oh that's a great question."

He retorted sarcastically before going on.

"I'll be sure to be asking that while he is going me to death. Oh Mr Minotaur why didn't you follow the 'pickle path' to my door."

Hitch had become quite animated in his sarcastic response and had to force himself to regain his composure.

"If he hadn't caught us in the act we would have slipped away and he would have been none the wiser. Now I don't know but the blankets are still wet and will keep us safe somewhat from the flames if they get too close."

His lecture finished Cielo nodded resisting the urge to cast the blanket off and turned to point up the street at what appeared to be another alleyway they could use. Hitch nodded his agreement and they were off running again across the street feeling as exposed as a field mouse running for cover while an owl watches from its perch.

"Rise..."

The woman's voice commanded gently. The minotaur looked up and was astounded to see his mother standing before him. She looked as though she had not aged a day since he had last seen her so many years before. Oddly she was dressed in flowing black robes instead of the simple dresses he had remembered.

"Mother...How are you here?"

Unable to take his eyes away from her he failed to notice he was no longer in the shattered remains of the simple wooden home where he had fallen through the staircase. He wasn't anywhere at all. Grey slate tiles stretched out in all directions, perfectly aligned with an eye to rival any craftsman until they disappeared into a distant fog. His mother stepped closer.

"It is time to get up now...You have much to do and have failed miserably so far."

The rebuke stung so harshly because of who was delivering it. He had been called so many names in his short brutal life and knew the biting sting of whips as though they were old friends yet the disappointment of his mother cut him deepest.

"I...I...did the best I could mother."

He started to plead before she cut him off with a swift motion of her hand.

"Your best! This is the best you could do with the gifts I have given you!? You do not think but blindly charge like a bellowing BEAST!"

He flinched at the word, a curse all too familiar as it was usually delivered to punctuate the biting sting of a whip. She stepped closer and her features began to distort, twisting and morphing.

"Where are your brains beast! Where is your cunning?!! You have allowed yourself to be bested by a dwarf and a little human girl! They make good their escape while you lay here."

The form shifted beneath the robes growing slender and lithe as the features of the face addressing him shrank and reformed until the visage staring balefully at him was the same as the one he had seen on the roof of the temple. A slender hand shot out to slap him across the face with the force of a knight's mace.

"Up you dog! Up!"

Striking him either side of his face she drove him to his knees. The pale feet before him started to expand into reptilian claws, the toes fusing into claws the white milky skin turning to scales. He dared not lift his gaze as he felt something massive and terrible looming over him. He felt the multiple heads moving, smelled their hot pungent breath as it burned the back of his neck. He braced for the sharp pain of fangs sinking into his skin, the rending of claws that could gouge through his body that would provide all the resistance of warm butter. The heads roared as one. He came back to the world with a start, scrambling and trashing around in the debris as he came to his senses. Splintered timbers lay all around, a huge hole in the staircase above him where he had fallen through. There was nothing beneath the staircase. It was not an entrance to a basement or a walled off section for storage. To his side was empty air and the living room he had burst into while in hot pursuit of his prey. He crawled out and slowly rose to his feet stretching and flexing. His muscles ached in protest the wound across his thigh throbbing. He touched it gingerly and pulled his fingers back like he had touched hot coals as his nerve endings screamed. Looking around he saw no clues that could help him, nothing to point in the ultimate direction of his quarry. Turning to leave he was puzzled why he was picking up the overpowering stench of pickles.

## Chapter 28

"Charge!!"

Locking arms together they charged, looted oars sticking forward as impromptu lances. They came on as one, shoulder to shoulder in a united wall. Propelled forth on feet wrapped in worn leather shoes they did not hesitate in the face of the enemy. Even the greatest of knights that the most noble of houses could produce would have been humbled by the courage displayed by these men of most humble means and origins. The soldiers patrolling the docks turned in time to see the men hurtling towards them, eyes bulging as they screamed their battle cries. The flat tips of the oars smashed into the front row like thunderous fists knocking men and draconians from their feet to clasp at their chests and gasp for the air that had been driven from their lungs. The front rank dropped their oars and fell onto their downed enemies beating at their faces with clenched fists. Their comrades leapt over the top swinging their oars in wide arcs as they came on like naked frenzied barbarians wielding two handed swords. They cracked skulls and dented helmets sending their enemies toppling sideways off the docks into the inky black waters. Weighed down with their chain mail shirts and leather weapon belts they sank as though their pockets had been filled with stones. They looked up to the surface of the waters as they desperately tried to claw their way up to no avail still able to see the plumes of orange and red of the raging inferno. Crashing into the sea floor their impacts kicked up clouds of fine silt that blurred their vision and stung their eyes. Their lungs burned as they clawed at buckles and belts in that terrible darkness, panicked hearts thumping in their ears.

"Get their weapons!"

Knives and clubs were pulled from sheaths and hooks on belts before their former owners were kicked and pushed over the edge of the dock to join the others below. Axes and swords were snatched up from where they had fallen as they raced onwards towards their target. The sail fluttered from a single mast, the bow and the stern curving high off the water to carry it through the breakers. Turf was the first onboard springing from the docks to land with the grace of a jungle cat among the piles of rope and netting typical of a fishing boat. A figure stirred from among the coils of jute to find the tip of a sword levelled at their chest.

"Can you sail this thing?"

Turf asked the quivering boy before him who meekly nodded their head in a bobbing motion as their eyes never left the tip of the sword before them.

"Then get on your feet!"

He roared as they others clambered on board, some of them tripping and falling into the boat as they tried and failed to maintain their balance on the rocking craft. The boy scrambled past the men with the practiced ease of someone used to a life lived at sea. Unhitching the lines anchoring the vessel to the dock they threw them back into the boat before leaping after them. Ducking back in between his new crew mates nimble fingers unhooked the rope which they wrapped around their forearm. Leaning far back they used their own body weight as they heaved on the rope until the square of canvas sail began to rise. The others were quick to rush over and lend their strength gripping the rope tightly they pulled until the sail was in full bloom.

"Here they come! Grab those oars!"

Turf was the first to spot the stream of humanity pouring down towards the docks like a black wave. Jammed tightly together they appeared as a single undulating mass back lit by the blazing fires behind them. They tried to push the boat along by jamming the tips of their oars into the gaps between the stones that made up the wall of the pier and shoving as hard as they could. The tips slipped beneath the slimy algae causing more than one man to slip and fall cursing. Others took to hanging half over the sides frantically paddling with their arms.

Looking around terribly confused at the comical attempts being made to propel them forwards the ship's mate grabbed up an oar and placing it into its notch in the side of the boat hauled backwards with a practiced stroke that saw their legs pushing off the back of the seat in front of them as their arms bunched and back arched. The boat was picking up speed fast and as the others looked around to see what was happening. Quickly realising their error they took to their seats and soon other oars were dipping into the water and scooping it away behind them. They were out in the open waters when the piers began to fill with the fleeing townsfolk. They pushed and shove one another as they jammed themselves into the limited space. Hands held out in begging gestures as voices raised to cry out for saviour.

"We need to... we need to turn!"

Turf grabbed the sailor by the shoulder and directed them in what they had to do next. Nodding their head in understanding they moved to the back of the boat to grab the rudder. Twisting the handle to one side the vessel started to turn in a wide arc. Turf ordered the others to stop rowing. They were far enough out that none but the most capable of swimmers would be able to get out to them. They scanned the docks looking for any sign of Cielo or Hitch among the soot streaked faces to no avail.

"It looks like everyone in the city..."

Cielo and Hitch watched from their balcony perch at the sea of humanity streaming past downhill on its way to the harbour. They jostled each other as they came on, heads popping up to try and see over the crowd for their loved ones or even orientate their direction as they had no idea where they were going having been swept up in the herd. Any unlucky enough to trip and fall did not rise again as they were trampled by the hundreds of panicked people following behind them. Their only passing was a ripple in the crowd where people suddenly rose and fell slightly as they stepped onto the body and then back down onto the cobblestones.

"Where do you think it is?..."

Cielo called out to Hitch over the roar of the crowd streaming by below.

"Closer than you want it to be I'd wager."

It was the stillness that gave it away, a figure unmoving just beyond the flowing river of humanity streaming by its spot in the mouth of the alleyway on the opposite side of the street. Its eyes burned up at them as it contemplated how it would cross the flowing river of people to get to them. Even with its incredible strength blessed by the Dark Queen herself it could not hope to bully its way through. Cielo's hand clamped around Hitch's bicep as she spotted the beast too. He could feel her trembling but did not take his eyes from the creature. Even though he was armed with an axe that could split a man's head like a ripe melon and clad in plate that could turn aside sword strokes like the slaps of an enraged child Hitch felt true fear in that moment. It stared at them as though they were insects it will relish pulling the wings and legs from.

"Don't worry it will never get across all those people. It will have to backtrack and find a way around."

He had turned to address Cielo and looking back his heart had dropped into his stomach when he saw that the minotaur was gone. He whirled back to the doorway they had stepped through onto the balcony, staring at the front door, expecting it to come crashing down any second. He looked around the room for something, anything they could use. He was not even sure if they should make their stand here or find a way to flee. It is funny how the mind operates and for reasons he would never be able to explain Hitch suddenly remembered something from the days of his adventuring many years before. It had been a summer day when he had found himself sitting on the golden sands of a beach, watching the waves rolling and crashing when he had spotted them. In the distance crescent moon shaped creatures leapt from the water sailing gracefully through the air as they came closer and closer to the shore. Soon they were sprouting from the waves themselves, their bodies half out of the water as they rode them close into shore.



"...riding the waves..."

He grabbed the edge of a round wooden table and started to drag it out onto the balcony. Cielo quickly rushed around and picked up the other side.

"Turn it over!"

Hitch ordered and they flipped the table over. Stepping over to the wooden railing he raised his axe, a few quick strokes easily slicing through the timber to clear their path.

"Get on the table!"

Looking confused Cielo sat down on the upturned table, gripping tightly to the legs. Hitch dragged the table backwards to the other side of the balcony. When Cielo turned around to ask him what was going on he answered before her lips could form the question.

"We need a run up for the launch."

Hitch took off running before she could question him further, leaning into the table as he pushed off from the floor boards picking up speed as they raced to the edge. Cielo heard a crashing sound and turned to the side to see for a split second the sight of the minotaur framed in a doorway whose door was now only shattered splinters. The table launched over the edge shooting out into space as it arced down towards the crowd. Cielo's stomach was in her throat for the split second of weightlessness she felt, Hitch trailing along behind her as he gripped onto the table legs. Wooden panels slapped the backs of a dozen heads causing them to cry out in agony, tripping and stumbling before the momentum of the fall was carrying the table forward to skip along the top of the crowd. The table was wide enough to displace the weight of it's riders, each person beneath them suddenly feeling their head compressed down into their shoulders for a second before the sliding table passed over leaving them stunned and confused. The minotaur leaped from the balcony not towards the crowd but onto a neighbouring roof, sprinting and leaping from one roof top to the other.

"Bud-da-da-Bud-da-da-Bud-da-da"

The sounds of hundreds of heads being slapped down beneath them hammered in their ears as they raced along the sea of people, leaning from one side to the other in a crude attempt at steering. Cielo gripped the wooden legs tightly, her eyes watering in the whipping wind. Hitch glanced over his shoulder and saw the inotaur was falling behind. They picked up speed as the road to the harbour sloped sharply downward. The great sweep of the piers and the ships pulling out into the harbour slicing through the blue black waters raced up to meet them. The longest stone pier laid dead ahead, the crowd turning to see what all the noise and commotion was about forgetting about their cries to the departing ships. They stared in wide eyed horror at the object racing towards them as it skipped along the heads and shoulders of their fellow citizens. The crowd began to part as quickly as they could, a wedge opening wider and wider as the table and it's pilot approached.

"BOOOLLEEEANN!"

The minotaur roared as it leapt from a roof to land in a side street that ran parallel down to the harbour. The parting bow wave of the crowd meet the on rushing duo. The table fell away beneath them and they would have lost their most unlikely of conveyances had they not already been gripping on so tight. The table smacked hard onto the ground sending a jolt running up their spines and bruising their backsides as it continued it's frantic pace sliding along the tops of cobblestones instead of peoples heads. The wall of people either side loomed over them, shaking fists and throwing curses and taunts as they shot past. The pier rushed towards them filling their vision as the wooden table top beneath them was ground down to a sliver of parchment, the scorching heat of the friction causing them to leap to their feet in a half squat.

"SNAP!"

The cobblestones of the path had sunken over time leaving a lip to step up onto the pier. The edge of the table met the stone lip with incredible force causing it to snap and shatter collapsing in on itself. Cielo and Hitch were pitched forward. Hitch's armour bore the brunt of the impact, the steel skittering over the stones sending sparks in his wake like a fiery comet. Mercifully Cielo landed in a wet pile of netting and ropes, their tangled and mouldering remains having been discarded dockside. Hitch remained where he came to rest unmoving as a statue which had been tipped over in a ruin. The people began to move forward towards the pier when the minotaur came storming into sight halting them in their tracks. Sweat lathered its flanks, great gulps of air were sucked through its mouth before being blown out of its muzzle. Cielo sat up in the tangle of ropes and spotted the beast approaching. Winded from its run it had slowed to a walking pace as it stalked towards its cornered prey. Scrambling to her feet she raced over to shake Hitch pleading with him to wake up.

"There they are! Go! GO!"

Turf called as the crew grabbed for their oars as one and started rowing back towards the pier. The flats of the oars clacked as they slapped the water, the men sucking in huge gulps of air before their bodies tensed to pull backwards.

"There is no where to run now..."

The minotaur growled as he stalked towards the pier.

"I am your doom... I am the Red Right hand of my Queen... I..."

His monologue was cut off by a young woman's voice raised in defiance even in the face of such impossible odds.

"I am a grass chewer!"

Cielo mocked as she pretended to be the beast before her.

"I soil myself as a baby when I am not crying for the milk of my mother..."

The minotaur froze in place, eyes bulging with rage as its muscles rippled. It scraped a hoof on the stones as it prepared to charge.

"...But I go hungry as milk maids keep my cow of a mother busy!"

Hitch began to stir as the minotaur started its charge, legs pumping, arms swinging as it rocketed forward. Cielo had slipped her hand into her pocket as she had begun taunting the beast as she had seen Janix do before her. As it began its charge her hand appeared, the fingers opening as they released the glass marbles contained within. The minotaur did not see the glass globes as it charged thinking the hand gesture was a failed attempt to summon some kind of spell. It was almost upon her when its feet suddenly slipped out from underneath it and it found itself staring up at the starry sky above. It slid along a carpet of the glass beads. Hitch opened his eyes lifting his head in time to see the Minotaur sliding past on its back. It was almost past Cielo when one of its huge hands reached out and grabbed her by an ankle yanking her from her feet. Hitch rolled over his arms outstretched screaming as he saw the minotaur disappear over the edge of the pier into the water followed right behind by Cielo, a look of panicked terror on her face as she reached out her hands for him to save her.

"GO!GO!NO! NOOOOO!!!"

Turf screamed from the bow of the boat as he witnessed the horrifying scene. The minotaur was still holding tight to Cielo's ankle as the pair disappeared into the water together. Hitch had scrambled to his feet and despite still wearing his heavy armour dived over the edge in hot pursuit. Turf threw himself from the bow of the ship diving into the water and disappearing below the surface, arms and legs frantically propelling him downward into the inky black water. Driven by instinct alone he surged forward with desperate resolve.

## Chapter 29

Bubbles burst from her mouth in a scream as she plunged down rapidly into the cold depths. Pain shot up her leg from her ankle as the minotaurs grip set to crush the very bones and snap the tendons. She kicked with her free leg, feeling her ankle strike the curled fingers but they did not loosen their grip as panic quickly set in. Looking down she saw the glowing violet eyes regarding her with a cruel triumph as they continued to sink deeper and deeper. It did not seem to care for its own life. It was determined to die and take her with it as its final cruel act. The landed with a shudder on the ocean floor, silt kicking up around the minotaur's ankles as it braced itself. It pulled her down to its eyes level. Its free hand gripped her around her neck, squeezing until her face felt like it was about to burst. Her eyes bulged. Her lungs burned. She was helpless against the incredible strength of the beast which gripped her. Burning with uncontrollable rage she refused to submit. She stabbed her hand forwards the fingers pressed together. Her hand was small enough that she was able to fit it into the opening of one of the Minotaur's nostrils. She met resistance at the depth of her third knuckle but by gripping the hand that was strangling her she pulled herself closer. With a pop her hand disappeared past her wrist into the hot gooey nasal passage. Instinctively the minotaur pulled back away from his nasal assaulter, pushing her away as he ripped his head backwards. Bright lights flashed behind its eyes as it was struck on the top of its thick skull by an incredible blow. Hitch in all his armoured glory had struck like a hammer on his forge, splitting the skin and fracturing bone where he crashed into the beast. It flailed blindly its fingers failing to close on either of its attackers. Hitch wrapped his arm around the beast's neck pulling its head back and down. Its back arched as it fell backwards onto the ocean floor coming to land on top of Hitch.

"Run girl! Run!"

Hitch screamed in his mind as he tensed his arms with all his strength, determined to buy her enough time to make it to the surface even if it meant trading his life for hers. He did not care in that moment. He did not fear for himself. His daughter was in danger.

"I will be the anchor that binds you here..."

He said to himself as he desperately gripped onto the bucking form above him. The minotaur had made one of the most terrible mistakes anyone could make in Krynn and that was to underestimate how dangerous a dwarf could be.

"Hitch..."

She flashed in his vision for a moment, her hand outstretched reaching down for him.

"I need you..."

He saw her face now. Calm and serene. Her hair floated about her head as a halo. Sunlight streamed down from the surface of the water as though it was brightest day. Hitch knew he could not let himself die here. He knew something he had known since that first night she had appeared in the doorway of his forge.

"If she lives then I must live."

In his battle frenzied state he had forgotten about the dagger sheathed at his hip. Reaching down he felt the grip and pulled the blade free. Gripping the beast tightly around the throat he pressed the tip of the dagger to its ear before plunging it to the hilt in one swift motion. It bucked and spasmed thrashing free of his grip. He kicked himself out from underneath as it continued to roll away, nerves and synapses misfiring from the brutal intrusion of the steel blade. Kicking up more silt Hitch was forced to close his eyes, his knife point going under armoured plates to slice through the leather straps holding them in place. His lungs were burning as though a scorched cat was trying to scratch its way out. He fought against the desperate urge to open his mouth and breathe even though he knew only sea water would come rushing in.

Moving with a desperate frantic pace he cut himself in places as he sliced and sawed his way to freedom. With the last of the plates falling to the floor he bent his knees and pushed upwards, kicking his legs as he headed to a surface he could not see for the silt stinging his eyes, a vision of his adopted daughter appearing before him urging him on the only guidance he needed.

"BOOOAARGH!!"

Hitch's mouth snapped open the second his face broke the surface as he sucked air into his lungs. He wiped the water from his eyes as he continued to gulp down more air looking around.

"Quick help me get her onboard"

Hitch turned to see Turf and the others lifting Cielo onto the ship. His heart sank when he saw her limbs were limp. Grabbing great handfuls of water he pulled them back to himself frantically paddling towards the boat as he tried to call out to them. He could see the figures moving around on the ship, someone shouting instructions to get back and make room. His progress felt painfully slow as he got closer and closer. It wasn't until he was almost touching the sides that he was able to get their attention and was quickly hauled on board. He shoved the others out of the way and rushed over to Cielo. Turf looked up with red rimmed eyes his face cracking as he tried desperately to do anything to try and revive her. Her face was so pale, the long brown hair plastered across her forehead. Hitch scooped her up in his arms, cradling her as he had done when she was a mere toddler.

"You called to me..., You called to me... Wake up!"

He shook her limp body, her open eyes stared up blankly at the sky above them.

"No..no..no!"

He pressed his lips down hard on hers, blowing a lungful of air into her. He turned his head away for a second, drawing in another breathe before pressing his lips to hers again. The others stood around watching, unsure of what to do but desperate to see her come back to life. Hitch blew and blew, the tears running down his face until he began to feel light headed on the verge of collapse.

"Damn you Reorx!! Damn you to the Abyss! Give her back to meeeeeee!!!"

Hitch's voice broke as he threw his head back in a howling wail. He sat there rocking her back and forth, knowing that she was now gone. He looked down and closed her eyes, grimacing at the ugly purple welts around her neck from where the minotaur had strangled her. She had died fighting against such impossible odds, alone in that watery nightmare.

"It should have been me..."

He whispered to himself as he closed his eyes and pressed her close to his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. He did not hear the shout of alarm as the forces of the Dark Queen appeared on the harbour, the crowd pointing out to the small boat bobbing by itself. He did not feel the passage as they cut through the water, oars desperately pulled as the single sail was hauled to catch the wind. In that moment he did not care if death came for him. He would not have flinched if a dragon had appeared overhead and roasted him alive with it's fiery breathe. He would have gratefully turned his head to the sky as a smile cracked across his face knowing that he would have soon been reunited with his Cielo.

## Epilogue

Hitch parted company with the Pinehurst Companions after they had sailed up the Lockspring river and reunited with their families. Cielo had been buried at sea after a simple ceremony. The men had almost had to fight Hitch in order to retrieve her body. They had used their lone sail as a shroud. Placing her arms over an anchor they had laid upon her chest they had gently wrapped her body before laying her in the water and watching the white figure disappear beneath the calm ocean waters. Hitch had not spoken for the rest of the journey, simply taking his place by an oar and heaving with the others until they had made their way along the coast to the river mouth. Upon landing Turf had been the only person Hitch had allowed to approach him. Turf had told the dwarf how much Cielo had meant to him as well and that he had hoped that after everything they would have been husband and wife. The news had torn at Hitch anew, the idea of all that she would miss out causing him to break down and collapse into Turf's arms for a moment before he composed himself. Afterwards he had walked away from the group without another word, disappearing into the woods to never be seen by his unlikely allies again.

And so Hitch returned to his workshop hidden in the valley of the Godsfell Woods far from the eyes of men and beasts and took no more part in the conflict that would in time become known as the War of The Lance. The pivotal role he, Cielo and the "Pinehurst Companions" had played in tying up the resources of the Dark Queen's forces at Haltigoth would never be known. During the remaining years of the war the men had kept themselves and their families hidden as best they could, avoiding contact with the outside world. In the years that followed they seldom spoke of what they had done as every man and his dog had killed a Dragon Highlord personally if the tall tales told around camp fires and tavern hearths were to be believed. Such was the fog of war that for every man who becomes a part of folklore and legend, thousands more fight and die in relatively unknown obscurity.

Down the years as Hitch rebuilt his workshop and plied his trade again he often found himself thinking of his adopted human daughter. She never aged as he aged, perfectly preserved as she was in his memories. As the lines that age and toil had cut into his face grew deeper, as the silver of his hair whitened to snow still she remained in his mind in the full bloom of her youth. Sitting down one day he decided to make something of great delicacy and complexity, far removed from the arms and armour that were his stock in trade. Retrieving a small oiled leather roll of brass tools he set to work hammering and shaping. It had taken many weeks to finally complete having stopped and started over several times when things had not been perfect until finally it was ready. A small wooden box with engraved silver panels. Upon flicking the latch and raising the lid a simple tune would begin to play as a delicate golden figurine of a human girl began to turn in place, their arms out for balance at their sides much like a young woman had once done as she walked along the stone fence in the backyard of a smith's forge in the tiny town of Pinehurst so many years ago while a dwarf had ceased his labours to watch and marvel at her beauty and feel his heart grow warm as it did whenever his gaze fell upon her.

The End



