

The Mhun Mafia

Chapter 1: Initiation

The young Imp appeared apprehensive, anxiously rubbing his hands together while shifting his eyes back and forth. He glanced once over to his guide whom was humming cheerfully as he strolled along.

Upon noticing his companion's angst and without as much as a look in the Imp's direction, the Mhun jovially remarked, "Look, it ain't really that hard. There is almost no way for ya to screw this up, ey? Ya sneak in, ya scare off the pig, and ya get out. Easy as a 'Lochian whore.'" He gave a short pause after the last quip before adding with a snicker, "Which would be all of the females in 'Loch, I 'spose!"

The Imp frowned intensely. "T-that hardly sounds easy," he stammered in response.

Rolling his eyes, the Mhun thrust out his arm and stopped their movement abruptly. "Does ya want in or not?" he asked with a furrowed brow. The Imp nodded vigorously without hesitation. "Then this is what ya have to do," replied the Mhun as he crouched down near the dirt. Using his index finger, he drew an 'X' in the dirt. "This is us," he said. Forward and to the right of the 'X' he drew a square and marked it with a 'T'. "An this is where that dumb Troll is." Continuing, the Mhun drew two lines parallel and to the left of the box, and marked the other side with a 'P'. "Here is ya's target. His name is Mr. Frisky. He's gots a collar that says so," he continued, nodding matter-of-factly. "It's real easy, ya see. Go over this fence, give Mr. Frisky a swift smack on tha rear, and ya scamper back over the fence, run past Blaan's hut screamin' 'Mr. Frisky's gittin' away!' Unnerstand?" asked the Mhun.

The Imp stared blankly at him with his mouth slightly agape.

Sighing and shaking his head, the Mhun grabbed him by the arm and hurried them along. Within a few minutes they arrived at their destination. The pair ducked behind a shrubbery trimmed into the vague shape of a sheep, with the hut and the adjacent fence in view. The Mhun grabbed the Imp by his shirt so the diminutive adolescent was squared up with him. He reached out and smoothed the boy's clothing as if to make him more presentable. "Does ya have any questions?" he asked.

The Imp thought for a second. "You're sure this is what they want me to do to get in?" he asked.

The Mhun grinned toothily. "As sure as me name is Morion!" was his response. Without further hesitation, Morion whipped the Imp around a half-turn and gave him a brisk shove, causing him to stumble out into the open.

The Imp gulped nervously and proceeded with trepidation towards the fence. He cautiously wiggled between the two boards and made large, exaggerated steps on his tiptoes towards the swine in front of him. Pausing momentarily, he glanced back towards the shrubbery from where he came. Morion's head stuck out of the rear of the sheep shaped shrubbery, and he nodded vigorously with a grin of encouragement. Licking his dry lips, the Imp inhaled deeply and turned back towards the pig known as Mr. Frisky. He wasn't sure if it was just his mind, but it seemed as though Mr. Frisky had doubled in size

from just a few moments ago, prior to glancing backwards. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts to focus on the task at hand. The boy drew in one final breath and raised his hand high in the air, taking care to aim for the fleshiest part of the pig's rump. He brought his hand downwards with all the force he could muster.

Instantly Mr. Frisky's eyes opened and nearly bulged out of his head. The pig let loose a deafening squeal and leapt up onto its feet, and in the process managed to knock the Imp backward and onto the ground. Mr. Frisky whisked around in a blur to face his attacker. He fixated his gaze straight into the Imp's now terror filled eyes. Mr. Frisky scraped at the ground with his front hoof and lowered his head, letting out a single snort that furiously blew a disgusting wad of phlegm from his snout onto the Imp's face.

A horrifying battle shriek was the last warning the Imp had before Mr. Frisky lunged at him. The pig's head struck the Imp's chest with such force that shattered his sternum and sent multiple bone fragments into vital organs like hundreds of osseous fléchettes. The boy began to choke on his own blood, fluids permeating his shredded lungs. Mr. Frisky reached down and clamped his jaws around the Imp's head and powerfully clamped them shut, crushing the tiny head as if it were an overripe melon. Grey matter, blood, and skull fragments exploded outward, showering the nearby area in a gruesome spectacle. Satisfied with his revenge, Mr. Frisky turned and trotted away into the night.

Behind the nearby shrubbery, a certain Mhun was rolling on the ground laughing maniacally. He doubled over gripping his stomach as tears flowed freely down his face from his mirth. He managed to look up and see Blaan the Troll stick his head out of a hole cut into his hut to see what the commotion had been about. Morion could have sworn Blaan stared right at him, but the Mhun had phased himself out of the same space-time as his surroundings. He continued to relish in his most recent exploit for quite some time before managing to pick himself up off the ground and stagger back along the road he lead the poor Imp down to his eventual doom. Morion continued to wipe tears from his eyes and had to fight back fits of laughter to regain his breath as he tried to quicken his pace. 'What a tale this will make,' he thought with a grin that nearly spread beyond both of his ears.

Chapter 2: The Black Flagon Inn

"Raise the ante, seventy-two gold and three spare buttons," said the older Mhun as he shoved a pile of gold sovereigns with three wooden buttons on top into the center of the table. His face remained expressionless as his eyes darted to the other Mhuns seated at the table. He was dressed in a fine dark velvet tunic and a pair of loose-fitting trousers, both well tailored to his specific shape. Brushed brass buckles adorned his soft black suede slouch boots. While none at the table appeared to be wanting for anything, this particular Mhun stood out as one of greater importance than the other men.

The younger Mhun to his right ran his fingers once through the mess of his wild black hair. He narrowed his eyes slightly, assessing the pile of wealth in front of him. His eyes darted up towards the older Mhun's face in an attempt to glean any useable information. There was none. "Make it ninety-six gold sovereigns, five buttons and some pocket lint," he replied, adding his treasure to the growing pile before taking a puff from an oversized cigar.

Next to him a female Mhun nibbled thoughtfully on her lower lip. She was dressed in a luxurious brocade corset with a flowing silk skirt. A pair of functional yet stylish silk slippers adorned her feet. A quick, instinctual flick of her head tossed a few of her luscious brown locks out of her face, her hand following soon thereafter to tuck the hair behind her ear. She smiled softly and nodded once, adding her ante to the pot.

The youngest of the four furrowed his brow intensely and stood up from the table, but not before knocking his cup off the oaken boards. Three dice clattered across the floor as he angrily dismissed himself from the game.

“Demarcus, dearest, there is no need to get upset, it’s just a game!” teased the female.

“Maybe to you, Mother, but you never seem to lose!” huffed Demarcus as he stomped off to the kitchen.

“While you’re in there, would you be so kind as to do a few of the dishes?” called out his mother playfully.

“Kerryn, why you tolerate that kind of disrespect from your son is beyond me,” said the man to her left dismissively.

“Well Haven, perhaps if *our* son had a father figure to look up to and to provide discipline he might act more like the young man you would prefer to be playing dice with,” chided Kerryn.

“What do you mean ‘if’ he had a father figure, I’m sitting right here!” exclaimed Haven in response.

“That is precisely the problem, dear Havers. There should have been a lot less sitting and a lot more role modeling and fathering for Demarcus,” responded Kerryn quickly.

The older Mhun grunted once, “Once you two figure out your parenting problems, I don’t suppose you might actually want to play this round, would you?”

Kerryn sighed and tipped her cup of dice over onto the table, lifting it slightly to peek at the results. “Of course, Lexen,” she replied, “four twos.”

Haven puffed twice on his cigar, casually blowing two smoke rings towards Kerryn’s face. She wrinkled her nose and swiped a hand through the rings causing them to disperse. “Liar,” he said.

A smirk crossed Kerryn’s lips as she shook her head, revealing her dice: four twos and a six. Haven grumbled and picked a die out of his cup and tossed it onto the floor with the dice Demarcus had tossed across the room. This drew an immediate frown from Kerryn. Clearly finding her reaction amusing, Haven could hardly contain an outburst of laughter. He managed to settle himself down quickly, and tipped his cup lazily. Squinting, he peeked at his hand and proclaimed, “One one!”

Lexen did not appear impressed. He tipped over his cup and without even looking at his dice claimed, “Two twos.”

Kerryn nodded, scooping her dice up and repeating the rolling process. She glanced at her dice and again said, "Four twos."

Haven's mirth immediately disappeared from his face. Glaring at Kerryn, he replied sternly, "Liar."

Kerryn shook her head for the second time, revealing her hand containing four twos and a one. A look in intensity overcame Haven's face as he slid one die out from under his cup and off to the side of the table and out of play. All three scooped up their dice and tipped them over. Haven glanced under his and said gruffly, "Four sixes."

The faintest of sneers passed over Lexen's face. "You are most certainly lying brother and very poorly at that."

Haven stood up from the table abruptly and struck his dice cup with his hand, sending the cup and the three dice remaining under it skittering across the room. He turned around sharply and stomped off out the door muttering about the need to set something on fire.

Kerryn giggled happily and began to carefully divide the pot between herself and Lexen. "It's almost too easy, as if he were trying to give his money away."

Lexen shook his head, "Sadly, no. He genuinely believes he can and is going to win."

Just then, Demarcus returned from the kitchen with a large plate with several bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches piled atop it with another quarter of a sandwich in his other hand, the edges containing the distinct imprint of a bite mark.

"Ah, that's a good lad, bringing your uncle and your mother a sandwich," said Lexen with a genuine smile.

Demarcus stopped cold in his tracks, blinking a few times. Doing his best to contain the crumbs within his mouth he said in a muffled tone, "Oh, did you want some too? I can make more."

Kerryn chuckled softly and waved her hand dismissively. "That's fine dear, Uncle Lexen can fetch his own sandwich if he so wishes." This drew a disdainful glance from Lexen, to which Kerryn replied with a look that that would likely kill a weaker willed person.

"Right, I can get my own," grumbled Lexen discontentedly. He pocketed his share of the take and lifted himself out of his chair, meandering off towards the kitchen.

A loud "BOO!" coming from the direction of the kitchen followed by girlish giggling cause Demarcus to jump slightly, forcing him to steady his plate of sandwiches to prevent them from falling. Kerryn merely looked over towards the kitchen, catching a glimpse of a small girl squealing as Lexen reached out towards her with hands poised to tickle. She took off in a tear out of the kitchen yelling, "I got you, Unca Lexen! I got you!" giggling all the meanwhile.

The girl ran about the inn, circling a few tables and chairs in an attempt to lose her pursuers. As she ran past the door, a long pale hand caught her by the throat and her eyes went wide with fear. In the

doorway stood an ominous figure dressed in garments made from the finest materials. Ambient light from the inn danced and glimmered off of precious metals and stones throughout the figure's wardrobe. With the child firmly in his grasp, the figure entered the inn fully. His eyes were slightly sunken and his skin was extremely pale. An unnatural preservation permeated the man's features.

Kerryn leapt to her feet and proclaimed, "Gwen!" with a gasp.

A loud clatter quickly followed as Demarcus' plate of sandwiches fell to the floor.

From behind the man two additional strangers emerged, both donned in deeply hooded cloaks made of exquisite black damask. "Don Cardinalis." the man said callously.

"Duke Ezalor. Or is it Marquis? Does it even really matter when you're a royal piece of filth?" Kerryn replied coldly.

"Tsk tsk." Ezalor replied, lifting Gwen off the ground single handedly. The child coughed and sputtered as the weight of her own body chokes the air from her throat. Ezalor looked at her, feigning curiosity and interest.

"Put her down. Now." Kerryn ordered, her fists clenched at her side.

"No. I think we'll see how long she can hold her breath." said Ezalor with a wicked smile.

Kerryn began to draw back into the Scorpion stance, drawing a wagging finger from Ezalor. "Oh no, I wouldn't do that. You might frighten me to squeeze a little too hard. We wouldn't want me to snap her neck," sneered Ezalor in response. Kerryn relaxed out of her martial stance, her fists still clenched.

"I've come to see if you're ready to return to our ranks and leave your sad little band of misfits behind," stated Ezalor, his gaze fixated on Kerryn. Gwen's little arms flailed about as she tried to grab at the hand choking her.

"No, I think I quite like my misfits thank you very much. Besides, I'd miss the sun too much," responded Kerryn quickly.

"Hrm. A pity," replied Ezalor. "You know, if we turned your daughter here, it would be impossible for me to asphyxiate her." Gwen's eyes started to roll up into the back of her head as her movements slowed.

Shaking her head with a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh, Kerryn said, "It takes someone with a lot of backbone to strangle a little girl..."

Enraged, Ezalor hissed, "It takes someone with any backbone at all to even try and stop him," his fingers digging deeper into Gwen's throat as he tightened his grip.

Without warning, a snarling voice from behind him quipped, "I like backbones. Let's compare yours." The hulking form of a fierce Atabahi appeared behind Ezalor. A single deft swipe of its powerful paw connected solidly with Ezalor's back, separating his spine from the rest of his body. Gwen immediately slumped to the floor as Ezalor's body disintegrated into a fine grey mist that rushed out of the room.

The two cloaked figures turn around in time to see the massive Atabahi towering over them at over nine feet tall. Pink froth covered the spine it held in its hand. Its wolf-like face bared its razor-sharp canines with a guttural growl before letting loose and ear-shattering howl causing the two figures to grab at their ears.

With lightning fast reflexes, Kerryn sprung from where she stood into a flying jump kick, knocking one of the figures skillfully to the floor. In one fluid motion, she lifted the figure up and dropped them down with significant force onto her knee resulting in a nauseating crack from the fractured spine. The figure slumped momentarily before disintegrating into the fine grey mist.

Kerryn immediately jumped up and lunged at the second figure that appeared frozen in place, unable to comprehend what had just unfolded before his eyes. Kerryn's lithe, curvaceous figure stretched out mid leap and her arms extended out. Mottled white and grey fur sprung up to cover her frame and her nose and mouth merged and elongated into a snout. Her ears rotated up towards the top of her head and were laid back as she attacked. A puffy tail jut out of her spine as the transformation completed itself just as she connected with the figure, knocking him to the ground. Kerryn's jaws opened wide and clenched down on the figure's throat causing blood to spray everywhere. The figure lasted mere moments before he too disintegrated into a fine mist.

Kerryn's ears twitched up as she sniffed the air, assessing for any additional threats. Satisfied the danger was over, she padded up towards the massive Atabahi in the doorway and nuzzled him affectionately. Together their shapes collapsed down into their normal Mhun shapes, the mystery Atabahi being revealed as Lexen.

"Thank you, Lexen," said Kerryn softly as she picked up Gwen in her arms.

Lexen nodded silently. He turned his attention to Demarcus and said, "So what's your excuse for making your mother do all of the work, lad?"

Demarcus blinked and shook his head a few times as if he was unsure of what he just saw. "I have no excuse, Uncle. But maybe if I were a member of the pack I would have been in a better position to contribute to the fight," he replied disdainfully.

"A place in the pack is something that is earned, not a privilege. I don't care if you're Kerryn's son, you have yet to earn your place amongst us," said Lexen sharply.

Demarcus frowned at the response. He reached his arms out to take Gwen from Kerryn and immediately began to whisper soothing words of healing over her. Her shallow breathing rapidly normalized and the marks on her neck disappeared. "I'll take her up stairs to rest," said Demarcus quietly as he turned and climbed the steps, disappearing around the corner.

Kerryn sighed and slumped down into a chair. Lexen immediately followed her lead, seating himself to her right.

No sooner had the pair sat down, the door burst open and a small Mhun scurried into the inn. "Don Cardinalis! Don Cardinalis!" yelled Morion, his arms waving frantically.

Kerryn and Lexen both leapt out of their chairs and faced the door, Kerryn drawing back into a Scorpion stance and a spiritual mace materializing in Lexen's hand. Both immediately relaxed upon recognizing Morion.

Panting, Morion ran up to them and skidded to an abrupt halt. Gesticulating wildly, he practically shouted at them, "Don Cardinalis! Dat Ezalor guy is comin' and he gots two goons wit 'im!" Having delivered his message, Morion collapsed into a chair and grasped at his chest trying to catch his breath.

"We know, Morion. They've come and gone," replied Lexen tersely.

Looking slightly annoyed, Morion responded with a short, "Oh."

Kerryn glanced down at Morion and adopted a focused look. "Morion, I have a message for you to deliver to the other families," she said finally. Still short of breath he looked up at her. "Tell them that I am requesting their presences here at the next Howling. Make it clear that those who do not show up will risk falling out of favor with me," Kerryn said brusquely. She immediately turned on her heel and briskly walked off towards the rear of the inn.

Chapter 3: Conference of Families

As morning turned to afternoon the members of the other families began to arrive at the Black Flagon Inn. At the door to the inn was one of Kerryn's enforcers dressed as a beggar, heckling those passerby's and watching out for danger. Phased behind him were two Syssin, keeping tabs on any attempted spying on the sudden meeting by opposing factions. Dark grey clouds have amassed overhead and a light mist dampens everything.

The central room of the Black Flagon Inn brimmed with bodies and activity. Flagons of ale are downed alongside plates of lamb, pheasant, and fish. Despite the perceived mirth, an overwhelming tension permeated the atmosphere. Uneasy hands rested on the hilts of daggers and staves.

Kerryn descended down the staircase dressed in a watered silk gown of sapphire blue accented by golden embroidery along the hem and waist. A deep green velvet bodice laced down the front with golden silk ribbons ending in tidy bow completes the garment. On her feet are a pair of thin-soled dark green velvet slippers with spiraling golden ribbons tied up along the ankle, matching the bodice of the gown perfectly. On the second step from the bottom, she extended her arms out in an invitation to her guests, the billowing sleeves of her gown appearing like wings as she does. "My friends, welcome. If you would be so kind as to join me in the parlor and we shall begin." Dropping her arms, Kerryn finishes her descent and gracefully strides into the parlor.

Hesitantly, several patrons rose from their seats and began to make their way back towards the parlor. Lexen's voice resounded throughout the inn, "Bosses only. Don Cardinalis' orders." A few curt nods and uneasy grumbling later, only a handful of participants continued their way to the meeting.

The flames of various candles around the parlor flickered and danced, casting playful shadows along the walls as the bosses filed in. Kerryn stood at the entrance, greeting each personally and commenting on an article of clothing, a recent accomplishment, or inquiring about a family member.

Each boss took their seat at the round table that had been set up in the middle of the room. Bowls of luscious fresh fruit, trays of magnificent candies, and decanters of the finest wines littered the table. Kerryn took her place at the last remaining seat and allowed those around her to fill their glasses and plates before the meeting began.

“I thank you all for joining me here on such short notice,” Kerryn began. “As we have suspected for quite some time, the Bloodborn have been increasing their activity in recruiting and are growing in strength. My spies inside of Bloodloch tell me that they are planning to strike soon at many of our operations if we do not submit.”

This revelation drew murmurs from the group and quiet dialogue was exchanged by several. Kerryn continued, “I am told their first target is Boss Erzsebet’s flower smuggling business into Bloodloch.” A small, winged Atavian woman with twigs tangled in her hair gasped. Kerryn nodded solemnly. “Furthermore, they have grown openly hostile towards us, one being so bold as to come to this very inn and attack my children. I’m offering a bounty of a thousand gold sovereigns for every severed head, and ten thousand for each subdued prisoner brought to me,” Kerryn finished with a sinister smile.

The side conversations grew louder and more intense. Boss Akilesio smashed his fist into the table and stood up, vehemently exclaiming, “What right do you have to spread these lies? My sources have told me nothing of these attacks. I can’t help but feel you are jealous that I’ve been able to come to a mutual understanding with the Bloodborn that has resulting in great prosperity!”

Kerryn just smirked at the pudgy Grecht with his greasy slicked back hair. “Of course, my spies also told me there was a recently turned boss in our midst. I thought flushing you out would have been more of a satisfying challenge. This will have to do, I suppose.” A look of focused concentration crossed Kerryn’s face, directed straight at Akilesio. Abruptly, his head exploded into a million pieces, each disintegrating into a grey mist. The rest of the overweight corpse fell to the ground and it too vaporized before everyone’s very eyes. The mist coalesced and rushed out of the room.

Lexen received a nod and quietly stepped away from his post just inside the parlor entrance. A short scuffle and a few muffled screams could be heard from the main room. Casually lifting a glass of red wine to her lips, Kerryn took a sip and smiled at the remaining bosses. “I do apologize for bringing you all here and exposing you too that, but it was a pressing matter that, I’m sure you would all agree, had to be dealt with,” Kerryn said to many nodding heads.

“I have devised a plan to counter-attack the ambush the Bloodborns are planning. Erzsebet, two of my Syssin will accompany your smugglers enroute to Bloodloch. I’m told the Bloodborn plan to jump the flower carts as they pass by the stables. My Syssin will quickly abduct your flower smugglers and travel through a nearby wormhole we have set up for their escape. Meanwhile, in place of your daisies and petunias will be several oversized carnivorous plants that will happily munch on the local’s decaying flesh. Have your Sentinels place traps to infuse the plants with rampant growth when they are uncovered by the would-be ambushers. The infestation will be so overwhelming, the Bloodlochians will have no choice but to firebomb that section of the city or risk losing even greater numbers to our trap,” explain Kerryn carefully.

At the conclusion of Kerryn's plan, Haven poked his head through the parlor's entrance. "Did someone say they needed something firebombed?" he asked with one hand engulfed in flames. Kerryn shook her head saying, "No, Haven. I have plans for your pyromaniac tendencies later." He extinguished his hand with a sight and slumped out of the parlor dejectedly.

Taking another sip of wine after delicately eating a grape, Kerryn asked, "Are there any questions? Additional instructions will come in their standard form – magically sealed letter delivered by a pigeon in a tuxedo. Anything else and presume it is a fraud."

Each boss shook their head and rose from their chairs. They rotated around the table and took turns paying respect to Kerryn and thanking her for her hospitality. Slowly the bosses gathered their capos and enforcers and made their way out of the inn. Kerryn emerged from the parlor and sighed, leaning up against the archway. Lexen followed her holding a glass of wine and offered it to Kerryn. Nodding she accepted the wine and took a long drink. Shaking her head she turned to Lexen, "That idiot Akileso. He's always been as stupid as he is fat. I'm surprised the Bloodborn lowered their standards and turned him."

Lexen offered a nod of affirmation. "Now that his usefulness has come to an end, I don't see things going too well for him. Spinesreach might offer haven for a short while..."

"... Only as long as it takes for me to deal with these Bloodborn scum," finished Kerryn.

Chapter 4: Am'bush'ery

The two Atavians cautiously pushed their carts down the perilous path. Each was wearing a tattered burlap potato sack haphazardly sewn into a misshapen cloak. Their wings were kept folded tightly against their backs to not distort their figures too significantly. Around their necks were amulets imbued with illusionary magic that hid them from the discerning eyes that lay ahead. Mausoleums and crypts of varying sizes and stages of decay lined their path as they made their way through the caverns beneath Bloodloch. An occasional withered plant was seen where a seed had unfortunately fallen from the likes of some previous passerby.

Although they could not see them, Morion and another Syssin matched the two Atavians step for step. Morion was alternating between skipping around his assigned cart as fast as he could and singing a nonsensical song at the top of his lungs – much to the dismay of his counterpart. The other Syssin was doing all he could to contain his seething anger and strangling Morion. Deep below Bloodloch there would be no witnesses, and given the risks of the operation it would be conceivable that something could go awry with their escape and Morion might not make it out. Unfortunately that would leave the second poor Atavian without a way out, and she would surely be subject to untold horrors and torture after being captured.

The smugglers quickly reached their destination. A tangle of cobwebs and dead tree roots obscured the entrance into a back alley along the outskirts of Bloodloch. The carefully pushed their carts through and waited for the two Syssin to briefly reveal themselves before re-phasing to confirm they too had made it this far. The pair looked at one another and nodded silently, each taking a deep breath before venturing out onto the streets in the city of the damned.

Carefully recalling the directions for their intended route, the lead Atavian navigated his way through masses of ghouls, ghastrs, golems and vampires. They passed clothing shops where the most modest article of clothing was something the brothels along the Prelatorian Highway would consider too revealing and risqué. Each citizen they passed seemed to progressively be wearing less and less clothing. Lewd acts were initiated on street corners by obvious strangers without a care for whom might see them.

Morion, of course, could barely contain his excitement. He had been spying in Bloodloch many times before and would always return with truthful tales of debauchery so outlandish he'd been called a liar and even charged in the city of Durian with theft of innocence, imaginative terrorism, and several lesser charges. He narrowly escaped the guards and hasn't been back since. He stood and stared at three vampires for so long he nearly lost sight of the smugglers and hurried to catch up to them.

The city stables soon materialized ahead of them and the Atavians quickened their pace. They were anxious to depart Bloodloch by any means necessary. As they neared the stables, several figures appeared on the roofs of nearby buildings. Both did their best to pay no attention to them and pressed on down the road.

The lead smuggler figured he had ten steps before he was in front of the stables. He dropped his hand from the handle of the cart and gave the signal. Ten... nine... eight... he noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. Seven... six... five... shadows appeared suddenly to his left and right. Four... three... two... a bitterly cold wind descended upon him as the figures from the roofs plummeted down aiming at him. Just as his foot hit the final step, he pulled as hard as he could on a cord attached to the canvas covering the cart. As he did, he felt the warmth of an arm wrap around his neck and collarbone and pull him backwards. The space-time around him distorted briefly and turned around to see a grinning Morion.

“Good werk dere! Quick, to tha hole!” Morion exclaimed, pointing to a black disc ahead of them. He didn't need to be told twice. The two smugglers made their way hastily towards the wormhole and they looked back just in time to see their carnivorous plants spring up out of their carts and deftly eat one of the oncoming attackers right out of the air. They lunged through the wormhole and tumbled out onto the floor of the Black Flagon Inn, quickly followed by Morion and the other Syssin. Morion took out a strange vibrating stick and jammed it into the center of the wormhole and began to twirl it around. The portal collapsed quickly upon itself and the group returned into phase with normal space-time. Kerryn stood by with her arms folded across her chest and a smile on her face.

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Tozzen could hardly believe the sudden reversal of fortune. His eight assassins were reduced to three before they could even land, and without so much as an opportunity to smash the two green menaces they had multiplied several times over. Thorny vines sprawled throughout the streets and began penetrating nearby buildings. Citizens unfortunate enough to be caught in the wild growth were immediately devoured and a new plant took their place, barely pausing before continuing the hunt for a new victim.

A few screams echoed around the quadrant as hundreds of half and completely naked vampires took to the limited airspace above the city. Realizing the potential of this newfound dimension, they

resumed their wanton self-indulgence with renewed vigor, promptly forgetting the danger that was growing out of control below them.

Tozzen clenched his halberd tightly and hovered in the tight space above the unhindered carnage below and the carnal festivities above. From his vantage point, the plants were multiplying at a terrifying and increasing rate. He made the command decision and pulled from his pouch several flares. He lit them one by one and tossed them into the overgrowth below. The flames took to the plants and rapidly spread outwards. The flames burned intensely, scorching several city blocks and reducing many buildings to burnt rubble.

The fearsome vampire shook his head in disbelief. The fire quickly burned itself out and Tozzen landed amongst the ashes. He examined what was left of the carts and curiously tucked in the spokes of one of the wheels was a single, pristine rose. Tozzen grabbed the rose and clenched it between his fist, crushing the delicate petals into oblivion. Someone had tipped the Mhun Mafia off to the attack. There was no telling what else might be compromised. He turned sharply and hastily made his way off into the city to report his failure to the Overlord.

Chapter 5: Reject-Shun and Retaliation

Demarcus lifted the tankard up to his mouth and took a long draught of the pitch black stout sending a gush of the cool, creamy liquid down his gullet. He set the tankard down with perhaps more force than was necessary, causing some of it to leap out of the tall mug and onto the bar table. Using the back of his hand, Demarcus wiped the head from his upper lip and began to survey the crowd.

All manner of people congregated throughout the tavern. On one end of the long oak bar stood a taller than average winged Atavian. Her wing plumage had been fancifully dyed fiery reds, bright yellows, and burnt oranges in an overlapping pattern giving the very realistic appearance of flames. Countless gem chips were scattered throughout the feathers adding additional refractory properties to the illusion. A low-cut, deep black lace corset is laced tightly around her diminutive figure, leaving little to the imagination. A small pleated black cotton skirt barely covers what it is supposed to. Black spiked stilettos complete the ensemble.

A more modestly dressed Mhun woman stood several places down from the Atavian. Several empty wine glasses sat in front of her and another was nestled in her hand. She was dressed in a red silk dress with quarter-length sleeves and a knee-length skirt. The garment was simple in design, but gave onlookers an enticing preview of what was beneath it.

To the other side of the bar was a sleek black Rajamala. Shiny black fur covered her from head to toe. Two cat-like ears protruded from her head. Her mane was cut short, and combined with her long, undulating tail she distinctly resembled a panther. A simple, short deerskin sarong was wrapped around her waist and an equally basic deerskin halter top covered parts of her torso.

Demarcus deliberated upon his choices. The exotic Rajamala would probably be a bit out of his league and certainly an ambitious mark. The Mhun's relative modesty suggested she probably was able to be very picky about her companions. On the other hand, the Atavian's wardrobe suggested a certain

degree of desperation. Either that or she was so far above him that any attempt would probably be an embarrassing rejection.

“Go big or go home,” Demarcus muttered to himself as he finished off his stout and made his way through the crowd to the Atavian.

As he approached her refined features were even more alluring than Demarcus had previously assessed. She had flawless tanned skin and glossy reddish hair tied back in a ponytail. As he approached, she fluttered her wings briefly, sending the smoke from the thin white cigarette in her hand away from her location.

“Hi there, I couldn’t help but notice…” Demarcus started before he was abruptly cut off.

“Spare me the stupid story boy. I’m not interested in drinks, I’m not interested in dinner, and I’m sure as hell not interested in anything you have to offer,” she replied sharply.

Demarcus leaned back slightly as if he had been hit with an unforeseen blow. He blinked a few times. “But you don’t even know…” he protested before again being interrupted.

“Are you deaf, dumb, or both? Go away,” she sneered, elegantly taking a drag from her cigarette and quickly blowing the smoke into Demarcus’ face.

His face reddening with anger, Demarcus began to stammer, “You d-don’t hav…”

Not even seeing it coming, the Atavian woman backhanded Demarcus across the face with a sharp crack. “You’re right, I don’t have to deal with you. You’re lucky I don’t have you killed little boy. You won’t ever get inside my corset, now piss off,” hissed the Atavian with an annoyed tone.

Demarcus rubbed his jaw, “Is that so? I’ll never get inside your corset?”

“Are you a parrot now?” jeered the woman.

Demarcus squinted at her and nodded once at her. “We’ll see,” he said. The Atavian began to laugh at him in response. Demarcus turned to make his way to the exit and suddenly noticed that his interaction had drawn the interest of the rest of the now silent tavern. He paused for a moment to think, and turned again to face the Atavian. She opened her mouth to say something in response and before any words could escape Demarcus reached up and grabbed her corset by the top under her arms and yanked with all of his might. As he suspected, the lacing wasn’t secured very well to allow for the quick removal, and Demarcus had done just that.

He stood there and looked at the corset in his hands with an expression of shock on his face. His shock paled in comparison to the stunned look on the Atavian’s face. She now stood exposed in front of all of the tavern’s patrons. Demarcus shrugged and turned towards the door. The onlookers parted and made a path for him, most still staring at the winged woman’s chest. When she finally recovered from the surprise undressing, she wrapped her wings around herself protectively and quietly made her way out the back.

Demarcus looked up into the heavens as he started the long, lonely walk back to the Black Flagon Inn. He never understood how his father and uncle both had immaculate track records when it came to women. They would often challenge one another to see who could bed a particular female first. The once tried to see who could deflower the other's daughters first. It ended up being a tie. The two men had fought alongside one another long ago as Infernal Knights, and there had forged a bond of brotherhood that ran deeper than blood. It also allowed for such activities to take place without it being incest.

As he thought about his perfect record of failures, tears began to well up in his eyes. He snuffled softly and wiped them away with his sleeve and did the best he could to fight them off. Demarcus was sure the only girls that would ever love him would be his mother, his sister, and his aunt Roux. He was tired of the merciless teasing he suffered at the hands of his father and uncle. The pressure the applied for him to successfully bed a girl was getting to be unbearable. He bunched the corset up in his hands and quickened his pace down the Raphaelan Highway towards Delos and his mother's inn.

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Inside the Black Flagon, Haven and Lexen were seated at a table covered in food. At the center was an entire roasted pig with the standard apple in its mouth. Cheeses, breads, fresh fruits and vegetables were so numerous they left little room for the drinks and plates. Together they feasted and laughed raucously as they shared stories of their past triumphs.

Demarcus quietly entered through the front door and tried to silently slip upstairs without being noticed. He forgot the bottom step creaked when weight was unevenly distributed on the side closest to the entrance of the inn. A wince crossed his face as he heard his father call out to him, "Demarcus m'boy! Come join yer uncle and I!" Sighing he turned around and headed towards the table.

As he approached the two men grew silent and stared at the article of clothing bunched up in his hand. "Er, I forbid you to give that to Gwen to wear, and I know it isn't for yourself, so how did you come by that delightful bit of lace, boy?" asked Lexen curiously.

Haven's eyes grew wide and he puffed his chest out proudly, "It's a trophy, isn't it!" he exclaimed.

Demarcus shook his head and tossed the corset onto the table. It landed on the back of the pig in such a way that a quick glance might cause one to think the pig was wearing it. "No, Father. Not that kind of trophy, at least," Demarcus replied sadly.

With clear confusion in his voice Haven asked, "What do you mean, m'boy?"

Demarcus stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers, looked down at his feet and shrugged. "A girl said I would never get in her corset. I proved her wrong."

"Demarcus!" cried Kerry from the archway to the parlor.

Sighing heavily he replied, "Yes Mother, I know."

"Apparently not young man, this Family does not permit barbaric acts," she replied sternly.

Haven stood up and held out his palms towards Kerryn. “Now now, Kerr Kerr, let’s hear what th’ boy has to say.”

Demarcus shrugged again and told his tale, “I was just down the highway at the Leaping Flame Tavern having a drink and noticed a few pretty ladies. I thought I would ask one of them if they wanted to share a drink with me. I guess I picked the completely wrong one because she rudely dismissed me before I could even ask her. She even backhanded me as I persisted to even get a single sentence in. And she suggested I would never get in her corset. So I proved her wrong and now have free access to her corset forever.”

Haven’s grin grew wider until he could hardly contain himself and burst into applause at the conclusion of the story. “That’s the next best thing, m’boy!” he exclaimed proudly.

Kerryn stared daggers at Haven. Without even looking at Demarcus she unfolded her arms and pointed upstairs and ordered, “Go.” There was no question of who it was directed at.

Demarcus trudged up the stairs dejectedly. Once he was out of sight, Kerryn stomped up to Haven wielding a cast iron cooking pot that had previously been attached to a belt loop. She swung the pot at Haven’s head and connected with his temple, knocking him out cold. Turning to Lexen she said, “He sleeps in the stable tonight.” Deftly she turned and headed to the kitchen.

Lexen muttered a curse under his breath and lifted Haven’s limp body up over his shoulder and hauled the unconscious man out to the stable where he unceremoniously dropped Haven in a pile of hay. Lexen briefly dusted his hands off on one another and left the stable. Midway between the inn and stable he stopped and sniffed at the air. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He rushed into the inn and found the front entrance wide open and on the center of a bar table laid the roughed up corpse of a pigeon in a tattered tuxedo.

Kerryn emerged from the kitchen, glanced at Lexen and then to the pigeon. With a puzzled look on his face, Lexen asked, “What does it mean?”

“Erzsebet now rests six feet under, and we go to war,” she replied calmly, retreating once again into the kitchen.

Chapter 6: One-Two Punch

“Unca Lexen! Unca Lexen!” Gwen exclaimed as she tugged on Lexen’s pants.

Lexen knelt down and whispered into Gwen’s ear. Her eyes began to sparkle with amusement. Nodding vigorously, she giggled and skipped through the inn and up the stairs.

“But Mother, I don’t understand WHY I can’t go,” protested Demarcus.

“Because the fighting will likely be in very close quarters. You aren’t versed in that type of combat dear,” replied Kerryn patiently.

“I’m pretty good with my shield, Mother. What type of combat skills do I need to be able to go?” Demarcus asked.

“Tekura.” was Kerryn’s response.

Demarcus frowned. He knew how to wield several weapons, but martial arts was not something his father or uncle had bothered to teach him. “Uncle Lexen, show me Tekura,” Demarcus said with defiance.

Without hesitation, Lexen dropped low onto one foot and swept his other leg around at Demarcus’ knees. He connected solidly and knocked Demarcus flat onto his back. Before Demarcus even hit the floor, Lexen had sprung back into a standing position. “That,” he replied with an emphatic pause, “is Tekura.”

Grumbling as he sat up, Demarcus rubbed his back slightly, “That is not what I meant, Uncle Lexen.”

Resuming going over his gear Lexen replied, “Be more clear in what you request, then.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, a giggle escaped from Kerryn in response to the exchange. She coughed and cleared her throat in an attempt to cover it up, resuming inspecting her brass knuckles and other equipment.

Haven walked in from the kitchen with a sandwich in hand. Demarcus turned to him as he entered and pleaded his case, “Father, you’ll let me come along, right?”

“Hell no!” replied Haven with a mouth full of bread and roast beef.

“What? Why not!” cried Demarcus.

“You could barely hold your own against a whore. There’s going to be dozens if not hundreds of whores!” said Haven with a chuckle. His response drew snickers from Lexen and Kerryn both.

In a fit of rage, Demarcus brought his foot down upon an unsuspecting chair in an attempted axe kick. The chair broke in several places and crumpled into a pile of kindling. He then stormed off up the staircase and a loud door slam could be heard from above them.

“Eh, he’ll get over it,” said Haven with a shrug.

“None of the other families are sending help?” asked Lexen.

“Apparently they’re afraid they’ll end up like Erzsebet if they act with us against the Bloodborn,” she replied.

Haven nodded and finished his sandwich. “That’s fine by me, more bounty money!”

Kerryn rolled her eyes at him. “You’re lucky I’m letting you come along. Besides, I’m sure I could easily find more entertaining ways to throw away a fortune than watch you gamble.” She nodded in

conclusion and started out the door. Lexen and Haven followed her and the trio disappeared into the night.

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In a staggered single file line they swiftly and silently made their way down the Praetorian Highway. As they approached the archway to Minia, Kerryn held up her hand indicating an order to halt. Lexen and Haven slung themselves up into the branches of trees just along the roadside and waited.

Kerryn stealthily crept forward, taking care to not reveal her position. She wore a hooded black robe over a tight fitting sleeveless black shirt. A simple cloth belt was slung low across her hip and rested against the loose fitting black gi pants. Her feet were protected by basic black cloth foot wraps. Nearly invisible in the night she approached the archway. The shadows of three figures were cast against the dense tree line opposite of her approach by a small campfire.

“Look, I already told you I don’t have that much money!” a voice said.

“How the hell do you pay for so many damn butterflies then?” asked a different voice gruffly.

“I’m just the middle man! You have to believe me!” the first voice said with an obvious tremble.

Kerryn finally made enough headway to view the scene unfold before her. Vellis the butterfly collector who has been paying top sovereign for live specimens of butterflies for centuries at the entrance to Minia was tied up and hanging upside down in the archway. While she could only see the backs of their heads, Kerryn could only assume by their idiot scheme and unfashionable uniforms the two must be henchmen of Tozzen.

“Listen here old man, I’m going to start squishing these little bugs one by one until you tell us where the gold is. Got it?” sneered one of the vampires.

“P-please don’t hurt them, I’ll get you some money, just leave the butterflies alone!” pleaded Vellis.

The smaller vampire of the two held up an extremely rare exquisite summerstorm butterfly between his fingers. “Not some, we want all of it.”

“Yes, y-yes, all of it, of course. Just let her go, please?” pleaded Vellis.

“So now you’re going to deny me of some fun?” snarled the vampire. After setting the butterfly down into the palm of his hand, the vampire raised the other hand above his head. With a wicked grin his hand began to descend down upon the unsuspecting butterfly.

An inch above the tip of the butterfly’s wings his hand abruptly stopped. Kerryn’s hand darted out from behind him and grabbed his wrist, stopping the vampire’s palm from collapsing down upon the bug. With a deft flick she snapped the bones in his wrist and twisted his arm behind his back and wrenched upwards. A sickening crunch accompanied the compound fractures piercing the pale flesh that once contained the bone.

Crouching low she swept the vampire's legs out from underneath him and he fell to the ground, writhing in agony. Kerryn effortlessly shifted her weight and reversed her sweep, connecting with the kneecap of the second vampire. The bone shattered and the vampire toppled over as his leg bent backwards in ways it was simply not designed to.

She leapt to her feet and pulled a bundle of rope from a small knapsack. She unfurled the rope in one fluid motion and tied the two vampires together back-to-back in a sitting position. For good measure, Kerryn brought her foot down hard on the knee of the first vampire and deftly broke it to ensure no attempt to get free would be successful.

Kerryn turned to Vellis but was surprised to find him standing upright and untied with the rope that had held him suspended in mid-air coiled unceremoniously in a pile next to him. She raised an eyebrow questioningly as Lexen and Haven emerged from behind the arch, each shrugging.

"What, I was afraid his head might explode with all that blood rushing to it," said Haven nonchalantly.

Dusting himself off, Vellis replied, "Oh yes, thank you very much for that, I was afraid I was in very big trouble!"

Kerryn nodded to the old man. She spun to face the vampires and squatted down to look one in the eye. "Tozzen sent you?" she asked.

The vampire snarled at her and bared his fangs, "I'm not telling you anything, wench!"

Kerryn instantaneously brought her palms together in a precise strike on both sides of the vampire's head, destroying all structure and support for the creature's jaw. It slumped and hung loosely by strained flesh desperately trying to keep it attached. "No, I don't suppose you will. Not now, anyways."

The second vampire winced at the sound of his companion's jaw being nearly removed. His words seem to stumble over one another as he rushed to get them out, "Oh yes, anything you want to know! Tozzen sent us out to shake down some locals to build up the coffers. He's wanting to hire Spireans to help fight those stupid Mhuns..." A wince crossed the vampire's face as he realized the company in which the last two words were being said.

Haven's hands immediately began weaving together a ball of elemental fire. Small flames flickered and danced in his eyes as he drew upon his inner flame. Lexen reached out and rested his hand on Haven's shoulder and whispered, "This is not your interrogation, brother." With a look of disappointment, Haven haphazardly tossed the ball of flames behind him, unintentionally hitting a lamb kept by the imps of Minia. The creature bleated in terror and began running around frantically as its wool burned.

Kerryn nodded to the vampire and patted him gently on the head. She drew a small kris from an ankle sheath and sliced off an ear. She repeated the process on the second vampire and sheathed the kris and stowed the ears.

"Vellis, might I ask a favor of you?" Kerryn asked.

“Oh yes ma’am, anything! I am indebted to you!” exclaimed Vellis.

“I need to conscript some of your butterflies,” she replied coolly.

Vellis looked at her puzzled. “Conscript?” he asked.

Kerryn nodded. “Give me a few of your nets with as many butterflies as can fit in them. I can’t promise they’ll be safe, but their sacrifice will not be without meaning,” she ordered.

Vellis nodded hesitantly and produced three butterfly nets brimming with the winged insects. He handed them to Haven who looked at them with disgust. Kerryn nodded her thanks to Vellis and motioned for Haven and Lexen to follow her. They set out once again down the Prelatorian Highway under the cover of darkness.

The trio cut through the grasslands and into the Dakota Hills. Skirting around the desert they ducked into the caverns leading to the gates of Bloodloch. Navigating their way through the twisting passages it wasn’t long until the ominous gates of the city were within view. A dozen guards were standing watch, carefully inspecting each creature to pass through their post.

Kerryn gathered Lexen and Haven in close. With a barely audible whisper she explained, “The target is Tozzen’s halberd. I expect it to be in his personal armory while not on his person. Once we’re in, Haven is going to melt it into a piece of scrap. We have to be quick, as Tozzen will no doubt sense the loss of his weapon – it is practically an extension of him by now. At that point we’re going to need to fight our way out. We’ll take to the rooftops and make our way to murder holes above the gate and slip down through them. If we’re quick enough, they won’t realize where we’re headed and all of their reinforcements will be inside of the gate. Our getaway will be easy from there on out. Any questions?”

Haven raised his hand. “Why do I have three butterfly nets?” he asked.

Kerryn smirked and replied, “Oh Havers, I thought you would have figured it out by now. What does Tozzen hate almost as much as us?”

“Skank vampires?” asked Haven inquisitively.

Kerryn rolled her eyes. “Those too, but they’re already in the city. As we’re making our way across the rooftops I want you to let all of the butterflies free.”

Comprehension flashed across Haven’s face. “Got it. Brilliant. Butterfly bombs.”

Nodding, Kerryn turned and started towards the gate. She eyed the guards, assessing their weapons and various sizes and selecting the order in which she would take them out. Haven and Lexen followed suit.

The team made it within two dozen paces of the gate without being spotted. At that point they all broke into a dead sprint directly at the leading three guards. Kerryn brandished her brass knuckles in clenched fists, Lexen launched himself into a flying jump kick and Haven leapt forward to tackle his target. With a flurry of her fists, Kerryn had handily fractured the guards skull, nose, multiple vertebrae,

both arms and sternum. A single thrust kick flung his broken body like a rag doll, knocking down two guards behind him.

Lexen's flying jump kick hit the guard captain square in the chest and he staggered backwards. Lexen pushed off of the chest of his victim and performed an acrobatic back flip, landing on his feet. He immediately transitions into a forward handspring and manages to catch his opponents neck in between his legs. Using his body's momentum Lexen continues into a second consecutive handspring and uses his legs as leverage to fling the guard through the air. The decaying flesh and bones holding the guard's head onto his body give way mid-fling and Lexen was left with the ghouls head clutched in his legs when he landed.

Connecting with his ferocious tackle, Haven knocked his target flat onto his back. He scrambled up to a kneeling position and relentlessly pounded on the guard's face until it more resembled a bowl than any sort of head.

As the four guards knocked over by the corpses of their compatriots clamored to their feet, the other five drew their weapons and advanced menacingly at Kerryn, Lexen and Haven. Brandishing longswords and morning stars they mounted an uncoordinated and inept counterattack. The results were devastating as Kerryn removed one guard's head with a single uppercut and broke another guard's neck in half leaving his head dangling by the remnants of a spinal cord with one jab to his face. Lexen ripped one guard's arms off and used them as clubs to pummel a second guard into a pulp. He finished the armless guard with an elegant back breaker throw. Haven, on the other hand, had managed to grab a morning star by the haft and wrestled it from his attacker's grip. Wielding it with more grace and precision than all twelve guards combined, he easily clobbered the remaining five guards into defeat. The entire fight lasted no more than forty five seconds and they had succeeded in not even drawing the attention of a single inhabitant of the city.

They resumed their stealthy movements into the city. Moving swiftly from shadow to shadow and using all available cover the three Mhuns covered ground across the city at a terrifying pace. Kerryn indicated a large house that more resembled a fortress than any typical living quarters. Lexen removed three neatly folded tree snake cloaks from his backpack and distributed them to the others. Each of them donned the outerwear and effortlessly flew up to the roof of the structure with the help of the magic imbued in the cloaks. Having reached the roof top, they discarded the cloaks and headed for the entry hatch.

Silently the three descended into a dimly lit hallway of the upper most level in the dwelling. Kerryn glanced in both directions and oriented herself. She indicated the route they needed to take and they continued on with their mission.

Cobwebs occupied every corner of the dwelling and a thick layer of dust covered everything. Several faded paintings adorned the walls. Most were portraits of vampires, but Haven stopped for a moment to inspect one peculiar painting of a fluffy grey kitten playing with a ball of string. "Pssst!" he whispered at his companions, pointing at the painting. Lexen and Kerryn turned around and stared at him. He pointed at the painting with a girlish giggle. Realizing the subject of the painting, Lexen and Kerryn rolled their eyes and continued onwards.

Thanks to their incredible vision in low light conditions, the Mhuns required no artificial light source other than what ambient light seeped through slits and cracks in the floors and walls. Down spiral staircases they went, descending further into Tozzen's lair. Finally they arrived at a large steel door. Kerryn carefully lifted the bolt holding the door shut and slid it back. The hinges of the door creaked loudly as she pulled it open.

Inside the magnificent armory were several suits of highly polished field plate armor. Racks of training weapons lined the walls. At the center of the room stood a fine weapon rack made of polished oak. It contained a bejeweled ceremonial sword, an elegant steel long sword, an exquisite longbow and quiver, a polished steel mace, two sharpened javelins, and a masterfully crafted Damascus steel halberd with a white oak haft and wrapped doeskin grips.

Haven began to salivate all over himself upon seeing the weapon. He rushed up to it and gingerly pulled it off the rack. Running his hand over the steel blade he cooed softly to himself. Kerryn and Lexen rolled their eyes at him.

"Well you certainly took your sweet time. I was afraid I might die of boredom while I waited," a voice said behind them. All three turned around simultaneously to see the formidable form of Tozzen in the doorway. "Yes, I've certainly been expecting you," he said with an evil laugh, "Don't think you're the only one with spies, Don Cardinalis."

"I never thought that, Tozzen. I do know I'm the only one with spies worth a damn," she replied quickly.

"Feisty to the end, I like it. Now die," commanded Tozzen with a smirk. He extended his arm outward to call his weapon to his side.

The halberd started to shake in Haven's hands. Haven tightened his grip and pull the polearm close into his body. It began to shake more violently and Haven started to be dragged along with it.

Kerryn moved in a blur and swept Haven's feet out from underneath him, causing him to fall forward with the halberd. His hands firmly attached to the halberd, he took off through the air at Tozzen. Kerryn's sudden movement and the sight of an oversized hairy Mhun attached to his halberd flying at him caught Tozzen off guard. Haven held on for dear life and the halberd wobbled uneasily on its trajectory. At the last moment, Haven let his grip loosen just enough for him to slide to the very end of the haft and he directed the halberd's blade into the gut of the weapon's master.

Tozzen grunted and looked down at his skewered torso. He coughed once and began to laugh maniacally. "What a cute trick that was," he said as he started to pull the halberd out of his stomach. Haven stood firm and shoved back on the haft, keeping it well planted inside of the vampire.

"Hey Lexen," Haven called out.

"Yeah?" Lexen replied.

"Do vampires burn?" he asked.

"Only one way to find out," responded Lexen.

With a grin, Haven began to chant a prayer softly over the halberd. Flames sprung up around it and raced down the haft towards Tozzen.

Tozzen strained to pull the weapon out from his gut but was unsuccessful as the holy fire made contact with his flesh. Instantly the fire spread over all parts of his body, searing all aspects of his unholy existence. Tozzen's eyeballs burst as they succumbed to the rapidly building pressure resulting from the rising heat. Dangerously hot vampire eyeball goo squirted onto Haven and burned several small holes in his shirt. He dropped the halberd and did his best to wipe the goo off and contain the damage. Within a minute the fearsome vampire commander had burned into an unrecognizable crisp by the holy fire.

"Huh. Well that worked out better than I expected," said Kerry as she brushed a few stray hairs out of her face.

Haven was grinning from ear to ear. "Well that escalated quickly."

Lexen smirked, "Yes, these confrontations always hotly contested."

Haven tapped his nose knowingly, "Ah yes, I wonder if he'll get fired by the Overlord?"

"That's what happens when you get caught in the cross fire," replied Lexen.

"That's enough!" snapped Kerry. "We need to get out of here before we celebrate."

Grumbling Haven and Lexen lead the way out of the armory with Kerry close behind. Upon reaching the roof they glanced over the side to see the streets filled with hundreds of soldiers. "Huh, looks like a welcoming party," joked Haven.

"Or an invasion," whispered Lexen more seriously.

Kerry hit both of them in the shoulder and motioned for them to make a hasty departure. Leaping from rooftop to rooftop they made their way across the city. Near the gatehouse Haven stopped and released the butterflies from the nets he precariously protected throughout the mission. Thousands of colorful butterflies swarmed the streets, flitting from awning to awning, resting upon steps, walls, and any other perch they could find. Some of the city's inhabitants stood by, dumbstruck. Others began to panic, unsure what to make of the sudden appearance of so many butterflies. Kerry again ushered her companions along and they slipped through the murder holes without incident. Once outside of the city, the three transformed into their Atabahi forms and loped quickly and quietly out of the caverns and back to the Black Flagon Inn.

Demarcus sat dejectedly at a table with a mug of ale in front of him as the three returned. He looked up at them and asked, "How did it go?"

Haven shrugged and replied, "Turns out there wasn't much close quarters combat. You would have been fine to come along."

Demarcus slapped his mug off the table in anger, spilling its contents all over the floor. He stormed up the stairs and again a door could be heard slamming above them.

Lexen chuckled briefly. "Haven, that was entirely unnecessary."

Haven grinned. "I know. It's just so much fun to inflame people."

Kerryn crossed her arms across her chest and glared at Haven before turning and making her way into the kitchen.

Haven began to say, "Hey, if you can't stand the heat, stay ou..."

"ENOUGH ALREADY!" screamed Kerryn from the kitchen. Her cast iron pot came flying out of the kitchen doorway and knocked Haven upside the head. He slumped to the ground, unconscious from the blow.

Chapter 7: Dat Dato

The rain began as a drizzle early in the month and had not let up for three weeks straight. It varied in intensity, several thunderstorms finding their way into the mix.

"Unca Lexen, make it stop raining!" cried Gwen one afternoon. "I want to play outside!"

Lexen ruffled the girls hair and replied, "What's wrong with playing inside, Gwen?"

"It's BORING," she said matter-of-factly with her hands on her hips. "I'm sick of the rain."

"Did I hear somebody is sick?" said a young voice from behind Lexen.

A taller than average Mhun wearing a long white oilskin trench coat lowered his hood and smiled at the girl.

"Dr. Data!" yelled Gwen as she rushed at him with arms spread wide. The doctor grabbed Gwen and swung her up into a wet but affectionate embrace. He set her down and crouched down to look her in the eye. "So what are we dealing with here young lady?" he asked.

"It's rainy and I'm sick of being inside!" protested Gwen.

The doctor rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. "Hrm. Sounds like you have a case of cabin fever." Gwen's eyes grew wide.

"Oh no!" she cried. He nodded affirmatively at her. "What can we do?" she asked worriedly.

"I think I'm going to have to prescribe cookies. It's the only known cure," replied the doctor.

Gwen giggled and dashed off to the kitchen to find some cookies. The doctor removed his coat and hung it up on the rack near the door. Lexen stood and nodded at the man. "Gwen dear, don't eat too many or you won't have room for dinner," said Kerryn's voice from the kitchen. She emerged from the doorway and smiled. "Hello Dato. Thank you for coming."

Dato nodded and smiled at Kerryn. "Greetings Kerryn. As always, it is my pleasure."

Kerryn motioned for the group to move towards the parlor. Filing in, several enforcers took up guard at the entrance. Once Kerryn, Dato, Lexen and Haven were all in inside they seated themselves about the round table. Kerryn's eyebrow raised questioningly as she asked, "Who are we missing?"

Almost as if on cue, an attractive young Mhun nurse burst into the room, panting. "I'm so sorry I'm late, I was a little tied up..." she explained.

Dato looked at her quizzically. "Tied up with what?"

"Oh, some guy wanted me to give him a physical. Said he would turn his head and cough. So I inspected him with my knee," said the nurse.

Haven and Lexen burst into laughter while Kerryn and Dato looked a bit concerned. "Kaleigh dear, if you have any problems you can ask your aunt for assistance," Kerryn reminded her gently.

Kaleigh shook her head, "That's quite alright Auntie."

Kerryn nodded and encouraged Kaleigh to join them at the table, to which the Mhun nurse obliged. Smiling, Kerryn began, "As you may or may not know, we've managed to strike fast and hard at the scum in the Shamtota Caverns. Those Bloodlochian bastards should think thrice before messing with us in the near future. For now we're going to turn our attention to the north. I've several reports of rumblings in Spinesreach of enemies congregating and preparing to preemptively attack our operations."

The group nodded and listened carefully as Kerryn explained the situation and her plan, "Akiles0's gang has recruited several bruisers to start intimidating and shaking down our agents in Spinesreach. The Syndicate is also less than thrilled at the extent of our reach and has petitioned the city of Spinesreach for permission to conduct operations against us. We need to act quickly if we are to mitigate the damage these groups can do." Frowning, Kerryn continued, "The Syndicate has recruited an assassin by the name of Tina. This assassin has no reservations, no morals, nothing at all holding her back. She will use any and all means to do whatever she wants. She would sleep with her father and kill and cannibalize her own mother if doing so at all furthered her cause. Not even the Bloodborn would commit such heinous acts, which is why we must take Tina out before she can fulfill whatever nefarious purpose the Syndicate has designated her for."

Dato frowned deeply. "Where do Kaleigh and I come into this, Kerryn?" he asked.

Kerryn smiled at Dato and replied, "I'm glad you asked, Dato. In addition to dealing with Tina, we need to teach the city of Spinesreach a lesson. I need you to create a plague to infect the general populous of Spinesreach with. The more incurable this plague, the better. These fools tire me with their pathetic attempts at removing our otherwise peaceful coexistence with them. If they can't play nice, I'll make sure they don't play at all." A diabolical sneer crossed Kerryn's face.

Dato swallowed hard and subtly lowered his head in submission and acceptance of the task. "Of course, Don Cardinalis. I will likely only be able to infect the populous with this intravenously. What do you propose for a delivery system?" he asked.

Lexen leaned forward and folded his hands on the table in front of him. "I've already dispatched agents that have created the illusion of an infection upon themselves to Spinesreach. They will stir dissent

and panic among the populace while spreading the falsehood that there is a vaccine and cure. You and Kaleigh will be the ones framed as having the vaccine and cure. These idiots in Spinesreach will be lining up to be infected by you.”

Kerryn’s face twisted into a malevolent expression of glee. “You’ll also be afforded an opportunity to directly poison targets that I’ve taken the liberty to designate. These fools will be so riled up over this plague they won’t think twice about what they’re being injected with.”

Kaleigh let loose with a grating laugh. “I like it Auntie, I like it very much!” she exclaimed.

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Dato and Kaleigh had arrived at the gates of Spinesreach where they were met by several guards and at least one city official. They were hastily whisked away to a dilapidated warehouse that had been set up for their arrival.

“Thank you Doctor so very much for coming,” the city official said. “Our citizens are so fearful they have nearly erupted into civil unrest due to the threat of the Dolt Plague. Your timing couldn’t have been any better. I hope you’ve brought an ample supply of the vaccine?” eagerly asked the official.

Dato had set two large bags on a table that had been set up for their arrival. Kaleigh nearly immediately had pulled out a handful of syringes and vials and displayed them for the official to inspect. The official clapped his hands together merrily at the sight of the medicine and asked joyfully, “Oh good! Good, good, good, is there any chance I might receive the vaccine while I’m here?”

Kaleigh smiled sweetly and beckoned the official over to the table. He briskly walked towards Kaleigh, rolling up his sleeve in the process. Kaleigh sunk the needle of the syringe into the vial and pulled the plunger, extracting the putrid green substance into the glass cylinder. She quickly jabbed the syringe into the forearm of the official who winced in pain as she did. Depressing the plunger, the foul concoction was forcefully administered to the city administrator. After all of the plague had been dispensed, Kaleigh pulled the syringe out with a subtle twist in her wrist as she did causing the man to yelp with pain as his tender flesh was further aggravated by the stirring motion of the needle in his flesh.

Woozily the official stumbled towards to exit of the building. He turned and waved with his good arm and said, “Thank you again Doctor, if you need anything let me know.” Sweat was already beading up and rolling down his face as a fierce fever began to wrack his body.

Dato waved briefly to the official before resuming setting up his vaccination station. Soon the masses began lining up to receive the promised immunity to the doctor’s plague. One by one they were stuck rather violently by Kaleigh or slightly more gently by Dato, though the end result was the same. Before the plague victims could even exit the warehouse they had broken out in a fever.

Amidst the administering of the plague, Dato noticed a large, burly Troll in line. A thick, stubby cigar sat in the corner of his mouth and a general look of stupidity pervaded his otherwise well-kept appearance. Before Kaleigh could stick the Troll, Dato grabbed him by the arm and pulled him aside. “Mr. Gnarlstone, so glad you came to get vaccinated!” exclaimed Dato as he did.

“AYE THANKEE DOCTOR FOR HELP HERE IN SPINESREACH!” bellowed the Troll in monotone.

Dato did his best to wince at the volume and overall unpleasantness of the Troll’s voice and speech patterns. Nevertheless the Mhun maintained his composure and general good-natured demeanor as he prepared the syringe. “So, how are things?” he asked casually.

“THINGS ARE GOOD FOR KLONK!” yelled the Troll without even the slightest inflection.

Dato muttered to himself and discarded the façade of the good doctor. He abruptly jabbed the Troll in his bulging bicep and quickly flushed the silvery fluid from the syringe.

“OW,” said Klunk loudly, his voice as vacant of expression as his face.

“Now, we’re going to need you to come here in the back room and lie down while the vaccine takes effect. We need to monitor you to make sure there aren’t any complications. Please, lie down,” urged Dato as he dragged the Troll by the arm into the recovery ward.

“KLONK LOVE TO LIE DOWN,” stated Klunk as he nearly fell over and landed in a cot. His massive form strained every joint and fiber of the cot but miraculously the portable bed maintained its integrity.

Dato pulled the curtain shut on the recovery ward as he exited. The poison he had injected into the Syndicate leader would act quickly and overcome even the rapid regenerative properties inherent in the Troll’s blood. Eliminating that towering oaf had been one of Kerryn’s ideal objectives. Dato was glad to have been able to oblige Don Cardinalis.

By the time they ran out of plague, over a thousand Spirean citizens had been infected. Those that were turned away were instructed to maintain close contact with those vaccinated to best avoid contracting the dreaded disease.

Dato and Kaleigh packed up and departed the city, scores of citizens thanking them as profusely as their sweat. Several had developed gangrenous sores on their body in the short time they had been exposed to the infection.

Once they were outside of the city gates, Kaleigh whispered to Dato, “Dato, how is it that an entire population could be so stupid?”

Dato looked at Kaleigh and tapped his nose as he replied, “Remember how like minds tend to think alike?”

Kaleigh nodded with a slightly confused look on her face.

“It just so happens that most of the morons think that Spinesreach is a great place to live,” Dato explained.

Comprehension flashed across Kaleigh’s face and she grinned wide. “I guess that would also explain how all of the whores of Sapience congregate in Bloodloch, yes?”

Dato nodded knowingly as the duo made their way back to the Black Flagon Inn to report the success of their mission to Kerryn.

Chapter 8: Pinnacle of Purity

Demarcus smiled at the breathtakingly beautiful young Mhun before him. A few wisps of her jet black hair had broken free of their bindings and floated down in front of her face as she laughed mirthfully. After three dozen words, he had set a new personal record for the length of a conversation with a girl he was not related to.

“No, really, I do like your ass Ms. Katszia. It is very nice,” explained Demarcus with his smile persisting.

“Yes well he rides as well as any stallion I assure you! Perhaps later you may want to go for a ride on it?” she asked with a giggle, her hand stroking the mane of her dapple donkey affectionately.

“Oh, I’d very much like to ride your ass!” exclaimed Demarcus with great enthusiasm and vigor, all of which drew even more laughter from the young woman. “So what do you do for pleasure?” he asked.

Blinking at the seemingly forwardness of the question, Katszia thought for a moment before realizing the intent of the question rather than what may have been asked. “Well, I enjoy hunting mostly,” she responded suppressing a giggle.

“Oh yes, hunting is good. I like hunting for foci and then tapping them. Father says I’m a bit slow, but I like to take my time when tapping, to be very thorough and extract everything that I can from the fissures,” Demarcus explained while gesticulating vividly. Katszia covered her mouth with her hand and passed the held back laughter off as a yawn. Demarcus was none the wiser.

“I see. Well, I don’t know how to locate these foci or, erm, tap them for that matter,” Katszia stated with a hint of playfulness. “Though I would imagine all it would take would be a good teacher!” she exclaimed with a wink.

Demarcus nodded and puffed out his chest with pride, “I’ve been told I’m an excellent teacher. However, the secrets to leylining have been closely guarded by a fellow in Delve, so you’ll need to consult him if you want to learn the basics. If you want more advanced instruction after that though, I’d be happy to go and ley with you!” he offered innocently.

Katszia’s laughter was easily masked by the others who had up until now been observing the pair silently. Lexen and Haven clinked their tankards together and drowned their laughs with long pulls of ale. The poor girl was without such armaments and instead tried to change the topic. “I’m not one for combat though, I would imagine these acts might be a bit dangerous for me yet without protection,” she managed to get out between fits of giggling.

“Oh, well protection is a must for sure. Especially if some of those enemies end up getting you on your back. But there usually aren’t too many fights that break out so you should be pretty safe. Again

though, I'd be more than happy to show you how to locate the foci and then how to deal with all of the stuff that comes out of them after you tap them," offered Demarcus, his face slightly confused at what everyone else found so amusing.

Katszia nodded affirmatively and reached up to wipe a small tear from her eye. "Demarcus, you are the pinnacle of purity and don't let anyone tell you otherwise," she said, shooting a glance over to Lexen and Haven in the process. They both raised their mugs and each took a swig in response.

By now Kerryn had emerged from her parlor to see what all the commotion was about. "What about my baby's purity?" she inquired.

Demarcus blushed furiously at the mention of his name. "Nothing, Kerryn!" responded Katszia sweetly.

Kerryn immediately grabbed her pot from a nearby shelf and began to wield it menacingly, advancing on where Lexen and Haven sat. "I told you two to leave him alone!" she exclaimed.

Haven held up his hands as if to urge Kerryn to put the pot down. "Hold up there, we have done NOTHING here!" Lexen nodded in agreement, taking another drink from his ale.

"What is all of this laughter I hear out here and why is my precious baby boy blushing like he's been defiled?" she snarled.

"We just introduced Demarcus to Miss Katszia is all!" protested Haven. He cowered more as Kerryn drew closer.

Suddenly Kerryn stopped dead in her tracks. She turned and looked at the dapple donkey that stood in the middle of her inn. "Doesn't Miss Katszia have a nice ass, Mother?" chirped Demarcus.

"Demarcus!" she scolded. He blushed and hung his head slightly in shame. Turning to Lexen, Kerryn ordered, "Would you please escort this *ass* to the stable?"

Lexen set down his tankard and shot Kerryn a puzzled look. After a brief pause he asked, "Which one?"

"BOTH OF THEM!" Kerryn shouted as she brandished her pot. Katszia couldn't help but burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter at the order.

Lexen sighed and nodded. He stood up and took the donkey by the reigns. Meanwhile, Kerryn took a solid swing at Haven, knocking him unconscious with a single blow to the head from her cast iron pot. Lexen lead the donkey over to Haven's unconscious body and he hoisted his brother up onto the donkey's back. Lexen then proceeded to escort the pair out to the stables as instructed.

"Mother, Katszia offered to let me ride her ass!" boasted Demarcus with a smile. Kerryn shot Katszia a nasty look. Katszia grinned sheepishly and stood up out of her chair, slowly taking a step backwards.

"I see. Well, what is wrong with your pony, Demarcus?" Kerryn asked.

“Nothing at all, Mother. I didn’t think it would be polite to turn down such an offer!” he exclaimed.

“Yes well, you should turn it down. You don’t know where it has been,” snapped Kerryn with a glance at Katszia.

With a disdainful glower, Katszia responded, “I was only trying to be kind to the boy. Let him experience the world without his overprotecting mother dictating everything he can or can’t do. Besides, it wasn’t my idea. It was Lexen’s.” She paused for a moment and then added with a slightly haughty tone, “And physically, my mount is as pure as Demarcus.”

Kerryn sighed and stowed her pot back on the shelf, muttering something about hitting the wrong one. “I’m sorry for the accusation, Katszia. How are you?” she asked upon returning to the table where Demarcus sat.

“I’m well, Kerryn,” replied Katszia as he embraced Kerryn warmly. “I trust my brother has been treating you properly?”

Kerryn nodded with a distant look of fondness and a slight smile. She shook her head slightly to refocus on the present. Forcing a larger smile Kerryn stated, “Yes, he is quite the gentleman. He sends his love.”

Katszia beamed broadly. “It is a shame I missed him on this visit. Perhaps next week he will be about?” she asked.

Kerryn paused and chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip. “Yes, he might be,” she replied.

Katszia sighed softly and gave Demarcus a chaste kiss on the cheek. “I must be off. Behave, Demarcus,” she ordered sternly with a wink to Kerryn.

Demarcus frowned. “I will Miss Katszia. Good fortune in your hunting,” he said as his bid farewell.

Kerryn bent over and planted a kiss on Demarcus’s forehead. She then turned and returned to her parlor, leaving Demarcus alone in the main room of the Inn.

Chapter 9: Morion’s Turnaround

“I’m not entirely sure what exactly you’re expecting out of him, Kerryn,” expressed Lexen.

“He needs to start acting like a respectable member of this family, or he won’t be here anymore,” said Kerryn matter-of-factly.

“You know as well as I do that Morion really isn’t capable of acting more respectable. It is simply astonishing that he is capable of what he is, all things given,” Lexen shrugged with his response.

“So you aren’t at all disturbed that he fed an innocent imp boy to a pig in Lodi Valley?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lexen chuckled softly to himself. “Yes, that. Well, maybe the imp was a spy?”

“If a spy is stupid enough to get fed to a pig, we could probably have used him as a double-agent. Not to mention we have no idea who might have sent him. This is assuming he was a spy to begin with. That is a big assumption,” muttered Kerryn as she turned away to look out the window.

“Given your latest tactics I’m a little surprised you’re this concerned with a single imp with otherwise unknown affiliations,” commented Lexen offhandedly, reaching for an apple from the round table in the center of the room.

Speaking to the window Kerryn snapped back quickly, “It has little to do with the imp but rather the immature and violent actions of one of my Syssin.”

Lexen raised an eyebrow questioningly and asked, “You mean one of *my* Syssin?” He took a sharp bite out of the green apple.

Kerryn turned about to face him. “Make no mistake, Lexen. You may lead the Atabahi unopposed, but in this form you are subordinate to me. You have what I give you and nothing more. And all that I give you is also mine to take back should I lose confidence in your ability to command,” she hissed in response. Kerryn stared down Lexen who noncommittally ate his apple.

Having finished his fruit, Lexen tossed the core aside and took a step towards Kerryn. “Need I remind you, Legacy, where you came from. I trained you when nobody else would take you. I defended you when all others wanted to destroy you. I fed you when you were too weak to hunt. I made you strong. All that you have you have because of me. Never forget that, Legacy,” replied Lexen sternly. He did not give Kerryn an opportunity to respond, instead turning on his heel sharply and exiting the parlor. Kerryn remained in place and glared at the parlor’s archway, half expecting Lexen to return. He did not.

After a lengthy wait she settled herself into the round table and pulled out a letter from a satchel lying near one of the legs of the table. Taking the quill from the inkwell in front of her at the table she began to compose a letter. When she was finished, she rolled the letter up and attached it to the foot of a messenger pigeon dressed in a tuxedo. Kerryn gently whispered to the bird as she gathered it up in her hands and took the animal to the window. She set the bird down on the window sill, upon where the bird reached up with its beak and unhooked the latch keeping the windows shut. It nudged the windows open enough to escape to the outside where it promptly spread its wings and took flight. Sighing, Kerryn shut and latched the windows.

Demarcus startled Kerryn as he asked from his position in the archway, “Is everything alright, Mother?”

Kerryn spun around and took a sharp breath. With her hand on her chest she sighed in relief and replied, “Yes dearest, why?”

Demarcus frowned. “I heard you and Uncle Lexen arguing. I wasn’t sure if there was something that was wrong or not. I don’t suppose I can be of any help?”

Kerryn began to speak but stopped short of saying any words. Thoughtfully she paused for a moment before saying, "You know, there just might be."

Smiling Demarcus nodded. "Anything, Mother."

She beckoned him into the parlor and spoke in hushed tones, explaining what she had in mind.

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"Don Cardinalis wunts me ta take Mister Demarcus an do what?" asked Morion with a contorted look of confusion on his face.

"Did I stutter?" responded Kerryn harshly.

"No?" asked Morion.

Kerryn frowned at the diminutive Mhun. "You are going to take him to kill the target I have designated. If he is going to be useful to this family, he needs to prove himself capable of something before I devote anyone else's time to training him further. Am I clear?"

Morion nodded meekly. He wasn't the sort that liked to kill without a purpose. Moreover, an unseasoned brat who has never fought anyone before was more likely to be a liability than anything. This was going to take some figuring, he thought.

"Demarcus!" called out Kerryn. From upstairs emerged the adolescent. He was outfitted with a suit of splint mail instead of his regular clothing and in his hands he wielded a kite shield and a mace. While Kerryn's back was turned, Morion slapped himself in the forehead with the palm of his hand repeatedly.

"A'ight Mister Demarcus, lets goo!" exclaimed Morion with a beckoning arm motion as he made his way to the main door of the Black Flagon Inn. Demarcus gave his mother a peck on the cheek and followed his small counterpart out the door.

The two Mhuns made their way down the highway at a respectable pace. Morion hummed obnoxiously, occasionally skipping a short distance but always reverting back to his ambling gait.

"So, how are we going to do her?" whispered Demarcus.

Morion stopped and shot a glance at Demarcus. "Doo? Whatchyou thinkin' dirty for, Mister Demarcus?"

Demarcus's face adopted a puzzled look. "Why do we have to do her dirtily? Can it be a clean kill?" he asked innocently.

Morion jammed his fingers into Demarcus's chest. "Listen 'ere Mister Demarcus. I'mma not let you mess dis up. Yer mudder made eet clear ahm responsibler fer yoo!" he proclaimed. "So jest follo mah lead!"

Demarcus sighed and nodded in agreement. He fell in line behind Morion as he again made his way down the highway. Darkness fell quickly upon the pair and Morion quickened their pace in response. Before long they arrived at a small dirt path nearly indiscernible to someone walking the main road.

Ducking into some bramble next to the path, Morion grabbed Demarcus by the collar and looked him in the eye. “Lookie, I’mma be phased right behin’ja. When ya git to tha cave, jest waltz in thar an’ bash dat lady over her head, ya?” he said.

Demarcus’s eyes shifted from one side to another uneasily. Nodding slowly, he tightened his grip on his mace. Morion let go of his collar and vanished before his very eyes. Suddenly feeling very alone, Demarcus tried valiantly to fight back tears. Cautiously he emerged from the bramble and set out down the path into the dark woods.

As he approached the cave, faint light could be seen from inside. Demarcus gulped and crept forward out of the copse of trees that had been his cover. He made his way to the edge of the rock face and slide along the boulders until he was next to the mouth of the cave. He gave a silent prayer to Auresae, Goddess of Fire, and slipped silently inside.

He made his way down into the cave and peeked around the corner. At the interior of the cave was a small campfire illuminating the rest of the room. A deer hide was suspended in between a frame of wood, stretching and drying the material for later use. Near the campfire was a large pile of furs laid out into a makeshift bed. An unnaturally cold wind found its way down the mouth of the cave and chilled Demarcus to the bone.

“Good evening, Demarcus. I’ve been expecting you,” said an alluring voice from within the main room of the cave.

A shudder went down Demarcus’s spine. The uncertainty of its source, be it from the voice from the cave or the cold blast of air, caused a second and more violent shudder to shake his entire torso. He peered cautiously around the corner and saw a sprightly young Atavian woman leaning up against the wall of the cave, just out of view of his first glance. She had long, flowing ebony hair framed her small heart-shaped face and cascaded down her back, sharply contrasting against her pure white wings. Her flawless alabaster skin seemed to glow in the light of the campfire and the reflection of the dancing flames sparkled in her striking crystal blue eyes. A simple sleeveless thigh-length deerskin dress belted tightly around her tiny waist was all she wore.

Pushing lightly off against the wall, she slinked into the center of the cave and gazed seductively at Demarcus. With a subtle flap of her wings she floated down into a surprisingly modest sitting position in the pile of furs. Patting a spot next to her, she beckoned Demarcus to come join her.

Completely entranced with her captivating appearance, Demarcus trudged into the cave willingly. His mace and kite shield clattered to the ground as he became completely fixated on the woman in front of him. Easing himself down into a sitting position he leveled his gaze with hers and stared into her eyes.

“What took you so long?” she asked in a soft voice. Before Demarcus could respond she had lifted a finger to his lips and answered herself, “It doesn’t matter. You’re here now with me.” A beguiling

smile crossed her face and she gently stroked Demarcus's cheek with the back of her hand. He continued to stare at her, completely mesmerized.

Biting her lower lip she leaned in and whispered entrancingly to Demarcus, "I can open your eyes to a world that has been hidden from you. Sensations you can't even dream about could be yours. Just stay with me?"

Morion had seen and heard enough. He slipped out of phase and grabbed his whip, moving in for the garrote on the woman.

"Ah, two tasty morsels tonight!" she exclaimed with glee and rose up effortlessly with the aid of her wings, turning to face Morion who stopped and froze. Seizing the opportunity, the woman lunged forward with a hiss, spreading her jaws to briefly expose two resplendent ivory fangs before sinking them deeply into Morion's neck. Instantly the woman's eyes changed from crystal blue to blood red.

The searing pain shot throughout his body as he was bitten. Morion's arms immediately moved up to shove the woman off of him, but she managed to drain a significant amount of blood from his arteries before he was able to fend her off. Desperately applying pressure to the wound on his neck, Morion ran as fast as he could from the cave.

Delighted feminine laughter echoed in the cave as the Atavian vampire settled back down next to Demarcus. "Now my sweet boy, where were we?" she said charmingly, leaning over and smelling Demarcus's neck. "I would be delighted to turn you here and now, but Lady Chakrasul has other plans... until then we're free to explore the pleasure of this flesh." Demarcus continued to stare blankly into her gaze, his mind completely under her control.

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Kerryn anxiously paced back and forth in front of the bar. "You're going to wear a groove in the floor if you continue pacing, Legacy," murmured Lexen in between drinks of his ale.

"They should be back by now," stated Kerryn.

Lexen shrugged, "Maybe they're having fun toying with their target?"

The door to the inn burst open and Morion stumbled in. Covered in blood with more continuing to pump out of the wound on his neck, the tiny Mhun collapsed onto the floor upon reaching his destination. Kerryn and Lexen rushed over to him.

Kerryn grabbed Morion by the shoulders and shook him violently. "Where is Demarcus!" she demanded.

Lexen grabbed her by the wrist. "Stop. Interrogating him won't help."

Kerryn pulled her hand back, breaking Lexen's grasp on her wrist. "Quickly, take him to the cellar and restrain him." Lexen remained where he was and peered quizzically at Kerryn. "Now before he turns!" she bellowed. Lexen grabbed Morion and carried his body away.

Descending into the cellar, Lexen moved over towards a set of heavy chains. He adeptly clasped the irons around Morion's neck, wrists and ankles. He sighed and stepped back. Just as Kerryn appeared at the bottom of the steps, Morion's body began to wrack with convulsions. His eyes opened wide and revealed soulless pitch black orbs flecked with red. Morion's head snapped to look at Lexen and Kerryn. Letting out a shriek he flew into a violent rage and lunged towards them but was stopped well short by his restraints. He fought violently against them and struggled to free himself.

"Where is Demarcus," demanded Kerryn sternly. Morion hissed in response and reached out, baring his new fangs.

Lexen shook his head. "It is no use. He's been turned and is consumed with bloodlust. Our two options would be to satisfy his bloodlust, or perform the cure." Kerryn glanced at Lexen.

She turned away and began to climb the stairs. "I know who is responsible," she stated. "Chakrasul."

Comprehension flashed across Lexen's face. "I'll assemble everyone," he said following her up the stairs.

Chapter 10: The Temple of Corruption

"How do you know Demarcus will even be there?" asked Lexen.

Kerryn shook her head. "I don't. I only know that the Goddess of Corruption is responsible for whatever happened to my son and this is the best way to force Her hand and get answers. Worst case scenario, it gives Haven something to burn."

Haven cackled madly behind her. "Damn right! There is always fire!" he exclaimed.

Every Syssin, enforcer and agent loyal to Kerryn had been summoned. The other members of Lexen's pack also joined the mob. Nearing a hundred strong the group lead by Kerryn were situated just outside the temple's entrance. There was only one thing standing in the way of the group and the heart of Chakrasul's Divine Order.

"How the hell do we get past this energy field?" inquired Haven.

An impenetrable field of unholy energy had been erected around the Temple, denying access to those who would otherwise be unwelcome. Haven had discovered the field by inadvertently walking into the field and was rather violently turned away.

Kerryn thought at the problem for some time. As the group began to grow restless, she slipped away from the group to find quiet serenity in the dreadful place.

"Lord Dhar, I humbly beseech you for guidance and assistance," Kerryn murmured under her breath in prayer. "Help me find a way into Chakrasul's Temple so I might find out what has happened to my son."

Tears began to well up in Kerryn's eyes and she continued to pray. As they rolled off her cheeks and fell to the ground, the entire area began to shake violently. Kerryn looked up from her prayer and hurried back to the group.

Just as she joined back up with the group, a fissure appeared before them on the ground and a single, intimidating figure rose from the fissure. Taking the form of a masked, muscular titan wielding a large hammer was the God of the Underworld, Lord Dhar.

Kerryn and several others in the group immediately knelt with bowed heads before the deity. Others looked on in awe.

"Disciples, a great injustice has occurred and I have come to confront Lady Chakrasul about it," spoke Dhar in a booming voice. He turned from the group and threw his hammer at the temple before Him. As the hammer made contact with the field, a brilliant flash of light momentarily blinded all in the group. Dazzling arcs of energy spread across the sky as the field dispersed, permitting access to those who sought it.

"Go now, my followers, and deliver my judgment upon the followers of Chakrasul!" shouted Dhar as he sank back into the fissure from which he emerged.

Kerryn stood and drew forth her arcane staff and raise it above her head to rally her followers. She pointed at the temple and the mass of bodies behind her rushed towards it. They poured into the temple with weapons drawn, prepared to dispatch anything that moved within the walls of Chakrasul's domain.

The mass of invaders slowed upon reaching the vast open courtyard of the temple. A thick miasma filled the air and twisted dark purple vines cover the pillars and stone floor of the courtyard. A sharp whistle pierces the air, originating with Lexen. Obediently the group disperses into a scattered formation, all crouched low as they crept forward ready to spring into action upon command.

"Warden," whispered Kerryn, "send two scouts to the right and two to the left to protect our flank and send the main body straight through the courtyard into the inner chambers."

Lexen nodded, giving a quick hand signal to his left and to his right, pointing off towards the columns on either side of the courtyard. Immediately the Syssin scouts faded from view and took up their positions along the flanks. Lexen looked around briefly with a puzzled look on his face. "Kerryn, where is Haven?" he asked.

A maniacal cry echoed throughout the courtyard and a blindingly flash followed. The mess of vines erupted into flames, explosions rocking the temple and causing several columns to crumble and part of the superstructure they supported falling with them. Several acolytes burst out from a nearby archway, their robes completely engulfed in flames. Their flesh melting from their frames they screamed horribly as they crumpled to the ground, dead. Haven quickly emerged from the same archway behind them, a frown on his face as the acolytes expired. "Damnit, and I thought we were having fun." he muttered discontentedly.

Kerryn snapped at Haven, "I thought I made it distinctly clear that we were going to make our way in by stealth, interrogate any prisoners, and then you can do your thing."

Haven shrugged. "What can I say, I can't help myself. It was too dark so I wanted a torch. I guess I underestimated just how inflammable this place was."

Kerryn frowned disapprovingly. She pointed her staff forward at the entrance to the inner chamber, a spiral of elemental fire streaming forth and striking the doors causing them to explode violently. Immediately a flood of acolytes and a horde of ghouls and skeletons rushed out of the demolished door frame and attacked the invaders, intent on repelling them.

The front line of forces braced themselves as the horde of undead threw themselves upon their shields, some being ripped apart by the spikes judiciously placed upon the shields' surfaces. Some lowered their shields and swung their weapons out into the mass of undead flesh, striking down several foes. From behind them, several arrows were fired, taking down scores of acolytes and skeletons.

Quickly the acolytes retaliated, muttering necromantic incantations. Several invaders fell amidst agonizing screams, their flesh decaying right off their bones. Sensing an opportunity caused by the disruption in their ranks, the undead defenders all turned and focused on the spots where the shield bearers had fallen. Breaking through, they lunged forward with mouths of yellowed and decaying teeth gaped wide, biting ferociously. Several connected, and the unfortunate recipients quickly succumbed to their wounds.

Haven let out an enraged howl and closed his eyes to focus on the space between his hands, a powerful ball of pure spiritual fire forming in between them. His eyes snapped open, the irises changed to a fiery amber from their typical blue. Thrusting his hands forward, the firebomb shot out in front of him and into the line of acolytes in the rear of the defenders' formation. The ball exploded violently, instantly vaporizing the robed figures and destroying a good part of the temple structure behind them.

Amidst the sounds of battle Kerryn yelled out, "How can we interrogate them if they are a fine pile of ash, Haven?"

Haven replied, "It's hard to interrogate someone when you're dead!"

Lexen shouted to both of them, "Will you two stop bickering! Haven, secure the right flank and reform what men are left and counter-attack, column formation!"

Haven laughed loudly and charged off towards the right, making quick work of the undead foes that were ravaging the now ragged invaders. He barked orders to them and they obediently reformed into a column of two. Haven raised his hand, glanced back and dropped it, the column rushing forward around him at the defenders. They fought fiercely, inspired by Haven's mere presence and quickly dispatched the remaining acolytes.

Lexen managed to rally the remaining invaders on the left flank. Reforming them into a line, he ordered them to swing around and collapse on the remaining defenders engaged in the center of the courtyard. Haven followed Lexen's lead and ordered his men to do the same, surrounding the ghouls and skeletons. They fell quickly to the superior numbers and skill of their living counterparts.

Kerryn looked over the counterpart as the remaining invaders checked those around them for injuries and the fallen for signs of life. At least half of her men were wiped out, but she had no choice but to continue forward. "Anyone that can hold a shield or swing a weapon continues on, leave the rest and we will gather the survivors on our way out," she ordered. Begrudgingly the able-bodied men moved towards the doorway to the inner sanctum of the temple. Two scouts appeared before Lexen and informed him that the flanks were cleared. He dismissed them to their position in the scattered formation and nodded to Kerryn, indicating all was in place to proceed.

Kerryn lead the way, stepping over the corpses and rubble that littered the area before the doorway. She stepped through the gaping hole in the wall and into the unholy darkness. Lexen and Haven followed close behind. Haven uttered a low incantation, and a brilliant luminescence emanated outward from his outstretched hand, unfurling the unnatural darkness that gripped the area. As the darkness receded, the only thing remaining in the room was a large stone altar in the center of the room.

"Damn it!" exclaimed Kerryn, jamming the tip of her staff hard into the ground in frustration.

Kerryn turned sharply on her heel, but before she could take more than a step an ominous cackle resonated throughout the room, heralding the arrival of Lady Chakrasul. A dark wind surged in through the doorframe and the Goddess of Corruption materialized before Kerryn's eyes, blocking her exit.

"Why have you desecrated my temple, mortal?" hissed the graceful human form of the goddess, clad in a simple black robe.

"Why have you taken my son?" snapped back Kerryn, her clutch on the staff in her hand so tight her knuckles had turned a ghostly white.

"Your stupid boy needed to learn some manners. Attempted murder on one of my oracles is a rather treasonous crime," explained the Lady of Corruption with a wicked sneer.

"Oh, that was your oracle?" asked Kerryn with feigned concern, fully aware of the importance of the target she had selected for Demarcus's assassination attempt.

"You fool, mortals should not meddle in the affairs of the Divine!" hissed Chakrasul in response.

"Return my son to me unharmed and I will consider not committing genocide against your followers, bitch," demanded Kerryn coldly.

The goddess shrieked loudly upon hearing the insult, dispersing into a fine mist and circling around the occupants of the inner sanctum. As the dark wind escorted the Lady's essence out of her temple, her voice could be heard through the howling gale, "Prepare to be pursued to the ends of Sapience, Cardinalis family! My Champion will hang you all by your own entrails, starting with your pathetic excuse for a son!"

Kerryn turned back to face Lexen and Haven. "Reduce this place to rubble. Leave no survivors," she ordered Haven. Turning her attention to Lexen she commanded, "Find me Tina. Bring her to me, either as a corpse or still breathing, I could care less. I can work with either."

Kerryn uttered “Voltada,” under her breath and was immediately swallowed up by the earth, leaving her orders left to be executed.

Chapter 10: The Temple of Corruption

It took Kerryn’s spies all of half a day to locate Lady Chakrasul’s Champion, the tiny imp known as Tina.

“She is attending to business in the Fields of Vilimio, is she? And this is a reliable source, Warden?” asked Kerryn skeptically.

Lexen nodded slowly. His best agents had tracked Tina to Vilimio. Fortunately for he and Kerryn, Tina was not a particular stealthy person. She preferred to simply be brutally efficient at killing, and efficient she was. Very few could match Tina in combat prowess, and even fewer still could best her. It was going to take careful planning and perhaps a bit of luck to capture the imp.

“What do you suggest for as a plan of attack, Legacy?” asked Lexen.

Kerryn shook her head. “I will handle Tina. I’ll need you and Haven to help me bring her back here once I’ve subdued her. We set out at sunset for Vilimio.” Lexen nodded and departed to inform Haven.

The trio set out that evening, and arrived at Vilimio by dawn. The entrance to the fields was a dusty, well-worn path with a set of wagon ruts down the center. Kerryn and her companions gazed out over the fields, taking in the layout of the fields. Five large sections were fenced off, and within the fences were hundreds of semi-conscious women and children. Field monitors wandered between the fields, clipboards in hands taking count of their crops. In a pen near the entrance was a pack of ravenous undead bloodhounds, their sole purpose to herd the women and children daily and disposing of bodies as needed.

“What a disgusting operation,” commented Haven.

“Agreed. As much as I would like to help, that is not our purpose here. We are here for Tina and Tina only. I’m going to guess she is either near the administration building or out by the barn,” said Kerryn in a hushed tone.

Lexen and Haven nodded, following Kerryn as she lead them down the road. They passed several field monitors, who looked up and appraised them. Occasionally they would draw a jeer, “Move along, warm blood!” one shouted. Most however, shrugged helplessly and ignored them, going back to their clipboards.

As they approached the administrative building, Lexen whispered to Haven, “I’m almost inclined to let you cleanse this place with your fiery temper, Haven. Put these poor bastards out of their misery. No person, no matter who they are or what they’ve done, deserve to simply be a crop to have their organs harvested by these undead creatures.”

Haven grinned, a small flame sparked within his eyes at the prospect of yet another taste of fire to inflame the tempers and purify the unholy that plagued Sapience. Kerryn shot both of them a glance and shook her head, “Tina FIRST. And she’s not here, she must be at the barn.”

Following the winding path deeper into the organ harvesting operation, the companions quickly reached the barn. From inside they heard the sinister cackle that could only belong to the most despicable and horrible person to ever disgrace Sapience with their presence – Tina, Champion of Chakrasul.

Overcome with emotion and wanting answers surrounding Demarcus, Kerryn hefted the heavy plank holding the doors closed out of its holder, tossing it to the ground. She forcibly pushed on both doors and slowly they gave way to her strength, opening. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness inside the barn, one of the many racial traits inherent to being a Mhun. What she saw would horrify any decent person.

Suspended in the middle of the darkened barn was Demarcus. The boy was covered in dried blood and dirt. Multiple cuts and bruises of varying severity appeared to be the source of most of the blood. What was most disturbing, however, was the source of suspension. A ragged hole had been torn in his abdominal cavity and a considerable length of his intestines had been pulled out and looped around a hook embedded in one of the overhead support beams.

“Just embrace Ilvon’s gift, Demarcus! Join us, the precious blessing of Undeath will stop all of this. Lady Chakrasul has even promised to let you stay with her Oracle as long as you so desire!” tempted Tina, who hovered with her tiny wings flapping just above Demarcus’s lolled back head.

A pained expression crossed Demarcus’s face and with considerable effort he managed to launch a mouthful of bloody spit at Tina, who dodged it easily. “N-never,” he replied weakly.

Tina lashed out with jagged nails and tore into the boy’s tattered flesh, drawing an intense and agonizing cry of despair. She landed on his chest and grabbed a handful of hair on his head, pulling it up uncomfortably for Demarcus. “I can do this forever, Demarcus. I don’t need to eat, I don’t thirst, I need nothing and am free to pursue only my desires. Just accept what is being offered, Demarcus! Don’t be a fool!” exclaimed Tina.

Demarcus stared at her blankly. “Death. F-first,” he stammered, the fiery resolve of his Locke blood mingling with the legendary stubbornness of his Cardinalis heritage and reflecting in his eyes.

Kerryn stepped confidently into the barn and announced her presence, calling out, “Tina. Let him go and I’ll make your destruction quick.”

Tina’s lips spread wide into a toothy, wry smirk. “Well well well, if it isn’t the legendary Don Cardinalis. I was hoping I would get the distinct pleasure of sending you to be judged by your divine patron,” she snickered with a delighted laugh.

“There is only one person here who will be handing out judgment. And it isn’t you,” she replied coldly, staring down the imp with her empty hands relaxed at her side.

Abruptly Tina shrieked loudly, leapt off Demarcus and spun towards Kerryn, flinging a glowing tarot card emblazoned with the image of a man hanging by a multitude of ropes directly at Kerryn.

Calmly, Kerryn stepped to the side and snatched the speeding card nimbly out of the air, completing a spin of her own to maintain the momentum of the card and redirected it at Tina. Taken completely aback by the sudden reversal of roles, Tina's attempt to dodge failed miserably. A tangle of ropes erupted from the tarot card and quickly encased Tina. She screamed wildly detesting the unfairness of everything, "WHAT! YOU CAN'T THROW MY OWN TAROT CARD AT ME! I'LL EAT YOUR HEART KERRYNN!"

Lexen dashed forward with his hands out as if he were prepared to catch the bundled imp as she fell to the floor. Instead he slid to a stop and performed a perfectly timed thrust kick to Tina's impossibly tiny head. The sudden kick not only sent the mass of ropes and imp to spin wildly for the remainder of its descent, but it also knocked her completely unconscious.

Meanwhile, Kerryn and Haven ran up to Demarcus. Haven leapt up in a careful back flip and grabbed the support beam between his legs. He carefully unwrapped his son's intestines from the hook that suspended the boy while Kerryn cradled him in her arms. She gently ran her fingers over his hair matted in blood, whispering soothingly to him, "It's alright Demarcus, we're here for you. We're all so proud of you."

"I'm s-sorry Mother," cried Demarcus.

"Shhhh, don't be sorry Demarcus. You did well, it is a very brave thing to be able to resist the temptation to embrace the curse of Undeath in the face of your own demise," comforted Kerryn, tears welling up in her eyes.

Haven climbed down from her perch and carefully tucked Demarcus's organs back into his abdominal cavity and covered the wound gingerly with a roll of bandages he procured from his knapsack. "We'll need to get him back to the Inn quickly. By all rights he should be dead, I suspect Tina used some sort of horrible magic to preserve his life while she tortured him," he explained.

Kerryn nodded with a soft snuffle, turning to exit the barn. Lexen approached her side with Tina tucked under his arm, still bound in the magical ropes from the tarot card. Haven glanced towards a pile of hay and snapped his fingers, producing a small ball of flames. He effortlessly flung the ball into the pile of hay, which erupted quickly into a fire that quickly spread to the nearby wall of the barn. The group of four had barely made it a hundred feet and the entire barn had been engulfed in the purifying flames.

As they made their way down the winding path out of Vilimio, several field monitors emerged from their assigned fields and stopped in the center of the road, blocking their progress. "Move," snarled Haven.

"Where do you think you're going, warmblood?" asked one of the field monitors.

"If you don't move I'll rip your head off and take it with me so you can find out," growled Haven menacingly. The field monitor laughed and began to open his mouth to reply. Springing forward with one arm drawn back, he punched the undead supervisor in face. The well placed punch was so tremendously forceful it knocked the monitor's head clean off, sending it flying into a nearby fence and rolling onto the ground. The headless body stood upright for a few moments before toppling over into a heap. Haven thrust his shoulder into one of the other field monitors, knocking him over on his way to pick up the

severed head. The others were gripped with fear and stood frozen in place, unable to move. Haven bent down and picked up the head and turned it towards him, exclaiming loudly, "I warned you!"

Kerryn and Lexen silently made their way past the statuesque field monitors. Haven quickly rejoined them, his new trophy in hand. Clearly annoyed, Haven flicked an occasional firebomb into the fields as they passed them, incinerating the unwilling and forsaken slaves of Vilimio. They quickened their pace and made unprecedented time back to the Black Flagon Inn with a great deal of work ahead of them.

Chapter 12: First Things First

Kerryn grabbed the bucket of ice water and threw it into Tina's face. Spluttering the imp was roused from her unconscious state. "Ieeeeeeeee! What is THIS!?" she cried, struggled against her restraints. Tina had been hung upside down by her ankles in the cellar of the Black Flagon Inn. The damp, dimly lit cellar had the barrels of ale, crates of wine bottles, shelves of dishes and eating utensils all shoved to the side. Sacks of food and provisions were piled carefully in corners, leaving the center of the dank cellar open for the events to come. A small pot bellied stove of cast iron glowed red hot, the only source of illumination in the entire room.

"Now, I promised I would drag this out. So here is how this is going to work. I'm going to ask you a question. You are going to answer it. If I don't like the answer, well... tell you what, I'll keep it as a surprise, how does that sound?" asked Kerryn with a half smirk on her face.

Tina shrieked again, yelling in an obnoxious high-pitched voice, "You bitch! Let me down now! I'm going to cut your spleen out with a spoon!"

Frowning, Kerryn thrust her hand out at Tina's face, striking the imp's nose with the flattened palm of her hand. A sickening crunch reverberated down Kerryn's arm as she shattered the imp's nose. Putrid black fluid rushed out of the wound and drained onto the ground. "That is not an answer I like," replied Kerryn. "Let's try a different question. Who tipped your Order off that Morion and Demarcus were going to assassinate Lady Chakrasul's Oracle?" she asked.

"I said let me down! You can't do this, Chakrasul will tear the very life essence from your pathetic and frail body and consume it with a sprinkling of your stupid boy's ground up bones!" exclaimed Tina in a nasally response.

Kerryn sighed and drew two knives from their place against her thigh, held in place by a feminine garter. She walked over to the stove and placed on in the glowing yellow embers and turned back to the imp hanging upside down in her cellar. She took the knife and deftly cut off several of Tina's fingers, letting them drop to the floor where they rolled in the viscous black fluid still dripping from Tina's broken nose. Tina screamed with every cut, unable to fight back.

"Who is the bastard responsible for hurting my precious boy?" hissed Kerryn, a flash of sinister intentions in her eyes.

"You'll never know because I'll never tell!" shrieked Tina gleefully.

Kerryn flicked the knife in her hand into the packed dirt floor sending small bits of dirt covered in the foul black bodily fluid coating the ground under the prisoner flying into the air. She retrieved the knife from the stove, the intense temperatures having heated the blade to a brilliant white glow. Kerryn grabbed Tina by the neck and held the imp still, slowly moving the nearly molten tip of the blade towards Tina's left eye. Heat emanated from the blade and washed over Kerryn's wrist and Tina's face. The imp screamed in horrible agony as it neared, causing the fluid in her eye to rise drastically in temperature. "Tell me who," said Kerryn calmly, the knife's tip slowly inching towards Tina's eye. "Never!" The vitreous fluid in Tina's eye began to boil and as the tip of the exceedingly hot knife pierced her eye it exploded violently, sending the scalding liquid in every direction. The drops that landed on the knife hissed fiercely as they were vaporized instantly.

Screaming Tina writhed wildly against her restraints. "Let me go! Lady Chakrasul help me! I beseech thee for assistance!" she cried out in vain.

"No one is going to help you, Tina. That's one thing you cowardly undead will never understand, there is no sense of esprit de corps, no loyalty amongst one another. The other members of your order could care less that you're hanging here being maimed and mangled. In fact, they welcome it either as an opportunity to take your spot as the Champion of Chakrasul, or are delighted that you are finally getting what you deserve because of every horrible thing you've ever done, which is pretty much everything you've ever done. Even the airless breaths you take are a crime against Life and Creation," explained Kerryn, placing the knife bag into the pot bellied stove to reheat it, its once luminous white glow reduced a dull reddish tint.

"You're wrong! Nobody cares about YOU Kerryn! You're the terrible one here, because you are a hypocrite! I know the teachings of Life and Creation preach forgiveness and redemption! Torture is saved as a practice for my kind only and has no place among the living!" decried Tina with sadistic glee.

Kerryn turned back and looked at Tina with a smirk. "You forget who you're talking to, Tina. I'm all too familiar with redemption. I was one of the first Bloodborn princesses to take the cure. I once stood as a proud Infernal knight, though one thing I have retained through all of it is my sense of honor and chivalry. I do what I must for the betterment of Life and Creation. And within all of Creation there is no place for the likes of you. Although Lord Dhar alone will pass judgment, I am confident as one of his most loyal disciples that this is just part of your damnation to come."

Tina cackled some more, the superheated vitreous fluid mingling with the black humor flowing from her nose and running down her forehead and continuing to pool on the floor. "Like a fool you gave up the only true power in all of Sapience, Kerryn! I know well of your past, do not patronize me!"

Kerryn laughed softly at Tina, giving her a soft shove and sending her swaying back and forth on the rope she hung from. "Oh you sad little creature you. I didn't think I would find pleasure in doing this, but it is incredibly satisfying to finally rid the world of you. No more will you be able to bully anyone, as your time is rapidly coming to an end."

With that Kerryn retrieved her once again white hot knife and steadied Tina. She slowly pushed the tip of the knife towards Tina's right eye this time, and the result was similar. Tina's eye exploded

violently as the vitreous humor boiled and exploded as the eyeball was pierced by the tip of the knife. Now blinded, Tina screeched with contempt for her captor.

“Now, let me explain something to you, Tina. No one has ever loved you. Lady Chakrasul uses you like a whore uses men. You are meaningless. You are insignificant. You lack even the most basic of redeeming qualities, and quite frankly I should cure your undeath, break your kneecaps and elbows, remove your tongue, nose, and ears, mutilate your face, detach your hands and feet and leave you to suffer, afraid and alone along the side of the highway. Lord Dhar, however, is more generous and forgiving than I am, and He will determine your punishment in final death,” said Kerryn slowly, drawing out the vivid imagery for the blinded Tina.

“You fool! You fool! I will have my revenge, just you wait and see!” squawked Tina.

“No, no I don’t think so,” expressed Kerryn thoughtfully sucking on her bottom lip. “In fact, speaking of revenge, I think I’ll let my son, Demarcus, finish this process.”

“Hah! That pathetic boy? He couldn’t hurt a fly!” exclaimed Tina boastfully.

Demarcus emerged from the shadows, clutching his abdomen tenderly. “There’s nothing in all of Creation more pathetic than you, Tina,” he said quietly.

“Ahhhhhh hahaha! You stupid boy, you should have taken your rightful place among the undead! Did you know your Mother was once an Infernal and a vampire?” she asked out of desperation.

Shaking his head Demarcus responded, “It doesn’t matter about Mother’s past. And I will never join the ranks of the undead, nobody has a rightful place there.” Kerryn stepped back, melding into the shadows and watched Demarcus take over.

“It was Morion, wasn’t it?” asked Demarcus gently as he tilted his head to the side and looked at Tina’s empty eye sockets.

“That idiot? Hell no! I wouldn’t have bestowed the gift of undeath upon him if Ilvon Himself asked me to do so!” screamed Tina.

“Well that isn’t very charitable,” chided Demarcus. He paused briefly, standing upright and straightening his neck. “You know, I don’t think there was a spy, was there?” he asked.

“What? Of-of-of course there was!” stammered Tina angrily.

Demarcus shook his head and gave Tina a gentle push, sending her swaying on her rope again. “No, of course not. I should have guessed it all along. You’re very bad at lying, Tina. Quite frankly, you should have just thrown yourself into the volcano and saved everyone a lot of trouble and anguish.”

“No! Nooooo! There is a spy! It was Morion! And, and that other one, what’s-his-name! Yes! Those two!” protested Tina.

Demarcus grabbed his mace hanging from his belt and chanted a silent prayer to Lady Auresae. Holy fire surrounded his weapon and he hefted it a few times in his hand, gauging the remaining strength in his body. “I grow tired and weary of this conversation, Tina. It was not nice knowing you, and the

world will be a significantly better place without you. There never has been a more despicable creature, not even Lord Severn's treason with the Artifice comes close to the quintessential evil that you embody. May Lord Dhar not have mercy on you, but instead subject you to untold hardship and suffering for the remainder of time. Goodbye."

The boy lifted the mace over his shoulder and wobbled unsteadily for a moment. He then took a mighty swing at the imp and connected solidly. The holy fire instantly consumed Tina, burning straight to the core of her very being. A fierce burst of energy set out in a shockwave throughout the cellar, knocking Demarcus over and buffeting Kerryn against the cellar wall. Tina's body vaporized and the undeath surrounding her life essence was consumed in the righteous fury of Lady Auresae. The pure black soul that lingered briefly before being pulled down into the Halls of Lord Dhar for final judgment and punishment for all of its heinous and unspeakable acts.

Kerryn pushed herself off of the wall and rushed over to help Demarcus stand. "Is she gone?" asked Demarcus weakly. Kerryn nodded solemnly in affirmation. "Good. Let the four cities and all of the villages of Sapience rejoice," he replied.

Chapter 13: Morion's Redemption

"We have to do something with him, Kerryn. He was one of us, and served your faithfully until he was turned. We can't leave him restrained in the barn forever," pleaded Lexen.

Kerryn sighed, raising her cup of piping hot tea to her lips and taking a sip. "Yes, you're right. We owe it to him, me especially for doubting him."

Lexen nodded in agreement. "Should we begin to prepare the cure, then?" he asked.

Kerryn sighed deeper, setting her tea down on the table behind her. She turned to Lexen and said, "So long as we're ready to accept the consequences that he may not be granted the gift of Life once more."

"Even if he is sent to the Halls of the Underking, surely that is a far better fate than to be eternally damned as a soulless, lifeless abomination, Kerryn," explained Lexen.

"Yes, yes you're right. Of course you're right. Begin preparations immediately. Gather the ingredients personally, Warden. The moment the cure is complete, we will perform the cleansing ritual on the rim of the volcano," she said with a bit of a forced smile.

"This is for the best, Legacy. Go now and tend to your son, the lad needs his mother's healing touch and an ear to listen. He's been through a lot," stated Lexen as he turned to leave. Kerryn followed him out of the parlor and into the main room of the Inn.

Katszias was sitting at a table with Demarcus. Most of his cuts had healed, though due to the unholy magic performed on him during his captivity they would all likely leave scars. It broke Kerryn's heart every time she saw him, and she cursed her poor judgment and selfish motives that caused

everything to transpire. She leaned against the archway and watched silently with her arms folded across her chest.

“No! Not possible, you’re lying!” exclaimed Katszia in disbelief.

Demarcus smiled weakly, “No, I’m not lying. Honest,” he said, raising a hand as if to testify under oath.

“But, how is that even possible?” asked Katszia playfully. “You know what, you’ll probably just have to show me,” she said with an alluring wink.

Demarcus blinked a few times and blushed, gazing bashfully down at his hand pressed against the bandages on his abdomen. He was still in a great deal of pain daily. His mother and Katszia had both attempted to heal his wounds, but whatever magic Tina had used on him was preventing their healing touches from being effective. They had made progress, slowly each day, but the pain endured as if each cut and bruise was fresh.

“Are you okay, Demi?” asked Katszia earnestly.

Demarcus looked up and gulped, nodding emphatically. “Yes, yes of course. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” she said with a warm smile. Katszia reached out and took Demarcus’s hand in hers, giving it a light squeeze. Demarcus smiled back weakly.

“Right, sorry,” replied Demarcus.

“Demi! Stop apologizing!” teased Katszia.

The red in Demarcus’s cheeks deepened as his blushed even more. He moved to get up out of his chair and Katszia reached out her hand. “Stay. What do you need, I’ll get it,” she offered kindly.

“Oh, I just wanted a glass of water,” he said sheepishly.

Katszia got up and went to the bar. Pulling out a clean glass she ladled the glass full with fresh water from a large barrel. She gracefully flowed back to the table and set the glass down in front of Demarcus and took her seat next to him.

“Thank you,” said Demarcus while reaching for the glass. He grabbed the glass in his free hand and thirstily took a long drink. He smacked his lips and set the glass down having drained three quarters of its contents.

Demarcus let out an exhausted sigh. He turned to his mother and asked, “Mother, how is Morion doing?”

Kerryn smiled weakly responding, “He’s doing fine sweetie. Don’t worry about him, your Uncle is going to take very good care of him. The best thing you can do is to focus on getting better yourself.” The lie was so unconvincing she was sure there wasn’t a prayer that Demarcus would believe it for even a moment.

“Oh. Well that’s good. Can I go visit him, maybe bring him something to eat?” asked Demarcus.

Katszia interrupted the exchange, gently resting her hand on Demarcus’s arm, “Demi, how about we go upstairs. I brought you a book on the history of Lady Auresae’s Divine Order. We could look it over if you’d like.” She produced a thick leather bound manuscript from her backpack. The thin vellum pages were worn along the edges, but the book itself appeared to be in very good shape despite its apparent age.

Demarcus’s eyes shot to the book. He stood up slowly, wincing and clutching his abdomen. Katszia rose and supported him by grabbing his arm, steadying him. “Yes, that would be nice I think,” he said, starting off towards the stairwell.

Gwen burst out from underneath one of the tables. “I want to come!” she exclaimed loudly. A brief look of frustration crossed Katszia’s face. She quickly replaced it with feigned excitement, “Of course you’re welcome to join us Gwen!” she exclaimed.

Kerryn moved towards Gwen and pulled a ribbon out of her hair that had come untied and loosely tangled in her locks. She neatly retied the ribbon into a bow and ushered Gwen along whispering, “Try not to aggravate your brother too much, dear.” Gwen scampered off ahead of Demarcus and Katszia as they made their slow ascent up the stairs.

Once they were out of earshot Lexen emerged from the kitchen, “She’s enamored with your son, Kerryn.”

Kerryn frowned. “I thought she was smitten with you and your devilish style and demeanor,” she teased.

Lexen shook his head, “I’m sure she still is, but she’s young. The heart is rather fickle at that age. Besides, I think it’ll be good for Demarcus to have some companionship. It’s about time, I was afraid that boy didn’t have any interest in women, or even men.”

Kerryn’s frown persisted, “I’m more concerned about his wounds. They aren’t healing, Warden. Whatever the hell Tina did to him, it is well beyond my capabilities to heal.”

“Not everything can just be healed, Kerryn. Speaking of capabilities, we have all of the ingredients except for a phoenix feather for the cure,” explained Lexen.

Kerryn raised a finger and tapped her nose knowingly, “The Sentaari recently acquired a phoenix hatchling. Given our good standing with them, I’m sure they would oblige us a feather, especially given the circumstances. I can personally go and retrieve it.”

Haven’s voice sounded off behind her, “Ew, you’re going to *Durian*?” Haven wrinkled his nose and took a large bite out of a turkey leg in his hand.

“Yes, Haven, I’m going to Durian. Just because you’re public enemy number one there doesn’t mean that I’m not welcome. In fact, I have retained my rather good standing there,” she boasted with pride.

Haven scoffed and dismissed her with his free hand, “Woman, don’t try flattery on me. The last time you tried that Demarcus happened. Sylphe knows we don’t need another one of his sorry kind around.”

In a blur Kerryn had grabbed her cast iron pot and hurled it at Haven with pin point precision. The heavy cookware struck Haven square in the face, a bright red fountain of blood gushing from his freshly broken nose . The pot clattered to the ground, settling in just a position to collect most of the blood as it poured down Haven’s face and dripped off his chin into the pot in a steady stream. “Gods damn, woman!” Haven exclaimed, dropping his turkey leg and both hands immediately reaching up to try and stop the flow of blood.

Lexen stifled a laugh, “Brother, you pretty much were begging for that one.”

“Eh? At what point did I say, ‘Kerr, would you pretty please throw your pot right into my face and smash my nose into oblivion? I think I have too much blood and would very much appreciate your assistance in losing some of it.’?” Haven asked, pinching the bridge of his nose and only managing to partially slow the flow of blood.

Lexen shrugged, “I heard it, clearly you must have said it since you have such a precise memory that you recalled exactly what you said.”

Haven glowered at both of them and stomped off to the kitchen, dripping blood along the polished hardwood floor of the inn’s main room. Kerryn nodded appreciatively at Lexen, saying, “Thank you Warden for your support in that, once he’s stopped bleeding tell him there are a few hundred sovereigns in the parlor that he can go and gamble with if he so chooses.”

Lexen thought for a moment and smirked slightly, “Right, a few hundred sovereigns to throw away at Ahkeem’s tent. Got it. Travel well to Durian, Legacy.”

...

Kerryn returned later that evening with three long fiery orange tail feathers. Extending outward from the brilliant red colored shaft, the inner and outer vanes both transitioned from a brilliant burnt orange nearest to the shaft to a vibrant yellow at the tips, giving the feather the appearance of a flame. The feathers scintillated softly in the ambient light of the room, furthering the illusion of their fiery appearance.

Having handed one of the three feathers to Lexen, Kerryn took care and gently wrapped the other two feathers in a fine white linen cloth. She disappeared into the parlor and re-emerged a few moments later without the neatly packaged feathers. “How long will it take for you to prepare the cure, Warden?” asked Kerryn.

“Not long. I will have it prepared and ready to be administered in a matter of hours. I suggest we prepare Morion for the ritual and administer the cure at dawn, lest we run the chance of the ingredients spoiling,” explained Lexen, toying with the phoenix feather in the light.

Kerryn nodded in agreement and turned neatly on her heel, making her way out the back entrance towards the barn. As she approached the barn, she could hear the sounds of chains clanking and being

extended taut, restraining the creature inside. Violent hissing and snarling could be heard from within, small clumps of dirt and hay striking the inside of the barn door. Wispy clouds of dust spilling out in between the cracks of the wooden door floated out and each mote within the cloud was illuminated by the full moon.

She reached out and slid the barn door open, revealing the gaunt form of a vampire sireling. The creature was shackled at the wrists and ankles by heavy chains run through metal plates with hooks plated to the support beam running through the center of the barn. It barred its fangs and lunged at Kerryn, being abruptly restrained by its bindings. Despite the futility it continued to fight against the restraints, a desperate growl emitted as it lusted insatiably for blood.

Sighing, Kerryn slipped into the barn and quietly closed the door behind her. She cleared her mind and reached out telepathically to make a connection to whatever was left of Morion's mind. As she expected, all that she could sense was a desperate feral urge to feed.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," she whispered, breaking the mind lock. "I don't know what is going to happen at dawn when we administer the cure. I pray to the grace of Dhar that you'll be granted life anew and your body reformed. If so, do hope that you will come back to us. If you don't, I understand." A tear silently rolled down Kerryn's cheek as she talked to the sireling. Silently she crouched down and just watched, her heart aching with a deep longing to right things for the cursed Mhun.

She waited in the barn until first signs of light could be seen along the horizon. The ruddy light barely crept through the slats in the barn walls. Kerryn was startled when the door behind her opened, and she turned prepared to defend herself.

"If you hit me I will break your arm," said Lexen annoyed.

"Sorry Lexen, you startled me," replied Kerryn, lowering her fists and easing out of her Tiger stance.

"Well, next time I come into the barn I'll be sure to announce myself," retorted Lexen. "It's time, would you like me to subdue Morion for the journey to the volcano?" he asked.

Kerryn nodded silently, taking one last glance over her shoulder at the restrained sireling. She shuddered, suppressed memories of her own awakening as a vampire making the way to the surface of her mind. Kerryn quickly concentrated and forced the memories away, a faint feeling of weakness hitting her limbs and the distinct taste of blood rising in her throat and settling briefly in her mouth.

As Kerryn stepped out of the barn she quietly slid the door closed. A loud thump followed by screeching and several additional thumps could be heard. For some reason Kerryn winced, likely from a lingering empathic link formed during her time spent in the barn over the night. She waited a few minutes and Lexen emerged with a large burlap sack tied with several heavy chains over his shoulder. Lexen hefted the sack onto the sprightly white stallion tied to the hitching post outside of the barn and quickly climbed into the saddle. Kerryn nodded to Lexen, indicating she will catch up to him at the volcano with Haven.

Lexen galloped off to the main highway and turned due south, riding off into the early morning light. Kerryn returned to the main room of the Inn where she found Haven eating a bacon lettuce and tomato sandwich at one of the tables without a plate. Normally a cause to hit him with her pot, she was still overcome with guilt and grief to follow through. She walked up to Haven and gently set her hand on his shoulder. He turned around and pursed his lips. Setting the sandwich down on the table, he brushed his hands together and cleaned them of any crumbs. Together the two set out in the direction Lexen went.

They met up with Lexen at the rim of the volcano. A large rock ledge juttied out over the molten lava that churned below them. Thick plumes of superheated sulfurous air rose around them, stinging their eyes and scorching their skin. Haven raised his hands skyward and muttered a prayer to Lord Sylphe, and a thin coating of spiritual energy surrounding each of them, preventing further damage from the heat to their skin.

Lexen and Haven unloaded the burlap sack from the stallion. Having served its purpose, Lexen gave a solid smack to the animal's rear, sending it galloping off back to the stable at the inn. Together the two Mhuns carried the burlap sack near the edge of the ledge and set it down on the rocky surface. The material quickly caught fire and burned away into ash, leaving just the semi-conscious form of the sireling tied tightly in chains. Blisters quickly formed on the creature's skin as the intense heat and the quickly rising sun burned it viciously.

Kerryn commented, "We should hurry, dawn is upon us."

Lexen nodded in agreement. Reaching into a small pouch affixed to his belt, Lexen produced a small vial with a cork stopper. He nodded to Haven, who grabbed the sireling's mouth and held it open. Lexen undid the stopper on the vial and poured the contents into the creature's throat. As soon as the liquid touched the back of its throat, Morion regained consciousness and thrashed violently against the chains wrapping him. Agonizing screams were drowned out by the rumbling of the volcano below them as the cure took effect. The powerful magic worked to counteract the curse that had overtaken the poor Mhun.

Kerryn raised her hands skyward as dawn's first rays of light broke the rim of the caldera and shined onto the group, penetrating the smoke and sulfurous air. The light began to burn away the skin underneath the heavy iron chains. As if on cue, Lexen and Haven lifted the writhing Morion up and heaved him over the side of the ledge, casting the unholy form into the rejuvenating flames below. "Lord Dhar, we commit this poor soul into Your care and for Your judgment. Should You deem it fit and if it is what Morion desires, we beseech you grant him life anew and a new body!" She finished with a magical incantation, sealing the ritual magic in place as the body struck the molten surface below with an inaudible splash.

A pillar of flames rose sharply from below in a torrent of heat, buffeting the group. The magic undone by the components of the cure and catalyzed by Kerryn's prayer, Morion's curse was lifted. Instinctually, each of the three Mhuns raised their hands to shield their eyes from the intense burning pillar of fire. As it subsided, they lowered their hands and blinking recognized the hazy form of their companion and friend. His body, however, was not substantial. Its pale ghostly form wavered in the heated air. A smile crossed his lips as Morion hovered in front of them. "Thank you my friends for freeing me from that horrible damnation. Please do not take it personally, but I have chosen not to return

to you all but join Lord Dhar in the Halls of the Underking. May the Light be with you all and I will hopefully see you all when it is time for you to join us in His Halls,” whispered the apparition. Slowly he began to fade and Kerryn reached out with her hand, opening her mouth to make a plea for him to stay but the words would not come out. As the sun finished waking and sat just above the horizon, Morion’s form dissipated forever.

Kerryn hung her head sadly. A comforting hand rested on her shoulder, guiding her to turn around and gently coaxed her to trudge away from the ledge and lead her down the volcano. Upon returning to the Black Flagon Inn, Kerryn silently entered her private chambers and closed the door, a sharp click emanating from the lock as the mechanism engaged. She collapsed onto her bed, displacing a fine layer of soot onto her down comforter and silk pillowcases. Her heart was torn, she had lost one of her most loyal compatriots. Worse yet, she had questioned his loyalty up until the betrayal that ripped him from her family. For the first time in a long while, she felt as though she had failed. She waited for the tears to come, but the heat and exhaustion left her eyes dry. She continued to wait until she succumbed to exhaustion, her eyes closing and her mind drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 14: The Great Hunt

Several days had passed since the events at the volcano. Kerryn had not yet emerged from her room, despite the pleas of her Capo. In her absence he did his best to fill in, though there were many decisions that Lexen was simply not comfortable making. This family belonged to Don Cardinalis. He had some success sending Kerryn’s children up to her with plates of food and drink, and he was reassured by them she had taken some bites. He suspected, however, that most of the food went unfinished.

On the eighth day, Kerryn emerged from her personal chambers. A tired, sullen look replaced her normal neatly kempt appearance that typically hid her feelings well. Lexen waited anxiously for her to speak, and he watched her closely as she moved slowly into the parlor. She walked up to the window and gazed outside silently. After what seemed like an eternity Kerryn spoke, “We will be having a Great Hunt, Lexen. Lady Chakrasul’s temple may be no more, but her followers are too numerous. I want their numbers culled significantly. I’m offering several powerful artefacts as prizes to the hunters that accumulate the most points.”

“And the scoring for this event will be...?” asked Lexen inquisitively.

“Depending on who or what is killed, the points will range from one to five points. The Great Hunt will run for two months, at which point the competitors will submit their point totals and prizes will be distributed,” explained Kerryn, her gaze still fixated on a point out the window.

“Very well, I will make it so. I’ll make the announcement based on the presumption that it will begin next month,” said Lexen as he departed.

“Mmmm,” replied Kerryn absentmindedly. Her thoughts were far from the Black Flagon Inn. Her revenge on the Goddess of Corruption was nowhere near complete, and this was simply the next step. Losing Her temple and Her champion were significant blows, but reducing her following to nothing more than a distant memory will ensure the Lady’s essence will eventually deplete itself and her demise will be

complete. The cost has already been great, and Kerryn had resolved in her mind that she will pay whatever the price for revenge, no matter how steep.

At midnight a bright flare rose over the Black Flagon in, signaling the start of the Great Hunt. Its bright red glow illuminating the Ithmian Forests, the Sirrocian Mountains, the city of Enorian to the south, the village of Durian to the northeast, Hashan and Spinesreach to the north, and as far west as Scdive. Kerryn remained in the parlor sipping a steaming cup of lavender tea and wrote an entry in her journal.

“The participants have been signaled,” said Lexen quietly in an attempt to notify Kerryn without disturbing her too much.

“Good,” she said, pausing at the end. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing, Warden?” she asked after the pause, still absorbed in her tea and journal.

“Legacy, do you remember nothing of the training I gave you as an Infernal?” asked Lexen. Without letting Kerryn respond he continued, “Do not let yourself be fooled into second guessing your decisions. Your first instinct is usually the right one.”

“Hmmm. My first instinct about Morion wasn’t the right one,” Kerryn quipped back quickly before taking a sip of her tea.

“That’s why I said usually right. But right, wrong, or indifferent, you have to make a decision. I trained you to make a decision and you have. For what it is worth, I would make the same decision if I were in your position,” he offered.

“Thank you Warden. Please keep me informed of the participants’ progress,” said Kerryn as she dismissed Lexen.

“Of course,” he said, pausing. “You know Demarcus is participating, right?” he added at the end.

The mention of her son caught Kerryn’s attention and she looked up from her journal and tea. “No, I was not aware of that.” She chewed nervously on her lower lip. “I trust you will look after him, Lexen,” she added, her eyes locked on him.

“I swear that no harm will come to him. Of course, his score may be somewhat inflated,” Lexen said boastfully with a smirk.

“Good. See to it that it is. I would rather Demarcus have some of these artefacts than others that I have heard were intending to participate,” Kerryn said, returning her focus back to her tea and journal entry.

Lexen departed the parlor and met up with Demarcus in the main room of the Black Flagon Inn. “Alright boy, you’re going to stray no more than ten feet from me and I will hear absolutely no complaints if at any point I feel the need to step in and assist you. Do I make myself clear?” asked Lexen.

Demarcus nodded emphatically. He eagerly hefted his mace and checked the straps on his shield. Finding them satisfactory, the two headed towards the door. However, they were stopped just short by a feminine voice calling out to them, "And you think you can leave without me why?"

Katsziaz appeared at the bottom of the stairs with a Lupine bow in her hands and a quiver full of arrows slung low on her hip. She already had an arrow nocked and ready. "Unless of course you're wanting to get beaten by a girl straight up. I figured I'd at least give you the option to give me a handicap by following you two to give you a fighting chance," she teased.

"Oh, no that's fine Kats, you can come along," said Demarcus with a smile. Lexen glanced at him with a flash of anger in his eyes. Lexen turned and walked briskly out of the inn, leaving Demarcus and Katsziaz behind.

"Hrm. I think I've started to annoy your uncle," said Katsziaz with a giggle.

Demarcus shrugged and responded, "Maybe. I think he's just grumpy. He gets like that sometimes."

"If by sometimes you mean all the time, then yes, he is grumpy sometimes," said Katsziaz with a trilling melodic laugh. "Come on, we better catch up to him before he just runs off and massacres an entire village."

Demarcus's eyes grew wide at the suggestion, "He wouldn't do something like that!"

Katsziaz was taken aback slightly at Demarcus's lack of historical knowledge. "Wouldn't? You realize he already has, right Demi?"

"Huh?" asked Demarcus, his face contorted with confusion.

"Don't mind me. Let's go," commanded Katsziaz, grabbing Demarcus by the hand and dragging him out of the inn.

The three set out for Three-Rock Outpost. A group of bandits had set up camp there and among their numbers there were a handful of Chakrasul's loyal followers. Lexen, Demarcus and Katsziaz made their way through the herds of wild horses and buffalo in the pastures leading up to the outpost. Lexen lead the two youngsters up to the outer fence and motioned for them to crouch behind it.

"From what we know there are five members of Lady Chakrasul's Order that have taken up residence here at Three-Rock. I sincerely doubt that the bandit leader, Ennioch, is going to appreciate us killing any of his bandits, so we're going to try a little bit of stealth. In and out. That means being quiet, Demarcus. Do you understand?" explained and asked Lexen.

Both Demarcus and Katsziaz nodded. Each tightened their grip on the weapons in their hands. A quick sweep of the path before them indicated it was clear and Lexen give the signal to move in. The three made a quick dash through the entrance and across the main path that circled the camp, hiding amongst several of the tents set up in the center. Lexen narrowed his eyes, taking stock of the surrounding tents.

He quickly located the target tent and pointed it out. Katszia drew back the nocked arrow and held the weapon steady. The trio crept closer to the canvas structure in silence. Just as they neared the tent a strong gust of wind rushed through the encampment and tossed open the flaps of the tent, revealing six figures in the tent.

Without hesitation, Katszia released the arrow she had nocked and aimed into the tent. The projectile flew straight and true, finding its home deep into the eye socket of the target. With practiced reflexes she drew and prepared a second arrow, drawing back the bowstring. Taking only a moment to aim she released the second arrow which also landed a fatal blow through the temple of a second target. The two followers of Corruption crumpled to the ground, delivered off of their mortal coil by the practiced aim of the young girl.

The other four figures in the tent were startled by the whizzing noise of multiple arrows flying into the tent. As the gust of wind subsided the tent flap returned to a closed position, obscuring the three hunters from their vision. The three living members of Lady Chakrasul's Order suddenly realized the presence of the fourth, most unwelcome gust and began to shout.

"Shit, so much for stealth. Go!" urged Lexen with a push to Demarcus's back. Stumbling at first, Demarcus charged towards the tent with his shield ready. Lexen was right behind him and Katszia drew a third arrow and prepared it for flight.

Drawing back the tent flap, Demarcus exposed the tents inhabitants and intruder. The three Order members had drawn weapons and were pointing them at the intruder. The intruder was a tall Rajamala with mangy, matted orange fur. His skin hung very loosely to his frame and the foul stench of decay surrounded him. The undead creature lifted a large stone flail and prepared to attack.

Lexen pulled a throwing knife out from where it had been tucked neatly on the inside of his boot and sent it flying with a flick of his wrist. The knife cut sharply through the air and landed right in the forehead of the Rajamala Terradim, penetrating deep into his decaying brain. Katszia followed the precise knife strike with a rapid volley of three arrows, all of them finding their mark into the neck of the would be assassin.

The Order members had sufficient time to gather their thoughts and actions and made their own attack, their daggers cutting deep into the Rajamala's flesh. His massive stone flail fell from his clutch as he staggered to knee. The repeated blows from the followers were too much for their first assailant and he fell onto his side unmoving.

Demarcus had covered the short distance and barreled into the group standing near the far end of the tent, knocking all three survivors of the initial attack onto the ground. He recovered his balance and swung his mace downwards, connecting with the face of one Chakrasulian. The blow reduced the woman's head to nothing more than a bloody pulp. Demarcus quickly shifted his balance and swung the edge of his shield at the neck of the next closest target and landed on the softly, fleshy part of their neck. The tremendous impact of the strike neatly severed their head and sent it rolling out the other end of the tent.

Lexen caught up to Demarcus and grabbed the fifth and final woman. He lifted her high above his head and brought her back down hard onto his knee, shattering her spine and severing the spinal cord in a dozen different places. She convulsed for a few moments and then subsided into death.

“Look sharp, we need to make a hasty exit,” explained Lexen as he pulled Katszia’s arrows out of the slain targets and handed them to her. She stashed them into her quiver and nodded, letting Lexen lead them back out of the camp. Unfortunately, their intruder had started their marks and created enough of a ruckus that half the camp had been alerted to their presence. Waiting for them at the entrance to the camp were half a dozen bandits armed with a variety of makeshift weapons.

“Step aside and no more of you have to die,” ordered Lexen loudly as he walked towards them.

“Get him!” one of the larger bandits ordered with a finger pointing at Lexen, Demarcus and Katszia.

Lexen muttered under his breath and dropped to all fours and charged at the group of bandits. Within two long strides he had shifted from his normal Mhun self to a large, hulking black Atabahi with a silver stripe down the center of his chest. Katszia followed his lead, slinging her bow around her torso and dropping to all fours. Her face extended outwards into a long canine-like snout, her legs grow outwards and a fine covering of soft, pure white fur covered her body.

The large black Atabahi leaped at the rushing bandits. His jaw opened, he landed with one of the bandit’s head caught in his powerful jaws. He deftly snapped it shut, crushing the bandit’s head like an overripe melon.

The much smaller and distinctly feminine Atabahi butted her head into the chest of one of the bandits powerfully, causing his ribs to break away from his spine and explode outwards as the chest cavity was crushed. A frothy mixture of blood and gore splattered against her pristine white coat, turning it delicate pink color.

The remaining four bandits turned and began to run away from their encampment entirely and the two Atabahi turned and pursued them. Each quickly overcame an escaping bandit. The now pinkish Atabahi efficiently ripped into the bandits neck, violently ripping the jugular out and turning the bandit into a brief fountain of blood. The large black alpha grabbed his bandit by the leg and shook his head violently, whipping the bandit about violently. After several seconds of the vicious rag doll treatment, every bone in the bandit’s body had been pulverized and the squishy corpse dropped from the frothing maw of the overwhelming wolf.

The feminine wolf rapidly transformed back into her humanoid form and pulled the bow off of her body and knocked two arrows at once. She drew back and released the arrows, and both found their marks deftly. Having dispatched all of the bandits, the alpha Atabahi stood up on all fours and shed his wolfen form, returning to the familiar image of Demarcus’s uncle.

“Well, wasn’t that exciting,” said Lexen as he glanced back at the bandit encampment. “I almost feel as though I should send your father over here to burn this place to the ground. I feel as though your mother may not be entirely too happy with me if I were to, however,” he added.

“Yes, well, this coming from the man who just turned someone into a gelatinous blob, I’m not sure you have a lot of room to talk,” teased Katszia playfully.

Lexen shot her a sharp glance and a low growl emanated from the back of his throat. Katszia’s head bobbed down slightly in submission and the growling ceased. Demarcus looked on with a frown.

Noticing Demarcus’s frown, Katszia asked, “What’s wrong, Demi?”

“Nothing,” he replied.

“Don’t make me beat the truth out of you,” she warned, placing her hands on her hips while awaiting a response to her question.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll tell you later,” he said with a dismissive gesture.

“Promise?” Katszia asked.

Demarcus nodded. “Come on, we need to find more of these sorry bastards and send them to the Halls of the Underking.”

Lexen grumbled, “At least one of you two has some decent sense about you.”

...

The two months designated as the Great Hunt passed quickly. Lexen, Demarcus and Katszia returned to the Black Flagon Inn an hour shy of midnight on the final night. The three hadn’t been back since they set out on the first night of the Great Hunt. They were greeted warmly by Kerryn, Gwen and Haven.

Gwen rushed up to Lexen and leaped into his arms, catching the older Mhun off guard. He quickly regained his composure and flung the small girl up into the air and caught her again, swinging her about in a full circle. The girl squealed in utter delight. “Unca Lexen you’re home!” she cried. “I kept your feeshies fed for you!” she added, pulling the corners of her mouth together and making a fish face at Lexen.

“Well thank you, Gwen, I appreciate it. I think you’ve gotten bigger!” he added, a barely noticeable smile coming to his mouth.

Kerryn walked up to Demarcus and Katszia and gave both of them a warm hug. “I’m glad to see both of you,” she said quietly. Both returned the hug emphatically and mentioned that they too were glad to see Kerryn.

“Oh to hell with all of *this* stupid mushy crap, tell your old man how many of those Chakrasulian bastards you turned into mushy crap m’boy!” exclaimed Haven with a hefty pat on Demarcus’s back. The boy staggered under his father’s emphatic blows to his shoulders.

“Well, I’m glad to see you too, Father,” said Demarcus with a hint of resentment. “I would imagine we were fairly successful. I ended up with fourteen hundred and eighty six points. Lexen had four hundred and sixty seven.”

Katsziaz adopted a wry grin and boasted proudly, "I, on the other hand, had thirty two thousand four hundred and ninety two points."

Haven balked at the number. "Wait, so you beat Demarcus by over thirty one thousand points?"

Katsziaz nodded emphatically.

Haven punched Demarcus in the shoulder, hard. "Well you little rascal, how nice of you to let the pretty little lady win. Though next time don't make it so obvious!"

Demarcus blushed and glanced at Katsziaz. "Right Father, I'll try next time to keep it closer so it is a bit more believable."

Meanwhile, Kerryn stared at Katsziaz and mouthed silently in complete astonishment, "Thirty two thousand?" Katsziaz gave a subtle nod in acknowledgement, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

Lexen turned to the four of them and said, "They both did just fine. Katsziaz has one terrifying killer instinct."

As midnight approached, pigeons began to arrive with letters containing the scores of participants from across sapience. While all of them needed to be verified, the results were very promising. Of the one hundred and seven participants that reported their scores, a total of forty eight thousand seven hundred and twenty six members of Chakrasul's Congregation and Order were slain. Katsziaz had eclipsed nearly every other participant's score, accounting for nearly a quarter of all of the slain zealots of Corruption.

Mere minutes before the deadline to report scores, and just as Kerryn was about to announce Katsziaz the victor of the Great Hunt, a chilling gale blew in from under the front entrance to the inn. The door swung open and a sultry winged woman stood in the door frame. Horns protruded from her forehead and ashen granite-like skin covered her lithe form. The fiercely dominate Azudim, a form granted only by the Divine themselves and represented the soul's embodiment of Death and Destruction, stepped into the inn and smiled knowingly. "Hello, Kerryn," she said in an entrancing, exotic voice.

Kerryn looked across the room and folded her arms across her chest. "Alexina," she replied curtly.

"That was a fun little game you had. I thoroughly enjoyed myself. I was a little disappointed that there were so many others that were taking so many kills from me. I'm a little disappointed in my score, but I think you'll find it is quite sufficient to win," said Alexina, sauntering up to the bar and pouring herself a glass of fine sparkling wine.

"Oh, well you better report it quick before I no longer accept any scores. Then whatever horrible things you've done would be entirely for naught," hissed Kerryn with disdain.

"Very well. I've gone ahead and done your dirty work for you, dispatching one hundred and sixteen thousand eight hundred and forty two points worth of those poor followers of Lady Chakrasul."

Everyone standing the room save Kerryn dropped their jaw in amazement at the overwhelming accomplishment proclaimed before them. The silence in the room was deafening. While everyone attempt

to rationalize the straight up impossibility of such a number, Kerryn broke the silence, “Well, the contest wasn’t open to members of Lady Chakrasul’s Order.”

Alexina laughed a trilling, sultry laugh, throwing her head back for emphasis. “Oh you silly, feeble little Mhun. I don’t follow Lady Chakrasul anymore. Oh no, I’ve found Lady Iosyne to be much more fulfilling. Besides, since I knew the identity and location of virtually every member of Lady Chakrasul’s Order, it really was a trivial matter to simply hunt them all down and snuff them all out of existence.” The Azudim tipped the glass of wine back and took a sip before adding, “Oh, and you’re welcome.”

“Prove it,” snarled Kerryn with disgust.

“Of course love,” replied Alexina. With a snap of her finger, several lumbering homunculi ambled into the inn, each carrying an oversized rucksack. With a twirl of her finger, Alexina commanded the mindless servants to empty the contents of their rucksacks onto the ground. They did so obediently, dumping over ten thousand severed ears covered in dried blood onto the floor of the Black Flagon Inn. Many had started to decompose and the stench was horrifying. Haven and Lexen gagged, Demarcus and Katszia both lost the contents of their stomach onto the floor.

“Why should I count your participation as valid, Alexina?” asked Kerryn sternly, her gaze fixated on the curvaceous Azudim.

Taking another sip from her wine, Alexina commented, “Because my darling, I’ve brought a greater success to your quest to end Lady Chakrasul’s reign than you could have dreamed in even your wildest fantasies.”

“Fine. What will you be claiming as your prize?” asked Kerryn reluctantly.

Clapping her hands together gleefully, “Ooohhhh, prizes! I do like prizes,” said Alexina. “How about that cute son of yours? I could just eat him up!” she exclaimed, running her tongue over her luscious full red lips.

“No. The prize list is very specific. Claim one and leave,” ordered Kerryn.

Alexina pouted with her lower lip stuck out. She stamped her feet, shaking the structure of the inn slightly from her sheer power. “Fine. I’ll take your flower pot,” she decided with her hands outstretched.

Kerryn nodded and ducked into the parlor. She emerged holding a simple terra cotta flower pot. Several different flowers had grown and were waiting to be harvested.

“I do enjoy these flower pots! I have twenty nine others just like it, thirty I believe makes a garden! I’ll dedicate it to you, darling, and you’re welcome to come visit it any time you’d like on my island,” Alexina said with an alluring wink in Demarcus’s direction. With that, the Azudim placed her wine glass on the bar and turned towards the doorway to make her exit.

“Aren’t you going to take your little trophies with you? I have a feeling I’ll get an earful of complaints from my patrons if you don’t,” inquired Kerryn.

“Oh Kerryn, if only you were as intelligent as you are witty. No, I think you can keep them all. I hear they’re all the rage!” replied Alexina with a laugh and a wicked gleam in her eyes. Once outside, she crouched low and launched herself into the air with her deceptively strong long legs, soaring high into the firmament. Her homunculi floated up after her, tiny wings on their backs flapping madly to gain altitude. A sinister cackle echoed across Sapience as Iosyne, the Malevolent, poured out her divine blessing upon the city of Bloodloch and Her Congregation for Alexina’s triumph in the Great Hunt.

Kerry grabbed her elemental staff from behind the archway leading into the parlor and summoned a mystical gust of wind that swept powerfully through the main room, gathering up all of the rotting ears left by the Azudim. Kerryn directed the gale out the main door and the powerful gale carried them far off into the distance, scattered throughout the nearby grasslands and mountains.

“Well, if the only good thing to come of this is that we know that Chakrasul’s members are so decimated in numbers that if any survived Alexina’s furious rampage, they are unlikely to be sticking their heads out of whatever deep recess they managed to find to shield them from her near infinite reach and the widespread destruction will certainly be an immense deterrent to future recruitment efforts,” commented Haven as he poured himself a mug of Stormbrew ale.

Lexen muttered discontentedly at the two large pools of vomit near his feet. “Well well, if you aren’t one who just manages to find the silver lining, Haven. I feel better already,” said Lexen sarcastically.

Katszia rushed into the kitchen to get a mop and bucket to clean up her embarrassing mess. Demarcus stood by looking dejected. “I just don’t understand how she does it,” stammered Demarcus in disbelief.

Haven quickly replied, “That woman has the stamina of a thousand me’s. She can go for weeks and weeks and weeks. Trust me, I should know. I nearly died trying to keep up.”

Lexen added right after Haven finished, “Most who do try and keep up end up falling to exhaustion. Whether it is a contest of stamina or whatever the hell it is your Father thought would be a good idea to do with her.” Haven let out a deep, rumbling chuckle and raised his Stormbrew ale in a toast before downing nearly half of the brew in one pull.

Kerryn folded her arms across her chest again and muttered, “Hrmp.” She sucked thoughtfully on her teeth for a bit and turned to go into her parlor.

Chapter 15: What the Eld is that!?

The sun shined brightly down upon the Black Flagon Inn, the neatly tended plants and flowers in the window planters and just outside along the walkways thrived in the late spring heat. An occasional butterfly floated past, some taking a moment to rest upon a flower before setting back out upon the wind that guided them to Delos in the first place.

Out in the back, Lexen was crouched low to the ground, holding Gwen close to his chest as she stood in front of him with a large string held firmly in her hand. The string rose up into the sky and at the

end was a brightly painted kite with brilliant rainbow streamers trailing behind it. Lexen gently whispered to the girl tips and pointed out when to pull on the string to make the kite dance in the thermals at the whims and fancies of the holder. Gwen was overcome by a continuous fit of giggles, thoroughly enjoying the experience of flying a kite with her uncle.

Nearby, Demarcus stood roughly twenty paces back from a large round hay bale with a painted parchment target affixed to the flat side. In his hands he held a finely carved bow with an arrow nocked and prepared to fire.

“OK, now this time I want you to draw back the bow string in a single, smooth motion as you inhale. Don’t hold your breath this time. Instead, exhale slowly once you’ve reached your full draw and use the focus on your breathing to time your release. It should be taking you at least that long to steady and take aim. Once you’ve finished exhaling, go ahead and release the arrow,” explained Katszia, who stood behind Demarcus instructing him how to properly shoot the bow.

“Right, inhale, draw, aim, exhale, release. Got it,” replied Demarcus as he draw back the bow string quickly, holding his breath. He inhaled sharply after taking a few seconds to aim and let go of the bow string abruptly. The arrow flew through the air wobbling wildly, striking the edge of the hay bale awkwardly. Lacking the proper angle to actually drive itself into the soft material, the arrow deflected nearly straight up and flew right at Gwen’s kite. The broad head on the arrow neatly sliced the string Gwen was holding and using to control the kite. Almost immediately a strong breeze caught the kite and took it soaring up out of sight and off into the distance.

“DEM-IIIH!” yelled Gwen as tears welled up in her eyes.

Katszia covered her mouth to hide her giggling. Demarcus scratched the back of his head awkwardly as he turned to face his sister. “I’m sorry Gwen, I didn’t mean to…” he tried to explain.

“B-b-but you s-shot my k-k-kite!” Gwen protested amidst sobs. As she finished, she was overcome with grief over her lost kite and burst into tears. She tore free from Lexen’s firm grasp and ran inside, trailing the length of severed string that once held her kite in her possession.

“Gwen, come back!” called out Lexen. He stood up and looked sternly at Demarcus. “Maybe next time you’ll actually pay attention to the instructions that are given to you, boy. That was the exact opposite of what Katszia told you to do and now look what you did,” he scolded. Lexen turned and chased inside after Gwen.

Katszia playfully punched Demarcus in the shoulder, “You’re rather a jerk of a big brother, you know that right?” she asked teasingly.

“Yeah, sure, rub it in,” grumbled Demarcus as he handed her the bow.

“Oh come on, I was just teasing,” she replied. Demarcus turned to leave but Katszia stopped him and turned the boy to face her. She reached up on her tip toes and planted an affectionate kiss on lips.

Demarcus shrugged off the apologetic kiss and broke away from Katszia’s grip. He headed towards the woods behind the barn.

“Demarcus!” called out Katszia as she ran after him.

He continued to ford ahead, trudging through the increasingly tall grass and weeds. He quickened his pace in an attempt to escape his pursuer, though she proved to be much to persistent and able.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she asked as she caught up to him.

“I already told you awhile ago, nothing,” he replied, trying to shrug off her grip on his arm.

“Hey, look at me!” she exclaimed as she settled her hand on his cheek, forcing his gaze to meet hers. “What has gotten into you lately?” she asked in earnest.

“Nothing,” he replied again at the risk of sounding redundant.

“Well, that was hardly nothing. Talk to me,” she pleaded with both her words and her eyes.

“I don’t feel like I belong here,” he said after a long silence.

With a puzzled look Katszia asked, “What do you mean?” She ushered him over to a large felled tree, encouraging him to sit on the makeshift bench.

“Well, I’m still not a member of your pack,” he replied reluctantly.

“Go on,” she said, leaning back prepared to listen.

“I’ve been raised up around Mother, Father, and Uncle. When I was a lot younger they tried to hide that they were all Atabahi from me since I wasn’t born with it. I know there is a way to impart the ability to transform into an Atabahi, and that’s all I want. I want to belong, Katszia,” he explained to her.

She rested a hand comfortingly on his, “You know, being in your Uncle’s pack isn’t necessarily all it is cracked up to be,” she said, subtly inclining her head to reveal several soft bite scars on her neck.

Demarcus shrugged, not noticing the scars. “I overheard Mother and Uncle talking yesterday. Gwen is already starting to demonstrate an ability to transform,”

A broad smile crossed Katszia’s face, “That’s excellent news!” she exclaimed. Demarcus glanced at her with a fierce frown. “Er, I mean good for her, but you’re right that they should make some sort of an effort to include you, Demarcus,” she quickly corrected herself.

“I’ve asked in the past, but Uncle Lexen repeatedly tells me that a place in the pack is earned and is not simply given. He’s never explained to me what it is that I have to do to *earn* that place though. Even that would be enough so I would know what I have to do!” he exclaimed with broad gesticulation to emphasize his enthusiasm for the topic.

“I agree, that would be a good place to start,” commented Katszia, gently biting on her lower lip.

Demarcus sighed heavily. “I’m not going to ask him again though. Especially not after accidentally shooting Gwen’s kite. I know Uncle thinks I did it intentionally because I’m mad and jealous about her getting a spot in the pack,” he articulated. “I’m not that juvenile though.”

Katsziazia smiled warmly, “I know you’re not Demarcus. I’m sure your uncle will realize it was just an accident. Things happen. Besides, there is simply no way you could possibly make that shot if you wanted to. Especially not with the ricochet!” she teased.

Demarcus blushed a bit. “Yeah I suppose you’re right,” he said finally.

“Of course I’m right, I’m always...” started Katsziazia, abruptly stopping mid sentence. “What was that?” she asked.

“What was what?” responded Demarcus.

“You didn’t hear that crackling noise?” she asked inquisitively.

“No, what crackling noise?” he replied.

“Shhhhhh, there it is again!” she hushed.

The two sat there silently on the log. A low hum followed by the crackling sound of raw discharging energy reverberated in the air around them. “Get down!” hissed Katsziazia sharply, grabbing Demarcus by the collar and dragging him down behind the fallen tree.

A wave of crackling energy rolled over the log they were sitting on, sending small glowing motes up into the air as it passed over their heads. Once it had passed, Demarcus stuck his head up slowly. Just on the other side of the log stood a large amorphous red creature spinning about frenetically. Its attention shifted towards Demarcus as his head moved ever so slightly above the log. The amorphous body swirled wildly as it advanced menacingly towards Demarcus. The young Mhun crouched there and remained perfectly still, hoping he hadn’t been seen. He couldn’t detect any sort of head or eyes on the strange creature, and Demarcus held his breath as the creature approached.

A series of particles rushed out of the center of the whirling creature and headed straight at Demarcus’s head. Katsziazia grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him down on top of her just in time. The particles slammed into the top of the log and caused the rotten bark to erupt in flames. Other particles that flew over the top neatly cut the grass on the other side of them as they flew through the air.

Katsziazia reflexively pushed Demarcus up off of her and rolled onto all fours, rapidly transforming into her pristine white Atabahi form. As she transformed she growled at Demarcus, “Run and get your Uncle!” She tried to say something else, but it came out as nothing more than a series of snarls and a short howl. Katsziazia then leapt over the log and lunged at the creature with her jaws spread wide.

Demarcus pushed himself up off the ground and pointed his hand in the direction of the creature, muttering a prayer to Lady Auresae. Lightning burst from his hand and split the air between he and the creature. The lightning slammed into the amorphous thing though appeared to do little more than piss it off.

Katsziazia’s jaw clamped down hard on one of the several whirling appendages as she neared the creature. The creature’s body was hardened and tasted unlike anything she had ever tasted before. It had an unusual primordial taste and essence about it. She repeatedly snapped her teeth down on the creature. Another volley of lightning slammed into the side of the creature and she could see Demarcus hadn’t

obeyed her command. She moved her eyes just slightly to meet Demarcus's in a plea to have him get help, but that lapse of concentration allowed the creature to shift its focus and it slammed a whirl of particles directly into her breastbone. The force sent her sprawling through the air and she slammed up against the log that had previously served as a bench.

Demarcus looked on with a horrified look on his face. He started to hurl lightning strikes at the creature with increased intensity. Bits of the creature started to fracture off, though it did not appear to be losing any strength or ferocity. It began to advance on where he stood, and he slowly began to step back, continuing his relentless assault. He raised his free hand above his head, summoning his mace. In a flash it materialized in his hand and he brandished it menacingly. Anticipating the creature's movement, he lunged forward and swung with all of his might, connecting solidly with a full downward strike on top of the creature's body. The force was sufficient to dramatically fracture the beast down to its very core, and the internal light and apparent life disappeared as the broken shell of the creature fell to the ground in defeat.

"Help! Someone come help me!" yelled Demarcus as he scooped up Katszia's slender Atabahi form in his arms. He staggered under the sheer size differential, but he focused on using all of his willpower to will each step, one foot after another. His breathing grew heavy and his voice hoarse as he continued to yell for help.

Once he was within view of the Black Flagon Inn, he saw several figures rushing out of the structure and towards him. As they drew near he recognized them as his mother and uncle. Lexen reached him first and grabbed Katszia from him and shoved the boy clean onto his back. "What did you do now you stupid boy?" he shouted, turning to run towards the inn.

Kerryn looked on horrified as Demarcus fell over at the hands of his uncle. "Lexen!" she cried out in response. She reached out and help Demarcus to his feet and supported him as she half-dragged him back to the inn.

When she and Demarcus arrived inside, Lexen had already placed Katszia on one of the larger tables and was examining her closely. "She's broken several ribs and a few have punctured her lungs. What stupid game were you two playing, boy?" he snapped at Demarcus when he approached the table.

"We weren't playing, Uncle. We were attacked," Demarcus replied quietly.

"Attacked? By who?" Lexen asked quickly. "Answer me boy, or so help me I'll beat you to within an inch of death!"

"I... I don't know, Uncle. It was some... some creature I had never seen before. Not even seen a drawing of it in a book, even," Demarcus tried to explain.

"You expect me to believe that some hocus pocus make believe creature that you can't even tell me what it looks like did this?" yelled Lexen.

Kerryn reached out to rest a calming hand on Lexen's shoulder. Lexen shrugged it off, although Kerryn persisted. At the second touch he turned and shove Kerryn across the room with a roar. Kerryn

stood up and dusted herself off, glaring at Lexen. “Lexen, you have three seconds to calm down before I calm you down,” explained Kerryn coldly.

“Quit trying to protect the boy, Kerryn. He needs to learn to take responsibility for his actions. He’s grown soft and very whiney. He cut his sister’s kite free while she was flying it because he’s jealous of her abilities! He needs to mature and you babying him is not going to help that!” Lexen snapped back sharply.

“One,” counted Kerryn.

“What do you think you’re going to do? This is pack business, Kerryn. That is where my word is final,” he snarled.

“Demarcus isn’t part of the pack, which makes it family business and almost none of yours at that. Two,” she responded and continued counting.

“Oh? Should I induct him into the pack now so it *can* be pack business, Legacy? Once that happens, there won’t be anything you can do to protect him!” he responded curtly.

“Do what you want, Warden, but you will calm down *now*. Three,” she finished counting and raised an eyebrow.

A short pause followed and Lexen threw his hands up in the air, “Fine. I’m calm. Say what is on your mind before I thrash this boy of yours since your ex-lover can’t seem to be around enough to father him properly.”

“Demarcus, is the creature still out there?” Kerryn asked gently.

“No. I mean, yes. I killed it,” he explained.

“OK, is there a corpse left?” she probed.

“Y-yes. I think so,” he said with a nod.

Kerryn nodded and took Demarcus by the hand and lead him out back. They returned a short while later, Kerryn dragging the large shattered corpse of the creature.

“Wait, what the…” stammered Lexen speechlessly.

Kerryn folded her arms over her chest, “Now, do you see what I wanted you to calm down, Warden?” she asked.

“Yes, fine, whatever, you proven your point. While you were out investigating I took the liberty of healing Katszia’s wounds. She’ll be pretty sore for the next week or so, but she should be fine,” muttered Lexen in response.

“Thank you, Warden,” said Kerryn tenderly in an attempt to smooth things over with her capo.

“Now boy, you better be honest with me in answering my question. I need to know what you and Katszia were doing leading up to the exact moment of being attacked,” demanded Lexen, jabbing his index finger into the table for emphasis.

Demarcus sat down and folded his hands on top of one another, gently rubbing them together. “We were just sitting on a log, talking,” he started.

“Talking about what? Were you playing around with some sort of magic that you had absolutely no business reading about?” asked Lexen harshly.

“No, Uncle, we were ‘playing around’ with magic. We were just talking,” he shrugged.

“OK, fine, I told you to be honest with me. We won’t get to the bottom of this without your cooperation, so once you decide to stop playing games maybe we can figure out what the hell this thing is, why it attacked you, and who or what is behind it,” demanded Lexen firmly.

“Uncle, I’m telling you the truth,” pleaded Demarcus. “We were just talking. Talking about you and Gwen and Mother,” he explained.

“OK, that’s a start. Then what happened?” asked Lexen, relaxing a little at finally getting somewhere with his nephew’s cooperation.

“Well, Katszia asked if I could hear a crackling noise. I had no idea what she was talking about, and the next thing I knew she yanked me down behind the log just before this strange energy wave rushed through the area. I think it may have left that thing behind,” said Demarcus, indicating the broken form of the amorphous creature with a nod of his head.

“Hrm. So you want me to believe that this thing just showed up out of nowhere?” asked Lexen with a skeptical eyebrow raised.

“Yes, Uncle, I’m telling you everything that I know!” exclaimed Demarcus helplessly and with growing frustration.

“Then what happened boy,” snapped Lexen, refocusing his nephew on recounting his encounter with the creature that nearly killed Katszia.

“I tried to look up over the log and Katszia yanked me back down just as that... thing, attacked me. It was like it threw a bunch of pellets or something at me, it cut down some of the grass behind us and set the top of the log on fire,” Demarcus explained with helpless gestures.

Lexen rubbed his chin thoughtfully, considering Demarcus’s story. “And then what?” he asked finally.

“Katszia transformed into her Atabahi form and tried to bite the thing, and I was zapping it with lightning. It took a lot to bring that thing down, it seemed to be fairly resistant to everything we had. My mace landed the killing blow and it shattered light that, and the light that had sort of been at the center of it dimmed and faded as it... died, or whatever,” finished Demarcus with a sigh, resting his forehead on the table in frustration. Kerryn reached over and gave Demarcus a reaffirming squeeze on his shoulder.

“You did well, Demarcus, but why didn’t you and Katszia come and get help?” she asked.

“Katszia told me to go get help, but I wasn’t going to just leave her there alone with that thing. She might have died!” he exclaimed.

“Well, she almost died anyways, so what a great decision that was,” Lexen snapped harshly at the boy.

“Lexen, I think that’s enough interrogation for now,” warned Kerry with a stern glance.

Lexen wave a hand dismissively at Kerry. “We’ll ask Katszia when she awakens what she remembers. It better match pretty closely to what you’re telling us, Demarcus, or so help me I’ll break your neck!” With that, Lexen stomped off up the stairs to his room upstairs.

Demarcus turned and looked up at his mother. “I’m sorry, Mother,” he started as his eyes filled with tears.

“No, Demarcus, I’m sorry. Your uncle has been rather frustrated lately. It wasn’t right of him to take it out on you like that,” she explained softly, taking a seat next to Demarcus at the table.

“I don’t know what he has to be frustrated about, he has it all if you ask me. He has a pack, you trust him completely and rely on him and let him do whatever he wants, he can pretty much have whatever woman he wants, he belongs somewhere...” Demarcus began listing of the different aspects of his uncle’s life that he was clearly envious of.

Kerry shook her head and held up a hand to stop him. “Those things aren’t necessarily everything your Uncle and Father make them out to be, Demarcus. You need to find out what makes you happy. Find your purpose and your place in this life, and then will you feel like you not only belong, but that your life has meaning,” she said.

At the mention of what makes him happy, Demarcus’s eyes immediately shot to the unconscious pure white Atabahi on the table before them. Kerry noticed the subtle indication and smiled with a nod of acknowledgement at her son. “Good. Well, I think we should let Katszia rest, perhaps we should take her up to her room so she’s at least comfortable when she awakens?” she asked.

Demarcus nodded and stood up, cradling Katszia in his arms again. He slowly made his way to the staircase and staggered up it without his mother’s help. The one time she offered he shrugged off the helping hand and made a silent demand to do this himself. He arrived in Katszia’s room and gently set the female Atabahi down on her bed, arranging the blankets and pillows around her in an attempt to make it at least appear as comfortable as possible. He had no idea what would actually be comfortable for a werewolf sleeping in a bed, however. Content with his work, he quietly slipped out of the room and closed the door and made his way into his own room where he kicked off his boots and settled into his bed for a quick rest. He at least hoped that his mother and uncle would wake him once Katszia awakened so he could have his story reaffirmed by his companion.

As he drifted off to sleep his mind began to wander back to the events. Questions poured out of his subconscious asking difficult question of him, like ‘Why couldn’t I have stopped Katszia from getting hurt?’ or ‘What caused that thing to appear so close to us in the first place?’ He wouldn’t find any

answers in the nightmares that plagued him that evening, though the series of events were certainly reaffirmed as he relived the experience several times before he awoke.

Chapter 16: Would you like ylem with that?

“Quickly, or we’re going to be late for the announcement!” ushered Kerryn as she tried to gather everyone together for the journey to Delve. Built on the continent of Albedos, Delve was a port city that had been reclaimed from the Dreikathi. Not much was truly known about Albedos, other than it had been overrun by the nearly unstoppable Dreikathi. Only after the Dreikathi attempted to invade the continent of Sapience were the then combined efforts of the Delvians and the inhabitants of Sapience sufficient enough to repel the Dreikathi. Progress was being made regularly on Albedos driving back to Dreikathi influence. Delve had just been the beginning.

Haven of course was taking his sweet time and Lexen was dragging his feet. After the previous incident last week he was still sour on the fact that he has unjustly flown off the handle on his nephew when the young woman Katszia, a member of Lexen’s pack, had nearly been killed when a mysterious creature now identified as an eld had attacked Demarcus and Katszia.

Only after a considerable amount of coaxing and borderline bribery was Kerryn able to shove the last of her cohorts out the door of her beloved Black Flagon Inn. She quickly locked the door and hung a sign indicating the inn’s closed status. Together they made their way to the magical portal that would lead them into the heart of the port city of Delve.

The group managed to arrive just in time. Researchers in Delve had made important discoveries and were about to announce them. Delve was a neutral city where the differences of Sapience were set aside and everybody could focus on the ever present threat of a Dreikathi counterattack that could instantly set back years of progress made against them. No hostilities amongst the inhabitants or guests of Delve would be tolerated, especially not at a function as crucial as this to the effort against the Dreikathi.

A rather pudgy man stood up in front of a strange pylon before the large crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen! Thank you all for coming! The Delve Research Society has made a groundbreaking discovery that has the potential to turn the tide permanently in our favor against the Dreikathi threat!” he cried loudly, emphasizing each word for dramatic effect.

“Recently our researchers have discovered the lifeblood of Albedos and the source of the Dreikathi’s power. Called ylem, it is the residual energy left over from when the Prime Material Plane was brought into existence. Focal points periodically come into existence throughout Albedos and more recently Sapience, sometimes even spawning primal, mindless eld that are manifestations of this residual energy. The Dreikathi have for many millennia mastered the refining process, twisting the vast power of this ylem for their own nefarious purposes!” the pudgy man continued, drawing understanding nods from the crowd.

“Our Researchers have discovered the secret to gathering this residual energy and refining it to harness its great power! This, my friends and allies, is the great equalizer we have been searching for in the eternal struggle against the Dreikathi!” Cheers of celebration and jubilation erupted from the crowd.

“In hopes to further the research, we will be distributing the fruits of our research for a nominal fee to all of the inhabitants of Sapience equally. Your great city states will have a pylon to focus your ylem gathering efforts and research, granting you the ability to unlock powerful new technologies to aide you in our struggles against the Dreikathi!” shouted the man loudly. He pumped his fist in the air several times to the deafening cheers and shouts continuing to come from the crowd.

“Great, just what we need, more things to fight over,” muttered Lexen to the group.

“This could be a truly fascinating thing, Uncle. Who knows what untold power could be unlocked with this... ylem. Besides, I’m just glad to have a better understanding of that thing that attacked Kats and I last week!” exclaimed Demarcus.

“Well, we’ll discuss it more once we’re back home,” said Kerryn as she herded her group away from the crowd and mad rush to be the first to receive lessons in refining from Braytal and the Delve Research Society.

The group took their time returning home, stopping to do a bit of shopping in the merchant district of Delve before returning to Sapience. They arrived at the Black Flagon Inn as dusk was settling over the land. Kerryn poured several flagons of mead, glasses of scotch, and a glass of wine for herself. She placed the drinks on the table within reach of everyone. Lexen and Haven took the flagons of mead, Demarcus and Katszia the glasses of Scotch. Each took a drink of their beverage and sat in silence for a short while.

“This ylem stuff shouldn’t be bothered with. I’ve already heard that Bloodloch and Spinesreach have declared any non-citizen found gathering it to be subject to the penalty of death for the crime of high treason and sabotage. What a bunch of fools, fighting over this silly substance,” mused Lexen as he sloshed his mead around in the flagon.

“Well, that just makes it all the more fun, dear brother!” exclaimed Haven. “Those bastards won’t come and play with me anyways, this way I can just run around and collect ylem and if they want to come get some, well, they can come get some!”

Kerryn frowned and took a sip of her glass. “I don’t agree with the stance of Bloodloch and Spinesreach, ylem should be a more cooperative effort given the potential it could have to benefit everybody. However, those two particular cities are not known for their cooperation but are instead notorious for their self-absorbed idiocy and blatant selfish, childish behavior. As far as I am concerned, those in the Cardinalis Family wishing to collect ylem will do so as part of a combined effort with the city of Enorian.” Finishing, she took another large drink of her wine, the fruity flavors delighting her taste buds despite the heavy topic looming in the air.

“Enorian? Pah! Those pansies are almost as bad as Durian,” ruminated Haven.

“Do you remember when I asked for your opinion, Haven?” Kerryn asked sternly.

Haven looked at her and down at his mead. He took a drink and shook his head.

“No? Yeah, I don’t either. This isn’t a matter that is up for discussion. We’re aligning ourselves with Enorian. The potential impact of the benefits provided by ylem are too great to pass up, and Enorian

is the only city that can reasonably be relied upon for sustained ylem research without tyranny and oppression driving advancement,” dictated Kerryn firmly, her gaze resolute.

All others at the table fell silent and most stared at their drinks. With tension hanging heavy in the air, it seemed fitting for Gwen to run down stairs. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and cried out, “Why didn’t you come get me, Unca Lexen! You promised me a story!”

Lexen picked the girl up and rested her on his knee. “Oh, a story did I?” he asked.

She nodded her head sadly. “The feeshies were telling me you lied and you weren’t going to tell me a story! I told them to be quiet and that they were the liars, not you.”

“Oh, well, in that case I suppose I better tell you a story,” he said, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to recall a story appropriate for the child.

“Tell me about Jaroo!” exclaimed Gwen as she bounced up and down on Lexen’s knee.

“Uh, Jaru?” asked Lexen hesitantly, shooting a glance at Kerryn.

“Ya! I want to hear about Jaroo!” exclaimed Gwen with wide-eyed excitement.

“Er, that really isn’t a story appropriate for a young lady,” Kerryn said softly to Gwen.

“But mama, you were there! I wanna hear about Jaroo,” protested Gwen.

Haven leaned forward and looked Gwen in the eyes, “You want to know about Jaru, huh?” he asked her. She nodded with big pleading eyes. “Alright, I think you’re old enough!” Kerryn shot him a look that would kill a less resilient soul.

“Once not so long ago, there was a thriving fishing village on the Peshwar Delta called Jaru. In Jaru there lived a little girl. Her name was Gwen,” Haven started.

“Nuh uh Unca Haven, only *I* am named Gwen!” she proclaimed with a giggle.

Demarcus leaned back with his scotch and sipped it gingerly, listening to the story as it unfolded according to Haven. “Oh yes, there most certainly was a little girl that lived there named Gwen! Her father was a well respected and renowned taxidermist. And for her fifth birthday he gave it a small calico kitten, who she named Patches.”

Gwen squealed with delight at the mention of a kitten, knowing full well that she had picked out a pet kitten for her Uncle Lexen for Celesmas the year before. He abhorred the poor creature, but he didn’t have the heart to tell his niece that, so he pretended that it was the greatest pet in the world. Lexen had since bought a writhing amphisbaena that he had hoped would devour the kitten. Unfortunately the plan had backfired and the two creatures are the best of friends.

“One day Patches had wandered off an gotten lost,” Haven continued. “Gwen had searched high and low for her precious kitten, but he was nowhere to be found! She looked in the abandoned church, in the old fishing shack, down on the docks, in the candy shop, and even at the cobblers! But Patches wasn’t in any of those places.”

Gwen stared at Haven with her oversized eyes, completely absorbed in the story. Lexen leaned over and whispered to Kerryn, “Do you remember a kitten at Jaru?” he asked. She shook her head and shooed him away so she too could listen to the story, sipping elegantly on her wine.

“Well, Gwen was distraught that she couldn’t find Patches. She had looked everywhere and that darn cat was nowhere to be found. When she got home her father asked her why she was crying and she told him that she couldn’t find Patches,” told Haven in an overly animated fashion. “So she put out a small pan of milk for her kitten and went to her room. As she was getting ready for bed, she didn’t notice that there was a small lump in her bed, and that it was moving!”

Gwen shrieked with excitement and yelled, “It’s Patches! It’s Patches!”

Haven grinned and nodded, “Sure enough, that little rascal had gotten lost under the covers in Gwen’s bed! Gwen was so happy she hugged and kissed her kitten and promised he would never get lost again!”

“Ohhhh Unca Haven, I like that story!” exclaimed Gwen.

“Oh? Well, if I were you I would probably check under my covers before I went to sleep tonight,” Haven said with a and exaggerated wink.

Gwen’s eyes grew impossibly wide and she began to shake visibly with excitement, “Ohhh! Patches! Patches! PATCHES!” she yelled and practically flew off of her uncle’s knee and up the stairs to her room where an incredibly high pitched shriek of pure excitement could be heard. Everyone around the table laughed heartily except Kerryn.

“Really, Haven? A kitten? She has problems already with fish,” protested Kerryn.

“Relax, Kerr Kerr. Unlike fish, kittens practically take care of themselves. Look at how hard Lexen has tried to kill his kitten, and the damn thing won’t die!” he exclaimed with a grin.

“Yeah, they may say the damn things have nine lives, but I can assure you it is far more than just nine. Maybe nine hundred or so,” grumbled Lexen angrily.

“Well, I’m going to go to sleep,” said Demarcus with a large yawn. Triggering a chain reaction, everyone else around the table yawned as if on cue. They all agreed it was likely time to turn in for the evening, so they went to their respective rooms. Little sleep was had, however, as the sounds of a small girl and her new best kitten friend playing all night permeated the regular silence of the inn.

Chapter 17: Manassius the Impotent

In the weeks following the announcement by the Delve Research Society, fierce battles along the mysterious leylines containing ylem ensued. Cities fought cities as each vied for ylem supremacy. Bloodloch and Spinesreach were brutally efficient, occasionally combining their forces into a single unstoppable war machine. Occasionally a battle would be won by the citizens of Durian or Enorian, though primarily when the inhabitants of Bloodloch were too busy indulging in the pleasures of the flesh.

“I don’t want you going anywhere near those leylines, Demarcus,” scolded Kerryn.

“But Mother, you were the one that said the importance of the research couldn’t be underscored enough!” said Demarcus in protest.

“Some of the more blood thirsty inhabitants of Sapience are consumed with a ylem-induced frenzy and no one in this family is going to be taking part of any of it,” said Kerryn firmly.

Demarcus scowled at her and turned to depart when his father and uncle entered the inn.

“Ho ho! You should have *seen* that vampire’s face right before he got incinerated, Kerr Kerr!” exclaimed Haven joyfully.

“They’re really dawn to this ylem stuff. It’s like vampire bait,” explained Lexen. Demarcus immediately glared at Kerryn in protest.

“No,” she said pointedly to Demarcus, already knowing what the young Mhun was thinking and going to say.

Trailing the two men by a dozen paces or more, Katszia entered in behind them, her face aglow with a broad smile. Dried blood was splattered across her cheek and she couldn’t look any happier. Demarcus’s face filled with mixed emotions of longing and jealousy, and the entire room knew it.

“Oh, well maybe next time boyo, you can come and hold yer old man’s ale while your uncle and I get things done,” jested Haven, sensing the boy’s frustration.

“Or he can stay home like he is supposed to,” commented Kerryn. She turned to address an issue in the kitchen that had been nagging at her conscious when Demarcus persisted in the argument.

“I was the first one in this family who handled one of those eld. I don’t get why everything I do is discounted and I’m not allowed to do anything, ever. Are you afraid that I’m going to get hurt? I can take care of myself,” he said.

“We’re not discussing this any further, Demarcus. I suggest you excuse yourself to your room and read a book or something. I can either have something brought up to you or I can send your sister up to get you when dinner is ready. Now go,” Kerryn ordered with a stern look on her face.

Demarcus turned about in defeat and slowly ambled up the stairs, hoping he would hear his mother change her mind. When he reached the top of the stairs, he still hadn’t heard her call out an apologize or asking him to rejoin the group downstairs. He entered his room with an angry slam of the door.

“Well, if nothing else he’s finally learning some obedience,” commented Lexen as he grabbed an apple from behind the bar.

“Your timing is impeccable, Warden,” she murmured in response.

“You should have seen how this young one here handled herself at the foci today,” said Lexen, changing the subject. He moved to include Katszia in the conversation but she was nowhere to be found.

Both Haven and Lexen exited the inn and found the girl outside along the side of the highway with an unusual man.

The man leaned in close to Katszia and was whispering seductively in her ear. His hand reached up and inappropriately fondled her as he did. The sight of one of his own being violated in such a manner immediately sent Lexen into a blinding rage, dropping to all fours and assuming his Atabahi form. In a single precise leap he pounced on the disgusting man and pinned him to the ground, Lexen's jaws snapping dangerously close to the man's neck in a dire warning.

"Woah woah woah there big doggie, hold up! I didn't mean anything, just trying to cop a little feel is all!" pleaded the man who struggle beneath the beast atop him. Lexen resumed his Mhun form and reached down,, wrapping his fingers around the man's neck and powerfully lifting him up. He held him at arm's length and the man stood on his tiptoes to avoid choking from Lexen's gasp.

Katszia scurried backwards and leaned up against the front of the inn, her head hung in shame. Kerryn had joined them outside and wrapped a comforting arm around the girl.

"Who are you, and be quick about it. I don't have time for the likes of you," snarled Lexen angrily, tightening his grip around the man's neck.

Coughing and spluttering the man pleaded, "Hey, I didn't realize it was such a big deal. The name is Manassius, the Impotent."

A severely puzzled look crossed Lexen's face and he set the man down, his curiosity piqued. "Explain yourself, and if you call me 'doggie' again I will remove your hideous face from your head before tearing you limb from limb," ordered Lexen, folding his arms.

The man rubbed at the red marks on his throat and replied, "Manassius is the name, and I am the Synthesist's gift to women. I was simply bestowing that gift upon that pretty little lady over there is all, no need to get yourself worked up about it."

Lexen glared at Manassius. "Manassius the Impotent? Yet you're Razmael's gift to women? You're so saturated in irony I'm surprised you aren't a metal statue." At the mention of his name, a small shrunken head affixed to the man's belt let out a loud sneeze.

Manassius scoffed and replied, "Shows what you know. Impotent, like all the gods! And Razmael has vast skills and experience in pleasing women and he has imparted all of them to me so I could walk this continent and bestow them upon these women!" His eyes darted to Kerryn and he licked his lips, giving her a suggestive nod.

"Impotent... wait, do you mean Omnipotent?" asked Lexen.

"Yeah, that! Impotent!" insisted Manassius. Haven shot a wild grin at Kerryn, who shook her head in response. "I am, simply put, the greatest non-immortal to walk on this plane, and it is only a matter of time before I ascend into the ranks of the Gods!" exclaimed Manassius.

"Er, you know there is a difference between impotence and omnipotence, right?" asked Lexen with seemingly genuine concern.

“They’re the same thing, and I am it, the very embodiment of impotence!” boasted Manassius proudly.

Shaking his head, Lexen dismissed the man with his hand, “I have no time for idiots. Be gone from here and don’t ever return.”

Manassius grew enraged at his dismissal. “You don’t know what you’re doing! I’m Manassius, Impotence manifested! My impotence will be brought down upon you for that comment!”

Lexen gagged. “I really hope for your own sake that you don’t bring down your impotence on me. You will be in a tremendous world of pain if you decide to go that route.”

Manassius pointed at Katszia and said, “My bed is open to you any time you want, pretty lady. You can bring you friend, too, there is plenty of impotence to go around!” He motioned at Kerryn mid-sentence. Having made his offer, Manassius set off down the highway towards Enorian.

“Er, is that guy for real?” asked Haven. “Manassius the Impotent? Seriously?” he asked again. A loud sneeze could be heard just south of them when Manassius’s name was mentioned.

Lexen faced Katszia and asked, “Are you alright, Kats?” She nodded slowly, her arms crossed over her chest protectively. Lexen sighed and replied, “As well as you can be, I suppose. I think that man’s middle name is fitting. Ass.” Haven tittered childishly.

The four of them went back inside and a warm mug of hot chocolate was poured for all. Haven added a generous amount of schnapps to his beverage. Before they could indulge in their drinks, the door to the Black Flagon Inn opened. In the door frame stood the same man from only moments ago.

“Alright, so I just really wanted to make sure you don’t want a good screwing pretty girl. Because you look like you could use it,” he asked towards Katszia.

Lexen immediately stood up and faced Manassius. “I don’t know what your problem is, Manassius.” The shrunken head on his belt sneezed. “I will not tolerate such crass and inappropriate behavior from anyone, towards anyone, at any time. I don’t care if you’re Razmael himself, I will end you if you do not leave *now*.”

“Well, no need to get all huffy. It isn’t my fault you can’t get a woman there wolfy,” replied Manassius. “But I can tell that my services are in fact needed here, so I’ll come back later.”

With a loud growl Lexen rushed up to Manassius and shoved him up against the doorframe. “When I say leave now, you leave now. It is a simple concept. Say another word and I swear by Lord Damariel’s will that it will be your last,” he snarled at the sad little man.

Manassius shrugged and winked at Katszia, making an incredibly crude gesture before departing again down the highway. Lexen stayed outside and watched the man leave, making sure he didn’t double back to make a repeat appearance.

“The nerve of some people,” muttered Lexen as he returned to the table.

“I don’t know why you didn’t just kill him outright, brother,” said Haven in an off-handed comment.

“Well, I probably should have. But there are some people that you can’t help but pity,” replied Lexen.

Kerryn blinked in amazement at the unintentional revelation by her former mentor. “You? Feel pity? I never thought I would see the day, Warden,” she confessed, shaking her head.

“Wait, what? No, I…” Lexen stammered in an attempt to back track his statement.

“Relax, Warden. I won’t tell anyone,” said Kerryn with a reassuring wink.

Katszias stood up and politely excused herself from the conversation, “Excuse me all, I think I’m going to go lay down for a bit.” All three nodded in response, Kerryn responding, “Let us know if you need anything, Katszias.”

No sooner had Katszias gotten upstairs, a shriek pierced the silence of the inn. Kerryn, Lexen and Haven leapt to their feet and rushed upstairs. Katszias was standing in the doorway to her bedroom, her face pale. “What happened?” asked Lexen.

Inside Katszias’s room the window was wide open and the curtains lazily floated in the breeze blowing in from outside. “Manassius,” she whispered quietly. A sneeze could be heard from below the window. Haven rushed over and shouted something out the window at the fleeing man.

Kerryn rubbed Katszias’s back tenderly and offered, “I’m sorry hon, that impotent man is becoming quite bothersome.”

Haven turned around and quipped, “Bothersome impotent men, Kerr Kerr? Sounds like a personal problem!” She shot a glance back at Haven and warned, “Don’t get me started, Haven.”

Lexen slammed his fist into the wall. “I’m going after this pathetic excuse of a… well, I guess he isn’t pretending to really be anything of significance. You’re all welcome to join me.” With that he dropped to all fours and made his transformation to Atabahi. Katszias shook the stunned look off her face and followed Lexen’s lead, dropping to all fours and assuming her Atabahi form. They both lifted their noses to the air and sniffed several times. In a flash of white and black fur they scampered off down the stairs and out into the cool night air.

The pair quickly picked up the scent of the fleeing man. Lexen lead the way with a loping gait and Katszias was hot on his heels. Manassius frantically scrambled through the forest ahead of them, even finding a small creek to ford across in an attempt to lose his pursuers. However, the frail man’s attempts at evasion failed utterly, and it was only a matter of time before the Atabahi were bearing down on him. Realizing the futility of his escape, he flopped down on his back and tossed his hands up submissively pleading for his life, “Look, I’m sorry! I’m just so incredibly sexy and talented in the sack, I just wanted to share what I have with the world! I’m good at pleasing men, too, Mr. Wolfman!”

The final plea sent Lexen over the edge and he flew into a primal rage. Chomping his jaws down powerfully on whatever part of the man’s body he could, Lexen shredded his tender and untried flesh.

Katszia swiped her front claws at the man's groin, miraculously managing to hit whatever small target was presented under his clothing. Overcome by the outright brutality of the assault, the man expired pitifully with a pathetic whimper. The task complete, Lexen and Katszia returned to their Mhun forms. Overcome with disgust for the disgraceful excuse of a man, Lexen spit viciously on the man's corpse and kicked dirt on top of him. He finished with a few deft kicks to the man's face, further defacing his body.

Without saying a single word, he turned and headed back towards the Black Flagon Inn. Katszia lingered in the area briefly, staring down her attacker's corpse. She sighed quietly and kicked the man's corpse once in his horribly mangled groin. Wiping the blood off her boots in the nearby grass, she broke off in a light jog after Lexen to return to the inn for the evening.

Chapter 18: Unexpected Visitors

The first flurries of the winter had come and the snowflakes swirled and danced merrily outside of the Black Flagon Inn. Gwen had become a permanent fixture to the windows, absorbed in the hypnotic patterns formed by the swirling motes of snow. "Unca Lexen, come look! There are feeshies flying around outside!" she proclaimed, beckoning her uncle towards her.

Lexen obliged his niece and joined her at the window. "Where, Gwen? I don't see any fish," he asked, picking the girl up and sitting on the chair she was standing on and setting her in his lap.

"Out there Unca Lexen! See? They're pretty and white!" she exclaimed in response.

Lexen shrugged to himself and said, "Oh, yes I see. They are very nice, aren't they? Speaking of fish, have you fed yours lately?"

Gwen nodded, her gaze still transfixed on the showing of snowflakes outside. "Of course Unca Lexen! I even fed yours!"

"Good. Did you feed my cat to Mr. Lizard?" he asked.

"Nooo!" cried Gwen as she tore herself away from the window and gave Lexen a shove in the chest. "You can't feed Mr. Fluffy to Mr. Lizard! That's mean, Unca Lexen!"

Lexen grinned and tickled the girl. "Well, I can only dream. Now you know what to get Mr. Lizard for Celesmas this year, though."

Gwen looked at him wide eyed in amazement. "I do?" she asked curiously.

"Yep, just wrap up Mr. Fluffy and sprinkle some salt and pepper on him!" teased Lexen.

"Unca Lexen, you're mean!" said Gwen as she hopped down off of his lap and skipped over to and up the stairs to presumably go to her room.

Lexen got up and pushed the chair into the nearby table it was taken from. He moved over to the bar and poured himself a cup of mulled wine, casually taking a sip. Kerry emerged from the parlor and asked, "What was all that commotion about?"

“Oh, nothing,” commented Lexen. “Just trying to get Gwen to feed that damn kitten of mine to that ridiculous lizard, you know, business as usual.”

“Right, you’re trying to get your niece to assassinate your kitten. I’m so glad you’re such a positive influence on my children, Warden,” replied Kerryn with a hint of a frown forming at the corners of her mouth.

“Well, it is simply an early introduction to the family business. At least, that’s how I can justify it,” explained Lexen with a shrug. He took another sip of his mulled wine.

“Had it occurred to you that maybe I don’t particularly want Gwen to enter into the family business? I had hoped that Demarcus might become a priest or a diplomat or a politician or something,” Kerryn expressed candidly to her former mentor. Sensing something wasn’t right, she glanced over towards the entrance of the inn.

A familiar ominous figure had entered unbeknown to her or Lexen. Although a dark cloak obscured much of his figure, the pallid complexion and overabundance of ornate jewelry and precious stones gave little doubt as to who had returned to the inn.

“Don Cardinalis, what a pleasure to see you again,” sneered Ezalor with his fangs bared menacingly.

“Ezalor,” Kerryn acknowledged with a polite incline of her head.

“I couldn’t decide what to get myself for Celesmas this year. I thought perhaps another concubine or twelve, or a fine nightmare steed, a pack of hellhounds, or even a magnificent pipe and the finest tabac to smoke. But I realized I had all of those already and thought back to last year when I was so rudely dismissed from your establishment amidst business negotiations,” pondered Ezalor aloud. He strode in to the inn and sat himself down in one of the chairs and motioned to Kerryn to join him. “I’ll have whatever it is that your beast of a lieutenant is having, just in a nicer glass.”

Lexen finished his mulled wine and slammed the cup down on the bar, glaring at Ezalor for the offensive comment. Kerryn shook her head at him, indicating her desire to settle the dispute without force if possible. She retrieved a clean cup from behind the bar and poured a glass of the mulled wine and set it down in front of the vampire.

Ezalor raised the glass in a toast and took a sip. He immediately spit the liquid out in dramatic fashion, wiping his mouth with a napkin from the place setting. “What IS that disgusting swill you heathens are drinking? Sewer water?”

Kerryn smirked and responded with a jeer, “Mulled bloodwine. I thought it might be up your alley.”

Shrugging, Ezalor settled comfortably backwards into his chair. “Well, when you lose your appreciation and taste for blood I suppose it would be easy to ruin something so simple and delicious.”

“What do you want, Ezalor?” asked Kerryn pointedly.

“Well, in a word, your daughter. I always wanted a little pet human,” explained Ezalor.

“Not happening,” chimed in Lexen, folding his arms across his chest.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t recall mentioning at any point that I was here to *ask* for your daughter. I was just giving you the courtesy of informing you that I was taking her,” replied Ezalor with a smirk.

A look of extreme worry crossed Kerryn’s face as she glanced at Lexen. He nodded silently and ran upstairs to check Gwen’s room. A few moments later he emerged at the top of the stairs and shouted, “She’s gone!”

Kerryn’s worry turned to anger and she looked Ezalor in his dark, empty eyes, “Return her now and I might let you live.”

Ezalor shook his head and chuckled quietly to himself. “No no no, my dear Kerryn, that isn’t quite how this works. My offer to you is this – join me as my queen and retake your place among the great Houses and I’ll let your daughter live. If you don’t, she still might be alive. Sort of. But I can’t guarantee anything. I can be rather fickle sometimes,” he replied to her threat.

“I will send you and your wretched followers to languish in the Halls of the Underking for this, Ezalor,” growled Kerryn.

“Actually, I’m kind of counting on you trying, Kerryn,” laughed Ezalor. He got up and brushed off his fine velvet clothing. “Next time I come back, perhaps you can get around to doing a little dusting? Some of us actually take pride in our appearance.” With that Ezalor strode out of the inn and disappeared into the intensifying winter storm.

As soon as Ezalor had departed, Kerryn turned to Lexen and asked, “I’m guessing we don’t have any agents left in Bloodloch?”

Lexen shook his head, “I’m afraid not. We pulled all of them out to make our assault on Lady Chakrasul’s temple and their cover was compromised in doing so. Why, what were you thinking, Kerryn?”

“I’m getting my daughter back, Lexen,” she said matter-of-factly. “You’re welcome to join me though all that I can guarantee is an ample supply of vampires to kill and the continuous imminent threat of death, or worse.”

“Sounds like fun!” exclaimed Haven from behind them. Lexen nodded in approval, “I’m in as well,” he said.

“I’m coming, too,” said Demarcus, who had been standing just inside the kitchen with Katszia.

“I would also like to come along,” expressed Katszia.

Kerryn frowned and started to protest against Demarcus’s and Katszia’s participation, but thought better of it. “Alright, you both can come. But you will do as you’re told without question or hesitation, do you understand?” Both nodded in agreement.

“Good, gather your things, we leave immediately,” ordered Kerryn as she stood up from the table.

“One step ahead of you, Mother,” said Demarcus with his gear in hand.

Looking around at the other members of her family, Kerryn realized all of her companions were already primed for combat and she was the one lagging behind. Closing her eyes, Kerryn focused inwards and her elemental staff materialized in her hand as she attuned herself to the elements. “Very well, let’s go,” she said as the shift was complete.

The group had no sooner made a few steps outside of the inn when they realized something was not right. The door behind them slammed shut and the locking mechanism engaged inside with an audible click. “Well, that was certainly sooner than I had expected!” cackled the voice of Ezalor from somewhere out in the blizzard. The Mhuns could barely make out the shapes of at least twenty vampires that formed a semi-circle around the five of them, trapped against the exterior of their own dwelling.

Ezalor stepped forward with his hands resting on Gwen’s shoulders. He said, “Now, in case your daughter’s life wasn’t generous enough, I’m willing to spare the other four dysfunctional members of your family in exchange for your conversion and cooperation, Kerryn.”

Kerryn shook her head, “That won’t be happening, Ezalor. Tell your lackeys to back off slowly and none of them will have to die.”

“Foolish woman, you know just as well as I do that you don’t have the power or the capabilities to destroy us. The gift of near immortality is not one to be underestimated. It is the same gift I am extending to you. Take it,” urged Ezalor.

“You leave us no choice but to tear you all limb from limb!” snarled Lexen.

“Lexen, no!” shouted Kerryn, but her warning came too late. Lexen began his transformation to Atabahi, leaping forward to land on all four paws and charge at his would-be captors. Before he could hit the ground, the twang of bowstrings being released could be heard and the snow beneath the half-transformed Mhun was painted bright red with blood as arrows struck him deeply in the chest and shoulders. Lexen collapsed in a heap in front of the inn, broken and defeated. Kerryn and Katszia broke their stillness and rushed over to their fallen companion. They checked for a pulse and were able to breathe for a moment when they found one, albeit weak.

“Such a waste. He could have made an excellent general for the armies of Bloodloch. His temper finally got the best of him,” shrugged Ezalor. He picked up Gwen and tossed her over his shoulder. With a snap of his fingers his goons broke their formation and followed him down the highway towards the entrance to Bloodloch.

Meanwhile Kerryn and Katszia were taking an assessment of the extent of Lexen’s injuries. “This isn’t good, Kerryn,” whispered Katszia. “This one is deep enough to have probably pierced his heart.”

Kerryn nodded reluctantly. “Get that door open,” she barked to Haven and Demarcus. They fumbled with the keys on their keyrings but managed to locate the correct key and unlocked the door, opening it wide for the two women to carry the wounded Mhun back into the inn. They set him gently down on the table and tore off the clothing covering his chest.

“Is he going to die?” inquired Katszia with pleading eyes. Kerryn shook her head and replied, “I’m not going to let that happen.”

She cradled Lexen head in her hands and rested her forehead against his. Kerryn concentrated intensely, feeling out each wound with her mind and sensing the inevitable realization that the wounds were fatal. She began to whisper pleas to Lexen to not go and hold on, but realized he had been unconscious the moment he hit the ground outside. As a last ditch effort, Kerryn extended her mind out and sought to connect with the remnants of Lexen’s psyche.

Locating what was left, she established a link between their minds. She felt herself being transported amidst a bright white light. The only other thing among the blinding light was the form of Lexen standing before her.

“Warden... don’t die on me. You can’t die,” she pleaded to him.

“Kerryn, this form is broken beyond repair. Lord Damariel has turned his back on my pleas for healing and redemption. What choice do I have left but to let go?” he asked sadly.

“Lexen!” she cried out. “Don’t you dare just give up. You fight, you fight until there is no fight left to give. You’re still here, so there is still some fight left.” Kerryn walked up to the subconscious projection of her closest companion and looked him in the eye. “Come back to us, Lexen. Your family needs you.”

The bright white surrounding her suddenly darkened to a slate grey color. She felt herself being torn away from Lexen’s mind. Kerryn sensed that Lexen’s soul began to unravel and she felt his psyche beginning to collapse. With one last pleading look, she severed the connection between her mind and his, finding herself back in the Black Flagon Inn once again on the outside looking in.

Lexen’s broken body before them began to disintegrate before their very eyes. A most peculiar and remarkable oddity surrounded the disintegrating body and a new form began to weave itself into a new form. The flesh and bone were stronger and denser than the original, forming a formidable fortress for the wild and primeval spirit that slowly settled into it. A deep gasp for breath sucked air into the newly formed being, and Lexen laid before them all transformed into a mighty Ildreth. A thunderous tone echoed throughout Sapience heralding Lexen’s rebirth.

Uneasily, Lexen climbed off the table and stood upright fully, his new height towered over six and a half feet tall. His hulking muscular form was covered from head to toe in a deep black obsidian, and a pair of massive stone wings protruded awkwardly out of his back. He flexed them powerfully and the unfamiliar imbalance nearly caused him to topple over.

Kerryn, Haven, Katszia and Demarcus all stood by in awe at witnessing the transformation of their companion. None of them was entirely sure whether the return from nearly dying or the transformation into a powerful Ildreth was more incredible. A long silence followed while Lexen assessed his new form.

“How do you feel?” asked Kerryn meekly.

“Incredible. Complete. Whole,” expressed Lexen truthfully, still marveling at the newfound power from within his soul.

Katsziah chimed in quietly, “Welcome back, Lexen.” He nodded to her while looking around.

“Which direction did Ezalor go?” he asked sternly.

“Warden, you need to rest and regain your strength before we set out after Gwen,” urged Kerryn.

“Legacy, that is simply false. I’ve never been stronger and we cannot let that filth get a head start on us. We must pursue them immediately if we want to have the best chance of getting Gwen back,” he explained.

Demarcus reached out and touched Lexen’s wings, completely enamored by the new appendages. The touch startled Lexen, who turned around and smacked Demarcus with a solid backhand. The tremendous force knocked the boy clear across the room, and he landed in an unceremonious heap against the wall. He stood up on his own, shaky at first. He steadied himself against a nearby chair and grinned. “I don’t think we have to worry about Uncle Lexen, Mother.” Lexen nodded in agreement.

“We’re going to wait until this blizzard subsides. It won’t do us any good to charge into another ambush. We’ve already lost one member of this family, and nearly a second in just as short of a time. I’m not risking another with a hasty rescue attempt,” Kerryn stated. “Lexen, I’m glad you’ve come back to us,” she expressed sincerely before disappearing into the parlor. Her tone made it quite clear she did not want company.

Haven grabbed several tankards from behind the bar and filled them to the brim with ice cold alcoholic beverages. “Come, let’s at least celebrate my brother’s ascension. It is not every day you get to witness the willful transformation from mortal to Ildreth!” he exclaimed, setting the drinks down on the table. Each member of the group remaining took a tankard in their hand and raised it in a toast. Then, they drank.

Chapter 19: Anything you can do...

The following day Kerryn emerged from the parlor looking tired but encouraged. She joined the others around the table as they dined on a hot breakfast prepared by Demarcus of biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs, ham, and fresh milk. Lexen took up one entire side of the rectangular table with his new massive form. The conversation was light, part in light of their missing chatterbox, Gwen, and part in light of the brevity of the situation at hand.

“Lexen, I was thinking last night. Ezalor headed off in the direction of Bloodloch, but why would he take Gwen there?” she asked curiously.

Lexen shrugged. “I don’t know, Kerryn. Why would he?”

“That is exactly my point. There is no reason for him to. That lead me to think further, if I were Ezalor where would I take Gwen. I then remembered that he had a castle deep within the Mannaseh

Swamp. I'd be willing to bet that he took her there. Trying to give us the slip by getting us to head towards Bloodloch is another attempt for us to walk into a trap. We'd be badly outnumbered and they could easily cut off our exit," she reasoned out loud.

"I agree," replied Lexen shortly.

"You do?" Kerryon responded, evidently surprised.

"Of course, the reasoning is sound and based on his previous tactics it would suggest he might try and pull a similar stunt if you were to overreach and rush in. I would guess the guards of Bloodloch and maybe the entire arm are on a ready alert status, poised to pounce on us if we were to try and waltz in there," he said.

"Very good. We'll set out for Mannaseh after breakfast," decided Kerryon.

Demarcus couldn't help but continue to stare at Lexen's massive wings protruding out of his back. "Mother, what if we flew in?" he asked abruptly.

The familiar clanking of silverware against stoneware stopped and everyone at the table looked at Demarcus. His face turned bright red at the apparent embarrassment of his ludicrous suggestion. "I just thought that now that Uncle Lexen can fly, he might be able to fly us in. I don't think they would be expecting it and it would be faster," he explained.

"Boyo, that is probably the first intelligent suggestion you've made in your entire life," said Haven with a surprised tone. This compliment made Demarcus blush even more furiously.

"No, I think you're onto something Demarcus," said Lexen. His wings flapped gently behind him as the Ildreth pondered the idea. "I like it. We'll have to do some quick experimentation to see how much weight I can lift, but I think it is a strategy we ought to consider," he mused, turning to Kerryon for approval.

Kerryon nodded in agreement, "Very good, let's clean up and see just how many of us Lexen can carry at once."

After clearing the table the group met out back behind the Black Flagon Inn. Lexen began by first flapping his wings, gently taking off. Gradually increasing the intensity of the flapping, he soared higher and higher. Almost as if second nature, Lexen gracefully dove and maneuvered in the brisk winter air. He came to a rather abrupt near-crash landing in front of the barn. Demarcus rushed over and helped his uncle up the heap he landed in. Lexen grinned and thanked the boy.

"Now, let's try this with another person shall we?" asked Lexen. He grabbed Demarcus by the wrist and powerfully launched himself into the air. The boy let out an ecstatic cry of exhilaration as he flew up among the clouds with his uncle. This was one of the moments the young Mhun had dreamed about since he was little. Unfortunately for him, time being of the essence meant the flight had to be cut short to pick up another passenger. As Lexen grabbed one after the other he lost little mobility and almost no maximum altitude. Demarcus's plan just might work.

After a brief respite following the final test with all of the passengers grabbing hold of Lexen, the group set off. Lexen hurled the group skyward and kept them aloft with his magnificent wings. They gracefully soared in the cold air, cutting through the winter sky like a knife. Over the Sirrocian Mountains and Shamtota Hills they flew, across the Liruma Scrubland. Below them at a distance the dark, gloomy canopy of the Mannaseh Swamp grew larger and large. Above the foul miasma that hovered over the swamp, a single stone spire rose above it all. Narrow slits in the tower glowed with a yellow light coming from within the structure. Lexen leaned down and to the left, swooping low and gliding just above the swamp's canopy. As they neared the rear of the formidable castle, Lexen spread his wings out to slow their descent. The landing couldn't have gone any better had they rehearsed it. One by one the Mhuns let go of the Ildreth as he approached the ground, staggering their landings. Each tumbled nimbly to their feet and stood up alert and prepared, scanning their surroundings for any impending danger.

"Look sharp, I'm guessing the castle is about half a mile ahead," whispered Lexen as he landed. His immense weight caused him to sink immediately into the bog up to his waist. Grumbling he gave a few sharp flaps of his wings to thrust him up out of the peat moss, and then began a series of short controlled movements to keep himself hovering just above the surface below him.

"Gained a little weight, eh?" teased Haven at Lexen's misfortune of falling through the surface of the swamp. Haven, like the other three Mhuns, was light enough on his feet to avoid falling through the surface and into the heart of the bog.

"Well, last time I checked I can rip you in half with my bare hands now, so I think it is a fair tradeoff," retorted Lexen.

Kerryn snapped at both of them in a harsh, hushed tone, "Quiet! Both of you! Remember what we're here for, Ezalor has Gwen and she's probably terrified. The longer you two play around and delay us, the longer she is going to be terrified. If we end up being just too late to save her, so help me I will kill you both!"

The Ildreth and the Mhun both grinned sheepishly as the group forged ahead through the mucky conditions. The biting cold whipped through the cattails and swamp grass, chilling those not warmly dressed to the bone. Even Kerryn, who was the most warmly dressed of them all, had a slight shiver.

In less than half an hour they arrived at the rear outer wall of the castle. There were no guards, and no gate. Along the ramparts were several gargoyle statues with brightly burning red eyes, giving them the appearance of being alive. Demarcus trembled slightly at the fearsome sight. Noticing his distress, Katszia offered a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Hrm. It doesn't seem like anyone is home," mused Haven as he walked up to the wall and studied it for a moment.

"Good, then they won't mind if I do a little exterior redesigning," commented Lexen as he charged forward with his fist drawn back. Nearing the wall he lunged forward, connecting his fist solidly with the moss covered wall in front of him. The force of the blow caused a deafening crack and a shockwave of kinetic energy washed over the Mhuns behind him. The wall itself practically imploded, being driven in towards the castle courtyard at terrifying speeds. Rock and rubble flew everywhere, and when the dust settled a large gaping hole was the result of Lexen's wrecking punch.

“Ladies first,” he said with a wry grin, courteously offering his hand out to assist Kerryn and Katszia to step over the lip of the gap in the wall. Haven and Demarcus followed them both, deftly leaping over the obstacle and into the castle courtyard. All four looked around with their keen night sight, staying on the alert for any movement.

The group made their way across the vast courtyard, filing past rotting piles of hay, several piles of bones and the newly placed rubble from the hole in the wall Lexen just created.

“Wait,” urged Lexen, holding up his hand. He looked around slowly. Sensing an impending threat, he pulled all four Mhuns in close towards him and wrapped his wings around them protectively. A volley of arrows bounced harmlessly off his heavy stone wings. He lifted them slightly to take a look at the source. A handful of shadowy figures had taken up a position on the far wall of the courtyard. The hazy air made determining their exact position difficult, but Lexen felt confident in his newfound strength that he wouldn’t have a problem with these archers.

“Stay here,” he commanded the other four. Haven and Demarcus slung their shields off of their backs and held them up in the direction the arrows came from. Kerryn and Katszia huddled in close behind them. Lexen jumped up and took off in flight above them. Several more arrows flew their direction, three striking Demarcus’s shield and one bouncing off of Haven’s.

Lexen rose higher and higher, rising well above the obscuring mist of the swamp below. His acute vision was able to pierce through the miasma from above and he quickly located the guards atop the battlements. Tucking his wings against his body he pointed himself in their direction and dove down, homing in on their position. Just as he neared them, Lexen executed an acrobatic flip in mid air, changing from a position of leading head first to a foot first descent. Lexen landed right on top of the center archer using his wings to make tiny adjustments in his descent. The creature was reduced to a messy pulp, his body overcome by the sheer force of the heavy Ildreth’s rapid descent from such a high altitude.

Crouching low, Lexen planted his fist against the rampart walkway and spread his wings out sharply away from his body. The deft strike from his wings neatly knocked the two archers on either side of him off the crenellated structure, falling into the swamp below on the other side. A unified splooshing sound indicated the force was enough to penetrate the layer of peat moss covering the bog. The near freezing temperatures meant it was highly unlikely they were going to escape the thick, viscous mud anytime soon.

The Ildreth hopped down from the ramparts and back into the courtyard. He met up with his companions in the center, directly in front of the formidable wooden doors leading inside of the castle. Shrugging, Lexen walked up to them and gave the doors a powerful shove. Under a creaking protest they swung open. The enormous foyer was darkened. Cobwebs and a thick layer of dust covered the broken furniture scattered throughout the entrance to the castle.

“You know, for a guy that loves everything fine in life, this is a very dreadful, dreary, crappy place to live,” commented Haven as he glanced around.

Lexen nodded, “I would almost be inclined to believe Ezalor wasn’t here if it weren’t for his lackeys taking a bit of a mud bath outside the walls right now.”

An ominous cackling echoed throughout the stone foyer. A dark wind preceded the materialization of Ezalor's form at the top of the grand staircase. The vampire spread his arms wide and exclaimed, "Welcome my friends, had I known I was getting such special guests I would have cleaned up a bit. Though, to be honest, I don't spend much time down here. In fact, I don't even use that door." With a flick of his wrist the doors behind them slammed shut. As the scarce light from outside disappeared behind the wooden doors, several chandeliers began to burn brightly, casting their cheerful illumination throughout the room.

"Where is Gwen, Ezalor?" asked Kerryn, stepping in front of her companions.

"Tsk tsk, Kerryn. It isn't very nice to go about demanding things from your host when you've just arrived. You haven't even afforded me the opportunity to offer to take your coats!" scolded the vampire.

"Enough of your games, Ezalor. Give me back my daughter, now," demanded Kerryn.

"Or? I don't think you're in quite the best position to be making demands, Don Cardinalis. Oh, wait, my my!" he exclaimed, his eyes landing on the massive form of Lexen standing before him. "Whom do we have here? Did you go out and hire a mercenary just to come fight me?" he asked with disdain dripping from his words.

"Lexen Verite, Infernal Marshall. Alpha Atabahi, and now pissed off Ildreth," snorted Lexen. He launched himself forward powerfully with his wings and began to close the gap between he and Ezalor quickly.

With a pained sigh, Ezalor dissipated into a gaseous form, the misty particulates rushing towards the oncoming Ildreth. Lexen passed right through the incorporeal form of the vampire and continued unhindered up the stairwell. He managed to stop himself just before slamming into the doors atop the staircase.

Meanwhile, Ezalor's incorporeal form shifted and spun around Katszia, causing a shiver to run down her spine. The vampire coalesced back into corporeality right behind the Mhun. Before she could spin around, Ezalor had reached down and grabbed her by the neck. He lifted her up to his eye level and gazed into her fearful eyes. "A pity, one so young and so beautiful has to be a casualty of this familial feud. Oh well, perhaps it is for the best if I just end her suffering now before it starts," he said callously before deftly twisting his wrists, snapping Katszia's neck in a single movement.

Lexen regained his balance in time to turn around to see his pack mate's neck broken in two like a rag doll. Haven and Demarcus sprung into action once they realized what had just happened, both leaping towards Ezalor. The vampire again turned into a fine mist and rematerialized on a balcony overlooking the foyer. The two Mhun collided with one another, and Demarcus miraculously managed to catch Katszia's limp body before she hit the floor.

He fell to his knees, cradling his friend's upper body in his arms. He pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, fighting back the tears. He gazed into her terrified eyes and whispered into her ear, "Stay with me, Katszia."

As the life started to leave Katszia's eyes, her pupils opened to their maximum width. Her body began to convulse and disintegrate. Within Demarcus's arms a new body began to weave itself out of the remnants of his beloved friend and companion. Thick bones and flawless skin covered the perfect incarnation of the beautiful Mhun's spirit. Long ebony locks flowed down her back and rested just above her lower back. Long, slender legs covered in strong, lean muscle and a curvaceous form took shape before their eyes. Katszia's irises transformed from a single colored halo to a lower semi-circle of vibrant ocean blue and an upper semi-circle of a sunset orange. The two bands blended beautifully together, giving the impression of a sunset to those lucky enough to catch the graceful Ildreth's gaze.

Katszia drew a deep breath as her eyes spread wide. She looked around with great concern, confused as to her location. "Shhhh, it's alright Kats, you're alright. It's me, Demi," whispered the Mhun. She looked up into Demarcus's eyes and smiled warmly. "I... I had an interesting epiphany," she tried to explain. Demarcus nodded with tears of happiness welling up in his eyes, "Yes, yes I can see that!" he exclaimed.

Ezalor rolled his eyes from where he sat perched on the balcony. "Oh how touching, now there are two of you. This is really quite fine and all, but you don't seem to understand how critical it is that one of you *dies*." The vampire turned his focus towards Demarcus. Focusing his unmatched psychic prowess, the vampire focused on Demarcus's mind, attacking it with unrelenting viciousness.

Demarcus fell to the ground and writhed under the force of the attack on his mind. He cried out in agonizing pain as his body was wracked with pain. Katszia scrambled awkwardly to her feet, standing an impressive five and three quarters foot tall. She stared at Demarcus in horror as he continued to thrash around on the floor helplessly, unable to repel his psychic attacker.

Kerryn covered her mouth with her hand and had to look away as her son lay brutalized and defeated on the floor. She continued her turn and looked up at Ezalor, a hatred growing behind her eyes as she clenched her first tightly.

"Help... me!" cried Demarcus, one of his hands reaching out towards Kerryn and then Katszia. Unimaginable pain coursed through his body, rapidly wearing down his mind and soul. With his final breath he called out to his Divine patron, Lady Auresae, "Lady of Fire, receive me into your embrace and let my sacrifice empower my family to continue on and purge the lands of this darkness!"

A pure white flame erupted from the center of Demarcus's chest and quickly spread over his clothing and flesh, completely consuming his entire body. The fire burned away his flesh and bone, though instead of leaving ash it left a refined and reformed body. Demarcus grew at least two feet as his old form was burned away and a new, perfect Yeleni form was willed into existence by the grace of Lady Auresae. Flawless white skin and striking blue eyes replaced his previously ruddy and pockmarked skin and dull eye color. His hair changed to a bright, vibrant yellow blond color with the tips of each spiky cluster of hair colored a brilliant red, resembling small wisps of flames.

The most dramatic transformation, however, was the formation of a pair of extraordinary ethereal wings. Protruding from his scapula were two long white shafts, bending into distinct wrists roughly three feet from the shoulder blades and extending out into a narrow point another two and a half feet. Boasting a nearly eleven foot wingspan, the ethereal wings had not feathers but instead a multitude of mystical fire

providing the surface by which to provide lift from flapping. Starting at a deep blue at the base of the white shaft, the ethereal fire transitioned to a brief green color quickly turning a brilliant yellow. Continuing the shift in the spectrum, the fiery wings change again in color, this time to a bright orange and ending in tips of red. The powerful Yeleni stood up and looked down at himself, surprised at the change.

Kerryn just stared at her son and stretched out her hand, not quite touching the flaming wings. Despite the close proximity, no heat washed off the spiritual fire. “Demi...” she whispered, “... your wings.”

Chapter 20: ... I can do better.

Ezalar cried out in frustration at the ascension of yet another victim of his intended murder. “For the love of Ilvon, what does a guy need to do around here to KILL someone?!” he exclaimed loudly. The vampire shot a glance at Haven who looked up sheepishly at him.

“Hey there pal, I would strongly encourage you to rethink whatever you’re about to do because I have no problem reducing this shithole to a hole in the ground complete with your own fiery explosion,” Haven warned with a rare seriousness.

“Give it up, Ezalar,” said Kerryn as she turned her attention away from Demarcus’s Yeleni form and refocused it on the villainous vampire.

“You know, Kerryn. I’m really not very amused at all by this whole situation. You were all supposed to die. That is how this all works. I’m very powerful, I kill you all, I feast on your corpses, I play with your daughter until she bores me and I either sire her and impart the gift of vampirism to her or just kill her, too. All of this Ildreth and now Yeleni nonsense is getting a little redundant,” confessed Ezalar with an exasperated look on his face.

Something within Kerryn changed upon Ezalar’s renewed refusal to make things easy. Ominous shadows and wisps of smoke began to swirl around Kerryn. The darkness swallowed the Mhun entirely and the very essence of death and destruction fell heavy across the room, encompassing the witnesses to the transformation in progress. Kerryn’s skin grew an ashen grey and as smooth and strong as granite. She grew from her shorter four foot stature to a full five foot ten inches and her hair became a vibrant auburn color. Her full lips natural redness were accentuated by the darkening of her skin. Sharp green eyes peered out from the shadow, and an unholy cry heralded the rebirth of Kerryn as a fearsome Azudim.

Ezalar threw his hands up in complete annoyance. “Oh come on, I didn’t even try and kill you!” he exclaimed. “And now you’re an Azudim? Why... shouldn’t you be an Ildreth or a Yeleni or something?” he asked confusedly.

Four fearsome creatures representing the pinnacle of Creation, a delicate balance between Dark and Light, Life and Death, Divine and Self-Reliance, stood in the foyer looking up at Ezalar. Haven tried his best to remain inconspicuous, ducking behind a pillar. The two Ildreth, Demarcus the Yeleni and Kerryn the Azudim all snarled menacingly at Ezalar.

Ezalor sighed in defeat. “Well this just isn’t going to end well,” he consoled to himself. “Might as well get too it.” He jumped down from the balcony where he had been hiding and onto the main floor of the foyer. Looking up and facing the quickly approaching beings, he let loose a fearsome shout and charged directly at Demarcus. Anticipating his strike, Demarcus crouched low and waited patiently. Once Ezalor had ran into range, Demarcus lashed out with his powerful arms, tearing Ezalor cleanly in half with his incredible strength. The holy fire imbued within his very being sparked onto the two halves of Ezalor’s corpse and caused it them to both burst into flames. The fire quickly consumed the unholy corpse, leaving nothing remaining.

“Ah, another job well done!” proclaimed Haven, emerging from behind his pillar dusting his hands off. The Mhun looked absolutely diminutive in the company of the four pristine beings.

“Mother...” Demarcus said quietly, reaching out to touch her arm. Her granite skin was cold to the touch and he looked up with deep concern in his eyes. “Why... why this form, Mother?” he asked, looking for answers.

“I don’t know, Demarcus. We’ll worry about that later. Right now we need to find your sister and get out of here,” insisted Kerryn. The other four nodded in agreement.

They broke into groups of two and began to search the castle, leaving Haven in the foyer to stay out of trouble. It was Demarcus and Katszia who found Gwen locked in a room mid way up the castle’s magnificent spire. When they opened the door, Gwen looked at them with confusion.

“Hi. Do I know you?” she asked curiously.

“Gwen, it’s me. Demarcus,” said the Yeleni.

“Um, no you’re not. You’re too tall, and too white, and all on fire. My brother isn’t a tall flaming white guy,” she said with all seriousness.

“Gwen, I know he doesn’t look like your brother, but it really is us sweetie. Your mother and uncles are nearby and would very much like to see you,” said Katszia in an attempt to coax cooperation out of the little girl.

“How about this, Gwen. If you come with us, I’ll do all of your chores for a month,” offered Demarcus.

The offer piqued the girl’s interest. “How about the next *two* months?” she counter offered.

“Fine, two months it is Gwen. Come on, let’s hurry,” urged Demarcus. He grabbed the little girl’s hand and lead her down the spiral staircase down into the foyer. She immediately recognized Haven and ran up to him, breaking free of Demarcus’s grasp. “Unca Haven!” she cried. Haven crouched down and picked her up in a hug and Gwen responded by wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Hiya sweet cheeks, are you alright? Did anybody bite you or be mean to you?” he asked genuinely.

“Oh, no Unca Haven. Mister Easylore was nice enough except he wouldn’t let me go home when I wanted to. But he gave me a dolly to play with and tried to give me moldy cake to eat but it was green and fuzzy,” she replied, sticking out her tongue in disgust to emphasize the nastiness of the moldy cake.

“Good girl, don’t accept strange fuzzy green cake from strangers. You’re much smarter than your brother, he probably would have eaten it and asked for seconds!” exclaimed Haven with a wink at Demarcus and Katszia. Demarcus just folded his arms across his chest and shook his head in response.

Demarcus called out with a booming shout, notifying Kerryn and Lexen that they had located Gwen and were ready to depart. It did not take long for Kerryn and Lexen to join them in the foyer of the castle. Gwen looked skeptically at the tall female Azudim when she crouched down and beckoned the girl towards her.

“Come on Gwen, it’s me, your mother,” said Kerryn softly.

“Um, I don’t know why you all look so different, but the only person I know here is Unca Haven,” she replied, tightening her grip around Haven’s neck. The Mhun shrugged at all of them and offered to carry the girl the rest of the way home. For expediency sake, everyone agreed. Demarcus grabbed hold of Kerryn and Katszia and launched himself skyward. Lexen picked up Haven and pat Gwen softly on the head before taking off.

In mid air, Gwen squealed with utter delight at her first flight. She stuck her tongue out to try and catch clouds as they flew through them and kept shouting for Lexen to go higher. “Please mister, go higher! I want to go higher!” she pleaded. Despite her pleas, Lexen headed straight for the Black Flagon Inn where they met up with Kerryn, Demarcus and Katszia. Gwen quietly thanked Lexen for the ride and scampered off up the stairs into her familiar room. Kerryn’s eyes followed the girl up the stairs, concern evident in her eyes.

“Let her be for now, Legacy,” comforted Lexen quietly. Kerryn nodded and let out a sigh that emanated deep from within her soul. While the other three that had experienced an ascension commented on feeling whole and complete, Kerryn couldn’t help but feel as though there was still something missing. It was an honor and a privilege to have been ascended by the grace of a Divine, though she would not have chosen the form of an Azudim for herself. The perfect manifestation of death and destruction, Kerryn began to wonder whether the form truly suited her soul. She recognized the Ildreth in both Katszia and Lexen, and the Yeleni in Demarcus couldn’t be missed by even a blind man. However, she began to doubt the pureness of her heart and the morality of her past actions. Are we shaped by our actions, or are our actions shaped by an immutable self? Will either answer truly be a comfort to her?

Kerryn mulled over these deep questions in her mind while the others conversed over drinks late into the night. One distinct benefit of having ascended to a perfect form was the absence of a need to sleep. Haven did his best to keep up with his superior counterparts, but shortly after midnight succumbed to exhaustion and passed out in his chair. Kerryn stood up and said, “Excuse me all, I think I’d like to be alone for now.”

Lexen, Katszia and Demarcus all three looked at her with a bit of shock and surprise. “Of course Mother,” responded Demarcus with a half-hearted smile. She walked over and planted a kiss on

Demarcus's forehead before disappearing into her parlor. The other three continued their discussion late into the morning, taking the occasional break to harass the unconscious form of Haven in some way.

Katszias drew particular glee from placing Haven's hand in a cup of warm water.

Chapter 21: A Second Chance

Weeks passed and slowly each of the former Mhuns grew accustomed to their new forms. It seemed almost daily they would discover an interesting new ability they had previously not had. Demarcus's long time childhood fantasy of having functioning wings being realized, he spent inordinate amounts of time flying and diving through the skies above the inn, taking Gwen and Katszias along whenever they wanted to go flying alongside him.

Kerryn continued to experience a deep sadness and sense of loss over her old identity. While there was no particular shame associated with being an Azudim, she was personally conflicted over what the implications are regarding her own self and the state of her soul.

One afternoon she left unannounced and set out to visit the temple of Lord Damariel, the Unbound. She had often felt a connection to Lord Damariel, and despite her longstanding service to Lord Dhar, a nagging suspicion in her heart suggested that it was Lord Dhar's will that transformed her into an Azudim.

Upon reaching Lord Damariel's temple, Kerryn lit some candles and incense and began to pray. She made a sacrificial offering to the Divine, beseeching him for guidance. A warm wind blew through the temple and the fine hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Kerryn opened her eyes mid prayer and stood up slowly. She turned around and found herself face to face with the physical incarnation of Lord Damariel Himself.

"My Lord!" she exclaimed, frantically dropping to her knees in front of him with her head bowed.

Damariel reached down and lifted Kerryn's chin up and looked into her eyes. "Why have you come seeking my assistance, Azudim Kerryn Cardinalis?" He asked with a deep, resounding voice.

"My Lord, I have come to ask you why I have been granted this form. I do not want to seem ungrateful or unwilling to assuming the responsibilities associated with it, but there is a certain stigma associated with the Azudim..." she explained, her voice trailing off towards the end.

"Kerryn Cardinalis, I cannot speak to why you were gifted the form of the Azudim, as I was not the one who willed your ascension and infused you with part of my own essence. Please though, elaborate on these stigmas that you are so afraid of," commanded Damariel with a steady voice.

Kerryn bowed her head graciously and explained herself, "The Azudim, my Lord, are most often the ascended form of those cursed with Undeath. While it is not a direct relationship, it is difficult for many to separate in their minds the difference between the undead and the Azudim."

“And are you having a hard time distinguishing yourself from the undead?” asked Damariel as she finished.

“N-no my Lord, it isn't that...” stammered Kerryn with a shaking voice.

“Then what is it?” asked Damariel.

“My past, my Lord. Does this form have to do with the choices I have made, and the atrocities I have committed?” asked Kerryn reluctantly.

“The forms that mortals are willed into are a direct reflection of their souls. Those with darkened souls and are tainted with death and destruction frequently find themselves ascending to this form. Those who are without any Divine influence must will their own ascension, mastering the psyche and the feeble flesh that limited their potential prior to ascension. And those who follow Creation and the Light will undoubtedly find themselves as a Yeleni, the warmth of goodness at the core of their being,” elaborated Damariel.

“While not ungrateful, my Lord, I wish to be a Yeleni,” confided Kerryn.

“A change in form is a very rare gift, Kerryn. Do you realize the significance of what you are asking?” inquired Damariel.

“Yes, my Lord,” replied Kerryn.

“Very well. I will grant you your wish, but I demand from you something in return,” said Damariel.

“Yes Lord Damariel, anything you request I will give it freely,” sighed Kerryn.

“Bring your daughter, Gwen, here to My temple. With this dagger, sacrifice her life essence to me. Then, and only then, will I grant you the transformation you so desire,” demanded Damariel.

The blood drained from Kerryn's face. She opened her mouth to find words to respond, but couldn't. What Damariel was asking her to do was not a sacrifice she could possibly make. She wasn't that selfish to give up her only daughter just so she could cast off what she perceived as a shameful form. Her mind raced with different possibilities, other sacrifices she might offer Lord Damariel in exchange for what she wanted.

“Is there a problem with my request, Kerryn Cardinalis?” asked Damariel.

“M-my Lord... I don't think... I c-can't do that,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Can't, or won't?” replied Damariel.

“My Lord, that price is too steep for me to pay. I cannot give up my beloved Gwen for anything. I am sorry, My Lord,” apologized Kerryn. She hung her head shamefully in front of the deity.

“No, Kerryn Cardinalis, I am the one who is sorry. I asked only for the sacrifice of your daughter as a test of your faith in Me. As you are unable to devote yourself entirely to Me, and do all that I ask of

you with the faith that I know what best, I cannot grant you this incredible gift,” explained Damariel carefully.

Tears slowly rolled down Kerryn’s cheek. She had failed yet again. She bowed deeply to Lord Damariel and waited for the deity to depart. The familiar warm wind again blew through the temple, and when Kerryn looked up Lord Damariel was gone. Kerryn collapsed on the floor of the temple and wept softly. Day turned to night and still she wept. It wasn’t until dawn the following day was she able to muster the strength to pick herself up off the floor and make her way back to the Black Flagon Inn.

When she arrived, Demarcus greeted her in the entrance. “Hello Mother, how was your trip?” he asked with a joyful smile on his face.

“It was fine dear, thank you for asking,” she murmured, planting a half-hearted kiss on his cheek and giving him a weak hug.

The patter of little footsteps could be heard above them as Gwen squealed and ran down the stairs. “Momma!” she yelled in excitement and jumped into Kerryn’s arms, snuggling up to her affectionately. Kerryn tightly hugged the child against her chest, the deeply conflicted feelings welling up from deep within her yet again. She managed to fight off the tears long enough for her to set the child down and make her way silently to the parlor where again she wept.

“Kerryn, what is the matter?” asked Lexen, startling the Azudim.

“Nothing, Warden,” she replied with a sniffle.

“The day that nothing is the matter and one of my Infernal Knights is crying is the day that the Dreikathi have enslaved us all and Sapience as we know it is destroyed. Now, be honest with me, what is wrong?” he asked again sternly.

“I asked Lord Damariel for assistance,” she started. “I asked Him to change my form to that of a Yeleni.”

“And?” inquired Lexen with hardened look on his face.

“Lord Damariel requested a sacrifice in exchange for the transformation,” she explained.

“What’s wrong with that? Did you do the sacrifice like He asked?” replied Lexen.

Kerryn shook her head quietly. “No, Warden. The request was too great. He requested I sacrifice Gwen in His temple.” Lexen was taken aback slightly by the deity’s request, unable to suppress the surprise on his face.

“And?” asked Lexen with a concerned tone.

Sighing, Kerryn shook her head again. “I couldn’t do that, Warden. I’m not that selfish.”

Lexen appeared relieved slightly, though continued with his questioning, “So what happened, Kerryn?”

“Nothing. Lord Damariel revealed that he didn’t actually want me to sacrifice Gwen but it was a test of my devotion and faith. And I failed,” explained Kerryn.

Lexen nodded slowly. “This isn’t the end, Kerryn. There will be other opportunities in the future, I’m sure. Give it some time, and don’t concern yourself with other’s opinions and thoughts. Most can only dream about their own ascension and will never achieve it. You should be proud, to have had so many in your family achieve it all so quickly,” he offered in condolence.

Kerryn turned away from the Ildreth, focusing her attention at some random point out the window. “Yes, of course Warden. If you wouldn’t mind, I would like to be alone for now,” she requested. Lexen inclined his head politely and departed the parlor.

Chapter 22: New Beginnings

Spring was upon the inhabitants of the Black Flagon Inn. Songbirds could be heard in the morning singing cheerfully and the flowers were in full bloom. The budding romance between Demarcus and Katszia had developed quickly through the winter. On a particularly sunny afternoon Demarcus suggested they go for a walk. Katszia was more than happy to oblige the fiery Yeleni.

Demarcus lead the feminine Ildreth deep into the Aureliana Forest. There the two youngsters came across the mouth of a cave obscured by a waterfall. Not one to shy away from an interesting adventure, Katszia urged Demarcus to explore the depths of the cave with her. Together they penetrated the falling water and entered the cave system.

There they wandered along the twisting passages, entering a large open cavern deep within the cave. At the center of the cavern was a magnificent pond. The surface of the pond was covered with hundreds of fragrant water lilies. A narrow dry path of crushed seashells and sand lead down the center of the pond, leading up to an oversized lily pad resting gently on a naturally formed bowl containing water. A delicate waterfall provided water to the pond and the bowl, softly breaking against an overhang above the bowl and creating a unique curtain of water around the lily pad.

“Ooooh, this is magnificent!” exclaimed Demarcus quietly, taking in the breathtaking beauty of the cavern.

“I would hope so, I may or may not have played a hand in creating it,” giggled Katszia, running down to the pond and slipping off her boots. She dug her toes into the fine white sand and walked a few steps into the cool, refreshing water.

Demarcus lifted himself off the ground slightly with his wings and floated gently down towards the pond. He settled himself down on the sand. Katszia skipped happily over to the path and down to the lily pad where she parted the water curtain with her finger. With obvious practice she rolled through the part in the aqueous curtain and onto the lily pad. A small amount of water flowed over the edge of the bowl, though the lily pad stabilized into an expansive surface that was surprisingly comfortable to relax upon. Tilting his head curiously to the side, he watched the lithe Ildreth make her way across the cavern’s pond and onto the carefully prepared lily pad.

Hesitantly, Demarcus began to hover and floated over the water. Displacing some of the water lilies, he made his way to the center of the pond where Katszia sat on the floating lily pad. He ducked beneath the curtain of water, not bothering to part the curtain with his finger as Katszia had done so.

“So,” Katszia said curiously.

“So?” asked Demarcus in return.

“What are you thinking?” she asked with a warm smile.

“I’m thinking how nice it is to have someone to talk to about whatever I want, who doesn’t judge me, and is supportive of me and the things that I do,” he said frankly.

“Tell me about it,” said Katszia with an exasperated sigh. “It seems these days all anyone wants to do is lecture, lecture, lecture. Don’t talk to this person, don’t get fed on by this vampire, don’t do that. They never want to just take something for what it is, you know?”

Demarcus nodded in agreement. “It is frustrating, I agree wholeheartedly. I for one am not one to go about judging anybody. I leave that for the divine. Too much responsibility for me!” he exclaimed.

Katszia giggled playfully. “Well, I’m glad that we were introduced, Demi.” She leaned in and planted a gentle kiss on his lips.

Demarcus playfully butted his head up against Katszia’s and asked, “Where do you see yourself in the future, Katszia?”

Katszia nibbled on her lower lip. “What do you mean, Demi?” she inquired.

“Well, do you see yourself settling down, or are you too free of a spirit to be tied down like that?” he whispered quietly.

Shaking her head Katszia replied, “No, not really. I guess a lot of men don’t understand how I can have so much love to give to multiple men, and to care for more than one man simultaneously. It’s kind of like having a dozen eggs. You don’t want to put all of your eggs in one basket. If you put all of your eggs in that basket and the basket gets stolen or dropped, then what? You have nothing. I’ve started from nothing far too many times in my life, Demi, to be placing all of my eggs in a single basket.”

Demarcus nodded in understanding. He leaned back slightly, bracing himself with his hands against the floating lily pad on which they both sat. As he reached his hands back, he fished a polished platinum engagement ring set with a single princess cut diamond from his belt pouch. With a subtly frown, he gave a quick flick of his wrist and cast the engagement ring off into the unknown depths of the pond. “Oh, I couldn’t agree more,” he lied. “Quite frankly, if I’m not able to provide something to you or someone else, I wouldn’t expect them to just stand by idly and go without. I would hope they would go ahead and get what they needed from wherever they needed to go to get it, if that makes sense.”

Katszia smile broadly, “I’m so very glad we’re friends, Demarcus. I feel like you’re part of something that I’ve been missing for quite awhile.” She genuinely seemed oblivious the barely audible plopping noise of the ring striking the surface of the pond and sinking below the surface.

“Me too, Katszia, me too,” replied Demarcus with a weak smile. “Well, this place is truly amazing,” he added.

“Isn’t it?” agreed Katszia, laying herself down on the lily pad and staring up at the canopy that shields the makeshift furniture from the falling water above.

“Well, perhaps we should be getting back?” he asked with a sincere smile.

“Do you have something you need to be back for?” Katszia responded inquisitively.

Demarcus nodded his head. “Oh yes, Father and I were going to go to Ahkeem’s and I was going to demonstrate to him how to not lose everything he owns while playing blackjack or roulette.”

Katszia nearly jumped up at the mentioning of gambling, “Ohhh, I love Ahkeem’s! Is it alright if I tag along?” she asked hopefully.

“Of course,” nodded Demarcus. He offered her his hand and helped her up. Together they walked down the path, pausing for a moment to let Katszia put her boots back on. Once she had her black leather boots secure on her feet she turned to Demarcus and said, “I’ll race you back to the entrance!” with a wry grin.

Demarcus grinned back and nodded in agreement. “Ready, set, go!” she shouted and pushed Demarcus backwards. He stumbled on a large conch shell and fell into the pond. The Yeleni laid back in the pond, floating on his back and listened to the sound of the Ildreth racing out of the cave to beat him. A sigh originating from the very core of his being escaped from his lips, disappointed at the turn of events. He managed to muster himself up out of the pond and took off in flight, navigating the tight corridors with ease.

Katszia easily beat the Yeleni out of the cave. She slipped his hand into his with a smile and squeezed it, nearly dragging him down the highway back to the Black Flagon Inn. There they met up with Haven who had at his hip a bulging wyrm skin money pouch. “C’mon boyo, the night is too young to be wasting it playing footsie here, bring Katszia along and we’ll go take ‘ole Ahkeem for all he’s worth!” the Mhun exclaimed.

Demarcus nodded in agreement and offered the crook of his arm to Katszia, who readily intertwined her arm in his. Together the trio headed off towards Enorian and the ornate gambling tent.

Immediately upon arrival, Haven’s eyes glossed over and the sparkle of gold sovereigns twinkled enchantingly in the corner of his eyes. He rushed over to the roulette table and threw down his entire money pouch on the ‘00’ betting space.

Demarcus raced over to stop his father from making such a foolish bet but was too late. He groaned, “Father, this is how you always lose everything. We didn’t even get to enjoy gambling this time, you just lost it all in a single bet on the roulette wheel!”

Haven shook his head and gave his son a bit of a futile shove to separate himself from the Yeleni a bit. “Don’t crowd me boyo, I’ve got a feelin’. This double zero is going to hit!”

“No more bets!” shouted the roulette wheel master and spun the small white ball along the edge of the roulette wheel. An agonizing clickity-clack repeated itself over and over again as the ball bounced over the slots on the roulette wheel. Demarcus covered his eyes, not wanting to see where the ball was going to land.

“AHOOOO! I WIN!” shouted Haven as the clicking of the ball came to a stop. Demarcus uncovered his eyes and wasn’t quite sure he believed what he saw. The small white ball had come to rest in the green slot on the wheel marked ‘00’. “Double zero wins, and pays thirty to one,” grumbled the wheel master, picking up Haven’s money pouch and counting the bet.

“I told ya boyo, don’t mess with yer old man, who is a gambling tycoon now!” exclaimed Haven as he bounced up and down at the edge of the table anxiously awaiting his winnings. The wheel master finished counting the bet and requisitioned the appropriate number of sovereigns for payment. He handed Haven a pouch containing over thirty million gold sovereigns. Haven could barely lift the money pouch after it was handed back.

“Ohh ho ho! Who is the fool now!” he exclaimed.

“Father, you should really let me hold onto that,” offered Demarcus, hoping to at least save the original bet from being foolishly lost.

“No! Nonsense boyo! Here, take this and go have some fun, yer father’s got some business to attend to!” He tossed Demarcus twenty thousand gold sovereigns and ran out of the tent. Demarcus sighed and trotted over to the door. Peering out of the tent flap, he saw Haven race into the nearby brothel.

“Ohhhh he’s entered the brothel,” said Demarcus with a sigh. Katszia did her best to stifle a giggle.

“Well, at least he’ll be able to get a lot of whores?” offered Katszia apologetically.

Demarcus shook his head, “Some things will simply never change, I’m afraid. But, at least he gave us a little money to play with.”

Katszia nodded and took half of the pile of money thrown at them. She lead Demarcus to a nearby blackjack table. They played throughout the night, ultimately breaking even but having a good time together. As the sun came up and Demarcus walked Katszia back to the inn, he thought to himself that perhaps this isn’t the worst thing in the world.

Chapter 23: The Inevitability of Change

“You know, Kerryn,” began Lexen one afternoon. “It really isn’t all that reasonable for us to be calling ourselves the Mhun Mafia anymore.”

Kerryn raised an eyebrow questioningly at him. “Oh?” she asked.

Lexen shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure how an Azudim Don, an Ildreth Capo, and another Ildreth and Yeleni make up such an organization. Heck, we barely even do most of the things that we did so long ago. The families haven't convened in forever, and I doubt most of them would come now if summoned, anyways."

"I never called us the Mhun Mafia, Lexen," replied Kerryn with a frown.

"Oh," he responded. Rubbing his chin he thought for a moment, "Where did I hear that then?"

"I don't know, it sounds like something stupid that Haven came up with," she offered.

Lexen nodded, "Now that you mention it, it does sound like something Haven would do." He fiddled with a blood stone pendant hanging around his neck on a barbed chain a bit before continuing. "There is some truth in it though, that the old ways of doing things have all but come to an end."

Kerryn nodded. "The constant fighting and bickering over the ylem has drawn out the city loyalties in most people. Previously viewed as a luxury, now citizenship has become a necessity and most cities don't appreciate sharing the loyalty of its citizens."

"I couldn't agree more with that assessment," replied Lexen.

Twisting the signet ring of the Cardinalis family on her finger, Kerryn deftly pulled the functional piece of jewelry off of her appendage. She held it up and examined the worn seal, fond memories coming back to her as she reminisced on times past. "I guess much like our previous selves, changing times dictate changing our ways." Kerryn sighed and set the signet ring down on her desk. "There really is only one way to find out just how much times have changed, Warden."

"Do you want me to summon the bosses?" he asked curiously. Kerryn nodded slowly, turning to look out the window. "Very good, I'll send out the pigeons at once. Though, there are so few left alive anymore... well, I'm sure some of them will come, at least," offered Lexen with an unusual tone of hope.

Two days later as the hour approached, not a single member of one of the other families had arrived. There hadn't even been a response via pigeon from any of those invited. Instead, there were several patrons in the Black Flagon Inn, and Kerryn wasn't about to turn away business. Income was income, and while the inn wasn't struggling to survive by any means, it never hurt to improve the bottom line.

In her parlor the typical elaborate set up had been created. Incredible dishes and wonderful drinks were laid out on the round table at the center of the room. Six chairs surrounded the table. After an hour past the start time of the meeting, Kerryn gave up hope of any of the other family bosses arriving. She was about to give up hope when there was a figure that appeared in the entrance to the parlor. She looked up from her seat and saw Lexen standing there.

"Did they arrive, Warden?" she asked curiously.

"In a way, Don Cardinalis," he replied with the familiar tone of respect. Lexen stepped aside and behind him stood the comparatively diminutive Haven Locke. A broad smile crept across Kerryn's face.

“Please, Boss Locke, come take your seat at the table,” Kerryn said with her hand extended towards the nearest seat to her.

As Haven left the archway, the lithe form of a female Ildreth filled the archway. Katsziaz offered a friendly smile to Kerryn and waited for Don Cardinalis to extend her an invitation to the table.

“Capo Katsziaz, so wonderful to see you darling! Your seat is ready for you,” she said, designating a nearby seat for Katsziaz with her hand.

Last but not least, a large winged Yeleni entered the parlor silently. Kerryn beamed proudly at her son and said, “Demarcus, come take a seat at the table.” Demarcus nodded and moved towards a seat. He paused for a moment before sitting and a grin crept across his face. From behind his wings Gwen popped her head up. “Boo!” she shouted.

Everyone in the room erupted in laughter. “Gwen!” exclaimed Kerryn, beckoning the girl to come to her mother. Gwen happily obliged, climbing down off Demarcus’s back and rushing up to Kerryn and giving her a big hug. Kerryn returned the embrace warmly, squeezing her daughter tightly. The Azudim looked up at her eyes met Lexen’s. Silently she mouthed, “Thank you,” to him, and he just nodded.

“Gwen, why don’t you come sit here next to your Uncle Lexen,” urged Lexen, patting the seat next to his. Gwen chirped, “Okay Unca Lexen!” and scurried over to her designated chair.

“Well, this may not be quite the meeting of the families that Lexen had planned, but I personally find it much warmer and more inviting,” pointed out Demarcus as the six of them took their seats. Haven, Katsziaz, and Kerryn all nodded in agreement.

“What are we having for dinner!?” asked Gwen enthusiastically.

Lexen looked at her and replied with a grin, “Oh, just some pan seared fish. You like fish, right Gwen?”

Gwen’s eyes grew wide and she exclaimed, “Not the feeshies, Unca Lexen!” A resounding chorus of laughter filled the room in response to the young girl’s concern.

Epilogue

The bitterly cold wind whipped through the mountainous pass. Shivering, the young girl wrapped her shawl around herself tightly. She readjusted the straps on her backpack and continued to forge ahead. The large pack of wolverines that had been following her through the mountainous region had only grown in numbers. The ferocious animals began to congregate along both sides of the canyon she was traversing. If the wolverines didn’t bear down on her soon, she was certain the cold would. She ran her thumb along the top of her belt, her fingers quickly finding the hilt of the small knife she kept stowed there. Not that it would be of much help against a dozen wolverines, but it had always brought her comfort knowing she wasn’t completely unarmed.

The girl trudged onward, her progress slowing as the blustery wind buffeted against her, impeding the progress she longed for. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the wolverines on the right ledge of the canyon began to pace back and forth anxiously. She couldn't help but feel as though something were about to happen soon. She turned to face the wolverines to her right, and almost as if by design the animals across the canyon from them sprung out from behind the rocky outcropping and descended rapidly upon the girl's position.

Defensively the girl drew her knife and raised it up, spinning around wildly to face the oncoming threat. She noticed a reddish-white blur out of the corner of her eye, but did her best to focus on the attackers at hand. The first wolverine leapt from a nearby boulder and she neatly ducked underneath its widely spread jaws. The creature tumbled into a pile of fangs and fur, skidding to a stop up against the canyon wall. A second wolverine jumped from the canyon floor directly at the girl's chest. With her dagger, the girl made a well-placed jab that caught the animal in the throat, unleashing a torrent of blood. The animal's corpse momentarily continued through the air and collided with the girl, knocking her down. The blood-covered wolverine came to rest atop the girl, pinning her underneath. The other wolverines took their time and made their way cautiously to the canyon floor.

The girl pushed upwards with all of her might, trying to get the heavy corpse off of her but it was to no avail. She closed her eyes and offered a prayer up to Lord Damariel, The Unbound, to protect her from harm. As she opened her eyes, she saw the reddish white blur again out of the corner of her eye. She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the surroundings, but the weight of the dead wolverine was far too great. The growling that had been closer suddenly turned into frightened yelps and whimpers of pain.

For a moment the girl was thankful her face was exposed to the elements as a warmth washed over her weathered features, soothing her skin and providing relief from the biting frost. She looked up and saw a figure bathed in vibrant white light looming over her. "Surely I must be dead," she thought to herself.

"No, little sister, you aren't dead," teased the figure above her. Apparently she had thought out loud. She blinked and squinted trying to make out the face of the person above her. The Yeleni's face came into focus after a moment and she immediately recognized her brother.

"Well, if I don't have my very own guardian angel," she muttered. The Yeleni reached down and shoved the dead wolverine off of the girl and helped her up. She quickly embraced her brother warmly, letting his warmth radiate into her frozen core.

"You know, you really shouldn't be travelling out here by yourself," said the Yeleni sternly.

"Oh, now you're starting to sound like Uncle. Don't get me started," insisted the girl.

"Well, it is good to see you sister. I know Mother will be overjoyed to see you," replied the Yeleni.

"I supposed so, I understand she has a new mystery man?" asked the girl.

"Indeed. You've already had the pleasure of meeting his sister," responded the Yeleni, breaking the embrace with the girl and beginning to lead her down the canyon and towards her destination.

“Oh really?” inquired the girl.

The Yeleni nodded solemnly. “Absolutely. He’s a nice young lad, albeit a bit young. Younger than you, even.”

“Hrm. Well, maybe I should be the one that is dating him and not mother!” exclaimed the girl with a playful laugh.

“Oh, don’t bring that up with Mother. She will get quite upset,” said the Yeleni knowingly. “Do you think you can make it the rest of the way?”

The girl nodded emphatically. “I should be alright.” She paused for a moment, thinking. “Although, it would be a lot faster if you just flew me there,” she suggested with a grin.

The Yeleni shook his head, “No can do little sister, the Bloodlochians and the Spireans have been trying to shoot down anything that flies. Why, I don’t know, but it has become a fact of life. I can’t risk you getting hit by a stray arrow or something.”

The girl huffed in annoyance. “Leave it up to those assholes to ruin everything fun and decent in this world.”

The Yeleni blinked in surprise. “Since when have you acquired such a dirty little mouth, sister of mine?” he asked.

The girl grinned and replied, “Well brother, when you set out and explore the world for yourself, leaving behind the protection and naivety of home there are certain habits that quickly become engrained so you can fit in with the more unscrupulous crowds.”

“Er, and why exactly did you feel the need to fit in with the unscrupulous crowds, little sister?” asked the Yeleni.

“Well, not all of us can be perfect angels, brother,” she replied with a smirk.

The Yeleni nodded with comprehension. “On second thought, I had probably better walk you the rest of the way. It isn’t much farther, just down the hill and down the road.” The girl nodded in agreement.

Together they made their way down the hill and down the Raphaelen Highway. Neither could contain their excitement once the familiar exterior of the Black Flagon Inn came into view. The broke into a sprint and raced one another to the warmth and merriment inside.