

## **Chapter Seven**

Arkady kept having dreams.

Of people he'd failed, those whose souls he'd been forced to commit to eternal destruction, unable to release their souls in any other way beyond the cruelest of forms, the only one available to him, all other options exhausted and his path chosen, inescapable, like gravity exerting itself upon his very life force, the only direction forward.

He couldn't remember which came first – the voices, the pain or the unrelenting eyes, looking upon him in judgment, saying 'why couldn't you save us?' or 'why didn't you try?' or 'are you really so helpless that you always take the easiest path?'

When he awoke awash in sweat, it felt like he hadn't slept at all, no more rested than he had been when he'd closed his eyes hours earlier. The weight of those souls lost to the æther would remain with him for quite some time, but it had been decades since last he'd needed to endure this, and he had blissfully forgotten how much the pain and pressure was at the onset.

Except now he was back in the thick of it, and he couldn't remember what his pathway had been through to the other side last time.

The dwarf knew all of this would eventually pass. It had passed before; it would pass again. But that didn't make it any easier when he was in the thick of it, the unbearable cost of war rubbed like salt into his eyes once more.

There were no other avenues to deal with blueflame weapons. Mages had been looking for centuries for a way to release the souls contained within without destroying them, and those far wiser than him had been driven to the brink of madness, contemplating any possible path to let those souls go gracefully, but it was not to be.

When he'd been given his training by his mentor regarding blueflame weaponry, his teacher had told the dwarf that, with any luck, all the blueflame weapons would be destroyed before he would ever be asked to deal with any of them, but alas, the arsenal had been tenacious in its determination not to be destroyed, hiding in nooks, crannies and caves, just waiting for time to pass and a new, naïve generation to discover them and put them back to use for their horrible causes.

Over his lifetime, he'd dismantled close to a dozen of them.

"You're awake," Moonweave said. She'd braided his beard while he slept and it hung in a neat red triple braid, bound with a heavy silver skull clasp at the bottom of it. He'd normally tended to his beard himself, but the last few months, they'd been so busy and overtasked that he'd let it fall into disarray, not having the time nor energy to keep it prim and proper, so he was delighted to see that the pixie had restored it to its normal glory, if not better than he usually kept it.

"That must have been quite the challenge," Arkady said to her, inspecting her work. "I... Thank you, for your kindness and attention."

"I need to earn my place here as much as anyone, Master Threadbinder, and if my small hands can bring some lightness while you sleep, then I am happy to have provided them." She looked a little demure, but there was also a sense of pride about her. She knew how much import dwarves placed on their beards, and how much must have been on his mind for his to have fallen into such a state of disrepair. She was a good-looking woman, but there was something about her that made him think she'd been mostly sheltered in the palace for much of her life, and now that she was out of that gilded cage, she was going to try and learn as much as she could as quickly as she could. "I want to do all that I can to establish my sense of worth to the group."

The dwarf chuckled softly. "I know better than most, dear pixie, that you're only that small because you choose to be. I have spent time with your kind and have seen them tower over me when the need was present. You need not hide your abilities around us."

"I'm not hiding them, Master Threadbinder," she said with a shy giggle. "I simply haven't had a call for them as of yet, but should they be needed, you can expect me to display them."

“You can also simply call me Arkady,” he sighed. “You’re going to be with us for quite some time, and I have no qualms about someone in our entourage referring to me by my first name and not my title.”

“Do... do you dislike me, Arkady?” Moonweave said, sitting upon his chest atop his beard, straddling the woven hair, folding her arms at the wrist in front of her, almost to make her bosom press up more towards his eyes.

He smiled a touch sourly, mostly at himself. “I apologize if I have given you that impression, m’lady. I’m actually quite fond of your kind, and you seem quite a sweet girl. I just...” He inhaled a let out a breath. “I know how ridiculous it sounds, but you remind me so much of soldiers I served with, back in the war, and all my memories of them are tied up in how they died. I’m... I’m trying to get past that, but when you’re around, it’s as though all their faces come springing to mind again and I’m trapped by their memories.”

“Perhaps we could set some other memory as my default?” she said with a soft smile. “What if I wanted to engage your services, to find where my thread connects?”

“Normally there’s sizable vitae transfer involved, but I suppose since you’ve already been effectively banished from your family, I could make the attempt for a pittance, although I know pixies have caused trouble for other Threadbinders in the past,” he said.

“Oh?” she said, leaning her elbow on a tuft of his beard, her hand in her palm. “How so?”

“Some pixies live complicated and highly changing lives, so while in the process of following a thread to its completion, that thread has been known to break and be replaced by another,” he said. “I’m not saying that *will* happen to you, but merely pointing out that it *has* happened and not only the one time, but multiple times. Pixie hearts are... complicated things. There is precedence for it happening, so I feel obligated to remind you that this is a possible path.”

“Do you need me to get your partners?”

He nodded. Arkady always preferred that his wife participated in the rituals whenever possible, although from time to time a client would ask that she not be in the room, and he generally respected the client’s wishes. “I can begin to prep my materials, but my wife at the very least should know that I’m going to be engaging in magics on Quiesh’s back, or if she can find a place where we can put down and stretch our legs a bit more.”

The pixie began to flit her wings and lifted up into the air, turning to fly out of the room, but making a point to show the underside of her skirt to the dwarf, revealing her bare ass to his eyes. A few moments later, he could feel the griffon started to descend. He wasn’t at all sure where they were right now, having been in the carriage since their departure from the blueflame weapon yesterday, but as they started to sink down towards the earth, he could hear gulls circling around the griffon.

“If nothing else, husband, you certainly *look* better than you did before,” Yasha said as she entered the carriage. “But I suspect that’s more to do with our pixie tending to your grooming than you doing it yourself.”

“You can tell she did it?” the dwarf asked as he rose out of bed, not bothering to put clothes on, making his way over to his toolkit. “What gave it away?”

“Beneath the skullclasp at the very bottom of the braid, there’s a small purple ribbon that I think our new companion has used as a belt from time to time,” Yasha laughed. “I doubt anyone else would notice, but I’m your wife, and I notice every little change that ever happens to you. Has your mood improved since you went to bed?”

“A little. Perhaps time is the only real curative for this pain, but we will do what we can to see if distraction can provide a little solace as well,” he replied. “Moonweave would like to find her partner, so I’m going to bind her thread and we’ll take a look and see what she’s got lined up in her future.”

“You told her about the Pixie Problem, I hope?”

“I did, but she’s still game for it.”

“Then I suppose we should get to it.”

Arkady moved to the door of the carriage and looked out, seeing they were on the coast, rather, a coast of some kind. He suspected they were about to cross over the Habiby Sea, on the other side of which laid Gom Weydan. They were going to visit the pocket city. It wasn't a thing they had ever particularly wanted to do, but in following Sophia's path, they would, in fact, be traveling towards an eternally elusive opportunity.

"We are only a day's flight from Gom Weydan, I see," Arkady said, looking back over his shoulder at his wife. "Do we know how much longer the window will remain open?"

"Until the first day of spring, so a month or so," Yasha said. "So as long as we don't spend too much time lingering there, we shouldn't be too concerned about being trapped there. I've always been a little keen to see the Shimmering City during its brief forays into our realm. The tales they tell of it are remarkable, if perhaps a little too far fetched to be completely believable."

"The more unbelievable the tale, my love, the more likely it is to be true," Arkady chuckled softly. "I knew a dwarf who'd set foot in the Shimmering City, long long ago, and she described it as a marvel beyond anyone's comprehension. The sort of things that I would consider miracles happening all around, taken for granted by those who will never leave the borders of Gom Weydan, or those who might exit in places other than our own realm."

"Other places?"

He allowed himself a tight-lipped smile. "The Shimmering City is always *somewhere*, my love, even when it isn't on *our* world. Most people are afraid to stay in the Shimmering City past its shift, because it means they will likely never see their home again, but every now and then, you can meet a traveler who's come through from somewhere else *before* Gom Weydan, another world, another time, another place."

"Oh!" Yasha said. "That's what that goblin meant when she said she came from 'extremely afar,' isn't it?"

He nodded. "At least that's what *I* thought she must have meant. She'd been on our world for some time by the time we met her, but you could see she still didn't fully think of it as home. I wonder if she made her way back to Gom Weydan. Mayhap we will see her when we get there."

"It's been a long time, husband of mine," Yasha sighed. "I suspect we have missed her aging and passing somewhere along the way."

"If so, then we'll just have to take comfort in the things we shall see and the glories we shall experience when we get there. I'm particularly interested to see if the stories of the phantom train cars are at all true. Can you imagine that? Passenger trains that run in rings around the Shimmering City, no driver, no engine, nothing but people being transported from one end to the other. Animated stone guardians that provide directions for anyone or anything within the city walls. And, of course, the tales of the Reagent, as odd as they are."

"Why haven't we made a point to head there before, my love?" Yasha asked him, rubbing her hand along his weathered bared scalp.

"We've just never been headed that way at that time, my beloved, and neither of us ever thought to make it a priority," he said. "Regardless, we should tend to the ritual. I'm sure she's likely doing it to lighten my mood only, but... but I appreciate the effort to try and bring some levity into my coal heart, even if it is only for a little while."

"Oh!" Yasha giggled, shaking her head. "Oh, dear *dear* husband. I forget that as wise and traveled as you are, you truly can be something of an idiot when it comes to my gender. You truly haven't noticed the eyes the pixie girl has been giving you since her arrival?"

Arkady sighed. "Oh no. It's not ThreadLock, is it?"

ThreadLock was a somewhat common phenomena for Threadbinders, where a patron would 'fall' for their Threadbinder until the moment they actually met the person they were threadbound *to*. Eventually, they would meet up with their bound, and things would fall into place, but the idea of assuming that because a Threadbinder could work such magic that all threads would lead right to them

was a painfully common misconception. Usually such things were dispelled easily and lightly. After all, once you came face to face with your one true love, how could you still harbor such self-deceptions?

Still, Yasha's bemused tone made it seem unlikely that this was what Moonweave was suffering from, so the dwarf couldn't help but wonder what he might have missed. He suspected he would know soon enough, and if there was anything dwarves were legendary for, near the top of the list would surely be patience.

He fished his vials from his bag as he saw Sophia stroll into the main bedroom portion of the carriage, Moonweave sitting on her shoulder before the pixie fluttered her wings, lifting off the human's shoulder and moving to land down on the wooden floor of the carriage. Then she began to grow and grow, her magic bringing her form into something akin to the dwarf's proportions, although she was still overly slim and buxom, containing that pixie figure that so many human women had gone through such manipulations to try and replicate over the years. Once she was the correct size, she reached down and pulled her dress up and over her head, leaving her slate gray skin exposed to all in the room, her nipples almost a shade of deep violet, and a small stripe of silver hair above her snatch.

"I... I have not been honest with you, Arkady," Moonweave said to him, her eyes looking down at her hands as he moved to begin the fleshlighting process, applying streaks of the glowing pigmentation to her skin.

"Oh? This is going to cost you a year's worth of vitae, so I should hope it isn't that you're changing your mind about the ritual," the dwarf said, his thumb slowly drawing the symbols upon her skin. "But it's early enough that I can stop if—"

"No!" she said, suddenly. "It's only... I'm doing the ritual for *your* benefit, more than I am my own, and I feel as though deception isn't a fair path for us to move forward on."

The dwarf stopped in his applications for a moment, tilting his head to one side. "If you have doubts about going through the ceremony, Moonweave, then you—"

"I know who I'm threadbound to already!" the pixie blurted out suddenly, her face scrunched up. "But I need you to *believe* me, and I don't think you will without this, so you must do the ritual!"

"I've lived centuries longer than I'd ever expected, my dear, and far longer than most dwarves dare to dream of," Arkady said to her. "Through magic, I will outlive all of those I grew up with by leagues and strides. I am capable of believing a great many things. Tell me, and I shall endeavor to wrap my head around it."

"When you pull upon my thread, Arkady, you will see it does not have far to go indeed," Moonweave whispered quietly. "In fact, you will see it leads to *you*."

The dwarf nodded. ThreadLock indeed, no matter what his wife thought. "You may think that now, Moonweave, but we'll soon know exactly where your thread will take you."

The pixie smiled a little bashfully. "I already know where it leads. *You* are the one who needs convincing."

"You barely know me, Moonweave," Arkady said, as he finished applying the last of the fleshlighting to her skin, moving to place the sigils on both his own flesh and his wife's. "Why do you think your thread will lead to me?"

"Watching you run rings around my mother was the single hottest thing I've ever seen anyone do," Moonweave said, doing her best not to rub her hands along her thighs, but it was clear from the girl's wiggling that she was impatient. "My entire life, my mother has been a force of nature, a storm from which no one is ever spared. She is control. She is force. She is the storm from which every woman and man has backed down the minute she made demands. And yet... and yet you, Arkady... you would not be dissuaded and you would not back down from her."

"You think your thread leads to me because I stood up to your mother?"

"You didn't just *stand up* to my mother, Arkady," Moonweave said, giggling a little, looking up at him. "You basically *broke* her. She had such plans she was going to use on the negotiator, such high expectations of all the things she would extract from him, and instead, you stripped her down to her

most basic of needs and wants and left her with the bare minimum of what she could accept without losing all faith in front of the clan. You could've let her keep more, but I could see that the notion of her getting the best of you never even occurred to you, and that to do anything less than what your skill could accomplish would be an affront to your soul."

Arkady smiled a little and shrugged. "I'm a dwarf. Hagglng is like breathing to us."

"You weren't just hagglng, though," Moonweave said, her hand reaching up to stroke the dwarf's massive cock. "You were *destroying* her. I've seen her have to accept less than she wanted in a negotiation before, but only marginally, and you took more from her than that. In fact, you embarrassed her in ways I don't think you fully understand yet."

"And how did I do that?"

"The *only* demand she was going to be completely inflexible on was you taking me off her hands," Moonweave said, licking her lips. "And you could tell that right away, so instead of quibbling with that point, you simply it remain on the stack of demands. If you'd pulled it out and she'd had to drop it back in again, she could've gained some ground against you, but instead you let it rest there like it was always going to be part of the demands, and that you'd both agreed upon it already. She'd planned to get the better of you with that, and you simply avoiding her game all together and starting playing your own. It was... enthralling to watch." Moonweave's fingertips curled on her thigh, her eyes looking up at him. "I want to be a part of that. I want to be a part of *you*. I want you to apply that razor mind towards making me *yours*. Eventually I want to be loved, but now, this first time, in this moment, I want to have my royalty stripped from me, my former position ignored. I don't want to be a princess anymore. I want to be a raw, carnal, primal, sexual creature. Not a lady, but a bitch. Not a queen, but a *whore*. I want to imagine you debasing my mother, imposing your will upon her, or or or *or*, even better, imposing your will upon *me* in front of *her*. Making her *watch* as you show her what true *power* looks like, how it doesn't *have* to be something flexed every hour of every day. Gods, that works me up, that charges me like I didn't even *imagine*."

As eager as Moonweave was, Arkady had heard an almost identical speech before, but it had been long, long, *long* ago. Some of the phrasings had been different. Some of the reasonings had been a little adjusted. But overall, the words had rung the same way.

Yasha.

When they'd first met, Yasha had been yearning to break free from her family, to walk on her own, and not to be seen as a princess. The dwarf was starting to wonder if royalty all found themselves envying the freedom that came so easily to those outside of their castle walls, or if he'd simply displayed his fortitude of will in front of two similarly driven women.

As a Threadbinder with a threadbound wife, he'd sort of trained himself not to look for emotional connections, but with Sophia entering the picture, with the remarkable energy she'd brought into their relationships, all the old systems and patterns that he'd come to know and rely upon could no longer be trusted.

The game had changed.

The *world* had *changed*.

He had to consider the new moments, to be open the possibility. Had he been ignoring her physical beauty because of his memories of those pixie soldiers he'd served with? He needed to go through the ritual and see what the results were. It would let him learn from it, and either Moonweave was wrong and he was simply a passing fancy, or the systems had changed far more than he'd suspected was even possible.

He was about to speak, when Yasha's voice cut through the air.

"Is that what you want, Moonweave Doubledawn?" Yasha asked. "You're not only asking to step into his world, but all of ours. Sophia's new, but she's integrating with us, and Arkady and I have been in lockstep for centuries upon centuries now. So if you're asking him to use you, to control you, you're asking the same of both myself and Sophia. Are you aware of that?"

“Yes, M’lady,” Moonweave said, licking her lips. “If licking your boots would bring joy to Master Arkady, I would spend the entire evening doing that.” She looked up at Yasha and smiled with a carnal hunger that even took Arkady aback a little. “An orgasm given, an orgasm taken, and vitae spilled. Point me in a direction and tell me whom I have to bring an orgasm from, and I will do that. I will charge with arms raised.”

Arkady suddenly stood a little straighter as something dawned on him. “Oh! I hadn’t...” He glanced over at Sophia and offered a soft smile. “We haven’t talked about it, but this is something we’re going to need to take a moment for – do you want a cut of the vitae?”

The human woman’s eyes parted a little wider. “Is... should I?”

“We can’t decide for you, Sophia,” Arkady said, placing his hand on the small of her back. “Without it, your time with us will be brief but brilliant. If you wish to extend it, however, that option is—”

“I don’t ever want to leave you both,” Sophia said, clinging to him. “I will take a split. Will it hurt? Will I feel it?”

Yasha placed her hand on Sophia’s shoulder. “You will feel it, it won’t hurt but it will be a bit of a rush. Arkady, put the rune on her.”

The dwarf reached over and grabbed his vial before opening it to place the matching symbol upon Sophia’s belly. “When the transfer hits, if it overwhelms you, that’s fine. Revel in the feeling of it, savor it.”

She nodded, leaning in to press her lips against his. “Thank you, Arkady. For not just your kindness, but your patience. But now, you should give my handmaiden what she desires.” She turned her gaze to look down at Moonweave. “You should sully her in ways she cannot even begin to imagine. Defile her, my love.”

With Sophia, Yasha and Moonweave all egging him on, he knew that if he didn’t approach this with the sort of raw carnal force she wanted, things would be complicated. So he moved to slide Moonweave onto her back onto a small bench they had, her head dangling off the edge of it, as he moved to slap her across the face with his thick cock.

Moonweave began to giggle, but also purred in sexual lust. “Thank you, sir. May I have more?”

“Open your mouth, bitch,” Yasha growled down at her. “And keep it wide.”

“I can take whatever you want of me,” the pixie stated proudly.

At that, Arkady shoved his cock directly into the pixie’s mouth and further into her throat, his ballsack resting against her nose. He held that position for a long moment before pulling back, and while the pixie was sloppy with slobber and spit, she reached up, grabbed the dwarf’s ass and pulled him back in once more.

His cock brutalized her face, thrusting his cock into her mouth to cut off air to her lungs, and the only thing the pixie did was try to get her face further onto his shaft. This wasn’t his typical experience, but the pixie had painted a very clear picture of what she wanted from her first time, and there was no shred of kindness or compassion in it.

“You’re imagining your mother watching him fuck your face like some common street whore aren’t you?” Yasha said to the pixie as she tweaked one of her gray nipples. “I remember doing that my first time with Arkady. The only difference was that my mother was only a few doors away. I was as loud as possible. I *wanted* her to know he was debasing me, that I’d *asked* him to befoul me. C’mon, beloved. You’re going *easy* on her. Really choke the bitch on your cock. She needs to feel it swollen to break her throat.”

“You should see her eyes, my love,” Sophia whispered into his ear. “I think she’s going cross-eyed with the overwhelming sensations. I’m a little jealous you haven’t fucked *my* face that way.” The teasing tone of his human lover’s voice had a stark honesty undercurrent to it, an envy that Arkady had only shown his kinder half to his new human partner. “Sooner or later, you’re going to have to go at me with such... vigor.”

The dwarf kept his hips moving, but he could feel the pixie's fingers squeezing a little nervously against his ass, clearly adrift in the sea of pleasure, intoxicated in her own lusts, but even Arkady hadn't anticipated what would come next. The pixie's hips suddenly shoved upward and a stream of clear liquid arced from her through the air and onto the large rug below, and he felt her throat constrict around his shaft, almost like her form had tried to revert to its smaller one for just a moment, felt the resistance of his cock, and then locked in a tight seal around it. The sudden inhalation of suction, as well as feeling Sophia's fingertip sliding between his cheeks to massage his prostate without warning, sent him off in turn, and he flooded the pixie's throat and mouth with jism.

As soon as he did, he heard Sophia's breath gasp and then turn into a single high-pitched note, getting her first transfer of vitae, an experience unlike any other. They had only taken three years off the pixie's lifespan and split it between the three of them equally, but to Sophia, he knew it would feel as though she were suddenly twenty years younger, old wounds and aches suddenly gone, her entire world not just brighter but more colorful.

It was an intoxicating, addicting feeling like none other.

He pulled his cock from Moonweave's mouth and looked down to see that indeed her eyes had crossed, and she looked utterly spoiled, but also somehow remarkably pleased and satisfied by it. Yasha had helped Sophia to lay down as well, leaving him alone to look at Moonweave's threads, and although he felt like he should no longer be shocked, he saw there was indeed a thread connecting him and her, although he did not see one leading to Sophia or Yasha. But more confusing still, three other threads dangled from her core and extended off into the far distance.

All this confirmed his greatest fear.

Threads were no longer one per person.

After Gom Weydan, he was going to need to head to the Council and explain his findings, because whatever it meant, it couldn't be good.