

The Threadbinders

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Chapter One

The griffon flew low over the snowy fields, the land stretched out beneath them covered in powder white like a coat of paint atop the trees that had months ago been stripped of their leaves for the winter. In just a few short months, the snow would pass and the flora would explode into blooms of color and life, but now, still in the mid of winter, the ice still clung to every available surface, the two suns giving spots of glare to both the left and the right of the magnificent flying creature.

Her name was Quiesh, and she was their friend.

Quiesh loved to skim down close to the surface, taking in the landscape as much as she could while her two passengers, partners really, sat atop of her, continuing their long voyage with no set destination, in search of work, which would bring them food, shelter and money to keep themselves going, and as such, Quiesh had been trained to spot one of two flags at a good distance. As much as she preferred flying low, she regularly took high swoops up into the air, to take in the lay of the land and scout for either of the two flags that would allow her partners to ply their trade.

To the right, a small forest splayed down up and over a hill, the ideal spot to find a village, and as the griffon lifted skyward, getting sufficient altitude to give the area a once over, she spotted a small town nestled in a grove that still clung to some foliage, some of that green still seeding the visual palate of the landscape.

That meant elves.

It wasn't a large village by any stretch of the imagination, only two dozen or so structures, but with the way elves built their homes, that could mean maybe fifty families living there, so they would be able to afford the services of her partners.

In the center of the village, as was true for every village and town Quiesh had ever seen, was a single flagpole that stretched higher than the top of any building, taller in fact than any tree around it. The signal flagpole tradition was one that spanned further back in time than written history, and every gathering of people had one, the height of it important so that mages could spot it at a great distance, even when impeded.

Most mages weren't dignified with a partner quite so elegant as Quiesh, and many of them had to travel the surface in carts drawn by lesser beasts of burden. Because of Quiesh's vantage, her partners were adept at finding the villages and townships that were lesser traveled and often more in need of their services.

The two atop her back hadn't always traveled by griffon, but since Quiesh had come into their lives, they had been more satisfied with their lives, seeing far more of the world than they had before. The two had always wanted to travel further, and with Quiesh, they were visiting lands neither had seen before, taking in as much of the world as they could, from the deserts to the forests, from the islands to the plains. Quiesh had been one of the best things to happen to their lives.

The griffon noted that the flagpole in the center of the village had one of the two flags she had been trained to stay on watch for, and saw it was the large blue flag with two red semi-circle lines not quite joined in the center of it.

The flag requesting the presence of a Threadbinder.

Quiesh moved to descend closer to the village, scouting the area carefully as she could see elves looking upwards at her, pointing and shouting, no doubt reveling in her majesty, as she finally decided on a proper landing place and glided downwards, giving a little shake to rouse her partners from their slumber, it still being mid morning, Quiesh having flown through much of the night.

The woman, Yasha, was the first to awaken, her silvery eyes fluttering open to look down beneath her, her fine elvish features hued in rose from the cool air. "Oh look, Arkady, it's your turn,"

she said to her husband, shaking the dwarf from his slumber.

“Hm?” the squat man said as he felt his wife tugging lightly on his beard. His eyes opened, the color of freshly mined ruby, as he looked down from their saddle where they were strapped in. “Mmm. Elves. I imagine that means you'll do the collecting, but I suppose we will see.” His thick hand patted Quiesh's mane affectionately. “Excellent spot, friend. You'll eat well tonight, I am certain of that.”

Quiesh cut through the air, swooping in a downward arc that curved up at the end before giving a single flap of her majestic wings to stop her forward motion, then floated down into an open portion of the village, one she would have no trouble taking off from after her partners had concluded their business.

Arkady unstrapped himself from the saddle and slid off, hopping down onto the ground once more, his leather boots happy to be back on the surface again. As much as he loved Quiesh and the ease of travel her partnership provided, a dwarf never liked to be too far from the stone.

In comparison to his slender elven wife, he was a short man, although no shorter than any other typical dwarf, strong and squat, with a proud red beard that he kept braided in a single knotted cord that ran down the center of his chest. Like most Threadbinders, he wore shades of dark blue, the familiar two red unjoined semi-circles embroidered in the fabric or painted on what sparse bits of armor he did wear, mostly on his shoulders and torso. He wore a heavy blue cap over the top of his head, the center quite bald, but the red hairs that formed a ring around that center barren patch peeked out from beneath the hat. He didn't look old, but then again, no binder worth their weight in spit did.

Behind him, his wife slid down from Quiesh's saddle, her appearance much more akin to those around them. She was a high elf, lithe and majestic, but extremely fit for her kind, her willowy limbs bearing strong muscle, her bosom perhaps a bit larger than average for her species. If her husband had a certain air of world-weariness to him, Yasha was sprightly and energetic. He moved with the deliberate resolve of the stone; she moved like water passing over that stone. Her hair was like spun gold, partially braided in a ring that formed a crown atop her head, the rest drawn back into a bound tail along the back.

The two provided quite the contrast to one another. His skin was leathery and heavily tanned by the sun, whereas hers still remained supple and light, almost the shade of milk, as if the sun simply rolled off of her and refused to color her even a smidgen. Both looked like they could easily win fights, but in very different methods. She looked as though she might wear her opponent down with lunges and parries before ending the combat with a single, well-placed deadly strike. He looked as though that great axe of his would split an opponent right in half on the first blow.

In contrast to her husband's blue attire, Yasha wore mostly red clothes, with a different blue symbol, that of four lines moving towards forming an X but unjoined in the center, reflecting the difference in her profession to her husbands. Mages often traveled in pairs or small groups, so that they could all benefit from one of their kind's services being in demand, but they were not often wed, as Arkady and Yasha were, something the dwarf had never been able to fully reconcile in his head, but as it turned out, many mages were far too timid to turn their abilities inward.

Once both were off Quiesh's back, Yasha moved up to stroke the griffon's neck a bit, scratching the muscles through the thick coat, taking a moment to pry some burrs loose from the fur, much to the creature's enjoyment, as a small number of elves became to approach them.

The leader of the village approached first, a large ceremonial staff in hand, a woman who had to be a few centuries past the lifespan of any human, but still only appeared as aged as a human woman in her forties. She had sharp, angular features, a sort of deadly pointed beauty to her, like that of well-crafted kris knife, with eyes the shade of ancient pine needles that looked at Arkady with trepidation.

“You are a Threadbinder?” the leader scoffed at him.

“Arkady Gormansson,” he said to her, accustomed to being looked down upon by elves, both figuratively and literally. “Eighth rank Threadbinder, so you know my skills are unquestionable. This is my wife and partner, Yasha Summervale, Threatbinder, twelfth rank.”

The village leader began to immediately bow. “My lady, I—”

“If that bow dips one inch further,” Yasha cautioned, “I will demand my husband double his fees.” The woman stopped bowing suddenly, hearing the tone in Yasha's voice that made it clear this was no idle threat.

“Apologies my lady,” the elder said, standing upright once more. “Your family name speaks volumes, even to us so far removed from elvish high society.” Arkady had grown accustomed to this over the years, and had accepted it part and parcel when he and Yasha had been wed, but he still found it all just a little silly. While dwarves also had their royalty, the bowing and toadying the elves gave theirs would've gotten any dwarf a punch up the bracket. “Also, I was not aware that binders could excel beyond a tenth rank.”

“Threadbinders have nine ranks, Threatbinders have thirteen,” she said, no opinion in her voice, simply relaying the facts to the villagers. “And the only name I choose to trade on in my own. You fly the Threadbinder flag, so someone here is in need of my husband's services.”

“Yes, I, ah...” the woman said, looking down at Arkady before looking back to Yasha once more. Arkady wasn't certain which had put the woman off more – the fact that he was a dwarf, or the fact that Yasha had identified him as her husband. “Forgive us, we are not used to having a dwarf among us. We do not mean to judge, fine Threadbinder, but your kind does not often venture into these woods, so far from any mountain.”

Arkady raised a thick hand in understanding, not wanting to put these people off any further. “It is no bother. If you do not want my services and instead choose to wait for a Threadbinder of a different race, you are entitled to do so.” He started to turn back towards Quiesh, as if he was going to climb aboard the griffon once more, but he had done this dance in enough towns and villages that he knew what would come next, and this was merely a tactic to cut through the bargaining bullshit. They would hem and haw for what felt like eons if he didn't push them to act quickly.

“Wait!”

He felt the smile creep in beneath his beard before he spirited it away, turning back to look at the elder once more, as the circle of elves gathered around them had only grown in number. “Yes?”

“It has been two seasons since we put up that flag, good Threadbinder, and since then, none of your particular skillset have come this way,” she sighed. “I apologize if my words implied anything but the utmost respect for you and your abilities. Please, I beseech you, lend us your mighty skills and solve our conundrum for us.”

“Who is it who petitions me for aide?”

“I do,” a young woman said, stepping from the pack. Her hair was silver, much like the metal he'd grown up around, swept back behind her pointed ears, running down to her neckline. She was certainly beautiful, but had a definite hesitation to her stance, even as she moved more closely to the two mages. She was slender, like most elves, but had a certain athleticism to her. He suspected she was one of those who went and hunted for wild game. “I am Zestry Honeydew, daughter of Elyria Honeydew, and I seek your aide, good Threadbinder, for this village holds no mate for me.”

“And you agree to pay your fair share of the costs?” he said, looking up at her. “There is no shame in changing your mind, girl, now that you know whom you will pay your tax to. I will bear you no ill will nor—”

“I know the cost, good sir dwarf,” Zestry said, “and I will pay it gladly. I would pay it gladly thricefold, if needed, simply to find that which the Threadbinders promise, which is to say an end to this solitude. I resolved to not go unbound any longer than I needed to when I told my mother to run that flag up in the spring after I came of age. It has been a long wait for one of your kind to pass our way. Wherever my thread may be bound to, it is not here, nor anywhere close to here, and because of that, I turn to you, Master Threadbinder, to ease my loneliness.”

Arkady chuckled a little, nodding some, as he turned his attention back to the village elder. “And the village is prepared to pay its share of the costs?”

“A week's worth of food and rations, a night's worth of housing, for all members of your party, as in accordance with the binder tradition. Would thirty golden aryou be enough to pay the difference? It's most of the money we have here in the village, but if it helps our beloved Zestry—”

“Fifteen aryou would be more than sufficient,” Yasha told them, “as long as the food and rations include something large and meaty for our friend Quiesh to eat.” She patted the griffon's haunches, and the village elder smiled a little.

“That is most kind and generous of you, m'lady. I will dispatch my hunters to bring the mightiest stag they can find for the griffon to feast upon this evening, as Zestry prepares for her departure on the morrow,” the elder said as the young girl moved to stand along side of her. “She has been looking forward to this for some time, but farewells still need to be made and affairs put in order.”

Arkady was amused by how his wife had chosen to set the price so low, but he understood her reasoning, being as this village did not seem to have the wealth to spare, and even the meager fifteen aryou was quite a sizable investment.

“Fine,” the dwarf said, adjusting his beard slightly. “Take us to where we shall lodge for the night, escort Quiesh to where she may lay down, and we will await your arrival later this evening, Zestry.”

“Thank you again, sir Threadbinder.”

He grabbed his satchel from the saddle, as his wife grabbed her own. Then they allowed the elves to lead the griffon over towards a barn, some place where the large winged creature could enjoy a night inside of warmth.

While normally they preferred to remain mobile and in motion, it was still important to take time to recharge and recuperate. A day's worth of relaxation would give them a chance to prepare, as Arkady suspected it would be a long voyage with the girl in tow, otherwise some local shaman might have been able to do a basic divining.

For much of the day, Yasha and Arkady chatted with the elves, giving them news from the frontiers, explaining what the two mages knew of in terms of development in extended politics, although Yasha did much of the talking, as she had always taken a much keener interest in such things than Arkady had. Elves did so love their politics, but dwarves often found the layers of social obfuscation annoying and unnecessary.

Most importantly, however, Yasha and Arkady both enjoyed a long hot bath, as the village had a hot springs they had covered, and the waters offered soothing release to the mages' well-traveled bones. Arkady felt like he did not want to leave the springs, and spent at least an hour or so simply soaking within the bath, as Yasha took the time to make sure all of his hair was cleaned.

Threadbinder life was never quite as glamorous as the mages had made it seem in Arkady's youth, but to constantly live a life in motion was a thing he would not trade for any price. In fact, Yasha had estimated that the three of them – herself, Arkady and Quiesh – had likely seen more of the planet than any other individuals upon it, a claim that Arkady could find no fault in, and had no reason to question.

It was the smell of the late lunch that finally coaxed the dwarf from the baths, as the elves had done their best to cook up some long forgotten dwarvish delicacy they had been taught long ago, the last time anyone in this region had seen a dwarf passing through. He suspected few of the elves in the village had ever seen his kind before, being as they were so far from any proper mountains. But whatever they had made, they had layered it in pepper, garlic, butter and spice, and it had a lovely aroma that stirred even the darkest heart into action.

Whomever they had learned it from, the elves had learned the way to a dwarf's stomach, and learned it well.

While they ate lunch, Arkady made it a point to dry his beard and to not get any food in it. His wife had referred to his beard as a soup catcher more than once, and Arkady, like any proper dwarf, had taken umbrage to it, his beard a proud reminder of his heritage. Once, when her teasing had crossed

from amusement to annoyance, he had threatened to cut it off if it bothered her so much. Never before nor since had he seen his wife quite so quickly crestfallen and ashamed of herself, and she went to great lengths to apologize to him repeatedly over the next week.

Into the early evening, the pattern continued, with elves coming to ask questions about what transpired beyond their forest, but also to come and politely examine the dwarf, the most excitement this village would see for years.

By the time dinner had finished, both Yasha and Arkady found their bellies full and their appetites satiated, and not one elf had dared ask how Arkady and Yasha had come to be wed, much to the dwarf's amusement.

One of the buildings in the village had laid dormant, its owner having died a few years ago, and during the day while they ate, a number of the elves had converted it into a makeshift inn for the night, a place where Yasha and Arkady could lay their heads down for the night and be on their way in the morning to continue their work.

As they walked from the dining hall to the converted cottage, the elder finally dared to ask the two mages a little more about themselves, having steadfastly avoided the subject for the entire day thusfar. "Do you find your services are more or less in demand than your wife's, good Threadbinder?"

Arkady bristled a little, stroking his beard with one of his massive hands. "Slightly more, perhaps, but not excessively such. Her work certainly pays more than mine, but I find mine more rewarding in the end, as I feel the toll upon our souls is less great."

"Do you find executing your tasks difficult, my lady?"

Yasha smiled, that subtle almost imperceptible hint of melancholy that was gone as quickly as it had arrived. "Everyone is important to some one, elder, but to require the services of a Threatbinder, your foe must have truly transgressed in some heinous way. That helps console me a little. But not much, as you might imagine. Ending a life is something never done lightly."

The elder nodded, as they arrived at the cottage. "Has anyone ever come to regret enlisting your services, Master Dwarf?"

Arkady scratched at his leathery cheek, shaking his head. "I'm not sure why everyone seems to ask this, but once a Threadbinder's business is done, they tend not to remain in contact with their patrons. That said, in our journeys we have doubled back upon locations many a time, and I have seen some of those whom have paid for my aid once more, later in their lives, and never once has anyone expressed any regret to me."

"In fact, more than a few times, a couple whom my husband has paired have invited us to return to help their offspring with their threads," Yasha said proudly. "They have always said it was the best decision they have ever made."

The elvish chieftain nodded once more. "Then I will believe our Zestry is in good hands, and we will arise with the dawn to see her off with your departure. You have done us a great honor with your presence, and we will endeavor to tell stories of this day for decades to come."

Arkady raised one of his large hands in salute, as he and his wife entered into the cottage. "We shall see you on the morrow, elder," he said, closing the door behind them.

The lodging wasn't much – clearly whatever furniture had belonged to the previous owner had been reclaimed upon their passing, but still a single bed remained, as well as a chair. The elves had even gone out of their way to construct a small series of steps to allow Arkady to climb into the bed, as it was too high above the ground for him to do so otherwise.

"They seemed nice people," he said to his wife, sliding the cap off his head, the cottage having a roaring fire to keep the inside of it warm. It was no molten iron furnace, but it would do for an evening, and was better than having to build a fire themselves somewhere.

"Do you think the girl's going to change her mind?" Yasha asked, as her husband took a small vial of red pigment from his satchel, setting it on the steps, starting his preparations for the upcoming ritual to begin shortly.

He shook his head, a wry smile on his face. "I thought she might when she found out I was the *Threadbinder* and you were the *Threatbinder*, but when she spoke... Nay, that is the determination of a woman who has decided that she is unhappy with the lot her life has dealt her up to this moment, and will not be stopped in her efforts to change it."

"When you took your clothes off for the baths, I thought some of the locals were going to faint. I always forget that some of these more rural elves aren't used to the amount of natural hair you have beneath your clothes."

He shrugged a little. "I suspected they were just as transfixed by our scars, both yours and mine, my love, but let them look and let them talk. They will have their stories to tell long after we have taken our leave of this place."

From the door came a quiet rapping of knuckles. "Seems she has arrived," Yasha said. "I'll let her in." She moved over to the door and pulled it in, revealing the girl, Zestry, standing on the other side of it, her fingers knotted together, her face looking down at her hands. She wore a dress now, whereas in the morning she had been dressed in a tunic and trousers, leather boots disappearing up underneath the falling fabric at her calves. "Come in, come in, no need to be shy, girl. This is as natural as anything else in our worlds, but I think everyone is nervous."

Zestry looked up at her, as if in sudden revelation. "You found each other through threadbinding?" she asked, as Yasha ushered the girl in, closing the door behind her quickly so as to not let any of the comfortable heat escape the room. "A dwarf and an elf? Isn't that quite unusual?"

"Unusual, I suppose," Arkady said, grabbing the vial, as he strode over towards the girl. "But *quite* unusual? Not hardly. Threads are complicated business, and while many a soul chooses to go the natural path, bound threads have a power unto themselves that cannot be denied."

"Who was the seeker in your relationship?" Zestry asked, walking alongside the dwarf over towards the bed.

"It was me," Yasha said. "My Arkady was still in training to become a Threadbinder when I enlisted the aid of a different Threadbinder, Valyria, to help me find whom my thread was bound to."

"Did it... was there..." the girl said, struggling to find a way to ask her question so as to not offend the dwarf.

"Did it cause a ruckus?" he chuckled. "Oh aye. An elvish princess being bound to a dwarvish war veteran attempting to change his course in life after a great injury? Much commotion was made in my wife's family. Her brother, in fact, insisted the Threadbinder had to be wrong, that it was impossible for someone so highborn to be paired with someone so... earthy."

Yasha rolled her amber colored eyes in amusement. "My brother has earth for *brains*, by my reckoning," she grumbled. "No insult to earth intended. My mother, however, knew better than to dispute a Threadbinder's reading, and besides, my heart leaped from my chest the moment I saw my husband-to-be. It was exactly how the stories tell it, only greater still, and never once have I regretted the binding. I thanked Valyria with all my might, and have never forgotten the great gift she gave me."

"Wait, a *woman* was your Threadbinder?" the girl asked, looking up at Yasha with wide eyes filled with curiosity. "And the payment...?"

"Was paid as any Threadbinder is paid, yes."

"What do you do when a young man comes to you seeking your services, Master Dwarf?"

"He pays my wife and she operates as a sort of go-between," he said, catching her meaning. "Some Threadbinders, many Threadbinders actually, refuse contracts if the payment is unappealing to them, but since I hold no shame in my profession, my wife aides me in those I do not directly partake in. Why, would you rather we go that route? I know many elves consider themselves too good to sully with the presence of a dwarf in their bed."

"No!" the girl said suddenly, her hand curling around his shoulder, as if in terror that she might have offended him. "I meant no disrespect in any way, Master Dwarf, and will be more than happy to pay my portion to you." She laughed a little nervously. "I supposed I was more wondering how you

reacted when some strapping young lad approached you in need of your services. You strike me as the type that prefers the fairer sex. I offered no judgment on if you partook personally or if there was a go-between. I had heard tales that some Threadbinders enjoy both sexes while others only one, and neither is any better nor worse than the other.”

He nodded. “Male flesh holds no appeal to me, but when Yasha and I were wed, we agreed that because of our particular professions, neither of us would get jealous of the other, and that we would both share in the bindings, both threat and thread, and together we would remain.”

“Basically, dear girl, as part of his trade, he lays a lot of women, and it's only fair that he let me dally with a boy now and then who comes seeking his counsel. They never measure up to him anyway,” she said with a wise smile.

Zestry giggled a little bit, holding her slender fingers to her mouth. “Well then, sire, I hope *my* flesh holds some appeal to you, as I wouldn't want to simply be a burden upon your skills without offering payment worth their time.”

He smirked a little bit, reaching one of his fat fingers up to brush across her jawline. “You're a cheeky one, aren't you, girl? Aye, your face is pretty enough, with straight teeth and a symmetrical enough face. I don't anticipate having a poor evening.” His voice was like distant thunder, low and rumbling, and it seemed to send a shiver down the girl's spine. “You've been with a man before? Or will I be your first?”

“I've been with a couple of different elvish boys here in the village,” Zestry admitted shyly, “when I thought that mayhap I would have a partner within these familiar spaces, but I felt like a player in a very poorly written play, reading lines that had no poetry in them, no soul. And the stories of love brought together by the Threadbinders... that is what I want, very much. What I have always dreamed of. From the moment I saw the symbols upon your tunic, I have thought of nothing else.”

“*Nothing* else?” he asked with a hint of mirth.

“Well, I would be remiss if I didn't confess a fleeting moment of concern about the stories regarding dwarvish anatomy, but I did say I would not be dissuaded by any cost, so I reminded myself of that, and then thought of nothing else.”

He took the vial between his thumb and forefinger, pinching it to secure it as he began to shake it, the contents within liquifying once more and starting to blend together from their congealed state having been unused for several days. “And the price, *your* price, you understand what it is, and are prepared to pay it?” He glanced inside of the vial, inspecting the liquid within, spotting large granules still floating within, as he began to shake it more.

“One orgasm given, one orgasm taken, and two years of vitae surrendered.”

“You're easy enough on the eyes,” Arkady said with a slight grin, “that I'll even lower the price down to a single year of vitae.”

“I wouldn't want to underpay you for your services, good sir Threadbinder. If the standard rate is two years of vitae, I should pay the standard rate.”

He shrugged a little. “Business has been good in our travels as of late, and the amount of vitae is a discretionary decision made by each individual Threadbinder. One year will more than suffice.”

“For particularly unappealing clientele,” Yasha said, “I have seen him charge as much as five years of vitae, simply to make sure the patron truly wants the service. In those cases, the taking of the orgasm can often be the tricky part, and so my husband merely wants to ensure we're being fairly compensated for the work.”

“Does... have you ever found that anyone whom you've brought for binding has been upset that you've had carnal relations with their new partner before they have?”

“Only the once,” Arkady said with a dry chuckle. “And even then only momentarily, as those emotions were eclipsed as soon as the man laid eyes on the woman who had hired me to bind her thread. I take great pride in the fact that I have always followed a thread to both ends correctly.”

The girl moved to toss another couple of logs onto the fire, clearly wanting to bring the

temperature of the room to a comfortable roast. She then turned back to look at him, swallowing a little bit. “So, not to be indelicate, good sir Threadbinder—”

“No,” Yasha exhaled in mock exasperation, “it is *not* true that dwarves have barbed cocks, and whomever started such slander does not deserve any kindness in their lives.”

Zestry giggled a little, holding her hand to her mouth. “That wasn't what I was going to ask, m'lady! I was going to ask...” she trailed off, her face darkening with blood and blush.

“Speak plainly and quickly, girl, or we won't have you threadbound until well into morning, and none of us will get any sleep,” Arkady said, humor undercutting his tone.

“Are dwarvish cocks any smaller or bigger than elvish cocks, sire?”

“They're different,” Yasha said. “But on the average, I would say they are not generally as long as elvish cocks, but certainly far thicker on the average. And while this may simply be personal preference speaking, I specifically have found them generally more satisfying.”

“Well, he *is* your husband, m'lady,” Zestry said with a smile. “Shall I undress now?”

Arkady nodded, gesturing with one hand as his other gave the vial in his hand a few more shakes. “I would hope so, otherwise the markings will be rather difficult to apply.”

The elvish girl nodded, reaching down to draw her dress up and over her head, setting it aside, leaving her in her boots, her underpants and a brassiere that looked rather expensive for a girl in a small village. The dwarf pointed at it, admiring the craftsmanship. “That's unexpected. That looks like gnomish handiwork, if I'm not mistaken.”

Zestry blushed a little, as she was reaching down to loose her boots so she could pull them off one after another. “It is, Master Dwarf. It was a gift from my aunt when she came passing through in the spring. She was the one who encouraged me to consider searching for a Threadbinder to help me find my one true mate, as she had done long ago. That had taken her far from here, and I am uncertain if my mother has truly ever forgiven her sister for leaving. Now here I am, following in her footsteps,” she said, tugging off the second boot, setting it aside. “Will I be bound to someone very far from here, or will you only know that once you begin?”

He smiled a little bit, as he uncorked the vial. “I know nothing about your thread until the ritual has begun, dear girl, so your mate could be just on the other side of the hill, or across several oceans. No need for concern, however. We will convey you there, as per the contract.” He saw her about to sit on the bed and clicked his tongue to summon her attention once more. “Fully nude.”

“Might...” the girl started saying before stopping a moment. Then she started once more. “Might I simply keep the brassiere on, sir?”

“Not how it works,” Yasha said, moving across the room to place her hand on the younger elf's shoulder reassuringly. “He will need all your skin as canvas upon which to paint so the magics can take hold and the thread can be visible to his eyes. But he is the kindest soul I know, Zestry. You have no need to fear of his gaze.”

The girl nodded a moment, resigning herself to the final steps. As a dwarf, Arkady had always found the difference between lifespans of the various races fascinating. The dwarvish lifespan spurted early, and a dwarf was basically of full maturity in terms of size and stature by only ten years time, whereas the elves were well into seventy years before they were considered adults. And yet, the two species lived generally the same length of time on the average, five hundred years or so.

The non mages, anyway.

Zestry reached in front of her to unclasp the front of the brassiere, a series of hooks undone one after another after another before she peeled the two cups away from her breasts, exposing her tender flesh to the two mage's eyes.

Yasha knew immediately why the girl had shown such hesitance, and it wasn't the presence of her husband. While the younger elf had two perfectly formed lush teardrop shaped breasts, one of them had a blotch of purple discoloration along the outer side of it, a large imperfection on the girl's alabaster skin, one that she clearly had yet to come to terms with.

"I... I am sorry to offend thine eyes with my marred flesh, my lord, but I have always been this way, and the healers know not for way to cure me of this affliction."

And then Arkady did the best thing he could possibly do in the circumstances, an action that made his wife very proud indeed. He wasn't attempting to put on false airs. It was his genuine natural reaction, and the sound blurted out from him before he was even aware of it.

The jolly dwarf *laughed*.

"Marred? Be gods, girl," he said, shaking his head bemusedly. "For an elf, you have a very lovely pair of tits, and if none of the elves in this village can see that, you're too good for them."

Zestry looked at him in surprise and astonishment, her eyes blinking repeatedly in confusion. "But, the mark, the blemish upon my flesh, the sign my skin is unclean..."

"No more of that, girl," Arkady said as he pressed his thumb to the opening the vial, flipping it over to make some of the liquid ooze onto his thumb, then flipping it back. "It is a birthmark, and it is no more a blemish than my beard is, and if you disparage my beard, I assure you, we will trek as slowly as possible to your threadbound. Am I making myself clear?"

The elvish girl smiled shyly, nodding a little, as he began to take his thumb and draw runes upon her body with the pigmentation he'd smeared on it from the vial. "Yes, Master Dwarf. I know well enough never to insult a dwarf's beard, and it seems a very *fine* beard, although I have seen few others to compare it to."

"Damn straight," Arkady said, leaning back from the girl so she could push her underpants down to the wooden floor, stepping clear of them to leave her nude to the two mage's eyes. Though he had lain with many an elf in his time, he still never understood how they managed to live with so little hair upon their bodies.

Elves bore only hair on the tops of their head, and brows atop of their eyes. That was all the hair any of them ever had. No whiskers, no fine coat upon their arms, legs or feet, no hair beneath their arms or upon their genitals, nothing upon their chests. Why, the greatest elf of all time was completely incapable of growing even the simplest of mustaches. No wonder, he thought to himself, the elves did so poorly in cold environs.

The fist-sized splatter of purple color upon her right breast was the only pigmentation upon her flesh, with toned, thighs and a neatly tucked in vagina. The girl did not cross her hands over her crotch, as many did, but instead kept her arms at her sides, as Arkady leaned in again to continue drawing runic symbols upon her flesh, one after another.

The fleshlighting was the most complicated part of the ritual, but Arkady had always been good at knowing which symbols would be required for which supplicant, and was able to completely mark up a patron in less than a quarter of an hour.

Behind her, Yasha was peeling back the covers from the bed, opening it up invitingly. Once the sheets were in place, she began to disrobe as well, which made Zestry turn to look suddenly, then look away, almost embarrassed. "Is... are you part of the ceremony as well, m'lady? I know frightening little of the Threadbinder rituals."

"My husband and I are partners in all things, Zestry, and I would no sooner leave him alone during this than he would me during a Threatbinder ritual," Yasha said, removing her clothes one at a time, folding them, setting them in a pile on a dresser near the bed. "When the ritual is done, we will all spend one night together, and the next day, we will convey you along your thread."

Arkady continued to apply pigmentation in shapes and swirls upon the girl's flesh, and he could see her pink nipples stiffen as his thumb brushed over them, the excitement of the moment clearly beginning to get to her.

"Might... may I ask a few more questions, Master Dwarf?" she said, nervously.

"Mmm. As my father once said, 'you may always ask and the worst that shall ever happen is that I shall not answer,' so carry on with your questions," he said to her as he applied three wavy lines stacked one atop another on her belly.

“Do... do you enjoy the gifted orgasms that power the ritual, or has it become rote at this point, simply something you go through the motions with?”

He chuckled a little, spinning her around, so he could begin to apply pigmentation to her back. “If a Threadbinder is bored with sex, then only the shortest of threads will be visible to them, and that level of cheap magic no one wants to pay for. Some are more enjoyable than others, but there is always at least a base pleasure to be taken from each experience.”

“What was your most enjoyable experience with a client? Was it with an elf?”

Yasha giggled a little as she slid out of her underpants, leaving her naked flesh exposed. Her breasts were larger than Zestry's, but so were her hips, and Arkady much more enjoyed his wife's plump ass than the almost flat ass the younger girl had. “Corienne, most assuredly.”

The dwarf chuckled deep and warmly, nodding his head. “Corienne indeed,” he said. “No, she was no elf. She was a dragon.”

“A dragon?” the girl gasped. “How... how is such a thing even physiologically possible?”

“Dragons are form shifters, my dear,” Yasha said, taking the girl's hand and giving it a squeeze, encouraging her to lift her gaze and look upon her naked form. Her family status often meant that other elves needed to be reminded that this was all part of the ritual, and that to look upon her form was not sacrilege, no matter how the nobleborn normally acted. “So she had not one form for the ritual, but several.”

“Made it a damnable time with the runes, but dragons have their own natural magic that amplifies all other spellwork, and Corienne insisted she make it an experience I would remember, as dragons so rarely seek out Threadbinders for their work,” he said, lingering upon the memory perhaps a moment longer than he'd intended to. “It was quite the honor for me, and quite the sexual experience for the two of us.”

“And what was the worst?”

Yasha clicked her tongue in disdain. “Weedthrasher?”

Arkady shuddered a moment, nodding quite emphatically. “Oh, aye, a thousand times over. I hate to speak ill of her, as it truly wasn't her fault, but...”

“But dryads leave splinters, even with the best of care applied,” Yasha said with a giggle. “I think your runes are done, dear husband, except for the ones upon you and I.”

The dwarf nodded in agreement and stepped around the girl, moving to draw a single circle upon his wife's right bosom, drawing two parallel lines inside of it, then a smaller circle between the two lines, completing the rune. “There's you done. Now to get out of this armor.”

With both elves looking on, he began to disrobe, a heavy adamantine breastplate the first piece removed after the blue tunic. He kept that single dense piece of armor always concealed, and in doing so had saved his life several times. Beneath that, he removed the undershirt, and Zestry got a look at just how hairy the dwarf truly was.

His skin was a deep golden brown, not far off the color of sun-baked mud, but there was a thick layer of fine red hair across most of his chest and arms, and all along his back. In removing the shirt, he had also removed his cap, exposing the bald dome in the center of his head, lined by a thick ring of dark red hair like cooling lava.

He kicked off his boots and then removed his trousers and his underpants, leaving him nude with the two nude elves, and he could hear a little gasp of surprise from Zestry, as she took in the sight of his cock for the first time.

His wife had been truthful, and for the most part, his cock was not particularly unusual for his species, although the thick girthy nature of dwarvish dick still seemed to astonish most elves the first time they beheld one.

“I am going to be one sore girl tomorrow, aren't I, m'lady?” Zestry said to his wife, who only giggled a little before replying.

“Oh buck up,” she said. “It's a good sort of sore, and it will help distract you from the voyage.”

Now that was fully nude, he could apply the two sigils he needed to upon his own body. The first was a symbol matching the one he'd placed upon his wife, which was transfer the vitae the girl had promised them into their bodies, prolonging their lives and keeping them youthful. The second was the three wavy lines, which he painted on his own belly, mirroring the markings he'd done on the girl's.

As he applied the sigils, Yasha noticed how the girl was appraising her husband, taking in the sight of a nude dwarf. Despite the fact that he was half as tall as either of them, he was much bulkier and significantly more muscular, his form powerful and more than a little intimidating in how strong it was clear the man was naturally.

Elvish men were agile, nimble, graceful, like dancers.

Dwarvish men were squat, chiseled, bulky and hefty, like brawlers.

The fact that Zestry licked her lips in anticipation might have gone unnoticed by the dwarf, but it did not escape the sight of the other elf.

"Your last decision to make for the night, dear heart," Yasha said to the younger girl. "Do you wish to take or be taken? Would you like to control the tempo, or to be controlled?"

Zestry shivered in excitement, reaching a single hand out to smooth her fingertips across the length of the dwarf's beard. "As exciting as it might be to be taken, m'lady, I think I would feel more comfortable if I could control the tempo, for the size of your husband's weapon gives me pause, if only with eagerness."

Yasha nodded with a smile. "He does not mind, girl," she said to her, as Arkady started to move up the steps before hopping onto the bed. "You are not the first elvish girl he's had who's afraid his mighty cock will split her cunt in twain."

"M'lady!" Zestry giggled. "Such language!"

Yasha clicked her tongue scoldingly again. "During this ritual, nothing is forbidden other than what my husband dictates is, so no words are unpermitted. I think you may find that level of freedom... exhilarating. I know I have."

Arkady moved to sit on the bed, scooting to press his back against the pillows that were wedged up against the mighty wooden headboard. "In your own time, my dear," he said to her, even as her eyes were transfixed upon his cock.

Zestry moved to the edge of the bed and reached one of her hands out, slowly curling her fingers around the fat oaklike shaft that protruded from the dwarf's belly. She had seen elvish cocks before, and while they were usually longer, none of them had looked as sizable or dangerous as this. Her long spindly fingers barely stretched around the width of it, and once they touched, she slowly dragged her hand down before sliding it back up, unable to look the dwarf or his wife in the eyes, unable to peel her eyes away from the weapon she held in her hands.

"I do not know that it will fit inside me, m'lady," Zestry whispered, even as her hands continued to jack along his shaft, having switched from using one hand to two, as she moved ever closer to the bed, her eyes almost unblinking.

"Oh it will," Yasha said. "It fits inside of me all the time."

Zestry moved to slide one knee up onto the bed before bringing up the other, crawling up onto it, as she couldn't help herself and leaned her head down to lick her tongue along the large curved head of the dwarf's cock, lapping up a single pearl of natural lubricant that had emerged from his slit, which gave the girl goosebumps all along her flesh.

"It's nothing like elf cum," Zestry whispered reverently. "It's richer, more flavorful, like a well aged brandy than any natural fluid."

"You can have more if you like," Yasha said to her, stepping in closer, standing at the edge of the bed now, one of her hands holding her husband's, the other stroking along the girl's back, taking care not to smudge any of the sigils, which were beginning to set.

"As much as I would like, m'lady," the girl said as she moved her knees closer towards the dwarf, one on either side of his thick legs, "I cannot wait any longer to discover how this feels, both for

my own edification and to hurry along my interests.”

The matching sigils on the dwarf and his wife began to glow, along with many of the sigils upon the girl's body, as she moved to straddle his waist, one of her hands reaching down to steer his cock, the other resting on his shoulders, as if to stabilize her. Once she had lined the wide tip against her cleft, she pushed her pussy down onto his dick slowly, a sharp gasp of inhaled air cutting through the room like a knife, but the girl did not stop, and slowly forced her way down onto his fat shaft, her eyes rolled back into the center of her skull, as her strong grasp on his shoulder threatened to try and clamp the nerves into a wound.

When she was half way down his shaft, Arkady could feel the girl begin to spasm and quiver furiously, oozing as much slickness as she could onto his member, as orgasm after orgasm shredded through her body, a symphonic cacophony of lust blossoming inside of her, and finally when she slid down to encompass all of his cock inside of her snatch, the thick curved tip of his dick nestled against the entrance to her womb, she trembled in waves, and Yasha lost count of how many orgasms the poor girl went through.

For a long moment, Zestry stayed motionless upon his cock, her body undulating in brief fits, as her breathing matched in sudden heaves, gasping for air before forcing it out in one of the filthiest moans either the dwarf or his wife had ever heard, the very pornographic nature of it making his cock throb inside of the girl. Then after what felt like days, she opened her eyes and smiled at him, a nervous, almost giddy laugh escaping from her throat. “I do believe I've paid my orgasms in full, Master Dwarf, if not overpaid by a sizable amount,” she said, a fuckdrunk look upon her face, the thick fog of post-orgasm bliss clouding her poise.

He chuckled, tilting his head with a slight nod. “The given, perhaps, but not the taken. For that, there remains work to be done.”

The expression on the girl's face changed immediately, the naive and almost innocent facade dropped in lieu of a different mask, a wanton, sultry harlot, her eyes snarled with lust and intent, as she dragged her fingers down across his muscular chest through the mat of thick hair over it. “But sweet Master Dwarf, can you not feel how snug and clenched my cunt is upon your massive cock?” she purred at him with a voice layered with sex that surprised both mages. “How it yearns to feel your gift inside of it, completing our contract?”

Yasha smirked a little bit, squeezing her husband's hand as she flashed him a little wink. They had seen things like this before, supplicants so enamored with their release to the threadbinding that they became purely carnal beings, hellbent on finishing the ritual, all hint of pomp and circumstance gone in the wink of an eye.

“Can you not feel my nubile flesh craving your release, good sire?” Zestry said, as she shifted up on her knees, working to lift partway up his cock before dropping her ass back down onto his thighs, impaling her cunt upon his dick once more with a giggling groan, her tongue swiping drool off her own lips. “Where once I was a nubile stanza, now I am an entire whorish sonnet,” she moaned into his face. “I am your own little elven fuck puppet, upon strings like a marionette, desperate to see a look of pleasure upon your brow even one sliver as powerful as what you have wrought inside my loins a dozen times already. Take hold of my hips, Master Threadbinder, and use my inexperienced twat until you find your delight to savor.”

The older elf was a little surprised, as the girl continued to bounce upon her husband's lap, one of the dwarf's hands moving from the girl's breast down to her hip, pushing her slender body a bit more firmly down onto his cock each time she thrust herself upon it, making the head of his member rap against the door of her womb like a battering ram upon a castle's gates.

Zestry growled a bit, as she tried to whip her hips in a fierce snakelike motion, whimpering each time she slid up his shaft, as if the emptiness gave her an unbearable sensation of hollowness, only to have that stripped away from her each time she impaled herself on his cock.

“Fuck me, Lord Arkady,” she hissed at him. “Hammer my nubile cunt like a weapon upon the

anvil, like something you are attempting to sculpt into greatness. Gods yes. Yes! Fuck the shit out of me until I know only the shape of your fucking cock! Harder! Gods harder still! Plow me until I am wrapped around your cock and you feel ready to give me that which I so desperately want! Gods please cum into my body, sire! Fill your wanton fucktoy with your gift! Bind her! Bind the thread and give her meaning! I beseech thee! Cum within my twat, oh mighty dwarf! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck me, sire! Fuck! ME! RIGHT! FUCKING! THERE! OHFUCK!”

The girl's voice was loud, far louder than the mages had expected, and just as she saw that look upon her husband's face, knowing the moment was about to be upon him, she feared the poor girl would make a noise too sizable for any in the village to ignore, so she thrust her lips upon Zestry's, kissing her hard, swallowing the moan into her own mouth as her husband began to erupt molten cum inside of the girl's pussy, each blast of the steamy jism sending a crescendo of orgasm through the elf's body, as the sound that poured from one mouth to the other was one of the most carnal things Yasha had ever felt.

The runes upon all their bodies glowed a ferocious shade of fire, and as his orgasm crested and the final blast of semen drained into the young elf's pussy, Yasha slapped one hand over Zestry's eyes, the other on the back of her head, keeping their lips locked together in a kiss. She knew well enough to close her eyes, as did her husband, but they had forgotten to tell the young girl about the overwhelming surge of light that would fill the room upon the ritual's completion.

After the light had passed and he could open his eyes once more, Arkady helped Yasha slide the girl over and off of his cock, his hefty club softening enough to slip out from her with a sloppy slurping sound, the fruits of their labors seeping from her gash. Yasha decided she had clearly not approached her husband recently enough, because the dwarf had clearly been backed up.

Once the nearly unconscious girl was laid on her back on the bed, Arkady began to complete the final stages of the ritual, the sigils still holding some glow to them even as they were beginning to fade back towards just pigmentation.

He gestured through the air, his meaty hands twisting into odd shapes, peeling threads aside, one after another just above the girl's body, invisible to all the most trained of eyes, until he found what he was looking for, the familiar telltale golden cord, the purest of threads, that of true love, connecting this girl to another soul somewhere on the horizon.

Now that he had marked it, he would be able to see the cord again with a simple spell, and would be able to follow it, and lead the girl to the soul on the other end of it. It was a powerful thread, which meant the girl was destined for a powerful love, the kind that would never fade or break. The nature of the spooling, how it almost seemed like several threads woven together to form one large cord, meant that the woman would be extremely happy with her decision.

As he finished closing the tagging spell on the cord, he felt a tongue lashing along his cock, and looked down to see Zestry was bathing his dick, licking it clean, a sensation that was only more complicated when his wife joined in, her mirthful eyes looking up at him. “Eyes up, mister,” she chided. “Finish your work and we'll finish ours.”

By the colors around the base of the cord, he could get a rough estimate of how far their trip would be and was pleased to see it would only be a day's flight or so to get the girl to her perfect match. “We should have you in the arms of your soulmate before the sun sets tomorrow, Zestry.”

The girl started to weep tears of joy, and climbed up into the bed to wrap her arms around him in a fierce hug, shoving her face into the side of his head. “Oh thank you, sire. I know I have paid for your services, but even now I think I have not done enough,” she said, her voice exhausted.

“Sleep now, and in the morning, we will take our leave of this village.”

He slipped down further as his wife snuggled up along the other side of him, drawing the heavy sheets up and over them, and before they knew it, all three of them were fast asleep.

The next morning, the girl made her final farewells, as several villagers loaded up much more heavily stocked saddlebags onto Quiesh, who looked reinvigorated from her night in the barn, her belly

fully with the entire stag she'd feasted upon the night before.

The elder gave Zestry a firm hug, and bade the girl to send word when she could of where she had ended up, even giving the girl a single aryou coin, to ensure that she would be able to pay for a messenger to ride to the village and relay a letter to her with information, which the girl insisted she would send, if she did not bring her soulmate to visit instead.

Yasha helped Zestry into the wagon part that sat on the back of Quiesh, as Arkady climbed into the pilot's saddle. He gave a light salute to the gathered villagers and then pulled back on Quiesh's bridle with a kick of his heels, coaxing the griffon to take to the air once more.

It was about six hours flight to the west, as Arkady followed the thread. It was far easier to do this by air, and he'd never understood why so many Threadbinders traveled by land, as it complicated the journeys endlessly. Of course, befriending a griffon was no slight challenge, so maybe that was why.

As they crested over a mountain ridge, Arkady could see the thread leading into a mage's enclave, much to his amusement. It wasn't a great academy, but it was a frontier school, where binders were trained to at least competent levels. Anyone who wanted to highly refine their skills would go to one of the bigger academies in a larger city, but there were hundreds of these feeder enclaves that could offer basic training to get someone to at least a passable level of ability, mostly Threatbinders, but the occasional Threadbinder as well.

Arkady brought the griffon down to land in the enclave's courtyard, as a handful of mages stepped out to see the creature land, a couple of elves, a handful of humans and a pair of dwarves. From the sea of bodies, a single gnome dressed in heavy robes pushed her way through, a wry smile on her face, an old and familiar friend. "Ah, Arkady! You bring a new person to bind?"

"I do, Weesha, now shush." Arkady followed the thread through the air, both Yasha and Zestry remaining in the wagon, as the dwarf stomped into the crowd and grabbed one of the human men by the wrist. He was tall for a human, with a rounded face and a big bushy black mustache upon his face. He was in the training robes of a Threatbinder, but still had much to do. He was reasonably good looking, Arkady guessed, with a bit of easy charm about him. The dwarf would guess he was twenty five years or so old, but humans were difficult to pinpoint sometimes. "You, boy, what's your name?" the dwarf asked him.

"Chester Skyson, sir," the man said to him. "Someone has hired you to find to whom their thread is bound, and that someone is me?"

"Indeed. Do you accept the binding?"

The young man smiled shyly. "Mistress Weesha has spoken quite highly of you, Master Arkady, so if you have found a thread that leads to me, I would be a fool to refuse it. Of course I do."

"You can come out now, Zestry," Arkady called over his shoulder, hearing the girl dismount from the griffon's wagon.

As soon as she set her eyes on the man, her heart leapt from her chest, and she ran over to him, wrapping her arms around him, kissing him firmly, as Arkady saw the two threads fold together, sealing their fate in perfect union, the new thread a thousand times stronger than the individual two had been.

She looked back, her eyes filled with an endless joy. It was a look he never got tired of seeing, and even the dwarf's stony nature couldn't keep him from smiling a little at the expression on her face. "Thank you. A thousand times, thank you. He's perfect. *This* is perfect."

"You are welcome, little elf. Now enjoy your new life as you and your soulmate figure out where your lives will take you."

She nodded, her body a little taller than the man's, and the two headed into one of the buildings, as Arkady started to turn back towards the griffon. "Well, don't want to bother you too long, Weesha, so we'll be on our way again."

"Actually, Arkady," the gnome said, scurrying closer over to him, "I could use your aid, if you can spare a bit of time. I would be happy to pay you for the time, but I have to admit, I'm in something

of a conundrum.”

Weesha was a fifth rank Threadbinder, but Arkady had thought the gnome simply hadn't done the exams needed to be higher, so the fact that she was asking for his help intrigued him, so he paused and looked back. “What kind of problem?”

“I'm not sure how to say this, but we have a person here who's paid for Threadbinder services, but the rituals have... well, the results confuse me, and I wouldn't mind a second opinion.”

“Confuse?” The dwarf raised an eyebrow, his curiosity getting the best of him for a moment. “I understand some threads are harder to follow than others, but I've never seen a result I would call confusing...”

“This one may stump you then.”

“How so?”

“The woman in question... she has *four* major threads coming from her.”

Unable to say anything for a moment, the dwarf finally brought an answer to his lips. “I can imagine that *would* be confusing. Alright, I think we can take the time to see what's going on. I do so love a challenge. Yasha, I think we have a challenge ahead of us.”

“I do so love novelty,” his elven wife said, sliding out of the griffon's wagon.

“Then this will blow your mind, m'lady,” the gnome said, as the three headed towards the main building of the enclave.

(to be posted 2/5)

Chapter 2

Frontier academies were mostly feeder schools. They weren't temporary enclaves, but they weren't built to look impressive. Arkady was convinced that the structures weren't designed to last as long as anything his people would've built. The workmanship was definitely that of human hands. No dwarf would've thrown something up with so little attention paid to the foundations, and there wasn't anywhere near enough ornamentation for elvish construction. It also just wasn't busy enough for the gnomes to have built it.

The main building was twice the size of the rest of the structures around the enclave, and it was clearly also twice as old as the rest of the structures. Once they walked inside, Arkady noted that the internal area was something that had obviously been converted into the school. He suspected it was originally a human hospital or trading post, and the inside of it had mostly been gutted and retrofitted.

“So tell us about your confusing supplicant,” Yasha said to Weesha. She'd met the gnome a few times over the years, but didn't know the Threadbinder as well as her husband did. “Did she present as anything unusual on first appearance?”

“Not at all,” the gnome said to them. Weesha was tiny, but had a rather gruff way about her, and both Yasha and Arkady had a load of respect for her. Her outfit was that of a Threadbinder, but it was much more loose fitting than Arkady's. The gnome had never seen the point of armor, but the gnomish people weren't warlike in nature. “Typical human woman, in her mid twenties. She's from the southern forests, but she's been part of a traveling caravan of entertainers for most of her life.”

“An actor then?” Arkady said.

“Not a profession you approve of, old man?” Weesha chuckled.

The dwarf stopped, crossing his arms over his chest. “Do you think so little of me, Weesha? The dramatic arts are a fine and noble profession. My late brother was an actor, before the Abari Wars, and I think very highly of them.”

Weesha sighed, rubbing her eyes, as she stopped to look back at him. “My apologies, Master Arkady. I was merely attempting to joke, and I had no wish to offend.”

“Aye. Aye, I see. Mayhap I took it more deeply than I should've done,” the dwarf said.

“Anyway, you did not answer my question.”

“Mmm. No, not an actor. An acrobat. She tumbles and walks ropes and swings from trapezes and the like. She also throws blades, spits fire, bends her body into unusual positions. Apparently there is coin to be made from such things, but it's a thing where the novelty of it is important, so her family was a caravan, and they dare not remain in any one location for too long.”

“The humans do so love a good show,” Yasha said with a smile, her hand resting on her husband's shoulder. “Why did she suddenly decide to seek the services of a threadbinder?”

“The girl had been saving for some time, and when she saw the threadbinder flag flying above the enclave as her troupe passed, she decided to inquire as to my rates.” The gnome led them into her office, a rather well decorated room with a grandiose window before a desk, a small stepladder leading up to the chair so the gnome could scale it, the chair hiked as high as possible. “I was having afternoon tea when one of our spotters saw your griffon on approach. It shouldn't have cooled too much, if either of you would care for some.”

“I would love some,” Yasha said, taking up the teapot to pour herself a cup. “My husband will decline, as he doesn't care for tea.”

“It tastes as though it is dirty bath water,” Arkady replied. “How long ago was it that her caravan passed? I don't recall seeing it from the skies.”

“Just over a week ago.”

“Walk me through what happened.”

The gnome sighed, picking up her mug, taking a sip from it. “The ritual itself was unremarkable, but the girl availed herself well, not even flinching when it came to paying her way, either in the giving or the taking. In fact, she was skilled enough at the giving that I almost felt bad charging her for the fee, and I decided to give her some of the aryou back, and that was before I began looking at her threads.”

The dwarf hopped up into one of the other chairs in the room, this one clearly designed with dwarves and gnomes in mind, as there were small steps on the front of it leading up to the perch. “Seeing multiple threads coming from a core has been known to happen before, but usually when you study the bases, it isn't overly difficult to separate the one true from the rest of the options. You know all this, though, Weesha, and you certainly don't need me to remind you.”

“That's just it, Arkady,” the gnome said, frustration in her tone of voice. “This girl doesn't have *one* true cord; she's got *four*. And they aren't identical, which caused me further consternation. One of the cords is thick, like heavy rope. One of the cords is thin, like finely spun silk. One of the cords is braided, like it's two woven lines together. And the last of the cords looks like a long scarf more than a cord. Each is remarkably different than the others, but they all seem to be made of proper golden dreamstuff, the sort of color one would expect from a true connection.”

“Have you sent word to the academy?” Yasha asked the gnome.

“Oh aye,” she replied. “But it will be weeks before the messenger has returned, and Arkady's practically a grandmaster Threadbinder anyway, so I decided since you were here, another opinion wouldn't go awry. So what do you think, old man?”

None of the three of them had any of the telltale markings they should for their age, one of the benefits of being binders. Mages were paid in vitae, and the rituals helped keep the mages from aging, so while Arkady appeared to be a dwarf of three or four hundred years, he was actually nearing a thousand. His wife Yasha, looking similar to elves in their first or second hundred years, was closer to her seventh. And Weesha only looked to be a gnome approaching two hundred, but was nearly double that. As long as there was a need for their services, and they didn't manage to get themselves killed, they would live very, very long lives indeed.

“Well, not having examined the girl myself,” the dwarf said, leaning back in his chair, “I would say you have a few options before you. The first, as unlikely as it may seem, is that the girl does, in fact, have four people she would be an ideal match with. Grandmaster Emisin did regale me with a tale once of that, during my education.”

“Emisin had passed before I got there,” Weesha said. “So I am unfamiliar with that story.”

Arkady reached into his satchel and pulled out his pipe and his pouch of fireweed. “Mmm. Shame about what happened to him. As I recall, he told the classroom that sometimes those with great lives, spectacular lives, could get multiple threads, and that if a binder ever came across that, a prudent threadbinder should most likely refund the coin given, add coin in addition for failing the contract, tell the supplicant that their future was uncertain and to run off quickly in the other direction as quickly as one's feet would carry them.”

“The tales I've heard of Emisin did not make him sound like he would be one to run from a challenge.”

Arkady's bushy eyebrows bounced in amusement. “That he would not. He was not what one would call prudent and he did not take his own advice, and continued the tale to the classroom. What he told us was that he united the applicant, an elvish woman, with an elvish man he found at the end of one of the threads, and then informed the woman that she had another thread they could follow. The woman and her newly found man agreed, and Emisin began to lead them along the other thread.” He pushed a thumbful of fireweed into his pipe before tucking the pouch of herb away, perhaps enjoying the suspense he'd left lingering the air while he did.

“And what was at the other end of the second thread?” Weesha finally asked.

“Nobody really knows,” Arkady said with a chuckle. “They were following the cord up and across the Gintany Mountains, and just as they were halfway up to the pass, the cord was snapped and disappeared.” He found a strikestick in his pouch, dragged it across the top of the gnome's desk and it burst into tiny flame, which he lowered down to light the fireweed. “Emisin's theory, or so he claimed to us, was that there might have been a second just as ideal candidate on the other end of that cord, but that he suspected they had died before they could be reached. On the other side of the Gitanyns, the nations of Kupte and Niang were warring over who had the rights to fish in the large sea both countries partially bordered. There was no way to be certain, as the cord had simply disappeared in a flash. One moment, Emisin could see it, the next it was dissolving on the wind.”

“What did he tell the supplicant?”

“Only that the other thread had vanished, and that perhaps he had been mistaken. He gave them back a quarter of the aryou they'd paid, and returned them to whence he'd brought them from, and tried to give it no further thought.”

“I don't understand why this wouldn't be in the modern lesson plans then, if this is a possibility we should all be on the lookout for,” Weesha said. “I envy you, Threatbinder. Your only engagement with hearts is to stop them.”

“It's not always as easy as it seems,” Yasha said with a soft smile.

“It's not in the modern lesson plans because it's extremely uncommon, and Emisin's theory about what it meant is still somewhat disputed.”

“What *else* could it mean?”

Arkady inhaled a deep draw from his pipe before blowing a couple of smoke rings into the air. “Each of the Grandmasters and Grandmistresses had a theory, but what the majority of them finally decided they liked the most was that both of the woman's options had been valid and strong, but that when she'd been introduced to one, the other dissolved on its own, no longer needed. Grandmistress Tesaira said the woman's path was such that she could have taken either cord and been truly happy, but that the two cords were in opposition to each other, so by Emisin leading her along one, he had dissolved the other.”

The gnome's brow furrowed in annoyance. “Except that goes against the core of the threadbinder tenets. True emotional connection cannot be dissolved by anything less than death, so while I can understand Emisin's theory, I cannot reconcile that with what the elders seemed to think.”

“Mmm,” Arkady agreed, taking another puff from his pipe. “I'm inclined to agree with you and Emisin. But I have threadbound a few hundred souls together over the centuries, and never the once

have I seen more than a single thread coming from an applicant.”

“So you're saying I made an error,” the gnome said, her tone started to grow cross.

“Easy there, friend,” the dwarf chuckled, raising one of his powerful hands. “I am saying no such thing. You said that the applicant was human, and you should know well by now that our services are not often requested by the race of man. While they have no trouble enlisting the aid of the threadbinders, we threadbinders are looked upon by most of them with a sense of distrust and paranoia. Therefore we don't have as much practice in looking at their threads. Why, in three hundred and some years of threadbinding, I've only had as many human supplicants as I do fingers on my hands, and I imagine you've had even less.”

Weesha frowned. “Aye, this girl is my first human. But I do not understand why their threads would be any different.”

Arkady's pipe continued to billow and run over with smoke as he nodded. “Aye, I thought the same thing the first time I met with a human supplicant, but there is something about the humans that you cannot forget, Weesha.”

“And that is?”

“Their lives are but flickering embers compared to the raging bonfires of our own. Not including binders, how old do your people typically live until?”

“Gnomes are considered in their twilight at around three hundred and fifty.”

“Elves are in theirs at around six hundred,” Yasha offered.

“Aye, and a dwarf at the end of his pint might crest seven hundred if he was lucky,” Arkady said, gesturing around with his pipe. “But an elder human? They are a mere seventy or eighty years. It is almost unheard of for a human to reach even a simply one hundred years.”

“How can they endure being so short lived?” Weesha asked incredulously.

“They simply pack all their living into the shorter span, so they do everything harder, faster and with more vigor than any of our peoples do, because they do not have the time to gain wisdom from the errors of their friends and family, only through their own desperate mistakes.” The dwarf brought back the pipe to his lips, letting it rest there a moment. “So that is one possibility, that there is something different and unusual about the humans that allows them to form more than one bond, although since the woman in Emisin's story was an elf, it's also possible that it isn't something that's unique to humans, only perhaps slightly more common.”

“What are the other options?” Weesha asked him, finishing off her cup of tea.

“It's also possible that your supplicant hasn't settled into who she is yet, and therefore doesn't know what she wants out of a partner, because she's human,” he said. “The humans who have come to me over the years have done so when they are somewhat older, as if they felt like they were going to exhaust all other options before settling on giving a threadbinder a try. Most of my human clients have basically been coincidences, springing as an afterthought after my wife has given her services to one of their little squabbles.”

“I asked the girl if she knew what she wanted out of a partner before I agreed to take her on as a client, and her answer intrigued me, if not annoyed me just a little.”

“What did she say to you?” Yasha asked her.

“She wanted a partner who wouldn't judge her for her past and was willing to give her a future.”

“Seems like a reasonable answer,” his elven wife said.

“Aye,” Weesha said. “I agree, although you must admit, it is a touch more vague than we are used to hearing. No specifics about what the partner looked like, how they might act, where they might come from. It's almost as though the girl was attempting to dodge my query.”

“Mmm,” Arkady pipped, taking another puff off his pipe. “I've stopped asking. I've found over the centuries that part of the reason supplicants haven't found their true love is because they're often lying to *themselves* about what it is they want from a partner. They tell themselves a story about what it is they think they want from someone, and inevitably, the person I introduce them to isn't at all like

that, and yet, they're extremely happy and go on to live highly fulfilled lives. You know what that tells me?"

"That people enjoy lying to you?" Weesha teased.

"That people can't admit to themselves what it is they truly want. Oh, they *think* they know exactly what it is they're seeking, but the person we are most accustomed to lying to is ourselves, and it takes a rather daring fool to look inward and accept whatever he sees there as right and fine."

"Fine," the gnome relented. "Perhaps the humans are less adapt at lying to themselves. Any other possibilities I hadn't considered?"

"A couple, although I must confess, they would be extremely unorthodox, but I suppose they are still fringe possibilities that should at least be mildly entertained, if only briefly." The fireweed in his pipe was nearly burnt up, and so he took a final draw from it, knowing he would get the last good lungful of smoke from it.

"Pray tell, Arkady."

"Both of these seem wildly unlikely, but they are things I suppose you must at least consider. First, the pocket city of Gom Weydan is aligned this winter, and the gates are open now and will remain so until some time after spring has bloomed. Gom Weydan is only accessible for about half a year every three decades or so, and there is a chance one of your errant threads leads through those gates. It wouldn't be visible at any other time, so that could just be utter coincidence."

"Gods help the girl if she would be paired with someone from Gom Weydan," Weesha said, laughing in amusement. "If even a tenth of what I've heard about that place is true, it might shatter the human's tiny little mind."

"Rich for a gnome to be calling a human's mind little," Yasha said, her voice sounding thoroughly unamused.

"You know what I meant, woman," Weesha said. "What's the other wildly unlikely thing I should be considering but am not?"

"She could also be paired with some of Parkeen's handiwork."

The gnome looked at him with an expression that seemed as though it were at the dead center between laughing and being agape with fear. "You must be joking."

Arkady raised one of his hands, as if he also considered the idea extremely implausible. "When Yasha and I were last in Byanmaz, the entire city was aflutter with reports that Parkeen had raised some fifty souls from the dead and restored them to full life. The necromancer claimed he was trying to undo a wrong he'd caused when he was a threatbinder, but no one knew what to make of it. Some of those had been dead nearly a century."

"I'm a little surprised the elder binders haven't seen fit to snuff out Parkeen's life, once he renounced his position as a threatbinder."

Yasha shrugged a little. "The elders don't agree. Once a threatbinder, always a threatbinder, and one of the fundamental rules of the threatbinder philosophy is that no threatbinder shall ever harm another. Besides, Parkeen is the only necromancer alive. The art was considered long lost centuries ago, and he somehow transitioned from being a threatbinder to being a necromancer. The elders certainly don't want him to go away until it's been determined how he did that and how they might replicate his success in the matter."

"I'm not old enough to remember the last generation of necromancers," Weesha said. "Did either of you ever meet one before the Inquisition took them from us?"

Yasha reached over and grabbed her husband's hand, giving it a tender squeeze, knowing this was likely to be a very touchy subject for him, one prone to bringing back long buried memories, but she felt it was important he not run from them, and wanted to provide him as much support as she could for him.

"Aye," Arkady said, drawing in a deep breath. He could feel the large scar in his side throbbing as the memories began to bubble up from the dark recesses he tried to keep them tucked away in. "Aye,

I did. Velktara, she was one of the last five necromancers to be taken by the Inquisition. She..." He stopped and Yasha squeezed his hand even more firmly, reminding him that this was all in the far distant past, and had only as much power over him as he allowed it to. "She brought me back to life, after I was killed in the Abari Wars, alongside my brother."

He could see the gnome's face fall to ash, and he knew at that point, he would need to give her more of the story.

"Rakon, my brother, was an actor and I was stage crafter for his theater. Rakon was always so good in the spotlight. The forgettown of Lingham saw enough commerce come and go through the gates that the theater always had an influx of new patrons coming and going, and as long as Rakon and his team had a new show up every season, there was always work to be had and customers to come paying. Lingham was high up enough in the mountains that it seemed unlikely that the wars would come to our front door, but war offers no sanctuary, and eventually the Selban armies were knocking upon our gates and we were forced to defend ourselves, and the Gormansson brothers were not one to run from fights unless given no other option. The town was overrun and Rakon's theater was destroyed, but we managed to use an escape tunnel to get us back safely into dwarven territory. Rakon and I decided to enlist, because everything we'd ever known or owned had been lost when Lingham fell."

"Arkady," Weesha said, horror on her face. "I did not know."

"Both Rakon and I were at the Battle of the Celestial Dawn, the final battle of the Abari Wars, and while the dwarves were victorious over the trolls that day, the cost of life was insanely high, and both myself and Rakon were killed," he sighed, trying not to replay those memories in his head, but finding himself unable to escape the memory of tasting copper in his mouth when he awoke. "What I hadn't known is that my brother had taken out an insurance policy on us, using the great battle axes and fine breastplates our father had made for us when we came of age as collateral, the only mementos we had left of our family. Velktara had taken some convincing, but as I said, when my brother had the spotlight on him, he could convince anyone of anything."

"How long had you been fighting?"

"Oh, I imagine it was close to fifty years between the fall of Lingham and the Battle of the Celestial Dawn, but I lost count somewhere in the middle of it. Rakon had been a passable soldier, but I had taken quite well to it. The insurance was that if both of us were killed, Velktara would resurrect the one of us whose wounds were the most easily mitigated." His fingers squeezed tight on his wife's hand, and she placed her other hand against the back of his neck. "I had been stabbed in the side by a troll spear that had dug in beneath the breastplate. Poor Rakon, his body had been crushed far beyond repair. So, two days after the battle, I awoke on the field, blood still in my mouth, the stench of death and rotting flesh all around me, and the soft eyes of Velktara looking down at me. She had taken my brother's breastplate and battle axe as payment, but told me that I should keep my own, as a reminder of the family, and the price my brother had willingly given to keep one of us alive."

"Ye gods. And how did you go from that to threadbinding?"

He smiled wearily, his hand relaxing a little on his wife's as the images and sense memories of the battlefield receded back into the shadows of his memories. "After my time in war, I wanted to get as far away from that as possible. I traveled back to Lingham, determined to see if anything we'd left behind could be salvaged, but the trolls had gutted our former home of everything they could carry as part of their war efforts. The theater, the building anyway, was still there, but the amount of work it would take to repair and restore it, well, I didn't have the heart, what with Rakon gone. So I sold it to a couple of reclaimists and decided I needed a new path to follow. I traveled the lands for a while, offering my skills as a mercenary and warrior, until I met Emisin on one of his pilgrimages, and he invited me to come and be a student at the school. He said that only a man who had truly seen his cup overflow with hate could live a life so full of love. I didn't have a knack for it, not at first anyway. Hells, I think I had to work three times as hard to learn three quarters as much as any other student there, but eventually, I started to show great promise, and Emisin seemed quite proud in his ability to

spot raw talent. Of course, there was the distraction when Yasha arrived.”

The gnome grinned a little. “Aye, now that story I *have* heard a little of, but the chance to hear it straight from the source? Would you do me the honor, m'lady?”

Yasha tittered a little with amusement. “It truly is not the remarkable story everyone seems to expect that it will be. I was King Karaja Summervale's third of six children, and second daughter, so it was clear to me that my eldest brother would eventually be king, and that my older sister and I were likely to be bartered away in arranged marriages to help bolster the alliances my father had spent lifetimes building and reinforcing. But as I came of age, I began to become increasingly paranoid of the life that would have given me. It seemed most likely my father was going to try and pawn me off to the eldest son of King Waterford, and while the king was a nice man, his son was a prat and toxic in more ways than I wanted to count. But I had grown up hearing tales of the Threadbinders, of how they would connect one soul to another and that the love of two bound threads was greater than any other could ever know.”

“That is what we promise and try to deliver, my lady,” Weesha said.

“My father did not like to admit it, but when he had been a prince, he had also enlisted the aide of a threadbinder to find the perfect mate for him. That had brought him to my mother. He only told me the tale once, but my mother had told it to me many a time before her passing. So when I was of age, I dispatched my handmaid to see if the threadbinder who connected my mother and father still lived, and I was pleased to find that Valyria had, in fact, survived and thrived in the intervening years, and so she was brought to meet with me. I had never been with another woman before, but I assumed that since I knew what sort of things brought me pleasure, using them to bring another woman to pleasure would not be such a stretch, and I found that generally to be true. The price was paid and she brought me to Byanmaz, where Arkady was in his third year of six studying to be a threadbinder.”

“They still talk of the day the Royal Guard of Summervale swarmed upon the school, thinking you had been kidnapped for ransom,” Weesha giggled. “As powerful as your family is, m'lady, I do not think they could've taken on the entire enclave of threadbinders.”

“Mmm,” Yasha said with a smirk. “And my father was inclined to agree with you. Mayhap I should have told my father of my decision, but I suspected that if I had, he might have tried to dissuade me from my course of action, and I found that rather hypocritical of him.”

“Was her family finally accepting of you, Master Arkady?”

The dwarf shook his head. “Nay, I'm afraid they did everything shy of disown my beloved when it found she was threadbound to a dwarven war veteran. Her eldest brother now sits on the throne of Summervale.”

“More like is dying on it,” Yasha sniffed. “Being that both Arkady and I are binders, we have far outlived both my father and will easily outlive my brother also. I know that my nephew, Prince Brastelon, will likely welcome us with open arms once my brother has passed, a time I suspect is coming shortly.”

“I've often thought your brother simply despised the fact that he could not pursue his true love as you had,” Arkady said. “But you told me the alliance between the houses of Summervale and Midnighthollow was desperately needed, which was why your brother married Elania.”

“They were not a good match but they survived each other as best they could,” Yasha said. “But my nephew is waiting for his father to die before he enlists a threadbinder's services.”

“Certainly not mine,” the dwarf said in amusement.

“Obviously not,” Yasha agreed. “But he will find a good threadbinder when his time has come.”

“So tell me more of the girl, what you know of her that might have lead her into bearing such a condition as to sport four cords of true love.”

The gnome shifted in her seat a little. “Her name is Sophia Burngrave. Her parents passed some six years ago, and she has been traveling with the troupe since she was born, so she knows no other life, truly. But she said when her parents passed, so did her love of the circus, and so she began trying

to plan her exit from their employ. She told me she began trying to acquire the currency needed to employ a threadbinder, taking on extra work in order to gather the funds she would need. I was not the first threadbinder she encountered, but the first one she encountered struck her as... too unfocused for her to trust.”

Yasha shook her head, her golden hair falling before her eyes for a moment. “Let me guess. Almas.”

“Almas indeed,” Weesha sighed. “She's still as much a drunkard as ever, and because of that, Sophia waited. When she was passing by our enclave, she came to interview me, inquire about my rates, and when we agreed upon something that was accessible, she returned to the caravan, gathered up what few belongings she wanted to bring with her, made her her goodbyes and came back to the enclave as the caravan continued on by. Since the ritual provided such... unusual results, I wasn't sure what to do with her, so we have been letting her stay here, since what she paid for hasn't been delivered yet.”

“How much vitae did you ask from her, considering how short the human life span is?” the dwarf asked the gnome.

“Only a month's worth, and even that I feel was too much, as I have been unable to deliver upon what I promised.” Weesha let out another deep breath. “I'm at wit's end, Arkady. I haven't the foggiest what to do with her. I'd feel better if you checked my results.”

He shrugged a little, tucking his pipe away. “I mean, I could do such a thing, and simply set the vitae asked at the absolute minimum.”

“What *is* the minimum amount of time a threadbinder can accept, my love?” Yasha asked him.

“A solitary day's worth. As I'm sure you recall, I've only ever asked the humans for months, never years. They do not have as much time to spare as our races do.” The dwarf stroked his beard a moment. “Aye, I suppose I could do you this favor, Weesha, and have you in my ledger as owing me something in kind somewhere down the line. Typically I prefer to wait a few weeks between rituals, but the details of this particular person have intrigued me, and so I will accept.”

“Let's go introduce her to you and we can see what comes of it.”

The gnome hopped down from her chair and started heading towards the door of her office. Arkady and Yasha moved from their chairs and headed to follow. The apprentice threadbinders had gathered around and scurried away as Weesha opened the door again, all trying their best to look innocent, although it was clear they had all been listening in.

Weesha paid them no mind as they headed out of the main building and over towards one of the side structures. “In addition to entertaining the students, Sophia's also been doing chores around enclave. Cleaning, cooking, whatever she can to offset her cost in food and lodging.”

They headed into a smaller building, one where it seemed the space was mostly open. Yasha recognized it as a combat training space. Both thread and threatbinders were trained in basic combat, and they used open areas such as these for training.

In the center of the area, Sophia was practicing some knife juggling. She was, as described, a human woman in her early twenties, dressed in burgundy slacks with a crimson band of cloth around her mid section, covering what seemed like a generous, if proportionate, bosom. Her skin was tan, like a sun baked tree bark. Her eyes, although distant, were clearly a brilliant shade of blue, like cold winter sapphires. Her hair, which hung just past her chin, was mostly jet black like carved obsidian, but had stripes of shimmering red like ribbons of ruby. She was taller than Arkady and shorter than Yasha, with a nimbleness and an agility that Yasha found herself somewhat envious of.

She was also heartbreakingly beautiful.

Yasha turned to look at her husband, as if to try and explain her feelings to him, only to see the look on the gnome's face just beyond his. “Gods. Arkady, Yasha... the entwined cord... it leads to the two of *you*...”

Chapter 3

To say the dwarven mage was astonished was something of an understatement, but he knew as soon as he laid eyes upon her that one of Sophia's threads would lead to him and Yasha. Humans had their appeal to some, but he'd never found them especially eye catching as a species, and yet, there was something about Sophia that he couldn't look away from. He felt as smitten as he had the day Yasha had marched into his life.

Her skin was darker than his wife's but not quite as dark as his own, and the spins and twirls she was doing while keeping three blades suspended in the air reflected an innate agility that Arkady certainly imagined came in quite handy. Her exposed toned belly also revealed a piercing through her navel that had a small gem attached to it, a deep lustrous ruby that helped the highlights in her black silky mane stand out even more.

The knives danced up and downwards, their flat metal sides catching the light to cast interesting shadows along the inside of the area. They were no cheap weapons either, as Arkady could recognize the handiwork of his people even at a good distance. A single one of those knives would fetch a month's worth of rations to an experienced blademaker, although he suspected they were commissioned as a set long ago, as each of the three looked like similar handiwork. They weren't steel, but adamantite, a denser metal alloy that only the better dwarven artisans knew how to work with. Usually weapons and armor of adamantite make were generally reserved for their own people, but the grips of the blades laid bare the fact that the weapons had been crafted for human hands, not dwarven. Arkady realized the weapons must have had quite the story behind them, but resolved not to let it be the first thing he asked about, because they had greater things to be concerned by.

Sophia paid no attention to the three mages as they slowly approached her, instead remaining extremely focused on the blades she kept suspended above her, each of them rising and falling like leaping frogs, the woman taking the time to whip them under her arm or leg every now and again, as if she was making sure some routine she knew stayed crisp in her mind.

The three of them didn't want to startle her, so they moved quietly and carefully, even reducing their speed so that hopefully they would catch Sophia at some point when she had finished her performance to an audience of none. The knives sliced through the air and eventually she grabbed them one at a time by their hilt, flipping them over and stabbing them into a large melon she had resting at her feet, the sort of thing she seemingly did often enough.

"Well done, Sophia," Weesha said. "Your skill with those is quite remarkable."

"Thanks, Weesha, but at this point, it's more a family skill than anything else, even if I am the only one left of my family," she said, not looking back at them yet. She was withdrawing each of the blades one at a time from the melon, wiping them off with a strap of cloth she wore around her waist as a belt of sorts, cleaning them before sheathing them in scabbards hanging from that same strap. The woman's voice had a confident way about it, someone who had been self-sufficient for some time, by needs more than choice. It was husky, reminding the dwarf of the smooth ales he'd enjoyed far too much of during his youth. "I haven't gotten to the stables yet, but I can have a looksee first thing in the morning, unless you need it done sooner."

"Actually, I have a couple of people I want you to meet," the gnomish mage said, as the woman's head turned to look at them.

As soon as Sophia laid eyes on them, she rushed over and grabbed Yasha, pulling her head down so that the human could lock lips with her, having had to leap up a little bit, forcing the taller elf to bend downward. Arkady grinned a little bit, seeing his wife slide her hand down Sophia's back, clearly enjoying the contact before eventually pulling back, as Sophia kept her eyes tilted up adoringly. "You came! I thought you might, but... in my dreams, you weren't alone? You were—"

Arkady cleared his throat, as if to draw attention to his form and suddenly Sophia's head whipped over to spot him, her smile spreading even further as she rushed at him so quickly, he didn't have time to react, as she slid down onto her knees in front of him so that he was, momentarily, taller

than she was, as she reached up in a similar manner, pulling him down into a kiss that was positively exuberant. The dwarf was stunned by the experience, as it was uncannily like kissing his own wife, the perfect level of aggression and emotion, as if Sophia knew she needed to be the more active hand with the more typically reticent dwarf, and wanted to put him as much at ease as she could, sliding one hand across his hip, the other reaching up to stroke his beard in a remarkably insightful fashion. This was clearly a woman who had spent her fair share of time among dwarves, he thought.

"I've never kissed a dwarf before," she whispered to him, having broken her kiss only by fractional space, her breath warm on his lips, the scent of a fire brandy lingering there. "You're the couple I've dreamt of," she purred to him. "Oh, the things I'm going to do to you, lover. I will make that head of yours spin." Yasha and Weesha moved over to close the distance, so all of them stood in close proximity of one another. Sophia grinned and hopped up off her knees. "Pardon the forwardness, Master Threadbinder, but somehow I knew you preferred the more forward type of lady. Was I correct in that notion?"

"Now I—" Arkady started before his wife jumped in.

"Very much so, Sophia," Yasha said with a wry smile. "You said you'd seen us in dreams?"

The human woman nodded. "For the past three seasons or so, I've been having dreams about once a week, featuring one of four sets of people. The two of you are clearly one of those sets. The highly refined elvish princess and her burly dwarven husband. I'm not sure how I know, but I think I love the two of you. At least, it's certainly seemed that way in the dreams. We've, ah, gotten up to some rather risqué things in those dreams," she said, blushing just a little bit.

"How much would you say you know about us, Sophia?" Arkady asked her, trying to parse all this knowledge with what he already knew.

"Intimately, and yet not at all, Master dwarf," she said with a slight shrug. "For example, I can tell you that your wife's right nipple is far more sensitive than her left, but I could not even hazard a guess at her name. Or yours."

Yasha was far too comfortable with her sexuality to be caught off guard by this, but nodded in confirmation, something Arkady knew all too well. "My name is Yasha Summervale," she said to the human, "and this is my husband, Arkady Gormansson. He is a Threadbinder and I—"

"—am a Threatbinder," Sophia finished for her. "Yes, m'lady, your professions I did know, as I have seen the Threatbinder colors several times before, and of course, your husband's attire is akin to Weesha's, whom I'm sure has informed you of my predicament. Sophia Burngrave, of the late Burngraves, at your service." She pantomimed a curtsy, clinging to an imaginary skirt as she crossed one leg behind her and dipped low. "Acrobat, knife thrower and juggler extraordinaire, if it pleases you both."

"You needn't bow to mages," Arkady said, although the slight undercurrent of his tone implied he found it amusing. "It isn't as though we're royalty."

"You may not be, Master Arkady, but she is," Sophia said, nodding in his wife's direction. "I recognize her from a portrait that I saw hanging in Daywander Castle, when we performed for King Tobias. Pardon my asking, Mistress, but how is it that everyone else in that portrait has aged so much and yet you remain remarkably the same?"

"Binders are paid in vitae, my dear," Yasha said, her voice kind and patient. Arkady had often regretted that children between their two kinds were so unlikely, as he'd often thought his wife would've made an excellent mother. Then again, perhaps it was for the best, as other binders struggled with the decision of whether to watch their children age and die, or to bring them into the business and retard their age in kind. "That means the more skilled or in demand of us can defy Mother Time's inescapable march for what might seem like an eternity."

"I imagine in comparison to our paltry little human lives, you must live eons," she said, not sounding at all bothered by the comparison. "I can't imagine wanting to live so long, to see everyone you know wither and die around you."

“That's typically why binders tend to live such nomadic lifestyles,” Arkady said to her. “So as to only build attachments to a few things and people, and to protect them with every fiber of our fabric. Threadbinders find physical satisfaction with every taken commission, and Threatbinders, well...”

“It's alright, dear,” Yasha said, laughing a little at her husband's hesitation to say it aloud, as if speaking the words would evoke the deed. “Threatbinders live a more intrinsically dangerous lifestyle, so nearly all of us die in the line of duty. I've never heard tale of a Threatbinder dying of old age unless they have chosen to retire from their profession. Accidents are almost as rare.”

“Yes, well, I intend to make sure my wife makes it with me to retirement, when we have seen everything we want to do the worlds have to offer us,” Arkady said, reaching up to give his wife's toned ass a good squeeze. “Although when it gets right down to it, my soldiering days have never held a candle to her martial skills. But we work together and get by.”

“And I have more common sense than most Threatbinders when it comes to turning down prospective clients with death wishes,” she chuckled. “There's challenging and then there's just insanity, and I'm not oathbound to accept any job I might feel uneasy about.”

Arkady noted that the human woman never seemed to move more than an arm's length away from either himself or Yasha, as if she was afraid they were carved of dreamstuff and would disappear if they were looked at funny.

“How did you know to bring them here, Mistress Weesha?” Sophia asked the gnome. “When you explained it to me earlier, you said there were complications with my thread, and that you were writing for guidance. Are they the guidance that you wrote for?”

“I'm afraid not, child,” Weesha sighed. “Word from the Academy is still forthcoming, but Arkady here might as well be a Grandmaster, so I decided to simply ask him to consult on your case, as he's far more experienced than I am, especially when it comes to dealing with your kind. He was delivering his most recent client to pair with one of my students. Him being at the end of one of your threads is... just a stroke of fate.”

The dwarven mage grumbled. “I am not one who looks fondly upon coincidence, Weesha, but I can see no possible way that anyone would know that our paths would cross. The elven girl we brought with us was unremarkable, and her thread perfectly normal.”

He felt Sophia's hand squeezing his, and despite how calloused and work worn her hands were, there was something astonishingly tender about her flesh on his. “Forgive me if this is a foolish question, Master Arkady, but couldn't you just have Weesha read your thread to verify the link?”

The dwarf found his own stumpy fingers curling around hers. “Once we begin the process of becoming a Threadbinder, it becomes impossible for our threads to be read, although threads leading to us can still be seen, which is how my wife was able to find me after I'd already begun my training. Long term romance is... uncommon for those in my profession.”

Sophia clenched his hand a little more firmly. “But you could still read mine? That way you could see that I *am* connected to you and your wife.” The woman licked her lips a little bit. “Is the ritual the same? A bit of vitae given, an orgasm given and one received?”

“It would be, yes, although I would reduce the vitae down to the absolute minimum, since you yet to receive what you'd already paid for,” he said, stroking his beard with his other hand. “I would waive the vitae entirely, except it's a component to the magic, and the ritual will fail without it.”

“And when you see that my thread connects to yours?” the woman said, her breath starting to quicken a little. “What then?”

“Let us not get ahead of ourselves, m'lady,” Yasha said, taking the woman's other hand, and Arkady wondered if his wife felt the little jolt of electricity he did when they were all linked together. “We can retire to a private chamber, discuss all the details over a meal and then, if you still—”

“I want the ritual,” Sophia said quickly, cutting her off. “Sorry. I want the ritual, Mistress, assuming you will honor me with your services, Master Arkady. I am afraid I am no innocent maiden, even before my encounter with Mistress Weesha, and I hope that does not sully me in your eyes.”

The dwarf bristled at the very suggestion of impropriety. “*Sully*,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I have never understood how inexperience was something that men and women prized, rather than experience and learning. The more experienced, the better I say.”

Sophia clutched his hand a bit more. “There... there is one more thing I should tell you, Mas—”

“For the sake of the *gods*, woman,” Arkady said, momentarily losing his temper, “simply call me Arkady, otherwise we will be trapped within this conversation until the suns have fallen and risen all over again!” He laughed to himself, shaking his head, seeing her taken aback. “Apologies, Sophia, but honestly, we’re going to be bare to each other in the immediate future, so I think we’re well past honorifics and titles, don’t you think?”

The acrobat giggled and nodded, as if she felt silly for having to have it pointed out to her. “Yes, I guess that’s fair. But still, there is one more thing I do need to share.”

The dwarf rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. “Then out with it!”

“I... I have traded on my body for coin now and again, since my parents past, when times were tough and I was in need of supplies. I take no shame in what I did, but I know there are those who feel differently about offering companionship to the lonely hearted.”

“You’re asking if I’m bothered that you’ve been a whore, Sophia?” he said, tilting his head in perplexion. “I, a mage who has sex for money in order to provide something to someone, am basically a whore myself, and I have never understood the implied disparagement that some people attach to that word. It is a proud word, and a fine profession. In dwarven culture, a whore is known as a joybringer, and it is considered a noble and challenging calling.”

“In elvish heritage, it is similar, but the elvish word translates loosely to lightgifter, and those are simply the ones who tend to everyone,” Yasha said. “It is a skilled trade, and quite competitive, with the most talented among them becoming courtesans to the rich and powerful, figures of great political and social influence.”

The two mages both looked at the gnome, who grinned from ear to ear. “My people just call them the Smile Service,” Weesha said. “You silly humans and your hangups.”

“Well, don’t I feel silly then,” Sophia said, looking down at her leather boots. “Then I ask th—”

“May your wish be granted,” Arkady said, cutting her off. “As eager as I am to see this unusual conflux of threads for myself, I truly must insist that we eat first. The journey here was made at breakneck pace and we chose not to take time for a proper meal along the way, so we are famished.”

“It can difficult to eat on horseback,” Sophia said.

“Mmm. It’s even moreso atop a griffon,” Yasha teased, knowing that Sophia had not seen them arrive, and had assumed they’d come in caravan. In a way, Arkady supposed, they had, but by sky instead of by land.

“I reckon we can rustle you up some grub and the three of you can make better acquaintance with each other in between the students peppering you with questions,” the gnomish mage said, turning to walk away, leading them away from the combat arena.

“We’re going to be eating with the students?” Arkady grumbled. “They’re going to demand stories from us, aren’t they?”

“Oh, you’ll be fine, stoneface. C’mon.”

Dinner actually turned out to be quite enjoyable, despite the students’ endless questions about the greater world at large. The biggest problem with the frontier academies was that they were often a good distance from more sizable cities, and so they weren’t up to date on all the gossip regarding conflicts and romances, with students asking about the great battles they’d seen and whether or not some of the princes and princesses had yet wed.

As much as he wasn’t a creature of high society, lifetimes with Yasha had trained him how to hold court when he wanted to, and he did his best to regale the students, mostly elves and gnomes but with a couple of dwarves and a lone minotaur, with big tales of the things they had witnessed over their last few months of travel.

When he wanted to be, Arkady could be quite the storyteller, and he tailored each tale to the person who had asked about it, lingering in fineries when discussing romance and blustering about with his hands in the air as he detailed a great battle between an orcish army and a nest of dragons that they'd witnessed from the sky in passing a month or so ago.

It wasn't until they were on the dessert course when one of the students finally stomached up the courage to ask about Quiesh and how they had tamed her. He could see Yasha blanch at the way the student had phrased the question, but Arkady knew that griffons were so uncommon that the children didn't even know that to suggest that they had "tamed" her would normally be considered an affront, so he let the unintentional insult slide.

"One does not 'tame' a griffon, students," he said. "One befriends them. Around thirty years or so ago when Yasha and I were camping on a trip between the cities of Wendhurst and Ozro, we had set our wagon against a cliff face, as we were high up in the Enkhaal Mountains, and were just settling down to rest when we heard an animal cry of pain. Now you fledglings don't know my wife, but I knew the moment we heard it that we were going to go and provide aide to whatever it was we would find there. Her kindness is one of the many things I love about her."

"Were you frightened?" one of the elves, a boy of barely fifty, asked him.

"I fought in the Abari Wars, boy, and my wife has over a hundred confirmed kills in her tenure as a Threatbinder," he said with all the confidence in the world. "Of *course* we were frightened. It could've been anything, but we decided we would either help the creature or we would end its suffering and eat well for some time, depending on what we found."

"What *did* you find?"

"A mother gryphon had managed to get her hindleg caught between some fallen rocks, and was unable to escape. When we approached her, it seemed like she was starting to consider gnawing her own leg to escape, but off to one side, we could see a nest with four gryphon pups, a month old at best. She looked at us with anger and determination, a mother protecting her young, but gryphons are very smart creatures, and when my wife and I laid down our weapons and approached with our hands raised, she was still distrustful, but I suppose she decided she had no choice."

"When you began to move the rocks to free her, at first I thought she might bite your head off," Yasha said, "and I was terrified that we had made the wrong decision."

"What happened?" a gnomish girl asked him.

"She bit my head off, obviously, and I died, the end," he said, matter-of-factly, which made all the students burst into laughter. "Nay, it was a nerve-wracking project, but after a time, I had moved enough of the rocks away that the mother gryphon was able to pull her leg free and move away from the rocks."

"I remember being just as nervous at that moment as I was when you first approached her, Arkady," Yasha said, "because at that point, she no longer needed us, and could've have decided we would make an excellent meal for her pups. We had to hope that we had earned enough good will from her that she wouldn't harm us."

"She didn't, obviously," a dwarven boy said, eager to move the story along.

"No, she didn't," Arkady agreed. "What did do, however, was move over to her nest and look through her pups before grabbing one of them by the scruff of the neck. She brought the pup over towards me, and laid her down at my feet before settled down to rest, while my wife did her best to bandage the mother's leg. To this day, I'm not entirely certain how the mother conveyed to her pup the obligation that she felt, but after a few minutes, the pup nuzzled against her mother, nodded, then crawled over into my lap and settled there. We named her Quiesh and she has been with us ever since. After she'd grown large enough to transport us around, we returned to that spot in the Enkhaal Mountains, perhaps just on the off chance of finding some of Quiesh's family again, but alas, we found none. I don't know for certain, but I like to think Quiesh thinks of *us* as her family now, as we've ensured she has a steady supply of food, and encourage her to hunt on her own when we know we will

be at a location for a few days time.”

During the course of dinner, Sophia, Arkady and Yasha had all spent a bit of time talking with one another, and the dwarf had been surprised to find there was the same kind of nervous energy between him and the human girl as there had been between him and his wife so very long ago. She told them both about how her parents had perished within weeks of each other, her mother falling ill to some disease and after she passed, her father seemed to simply give up and died of a broken heart. Her mother had told tales of how she had used a Threadbinder to meet her father, and after they had both passed, she'd resolved to do that for herself.

She also told them about her meeting with the female dwarven Threadbinder named Almas, and how she had declined to take her up on her offer of services, simply because Almas had been so unfocused and undisciplined, and instead waited until the caravan saw the flag flying over the frontier academy.

After dessert, Arkady started to feel just a tiny bit awkward, something he'd not felt since he'd first met Yasha, and had been completely taken aback by her beauty and her directness. He'd felt like he was barely a man when Yasha had come storming into his life, and he looked back upon their first night of lust and passion with an inescapable fondness.

In an attempt to prolong the wait even longer, Arkady made certain that Quiesh was being cared for, and found to his amusement that the students had fed the gryphon an entire wild creature they had killed on their hunt, and the mages' friend seemed quite content, having curled up next to a fire they had built for the creature after gorging herself upon the carcass.

The three of them excused themselves and headed to the chamber that had been prepared for them to rest for the evening, and for them to partake in the ritual. For a human with such a short life span, Arkady had to admit that Sophia had lived a rather epic tale, visiting many different kingdoms across several continents, having been on the move her entire life.

“You've already been through the ritual before,” Arkady said, kicking off his boots, “so I suppose I need not go through my usual speech about what you're going to be doing, the payment, and so on and so on...”

“Nope,” Sophia said, sliding out of her soft leather shoes. Arkady had never seen footwear as pliant as such, and he expected it was so she could use her feet to their utmost, something he'd been told acrobats needed. “We can get right down to the fucking,” she said with a soft laugh. “Foul language. Are we for it or against it? Because if it's up to me, we're *for* it.”

“Well, I –” Arkady started to say.

“He's for it, as am I, although knowing my husband, he'll sputter and deny it for at least a couple of moments before relenting,” Yasha said, “and we both know I speak only truth, especially since you're going to be with us for the foreseeable future.”

His wife had begun undressing, and Sophia took that as her cue to strip down as well, unpinning the strip of crimson cloth over her breasts, unwinding it to reveal a very generous bosom, large tits capped with small nipples the color of deep earth, already stiff at their unveiling. She pushed off her trousers and stepped free of them, a well groomed but thick thatch of black curls over her pussy. It was a marked change from the nearly hairless elves, and he found the look both exotic and appealing.

“He'll defer to his wife on the matter, since she's decided for him,” Arkady teased in response, as he began to remove his own clothing, while shaking the vial of liquid with one hand, getting the fluids within to mix and meld. “But yes, we're fine with foul language.”

“Good, because I have to say, Arkady, that is one *fine* cock you have there,” Sophia said to him as he removed his trousers. “Is that typical for dwarves or am I just an exceptionally lucky woman?”

“Can't say I've gone around measuring,” he said, taking the last of his clothes off, putting them all into a small stack. “But I've done alright, I like to think.”

“I'm quite fond of it myself,” Yasha said, “and while I'm no great expert either, I can say I believe it to be somewhat larger than the average.” She moved over to slide a hand along one of Sophia's arms, fine black hair along her skin. “I still find it so remarkable that humans are so much

more like dwarves than elves when it comes to hair.”

Sophia's hand reached up and cupped one of his wife's breasts with her work worn fingers, seeing the elf shiver in anticipation of the touch. “And I also find it so unusual that elves are all so smooth, nary a hair below the neckline. Don't you get cold?”

“That's what they make clothes for, dear,” Yasha said kindly.

Arkady moves over and began to draw sigils upon their bodies, taking time to make sure to get each line and curve correct, even though Sophia was wiggling a little, as if impatient to get on to the ritual itself. “You keep wiggling,” he scolded, “and I'll end up accidentally thinking you're threadbound to a great sky drake or some such nonsense.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Sophia said, licking her lips. “I'm just eager to have my first encounter with a dwarf, especially one as handsome as you.”

“You're just humoring an old man now,” he chuckled.

“Oh no, Arkady,” Sophia replied, her voice taking on a serious tone. “When I first laid eyes on you and Yasha, I wanted to rip your clothes off where you stood and *fuck you both* until one of us surrendered from exhaustion.” She traced her fingertip along Yasha's jawline. “My money was on him, by the way. Not because he's old, but simply because I find male virility to be the first to yield in a competition.”

Yasha grinned, shaking her head. “The things a Threadbinder will teach you, little girl. I once saw a succubus beg him to relent, for she couldn't keep up with him.”

Sophia turned to look at Arkady, as he moved to applying the sigils to himself. Normally he applied them to his own flesh first, as a way of letting the applicant grow more comfortable in the surroundings, but Sophia had been so eager, he'd saved himself for last. “You fucked a succubus? Had she come in search of her threadbound?”

“She had,” he said, taking his thumb to draw a line in sharp formation across his chest, the gel matting down the dark red hair on his skin. “And I found him for her, a dwarf far in the south, deep below Mount Rigalad. But after the ritual, she bet me double or nothing on the aryou portion of her fee that she could make me yield in a battle of pleasure, and my dear wife would not let such slander stand, although I would've happily walked away without indulging in the challenge..”

Yasha giggled. “I mostly wanted to see what the succubus would look like when she was bested, which she most certainly was.”

“Somewhere in the fourth hour, she had enjoyed too many orgasms to count and her body was limp and drained as she begged me to stop, not to touch her again, and to never speak her name when telling the story to others,” he laughed.

“I'm surprised she didn't insist you never *tell* the story again.”

“Oh no,” Yasha said, her hand brushing Sophia's hair back, sliding against it affectionately. “She *insisted* he tell the story whenever appropriate, not as a boast, but as a cautionary tale for those who might seek similar combat.”

He drew the final symbol on his flesh, matching one he'd drawn on his wife earlier, setting the vitae price at a single day's time, the smallest amount he could ask. They'd also asked no coin for this, as technically Arkady was simply continuing with Weesha's unfulfilled contract. “There we go. In your own time,” he said to her. “And as you like.”

“You're the perfect height for this, although you'll need to help hold me up a bit,” Sophia said, as she placed her hands onto the floor and then lifted her legs up into the air, walking on her palms over to him until her lips moved to brush against the head of his cock, her cunt almost perfectly aligned with his face.

His strong hands grabbed onto her hips as his wide tongue pushed out and scooped along her slit, feeling her shiver and moan beneath him, as she moved to push her mouth upon his prick, forcing her face onto it before doing her best to lean her head backwards.

The odd angle was certainly something new to him, although he felt as though Sophia might

have done something similar before, as she easily moved towards bobbing her face along his cock, her tongue on the topside of it instead of the underside, as his wife giggled. "Agile little minx, isn't she?" Yasha said, stepping in close. "Let me have a taste, dearest husband," she said, grabbing onto Sophia's hips, lifting her up as she bent down, pushing her tongue inside of the human woman's cunt, that elvish tongue reaching far and deep, which made Sophia groan carnally onto his shaft.

Sophia slipped her head off of his cock before growling. "Fuck, woman, you're *damn* fucking good at that," she said, moving to hook her legs over Yasha's shoulders before bending her body upward, until she was high above them, her pussy ground against Yasha's face, the elf holding onto the human's hips. Sophia ran her fingers through his wife's hair, almost clawing them against her skull. "Gods asunder, *yes*."

For a moment, Arkady wasn't entirely sure what to do. Sophia's entire body was almost entirely out of reach for him, as she rested on his wife's shoulders, and a moment or so later, Yasha seemed to realize adjustments needed to be made, and brought herself and the other woman over towards the bed. She bent forward and laid Sophia on top of the bed, the human writhing as Yasha pulled away, even momentarily.

"No," Sophia whimpered. "I need *more*."

"Oh you will get more, little human, until even you may need a moment's pause," Yasha said, as she moved to lay down on the bed as well, her feet towards Sophia's head, as she positioned Sophia's knees near the edge of the bed. His wife gestured for him to come back and join them, as she lifted her lips up to kiss at Sophia's snatch once more, while the human woman buried her face against his wife's elven pussy.

He could feel his wife's hand on his hip as he moved in, the height just perfect for him to stand at the edge of the bed and thrust forward directly into Sophia's drenched cunt, a fierce howl of pleasure erupting from her as he pushed inside of her, feeling just how snug and unstretched her channel was around his girthy dwarven shaft.

Sophia's moans were muffled by the fact that she kept her face buried against his wife's slit, and Yasha was doing her best to alternate between teasing her husband's balls and the human woman's clit.

Because of her pressuring tightness, he had intended to take it easy, but his wife's hand on his hip yanked him into a forceful and hurried rhythm. It had felt cool in the room moments ago, but now the very air felt like that of a molten furnace, and Sophia's squeals grew louder and more frantic.

His eyes widened as he glanced down at the runes upon the human's skin which burned like streaks of lava, and he could feel her start to spasm, so he shouted suddenly "Eyes!" as he screwed his eyes shut just moments before the room was flooded with light.

He held still while Sophia's orgasm washed over her, praying that she'd closed her eyes, or perhaps that his wife had clenched her thighs around her face to protect her. Normally there was more warning before the ritual resulted in the light bloom, but he hadn't realized that apparently Sophia had brought his wife to orgasm early on in the encounter, so once Sophia was breaching hers, the supernova of light exploded.

The dwarf took the moment to solidify the link to her threads, completing the final stage of the ritual, as he felt Sophia's cunt start to loosen its tight hold on his shaft. It was uncommon for him to be doing this with a full erection, but it had happened a few times over the centuries.

He was about to start looking through the threads when he felt a slap on the cheek of his ass as his wife spoke up to him. "You still haven't been paid, husband."

"Mmm, but apparently *you* have, my dearest wife," he chuckled. "I'm lucky I happened to glance down or I might have been blinded for an hour or so."

Yasha giggled intensely. "She is *quite* talented with her tongue, my love, but you must take your fill of her."

"The price has been paid, love," he said with a sigh.

"Then take your *fill* of me, Arkaday," Sophia moaned. "*Use* my body and *fuck* me until you

have left your mark inside my cunt.” She started to back her hips onto him, almost doing the movement for him, wantonly. “I want *more*, I want to *feel* the heat of your dwarven cum *boiling* inside of my human twat. I want to *feel* that sensation of your release, proving to me I am *worthy* of your seed. *Fuck* my snug snatch until it bears the name of the dwarf who showed me how to love again. We are threadbound, are we not? So *bind* me, *claim* me, *fuck* me. Fuck fuck fuck...” she said, repeating the word as she bounced her ass against his pelvis, her arms stretched forward in supplication and to give her better leverage with which to push herself into him.

As Sophia did this, his wife moved to wrap her lips around his balls, her long tongue washing them in parallel spirals. His wife knew him too well, and clearly, this human knew him better than he thought, because moments later, he could feel that familiar tightness in his groin, and his cock began to spew within the human woman's womb, setting her off onto yet another orgasm, her body wobbling atop of his wife's before slumping down. His hand on her hip which had once been setting the pace was now steadying his unsure legs.

When he pulled his cock from Sophia's sullied snatch, he could see some of his thick goo dripping from her slit for only a moment, before his wife leaned her head up and licked up any cream that drizzled loose.

He wanted to sit, to lay down, to desperately fall asleep, but while the threads would wait as long as needed, his curiosity would not. He stepped back and curled his hands through the air to make those threads from her spring forth to his eyes.

“By Olach's Hammer, Weesha was right,” he muttered to himself.

“Of *course* Sophia has a thread that leads to us, my dear,” Yasha said sleepily to him. “We both knew that the moment we laid eyes on her.”

“Aye, my dear, that thread is true, a braided pair of threads that lead to you and I, but the others are here too. A cord that looks more like a ribbon, flat and wide. A cord as thick as my arm, powerful and stern. And one final one so thin as to almost be overlooked. Each made of solid gold dreamstuff, as pure and true as the others.”

“Am... Am I damaged?” Sophia said, rolling off of his wife to lay down on the bed on her back.

“No, far from it,” Arkady said. “You are glorious, and unique, and mysterious. And none of the other threads seem to be wilting.”

“So what does it *mean*, husband of mine?” Yasha asked him.

“Honestly, my dear?” he said, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. “I'm not sure I have any *fucking* idea...”

Chapter 4

They hadn't remained at the enclave long past getting Sophia's things squared away. The woman traveled light, only one small bag of things to her name, and even that wasn't so large that it took up much room in the carriage on the back of Quiesh. The griffon was accustomed to flying with three or four passengers, so for them to have three regularly for the foreseeable future didn't seem to bother the majestic creature in the slightest. In fact, Quiesh seemed to take quite a liking to the woman on first sight, not even having the typical hesitation or caution the griffon usually took to newcomers.

Weesha had been sad to see them go, but Arkady had also spotted a bit of relief that the problem of Sophia was no longer one of her concern. Arkady had known the gnome for a long time, and while Weesha was always happy to take on interesting challenges, she didn't like getting bogged down in them for too long, and would much rather move on to newer and brighter things. She made an excellent teacher because magical students were an endless cavalcade of original and inventive problems.

Before their arrival at the elvish enclave several days ago, the plan had been to head towards the northwest. While Arkady and Yasha had lived lives full of exploration and excitement, neither of them had ever been into the dragon kingdom of Rizo. None of the threads coming off of Sophia headed that direction, however, so they had agreed to put those plans on hold for the time being, while they ran

down at least a couple of the other threads that ran off their newest partner.

Sophia had folded into their group with no effort at all, picking up natural rhythms between Arkady and Yasha that the two had cultivated over centuries within hours. She'd also made a point that she would do whatever she could to contribute to the financial stability of the newly formed trio, although Yasha told her that they would easily be able to incorporate her with only minor adaptations.

Of all the threads coming off of Sophia, Arkady had decided to follow the thinnest one first, simply because it meant he would be doing the hardest work upfront, as the cord took more effort to narrow in on than the others did.

The threads having such radically different appearances was another mystery that Arkady hadn't cracked yet. In all the centuries he'd been doing this, threads had only had some minor variations to them, and none this diverse. They were never uniform, but the variance was generally minor, slightly thicker or thinner here or there. Sophia's threads were each strikingly unique, and he hoped that after they met another of her threadbound, perhaps it would make more sense.

The thinnest cord, the one which seemed almost a literal thread instead of the typical rope thickness, headed west, towards the Rebevins Desert and likely beyond, so that was where they were headed, even as much as it displeased their personal sensibilities.

Crossing the Rebevins wasn't pleasant, even in the winter when its bracing heat wasn't as cruel and dominant, but it was still the most direct path along the cord, and with Quiesh putting a bit of a push into her flight pattern, they would be across it within a day or two.

Or they would have had they not come across a distress flag half way through the trek across the barren wastelands.

In their typical trips across the Rebevins, neither of them typically needed to keep much watch as the lands were generally featureless and uninhabited, but there was one structure they had passed by before, one incredibly unlikely to have need of either a Threadbinder *or* a Threatbinder.

Najov.

The Crystal Prison.

Deep in the heart of the Rebevins Desert lay a magical penitentiary known as Najov, but which everyone colloquially referred to as The Crystal Prison, Carved out of a cliffside made of a semi-transparent red crystal known as phonshux, Najov was a designated shared prison for all six surrounding nations to send their worst criminals, a place for the trash to be dumped and forgotten about, those who considered beyond redemption but too troublesome to just kill on spot. Its phonshux construction meant that breaking in or out was considered nearly impossible, the crystal legendarily difficult to work with. In fact, the prison was believed to be an abandoned castle of a forgotten empire, as even the most dedicated of smiths and craftsmen couldn't find ways to break, shape or manipulate phonshux, meaning the building's layout was immutable, although the warden had made some attempts with internal walls and structures carved out of other things.

Najov was generally where criminals went to disappear from the conversation for all time. Occasionally a Threatbinder would be called to put down some form of internal gang rivalry, but neither Arkady nor Yasha had ever set foot inside of the building. It had only two entrances – one on the ground, behind the heavy main gate, and one on a rooftop terrace, where there was a smaller entrance for airborne mounts, such as Quiesh, with a small stable, and one immense iron door. Also on the terrace was a flagpole, which would allow the prison to run up any of the twenty standard signal flags used across the kingdom.

Currently they were flying the “magical distress” flag, a black flag with a red circle and a white X overlaid atop one another.

As much as Arkady wanted to pretend that he hadn't seen it, to simply progress on by without causing any more difficulty, he was a dwarf of honor, and there was only shame to be had in ignoring a distress flag, even for someplace as loathsome as Najov.

He wasn't worried about his or Yasha's personal safety, but Sophia was still new enough to their

little clan that he wasn't sure exactly how strong her defensive capabilities ran, even if she was an expert knife thrower. Performance skills rarely translated to combat under fire. But if they kept her close to them, he felt she would be safe.

Najov's appearance was striking, even from a distant. The structure was four stories tall, all carved out of the red crystal that apparently was fully impervious to the impact of weather and time. The walls weren't entirely opaque, allowing light to permeate into the building without giving much sight as to what was happening on either side. The shape of the castle turned prison could be difficult to make out, with no obvious outline or defining features beyond the steel front gate at the bottom and the dust covered terrace at the top. Arkady suspected that while they cleaned the terrace of sand regularly, the weather was more persistent than whoever was assigned cleaning duties. The red crystal building bled into the side of a mountain, and the dwarf wondered how far into the mountain the prison had grown.

With no way to go out, the only ways to go were in and down, neither of which was blocked by phonslux crystal. Beyond the outer walls, eventually it turned into heavy stone, although Arkady had heard tale that it was only directly out backwards and downwards, the sides still caged in with impenetrable red crystal. A few years ago, he'd spoken with a couple of dwarves who were being brought in to expand the prison by tunneling and carving into the available mountain space. They weren't keen to be surrounded by inmates for months, even years, but had agreed that the amount of money they were being offered for the work was more than worth the risk.

The flag being flown meant it wasn't a prison riot or other such problem, as that would have been indicated by a blue flag with three red triangles on it. The distress flag meant there was a problem of magical sorts that the guards and warden of Najov Prison didn't know how to handle on their own, and it wouldn't be proper not to go and answer it.

It was early in the evening, and the sun hadn't fully set behind the mountains in the distance, so both Sophia and Yasha were well awake as Quiesh brought them down onto the terrace. Whoever was on duty was accustomed to military landing on the terrace, usually on dragonback, but the sight of a griffon was not something they were used to.

There was plenty of room on the terrace for the griffon to land, but somehow Quiesh managed to make the three guards who came out look nervous and spooked. "Who goes there?" one of the guards said, pointing a pike at Quiesh's carriage.

"You flew the flag asking for magical help," Arkady said as he opened the door of the carriage, kicked out the fold down stairs and walked to meet them. "Unless you'd rather I get back on my friend here and we fly away while you're waiting for someone better?"

"Thank the gods, no Master Threadbinder," one of the guards said as they all lowered the pikes, a look of relief spreading on their face. "Whatever help you can offer we will gladly take."

He could see the relief increase a great deal once his wife stepped out as well, her Threadbinder colors proudly on display, so he assumed whatever problems they were facing, they were dangerous, and the guards assumed a Threadbinder would be of little assistance.

It wasn't a common misconception, so Arkady took no offense to the matter. People knew their one thing about Threadbinders and assumed that was all there was to them, so he knew it was actually to his advantage to let them continue thinking him to be utterly defenseless.

"And yours Mistress Threadbinder," another guard said.

No one said anything to Sophia as she moved out, but a few appreciative nods were offered.

"Please get my friend Quiesh out of the sun and into the shade while we go and talk to the warden about solving your problem for you," the dwarf told them. "Don't herd her, don't anger her; simply respect her and you'll all be fine, won't they, my friend?" Arkady reached up and patted Quiesh's nuzzling face before turning to follow the one guard leading them deeper into the prison.

"What sort of problem are you having?" Arkady said, as the guard walked them through the gate and down a series of red crystal stairs. The dwarf noticed with some amusement that the guards

had probably brought some sand in and scattered it over the floors, to help provide some better definition of where the walls and floors were, not to let the crystalline structure be a complete imposition to everyone and everything. “The mystical distress flag is a rather generic plea for help, and any details we can start gathering early would be appreciated.”

“We’ve had a couple of... unexplained deaths,” the guard said. “Normally, that wouldn’t be anything to bother us much, but it’s more of the matter of *how* they died that concerns us.”

The four of them walked down the stairs to a landing and began to move past a series of cells. Despite how difficult the crystalline structure was to work with, they had still managed to ingrain a series of metal bars to form cell after cell, each with a couple of horrific prisoners inside of them, truly the worst among the worst.

“Hey little elf,” a troll sneered at Yasha as they were walking past. “I’ll bet that pretty mouth of yours would look great wrapped around my cock.” The gargantuan was at least twice his wife’s size, but Arkady suddenly felt very sorry for him, as the troll had dropped his trousers and was waving his dick in their direction. His body was covered in scars and muscles and not much else, clearly a life spent fighting in one war or another. “Why don’t you come in here and let me skullfuck you, pretty little elf bitch, and show you what you’re missing?”

Yasha stopped, an ice-cold smile on her face, as she turned to look at him through the bars, the troll obviously uneducated as to the Threatbinder attire. “Why don’t I show you why you’re lucky there’s bars between us?” she said, contorting her fingers into one shape, a second, and then a third, as the troll suddenly gasped in sharp pain.

The spell in question had caused a magical rope to form and tie around the base of the troll’s cock and was pulling tight, forcing the flesh inward, constricting it until the troll was whimpering in pain, having fallen to his knees. She’d chosen a thicker cord, because anything too thin would have sliced the troll’s penis off immediately, like a garrote castrating him instead of choking him.

“If I wanted to,” she said to him through the bars. “I could pull the rope tight enough to pop your useless member off like a pimple. Then I could force you to *eat* that flesh in front of your peers while my husband seared the wound closed so you wouldn’t bleed to death. Is that what you think you’re missing?”

The troll’s face had turned a dark color, both in pain and fear, as he looked like he was about to go into shock. He shook his head, unable to bring forth any words at all. For a moment, Arkady himself wasn’t sure if his wife was going to pop the troll’s dick right off, but she eventually flicked her fingers away and the cord vanished as the troll suddenly gasped for air like he’d been drowning.

“Keep in mind, friend,” Yasha said to the doubled over troll. “This wasn’t even in the top one hundred meanest things I could have done to you. So show a little respect.”

The inmates in the nearby cells jeered and laughed at the troll until Yasha turned her gaze upward, and they all fell silent, afraid she would turn her wrath upon them, which made Arkady smirk just a little bit, as they started walking again.

“She can be mean when she wants to,” Sophia whispered to him.

“Never unwarranted, though,” he replied.

The rest of their walk was unmolested, something Arkady took note of. Word spread fast in this prison, which meant that tales his wife’s confrontation with the brute were already reaching the lowest floor before they’d even arrived at the warden’s office.

The warden, it seems, had taken what must have been the master bedroom as his office, as the room itself was large, and contained everything of the warden’s in one place – both office and bedroom, as the desk was the most prominent thing in the front of the room, but in the back, a spartan like bed could also be seen. There was more than enough space in the room for all of it, with a high vaulted ceiling, the top of it clearly exposed to the exterior, as light filled the room warmly.

“Ah, mages,” the warden said from behind his desk. He was a Rathkin, a large humanoid race of bipedal lizards covered in deep green scales. Those less traveled often mistook them for small

dragons upon first sight, but Rathkin had no wings, could not breath fire and never grew all that much bigger than an ogre or troll. This Rathkin had a pair of spectacles on his face, and was dressed much more formally than the guards, who wore somewhat ramshackle uniforms. “Excellent. Excellent indeed. I hope that your appearance here is in response to the flag we raised?”

“It is, Warden...” his wife said, fishing for the Rathkin's name.

“Warden Ziroh, at your service,” he said, standing to offer them a little bow. “And you might be?”

“Threatbinder Yasha Summervale, twelfth rank. This is my husband, Threadbinder Arkady Gormansson, eighth rank. And this is our companion, Sophia Burngrave,” Yasha said, finishing their introductions. “We were flying by and saw your flag asking for help. How can we be of service?”

“*Flying* by?” the warden said, seeming a little ruffled. “You don't travel by dragon, do you?”

“Don't be silly,” the dwarf laughed. “No no, we have a griffon friend who offers us transportation in exchange for being cared for. It's an arrangement that's suited all parties quite well.”

“Ah. Yes. I see. Or, rather, I don't, but it isn't any of my concern,” the Rathkin said. “*My* concern is that I have had a couple of prisoners turn up overly dead. Now now, I know what you are going to say, that deaths in a prison are a commonplace occurrence and no reason to be raising flags asking for aid, but it is the manner in which they have been turning up dead that has me concerned. Might I show you one of the corpses?”

“Of course,” Yasha told him, as the warden moved to lead them out of the offices and head down a nearby set of stairs. “By couple do you mean actual two, or has there been more?”

“Five, all said and done, and all in the same manner,” the Rathkin said, leading them all the way from the top floor of the prison down to the basement. “I have some experience with magical combat, and while I suppose it is possible that the deaths could've been caused by a particular gifted caster, it seems unlikely that they were. For the first couple, I was willing to write them off as nothing more than the cost of doing business, but now, on our fifth corpse, I consider the matter an affront to the way I maintain my prison.”

Arkady noticed that there were plenty of guards stationed all around the prison, and that several of them were low-level casters, Fire Flingers or Spark Spartans, but none of them with any real rank of distinction. He suspected that having magical defenses in a hall of monsters and criminals such as this could come in handy.

As they moved into what the dwarf guessed was their morgue, the warden waved to an older looking dwarf sitting high atop a chair, looking down onto a table with a desiccated body resting on it. “They here to fix this mess?” the dwarf said to the warden.

“One would certainly hope so,” the warden replied. “Doctor Arvanesson, this is Threatbinder Yasha, Threadbinder Arkady and their companion, Sophia.” Arkady noted with some small amount of amusement that even though he was being introduced to another dwarf, his wife's profession still took prominence in order of introductions.

“What do you have, Doctor?” Yasha said, walking over towards the bodies.

“Not entirely certain,” he said, poking at the corpse in front of him with a thin metal rod.

“They've all been like this, completely drained of water, and done so in a very short amount of time. The bodies have shown up only a few hours after the person in question's gone missing, and there does not seem to be any other form of wound or damage on them.”

“No bite marks? No scratches?” his wife asked the other dwarf.

“None that I've been able to see, but the lack of hydration means the bodies have contracted significantly, so it means external wounds are much more difficult to spot and identify,” the dwarf told them. “No commonality between the victims, either. One male troll, one male ogre, one female human, one female ogre and one female Rathkin, which you see before you.”

“Wait, *that's* a Rathkin?” Sophia said. “How can you even tell?”

“There's some scaling here and there that's left, and the body hasn't shrunk nearly as much as,

say, the humans have. The human body has a much higher concentration of water in it than the Rathkins do, although not quite as high as an ogre does. Our two ogre fatalities we had to identify on head count, the corpses were so unrecognizable.”

“Good gods,” Sophia said. “What could do such a thing?”

“I’m not entirely certain,” Arkady said.

“I might have an idea,” Yasha said, “although if it is, we’re lucky you’re here, my dear husband. Tell me about the expansion you’ve been doing to the prison.”

The warden looked over in surprise. “I wasn’t aware that was common knowledge.”

“It isn’t,” Arkady said, “but the two dwarves you hired to do some of your work ran into me in a bar, and you know that there are no secrets between dwarves over drinks.”

Everyone laughed a little at that, and the warden nodded. “Understandable. Yes, well, because we cannot build outward, the only possible way for us to add more to the prison is to go further into the interior of the mountain, so a few years ago, we hired a team of dwarven miners to tunnel and clear out portions of the back walls, giving us room to expand.”

“They stumbled into some tunnels, didn’t they?”

“How...?” the warden said before stopping. “They did. There were some chambers that had been walled off quite some time ago. The structure had several rooms which the dwarves just discovered while expanding for us, and a couple of them had long and winding tunnels attached to them that run deep into the earth, far below the mountain. We haven’t explored them thoroughly yet, as it seems they run for ages, but the dwarves noticed a definite difference between the rooms and the tunnels, in that the rooms themselves seemed more in line with the existing construction of the prison and the tunnels were smoothed and more organic.” He paused a little, looking over at the mages questioningly. “Does that mean something to you?”

“It does,” Yasha said. “Especially the smooth tunnels. You should know that sign as well, beloved, even if we haven’t seen one of these in a long time.”

“You think?” Arkady asked his wife. “This isn’t their typical environment. They typically prefer much more damp climates. This sort of arid climate is *rather* unlike them.”

“We did find a large series of blue crystal cages upon exploration, but it seemed like some of them had been broken open, as they were all empty,” the warden told them.

“Were the prisoners unattended in the tunnels at any point?”

The warden nodded. “Our first victim, we think, might have been engaging in a jail break of some kind, as one of the guards at the expansion area was knocked unconscious. He’s been reprimanded for his error, naturally.”

“Blue crystal?” Sophia asked.

“Are you familiar with gernosh crystal?” Arkady asked her. “I don’t see why you would be, but with you, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Isn’t that used for keeping food fresh for long travels?”

Arkady smiled a little bit, cocking his head to one side. “I’ve never heard of it being used for such purposes, but I suppose it could function as food locker. It’s a bit like using a griffon to hunt sparrows, however. Typically gernosh crystal is used to put living creatures into a sort of temporal limbo, where their body does not age. It can be used to secure someone in dangerous medical conditions for transportation to medical assistance or to keep troublesome creatures in stasis for relocation. It’s a bit rare these days, but the crystal used to be very common place.”

“So common, in fact, that in long ago years, they were used to keep zoos and collections by the very wealthy,” Yasha said.

The warden groaned. “You mean, the sort of wealth that might’ve had a castle, much like this one we’ve taken over. Our escapee broke open someone’s ancient zoo, and the creatures are angry and eating my inmates.”

“Angry is unlikely. Confused and hungry is much more in line,” Yasha said. “We know what

this is, and my husband should be able to subdue the creature until you can signal for it to be picked up and relocated.”

“What is it?” the warden said.

“The creature is known as a weelay, although they've had loads of names over the years,” Arkady said. “We will handle and contain the creature for you, and give you instructions on how to keep it secure until someone can come by and bring the creature to better climates where it won't be as dangerous to thinking creatures. We would transport it away ourselves, but we aren't headed that direction, and I imagine your next influx of prisoners can stand to transport one outward.”

“Thank you, Binders,” the warden said, bowing a little. “How might we offer payment for your services?”

“Is it true there is some of the phonshux crystal loose?” Yasha asked. “We would ask for three pieces of that, none larger than my thumb, but not smaller than my thumbnail.” She held her hand up for the warden to judge.

He nodded. “It is... extremely uncommon for us to allow phonshux crystal to leave the premises, but you aren't asking for crystals of a size large enough to do any serious work or damage with, so if it means we don't lose any more prisoners, then I will agree to that trade.”

“Excellent,” Arkady said. “Then you should take us down to the tunnels.”

“Now?” the warden asked.

“No need to wait,” the dwarf said, dusting his hands off. “I would rather handle this and be done with it than losing too much time. Also, I do not think you would like to lose another prisoner or guard, either of which is a possibility. This creature is going to need to feed regularly, so be prepared to sacrifice a large creature to it once every couple of days if you need be.”

The warden led them out of the morgue and down a hallway before taking a turn into a more undeveloped part of the prison, a larger room that it was clear they had opened recently, with five cylindrical daises, bits of gernosh crystal on the ground. There was also a smooth circular tunnel leading out through one of the walls, like an organic borehole, heading deeper into the mountain.

“Mmm...” Arkady said. “You're right, my dear. This does seem like it might have been a sort of trophy room, although keeping a weelay alive, even imprisoned in gernosh crystal, seems like it's only inviting disaster.” He turned to look at the warden. “You can leave us now. I would rather not put you at risk while we do this.”

“Are you unable to protect me?” the warden asked.

“I could, yes, but if it turns out that I have to defend myself from both you *and* it, I'm likely to have problems with one or the other,” Arkady humbly admitted. “I would rather not risk it.”

The warden frowned, then nodded. “Then I will leave you to it.” He turned and walked back and out of the room, the two guards closing the doors behind him, remaining on the outside.

“Ladies, if you would be so kind as to cover your eyes,” Arkady said. “I do not want either of you risking your health either.”

“Of course, my love,” Yasha said, reaching into a pocket to pull out a blindfold, wrapping it around her head, covering her eyes completely.

“You're sure this is necessary?” Sophia asked him.

He smiled softly. “I wish that it was not, but it is.”

“Then I trust you.” She reached into her own pocket, pulling out a blindfold that he suspected she had used during her blade throwing days in the circus, shifting the tie a little to pull it over her eyes. He'd often suspected that the fabric was a little thinner in some parts for some knife throwers, so he was glad to see she was making sure her vision was completely obstructed. “Now what?”

“Now we wait,” Arkady said. “Although perhaps I can hurry it along a little bit.” He dug into his own pocket and pulled out a small dwarven musical instrument called an arclave, a sort of flute with some reeds in it to let him play multitone notes, each blow into it creating full chords rather than individual notes. The dwarf wasn't playing any specific tune, but just sort of jamming on his own,

knowing that the unusual sounds would draw the weelay to them.

A few minutes later, he could hear the sound at the edge of the borehole, so he tucked his arclave away and turned his eyes towards the tunnel entrance.

There standing at the edge of it was a form he'd seen before. It was an elvish woman, completely nude, with tan skin and silver eyes, her plump tits on firm display, her black hair swept back over her pointed ears, waterfalling down her back. She was beautiful, almost unbearably so, her form curved and inviting in all the most perfect ways.

"Hello there," Arkady said, both Sophia and Yasha remaining quiet and still. "Shall we?" he said to the vision of sexuality that was slowly approaching him.

In his mind, Arkady knew that this wasn't the weelay's true form. He knew especially since he'd seen this form dozens, if not hundreds, of times when he was in training to become a Threadbinder. Lust magics were dangerous, chaotic, difficult to control and maintain, and there was always a risk that one could find themselves under the influence of their own magics accidentally.

So trainee Threadbinders were introduced to something his instructor had called a togabbit, which was actually a shortening of 'too good to be true.' Beyond any sentient being's control, there existed that person's ideal sexual partner, a vision of what, exactly, the most attractive being from a physical perspective.

That was a togabbit.

A weelay was a creature that lured in prey by tampering with their visual cortex, projecting their personal togabbit to them, overflowing them with pheromones and lust, shattering their ability to think clearly. But Threadbinders learned how to manage that, even as the creature approached him.

He knew what lay behind the illusion, and how unappealing it would be, but if he allowed his sight to pierce it, the creature would turn and flee from him, which was exactly what he did not need. He needed his excitement and attraction to feel genuine.

The weelay moved closer and closer to him, swaying its body to shake its hips alluringly, one hand reaching up to cup one of her breasts, pinching the nipple to make it stiffen in response, those silver eyes trying to lure him in even more as it was nearly on top of him.

It was good that Yasha had recognized the description of the victims because there was little chance Arkady would've considered the possibility, based on the desert locale.

The form of the woman reached his body, and slowly pushed one of her hands down the front of his trousers, wrapping her fingertips around his cock, stroking it slowly beneath the fabric, as he smiled a little. By this point, the prey would normally be completely submissive, drinking from the prey's lust until they were exhausted, and they could drink their fluids.

The weelay would have no such luck with him.

He could feel the impression of fingers tugging on his prick, and the weelay, seemingly frustrated that it wasn't placating him, dropped down and yanked his trousers downward, exposing his thick dwarven cock, as he could feel the impression of a mouth wrapping around his shaft, the illusion of the elvish woman starting to bob her head upon his dick, the illusion slipping just a little as he could feel the sensation of multiple tongues against his shaft.

That's when things went south for the weelay.

Arkady cocked his hand to one side, and suddenly the channel of lust was unleashed, as the weelay began to panick a little, trying to decide whether to double down and ride through it or to pull away and run, so Arkady's other hand reached down and grabbed onto whatever he found there, pushing the illusion of the elvish woman's face harder onto his cock, holding it there.

The problem weelays had in feeding on Threadbinders was that there was no bottom to the lust that ran through them, and so once Arkady had opened the floodgates, the amount of lust was simply drowning the weelay in sensations it had no way to stay afloat over.

A moment or so later, the weelay experienced its first orgasm from anything other than its own kind and slumped back onto the floor, completely unconscious, as the illusion faded and the weelay's

true form was revealed.

Weelays were humanoid in that they were bipedal, but instead of arms, they had six prehensile tentacles emerging from their back. Their heads were more fishlike than having traditional features, and their bodies were covered in a layer of scales, except for the tentacles, the undersides of which were covered in endless fine hairs that the weelay could use in place of fingers.

"It's safe to unveil your eyes now," he told the ladies, as both Yasha and Sophia uncovered their eyes. "This is quite the senior species. I imagine it went into shock when it realized how long it had been in stasis."

"Are they capable of judging time?" Sophia said.

He tapped his head with a single digit. "They're all part of a telepathic hive mind, but I imagine that mind has changed more than a little over the millennium."

"You've still got quite the weapon there," his newest partner said to him. "Did it leave you all worked up with no release?" She slyly padded over his direction before slowly closing her fingertips around his thick cock. "Let me wash it off then dirty it back up again." She had a pouch of water in her satchel, took it out and poured it over his shaft, cleansing it of a bit of slime that was lingering on his cock before she winked at him. "Just stand there and let me handle it."

Arkady smirked a little bit, arching an eyebrow as Sophia spun around, turning her back to him before pulling her breeches down to her knees, scooting back until she could feel the head of his cock pressed against one of her asscheeks.

She tossed her head back and glanced over her shoulder at him. "Alright, just one bit of help then. Get us in line."

He reached down and pushed his cock down and to the right until the thick head of his cock lined up against her human snatch. She leaned back as soon as she felt it, sliding herself up and onto his dick, as she groaned eagerly.

Yasha grinned, moving over towards them, her hands reaching down to grab Sophia's shoulders, pushing and pulling her as she leaned over her, her tall form giving her space to lean in and kiss her husband. "She's quite the little eager minx, isn't she, love?"

"That she is."

"So give it to her then. We've work to do."

"Are you rushing me, love?" he teased her.

"Not at all," she purred back, before leaning to whisper into his large ears. "I just like hearing her cum."

He'd been bucking his hips against Sophia's ass, bouncing her on his cock, the difference in their heights letting him really put some muscle into it. The rhythm was quick and rough, and before he knew it, he could feel himself spewing a hot load inside her human cunt, the blast of his semen setting her spasms off as Sophia orgasmed on cue, as if his own had set hers off.

Yasha held them both up with a wry smile. "Before you sleep tonight, Arkady, I'd better get mine," she giggled at him.

"Aye, love," he told her with a soft laugh. "Once we're skyborne. You do love it when the air's thinner."

"You old romantic," she whispered.

Chapter Five

The rest of the trip across the Rebevins Desert was without major incident, although they had been forced to lose the better part of an hour after Quiesh had decided she wanted to go hunting for a particularly challenging drake that had been harassing her for part of the trip, something the three of them had just needed to accept and ride out the chase that took them whipping through the air until the griffon got the drake caught in her beak, snacking on her just as they started to transition from the desert into more wooded areas.

The transition meant they were headed more towards civilized lands, with settlements across the ways, and that meant they would need to be on the lookout for flags. As part of her responsibilities with them, Arkady and Yasha had taught Sophia the twenty standard signal flags that could be flown, including which ones could be ignored and which were high priorities for them to go and deal with. It was helpful, as it let the two mages have additional time to rest and recoup their energies, as well as spend time getting to know Sophia one-on-one.

Yasha and Sophia had formed an immediate bond beyond the instant sexual attraction, both artistic souls at heart. They had spent much of the time talking about Sophia's life with the circus and Yasha's memories about palace life, something she rarely regaled anyone with, including her own husband, not that he was at all bothered.

Sophia and Arkady had connected about a great many other things, with Sophia's interest in Arkady's time as a soldier getting him to open up a little about old war stories, things he also generally did not bring up, but Sophia's interest was so genuine and moving that even the dwarf's stony exterior had to soften a little over time.

They were still following the thinnest of threads that led from Sophia westward, occasional pulse of light throbbing through the cord whenever he glanced at it to be sure it was still there. It stretched out far towards the horizon, and Arkady was starting to wonder if one of his initial guesses had been correct.

It *did* look like they were heading to Gom Weydan, or at the very least *towards* it.

Arkady had decided he would unearth that particularly difficult gemstone when he got to it, and not a moment sooner.

The Charopy Forest, which they were currently over, stretched across no less than five separate kingdoms, and was often fraught with peril, which was why Arkady had been loathe to fly across it. He suspected they were going to be waylaid more often than he wanted, as the Charopy Forest held all sorts of dangers within it, and so they expected to see more than a handful of flags during their time crossing the expanse of woodland.

As they'd begun to fly over it, Yasha and Arkady had made the decision that they would take no additional work during this particular leg, but that they also could not ignore general distress beacons. There were three levels of those – in need of help eventually (a yellow flag with a black X and a blue cross in the center), in need of help soon (an orange flag with a black X), and the urgent/dire need of help flag (a red flag with two tall slender chevrons in white), as well as the specific magical distress flag (a black flag with a red circle and a white X overlaid atop one another). Only the last two were going to be significant for them to stop, and the others would be able to wait for mages that had more flexibility in their schedules.

To cross the Charopy Forest by air would still take three days of flight and Arkady had guessed they would have between three and five stops across the land, but it turned out they only made one, although that one would turn out to be something of a doozy.

Towards the end of each day, Quiesh would find some high, secure place to perch and lay down, and would spend about six hours resting during high night, to regain her strength and to avoid some of the more dangerous large sky predators that would come out under starlight. The griffon was more than adept at avoiding them when they needed to travel at night, but if the option to travel exclusively by day was available to them, it was something the griffon always preferred, and the two mages knew it was good to let the griffon get her way whenever possible. She did plenty of work for them, so the least they could do was return the favor.

On the beginning of the third morning, Arkady made the fatal error of getting his hopes up that they would cross the Charopy Forest without having to stop, and when he saw the magical distress flag a mere half an hour later, he logically knew that his thoughts hadn't manifested it into being, but it damn well *felt* like it had, as he sighed with a heavy spirit and moved up to the front of the platform so he could tell Quiesh they needed to land again so soon,

They were somewhere within the Kingdom of Chetfield, a place that Arkady had no particular love of and that neither Yasha nor Sophia had ever visited. Chetfield had begun its existence as a bandit haven, a sort of lawless, unruled common area that several bandit factions had simply agreed to work together and eventually they settled down and formed the Kingdom of Chetfield when the factions had agreed upon a battle royale to settle who would be the first ruler of their newly established country. The bandit Olverna had become the Queen and had actually turned Chetfield from a chaotic collection of troublemakers into a legitimate nation.

Their residents were a little rough'n'tumble for Arkady's tastes, however, and they tended to be more impolite than he preferred, but he decided that he would manage and they would get these people past whatever problem it was they were dealing with.

It looked like the village they were landing at held perhaps a few hundred people, a little large for a village but certainly not large enough to be a city. A township, maybe, Arkady thought to himself as he brought Quiesh down to land at the edge of it, letting her walk up towards the heavy wooden gate in the massive fence that surrounded the perimeter of it. They could've simply flown over it and landed inside of the border, but Arkady suspected it might have made them more nervous than he could tell they already were. The tension he could sense from the guards at the gate was denser than a lot of rock he'd worked with as a young man.

"You've got the flag flying," Arkady said as he hopped down from the platform atop of Quiesh, moving towards the door. "We are here, to answer that call. Will you grant us entrance?"

"And you are?" a voice atop the gate shouted down, sounding rather disinterested, what with it apparently having been an emergency.

"Threadbinder Arkady Gormansson, eighth rank, along with my wife, Threatbinder Yasha Summervale, twelfth rank, and our companions, Sophia Burngrave and Quiesh, upon whom which we travel," Arkady said patiently. "Will you let us inside, or shall I simply remount and fly away from here?"

"No no, Master Mage, just wait one moment," a different voice said, and then the gate began to open as quickly as they could get it open for them.

Once the gates opened, Arkady led Quiesh into the walls, only for them to close the gates behind them again almost immediately, although this Arkady could understand, as it was more for the protection of the city than to keep the four of them inside, as they could simply fly away any time they wanted. The villagers weren't paying them as much attention as Arkady might have expected, but he took that as a sign they were worried about other things.

What he assumed was either the village elder or the mayor came out to meet them, a human woman in her mid sixties. She was dressed meagerly, but with utilitarian eyes to her clothing, probably a farmer or a craftswoman when she wasn't tending to the needs of the village. There was a good mix of several races in the township around them, but he saw mostly humans and elves, which didn't come as a big surprise to him. "Ah, Master Threatbinder, welcome, we are glad that you are here," the woman said. "I am Wrafti, Mayor of the township of Reeganly."

"Threadbinder," he corrected. "The Threatbinder is my wife, Yasha. Whose services are you in need of?"

"To be honest, I'm not certain," she said with a frown. "We need someone to solve a problem we're not entirely clear on how we stumbled into."

"Let's start with the obvious then," he said, as Yasha and Sophia were slowly climbing down from Quiesh's carrying space. "Who's the opposition? Who are we up against?"

"As far as we can tell? The pixies."

Arkady shook his head with a deep sigh. "Mmm. I suppose that tracks. Walk us through it."

Over the course of the next hour, Wrafti walked them through how the people of Reeganly had had a very tenuous balance with the pixies who also lived within the forest around their township. The two had often failed to see eye to eye, with the pixies accusing the villagers of throwing their waste into

their sacred lands, and the villagers had accused the pixies of poaching their cattle and attacking their children. It was the latter which had necessitated the raising of the flag, because Wrafti showed them one of their children, covered in tiny spear marks, none of them serious but each of them definitely enough to raise alarm and concern.

It was enough that it ensured they would go forth and settle the disagreement, although Arkady had a feeling he would be returning to the village with a list of demands they would need to relent to. Pixies, while often known for being pranksters, weren't so bad as that nobody could work with them, so he suspected there had been bad actors on both sides making things worse for everyone.

They left Quiesh feasting on mutton provided to her by the villagers as the trio headed out into the deep woods, Sophia staying between Arkady and Yasha, watching around her, but full of questions that she couldn't stop asking the two mages. "Should I be concerned for my life?"

"It's highly unlikely you'll be in any danger," Yasha said. "The pixie people are, by their very nature, not violent or aggressive, so for them to be acting in this way, well, let's just say I'm sure they'll have a list of things the villagers will have to agree to as well."

"Have you two had much dealings with pixies before?"

"I haven't," Yasha admitted. "A few encounters here and there, but mostly that was sort of periphery to my old life, where their courts and ours would occasionally intermingle. But beyond that, I've not had all that much to do with them. I know my husband has."

"Aye," Arkady said. "We had a small cadre of pixie soldiers helping us defend Lingham, although they were all slain in that fight. Very brave souls. But that was long, long, long ago. And time has not been particularly kind to the pixie people. Where once they were united into a single kingdom, over the past few millennia, they have become fractured and disorganized, a hundred courts in place where just one used to do. That's made them more difficult to deal with, but at their core, they aren't all that different. They just need to be reminded of that sometimes. Speaking of which, we're approaching their trading post, so let me do the talking, and whatever you do, don't accept any gifts. You hear me, Sophia? Take nothing from anyone, no matter how insistent they are."

"I hear you, Arkady," Sophia said to him. "And you know that I can follow instructions to the letter."

"Mmm. But they can be clever, tossing things at you, trying to shove things into your arms. It's a game to them, and it isn't one you want to lose."

"I will consider myself notably cautioned then and will touch nothing," she said, having heard the seriousness in his tone. The dwarf wasn't known for giving her warnings lightly – they'd established that whenever possible, she would prefer to learn by error, by pain, by the mistake having been shown to her instead of being told in advance, something he'd agreed to do whenever possible. Being that he was calling this out not once but twice, she knew that the consequences of letting her learn this on her own must have been quite severe.

The air before them suddenly grew darker, and Sophia's eyes narrowed a little as she could make out a cloud of flying tiny figures, maybe forty or fifty of them, each no taller than the length of her human hand, dressed in tunics and pants, holding tiny spears, their little blue forms gesturing angrily in their very direction.

"What is your business here, dwarf?" one of the pixies, the front one who looked to be in charge of the battalion of them. She wore her hair short, in some exquisite shades of brilliant pink, her nose almost hinting at having been broken before, but it gave her a sort of rugged beauty.

"We're here representing the human settlement, here to find some sort of compromise between you and them that will bring some peace back to this region, and so everyone can stop stabbing everybody else," he chuckled, finding a little amusement in the legion of twigs gesturing angrily at the three of them. "If you want, we can wait here while you go tell your liege that we're here, but I think you will find that their opinion of you for keeping a mage waiting will only dwindle greatly."

The lead pixie considered for a moment then sighed, gesturing for them to follow her. "Come

on then. I imagine even delaying you this long will be considered a fuckup my mother won't be pleased by, so let's go."

The pixie village didn't seem all that different than the one they'd just left a bit ago – people milling around, trying to go about their daily lives, not willing to pay much attention to the interlopers who were walking through it. The path they were walking down was more of a road, a widened street for faeries to move things to and fro. There were plenty of pixie villagers giving the trio similar stares of 'who are you and why are you in my way' but the mages knew it was a common enough thing wherever they appeared.

It was no surprise that the pixie court was held in a flower ring, a circle of daisies forming a large grove near the center of town, with a series of tall mushrooms operating as both platforms and chairs for the more important members of the pixie royalty to rest upon.

In the center of it rested the queen, an older pixie who had indulged her lusts perhaps a bit more than she ought to have, her body swollen, long wrinkles running in trenches upon her face. She had spent her time living in hard and enjoyable ways, and it clearly taken a toll upon her. She was dressed in a giant gown that billowed around her, draped over the edge of the mushroom, flapping in the air like a flag off a minaret.

Off to one side, a pixie in rather formal looking attire suddenly flew up and lifted a trumpet to his lips, as if announcing their arrival to the queen. "Presenting the mages Arkady Gormansson and Yasha Summervale, as well as their companion, Sophia Burngrave. Your Royal Highness, the Queen of the Resolute Thorn Empire, Queen Barrowlily Doubledawn."

"Your majesty," Arkaday said, giving a short but polite bow, the other two following suit, although Yasha bowed much lower than either of the other two. "I have come here to broker an accord to bring both your village and the village of Reeganly back into balance once more. The upsets on both sides are unfortunate, but at the end of the day, some stability must be reached, and the accords already in play must be respected once more. I assume you have some list of grievances you wish to have addressed for you to the people of Reeganly?"

"Only two – they need to respect our faerie circles and not let their cattle use them as grazing lands, and they must keep their children from crossing over into our borders," the Queen said, cutting straight away to her demands, as if she was eager to have this entire mess put behind her. "But we also demand restitution."

"Don't you think you've already gotten that by stabbing those poor children as much as you did?" he asked, a kind smile on his face.

"No, we demand satisfaction, and if you are being sent as their representatives, you will have to face one of our champions in combat," the Queen replied, a certain pettiness to her tone.

"If you insist, your majesty, but I think you will find duels to be quite unsatisfying."

"Your champion shall be... her," the Queen said, pointing to Sophia.

Arkady could feel both Sophia and Yasha tense up a little, but he spread his arms, placing a hand on each of their shoulders to comfort them. "She's not a mage, your grace. She's our companion, but she isn't exactly here managing the negotiations."

"But she is here, so she's viable as a choice for champion, agreed?"

"Ah, but if you are choosing champions, then you will be forced to surrender some things in return."

Behind him, he could hear Sophia leaning over to whisper to Yasha, "What's he doing?"

"Engaging in the greatest skill the dwarves have," Yasha replied.

"Mining?"

"*Haggling*," Yasha answered.

For the next several minutes, Arkady and the Queen dodged and weaved through a complex negotiation, one that included terms of the duel, what levels of adherence to the accords would be needed and what restitution would be offered to the aggrieved parties. Sophia did her best to try and

follow some of the paths of Arkady's logic, but the dwarf was a master of taking a premise and walking it around the block a few times until he'd nearly changed everything about it, and yet, the Queen never seemed to catch on to his negotiation tactics. Not to say that he was getting everything he wanted out of the haggling, but he was certainly coming out far and ahead beyond what anyone had expected him to be able to pull off.

After a little bit, he and the Queen had come to terms, and Arkady turned back to talk with Yasha and Sophia, who had lost interest in the discussions around the turn of the hour. "So, it will be one-on-one combat between you and their champion, who will scale himself up to your size, so that the combat will be fair. It's first-to-bleed loses, but it needn't be a big wound – even a tiny scratch will do. Don't make it look so easy that it seems like I was scamming them. Put up at a decent fight and make it seem like their champion at least stood a bit of a chance."

"Did I hear her correctly? Win or lose, we're taking the Queen's daughter with us?" Yasha asked. "I was only half paying attention, but it sounded like that was something she added and not something you requested."

"Mmm," Arkady sighed. "I have a sneaking suspicion all of this may have just been a way for the Queen to get her daughter, the princess, out of the kingdom without losing face."

"The fight?" Sophia asked.

"The fight, the incursion, the squabbles with the villages, the whole thing," Arkady bemoaned. "She introduced the stake of her daughter into the bartering almost immediately, and would not take it out, despite my repeated recommendations. Like I said, I think she just wanted her daughter taken away from here in a way that let her do it honorably."

"What's it mean that she's going to be coming with us?" Sophia asked.

"Well, she's going to end up being *your* handmaiden," Arkady said with a chuckle. "After you pass away, then the lady in question will be free to come and go as she sees fit, but until such point, she will be your servant, something which I assume you will be able to handle gracefully?"

"I've... I've never had a servant before," Sophia said, almost nervously.

"Consider her more like a friend who can't leave and you'll do fine," Yasha said to her. "You may be surprised to find yourself strangely enamored with her company."

"Why does her mother want her gone?"

"It seems like she doesn't think her daughter would be a good mesh for the throne, so she wants to establish the princess's younger sister as legitimate heir instead, jumping her ahead in the line of succession," Arkady said. "It doesn't seem like the princess wanted the throne much anyway, as she seemed rather eager to have the opportunity to come along with us on our voyages. She seems like she'll do well with us as a group."

"You made that decision for us, did you, husband?" Yasha teased.

"No, but I let the princess make it for herself," he countered. "I insisted we would not bring her along unless it was the sort of thing she would agree to, and while she did parrot some of the same things as her mother about honor and duty and whatnot, she also had a rather interested tone to her speech, and said she would do her best to be the best assistant, should her mother's champion lose."

"So now all that's left is the fighting," Sophia said, folding her legs back one at a time to bring her foot to rest on her ass. She was limber, far more limber than Arkady had expected when they first met, and he had seen her practicing with her knives enough that he knew this would be over in second if she wanted it.

The pixie champion had magically scaled himself up to be about Sophia's size, and he looked like the kid who was always itching for a fight. He couldn't sit still, fidgeting, hopping between one foot and the other, his skin an ashy gray, his eyes red like rubies, his hair short and green with a swath of it hanging over his right eye, as if he thought it made him look cool. He wore a green tunic and black breeches, his feet uncovered, a dagger in each hand, one held pointing up, one held pointing down. He had a couple of visible scars across his arms, and he grinned maliciously at Sophia. "You're gonna be

bleeding before you know it, human,” he taunted.

“Mmm,” she replied, unphased. “Where do you want your next scar?” She was continually stretching, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

“That's not up to you.”

“Say that it is. Let's say you could decide where you want your next scar to be.”

“Fine, since you're so confident, let's see you leave a matching one to this across my cheek,” he said, gesturing a thumb at his face.

She shrugged with a casual smile. “Your call. Let's go.”

While the pixies might not have been able to tell, to Arkady and Yasha's eyes, it was clear she was toying with them, her dance steps keeping her always a few moves ahead of whatever the pixie had planned, a wondrous and mystical grace to how the human seemed to anticipate the soldier's strikes. True to her word, she made the entire fight last a few minutes, although mostly it seemed like she wasn't taking any strikes, merely dodging and weaving into the spaces he was leaving for her, before finally a choice opportunity presented itself and her left arm thrust out, dragging the tip of her blade across the pixie's cheek, in fact giving him a matching scar to parallel the one he already had. The cut was deep enough to cut through the skin, but not so deep that it would split the cheek entirely open.

Arkady almost wondered if Sophia had gone at him too well, but the pixies seemed to have a grand old time watching the chaos, and when their champion had his blood drawn, they all erupted into a mass of cheers, as the champion scowled, looking down at the ground.

He was about to charge Sophia, his daggers drawn, when Yasha's fingers snapped to, and a series of blue mystical ropes appeared to hold the pixie champion back, preventing him from swiping at Sophia's back, as the queen shouted at him. “Champion! Drop your weapons now, or I shall let the mages have at you with their worst.”

The champion released his blades and let them clamor down onto the dirt below, sighing as the fight died down in him. “I yield,” he grumbled. “Although it might have been better if you had just killed me, human, for I shall never live down this shame.”

“You were outclassed, warrior,” Yasha said to him as she brought the ropes down, letting the pixie loose once more. “There is no shame in losing to a greater opponent.”

“Time shall tell, m'lady,” the champion said picking up his daggers, walking away from the room.

“The princess shall gather her things and meet you at the human village at dawn, mages,” the queen said to them. “If the humans will obey the terms of the compact once more, so shall we. Just... tell them to keep their children on leashes if need be. They're troublemakers.”

“And this is coming from a pixie,” he teased.

She laughed heartily, waving a hand at him. “Begone, mages, before I change my mind.”

The trio made their way away from the pixie village, heading back towards the town, although Sophia still seemed a little worried about having another person joining their little traveling party. “I just don't know what I'm going to do with a servant.”

“Then don't think of her as such. Think of her as a friend, or a student,” Yasha said. “And you will be better off for it.”

“I'll try,” Sophia said with a heavy sigh.

“That's all anyone can ask,” Arkady consoled.

After explaining the terms to the villagers (who, while a little irked at first, eventually came around and agreed to do better keeping an eye on their cattle and their children), they mounted up on Quiesh and moved to wait outside of the village gates. The pixies and the villagers were still on uneasy terms and bringing one to the other, even for a brief moment, might have strained that more than they would have liked.

In the evening, a single ball of golden light began to float towards them, a peppy little song whistling through the air as it did. Yasha was atop Quiesh and in their quarters, already fast asleep, as

she would be navigating the griffon throughout the night, making up for lost time in their day spent solving this particular mess. Sophia and Arkady had been sitting and discussing Arkady's time in training as the ball drifted their direction.

Within the center of it was a single female figure, resembling a miniature human woman in her mid twenties, busty but not uncomfortably so, dressed in a billowy peasant's blouse with bindings around the wrist, neck and waist to keep it from flying loose and leather pants, as well as rather fashionable leather boots which went up past the pixie's knees. Her skin was a slate gray, with hair a shade of lustrous silver that shimmered from the firelight. Her wings glittered like rainbows, thin and diaphanous, but flitting powerfully enough to keep her aloft. Dangling from one hand was a single suitcase, all the clothes she had brought with her. She was definitely gorgeous, although there was also a sort of deviousness to her smile, as if she might even be especially mischievous for a pixie. "Are you Lady Sophia Burngrave?" the pixie asked. "I am Princess Moonweave Doubledawn, reporting to join you in your travels." She offered a deep bow, a rakish grin upon her lips.

"I am Sophia, although if you call me m'lady, I may vomit," Sophia laughed. "This is one of my two partners, Lord Arkady Gormansson, Threadbinder of the eighth rank. His wife, my *other* partner, Lady Yasha Summervale, Threatbinder of the twelfth rank. If you are in my service, you are in theirs as well. But we should be on our way, unless you have other things to attend to?"

"Nay, m'l- Nay, Sophia," Moonweave said, catching herself. "Let us be off!" She zipped past them and onto the cabin on top of Quiesh's back.

"One of us may come to regret this, lover," Sophia laughed at him.

"Just *one* of us?" Arkady laughed back. "I'll consider that a win..."

Chapter Six

They were somewhere over the Nomadic Sea when Sophia decided to approach Yasha. "Have... have I done something to offend Arkady?" the human asked the elf, trepidation in her voice. The dwarf was asleep in the back of the chamber atop Quiesh as they flew through the moonlight. "He's been... a little curt the past few days, and I'm worried I've said something to upset him, so I thought I might come to you, since you've been together so long."

"Mmm," Yasha said, sipping from her tea as she watched the murmur of the waves far beneath them as the two moons cast dueling paths across them. "It's not you, my dear. My husband has a somewhat conflicted relationship dealing with pixies, and your new companion, Moonweave, is a reminder of a particularly difficult time for him. I imagine it will pass in time, but neither you nor she should take this as a reflection upon either of you. When you have lived through as much history as my husband has, sometimes it can take a toll upon you in the most unexpected and unusual ways."

"I keep forgetting that even among your highly long-lived species, both you and your husband have remained extremely youthful through the aid of your magics."

"Threadbinders and Threatbinders are sizable investments in knowledge and power," Yasha said, "so that comes with the expectation that we will pay back that investment over the centuries, both in great ways and small."

"Can I ask what problems Arkady has with pixies?"

Yasha sighed, leaning her slender frame against the railing that circumnavigated the edge Quiesh's carriage. "Problem is perhaps a poor choice of words. Arkady fought alongside an entire battalion of pixies, but none of them survived, and during that time, he'd grown quite fond of them. Because of that, he came to associate their kind, completely unfairly I will confess, as harbingers of ill-omen, despair and death." Yasha placed a hand on Sophia's shoulder. "He *knows* it is silly, and that it is without merit, but that war still haunts him to this day, and he has yet to be able to fully shed its wear and tear upon his soul."

"Should I advise Moonweave to steer clear of him then?"

"No no," Yasha said, waving her hand. "I will not see your companion feeling rejection because

my husband is still dealing with grief. Just caution her not to take Arkady's gruff demeanor personally, and assure her that he will, at some point, work through it. We've not had cause much to be around pixies over the centuries, so it's likely time that he begin the process of moving through the grief rather than stuffing it in the cupboards of his mind."

"Might I ask another question, m'lady?"

"Sophia, my dear, we're partners now, so I think that you should definitely drop the 'm'lady' unless absolutely necessary," Yasha scolded with a slight smile of amusement.

"Very well. Yasha, what the bloody hells is that?" Sophia said, pointing over to the left of their path where a ribbon of blueflame cut through the sky in a threatening volley, landing upon a field of soldiers off in the far distance.

The elf squinted her eyes to focus them on the far distance and she could see a familiar wrinkle she'd not laid eyes upon for centuries, a rounded insectoid shaped tank with a large cannon on the back of it, a piece of Zincolum magical technology that was thought long destroyed. They were known as Rackows, a sort of military tech now banned by polite society. Even at such sizable distance, she could make out the distinct lapis lazuli carapace, a sight she'd seen during the Cosmion Wars, and hoped never to see again. The six spindly legs looked as though they had been reconstructed, cobbled together from whatever materials could be found. A far cry from their hayday, this one looked to have been on its last legs several lifetimes ago, and yet, the very sight of it still instilled a sense of primal fear deep in the back of her skull, as she remembered seeing their cannons shredding through soldiers by the legion. If anything, she mostly found herself glad to be only seeing one of them, and not a full squadron of them on approach, even in its dilapidated state. Despite how long they'd been gone, she found the very sight of one causing her unrest.

"That, dear Sophia, is forbidden magic," Yasha said, a sliver of nervousness in her voice. "And something we, sadly, cannot just ignore. Go, wake Arkady and your new companion. We're going to need all hands on-deck, although this is far more my field than it is his."

"I'll get him."

A few minutes later, Quiesh had changed course and was drifting through the air currents over towards the battlefield, which looked as though it had quieted down, the battle having broken for a time, each side retreating to their lines, leaving the empty battlefield between them mostly scorched earth and untended corpses.

Both Arkady and Yasha had significant military experience, but they came at it from two entirely different angles, and in entirely different eras. Arkady had fought in old wars, before he was a mage, and before he was properly armed to deal with them, so he had the frontline battle experience. Yasha, by contrast, had developed all of her initial military knowledge while becoming a Threatbinder, and had spent centuries refining those skills, so she was far more equipped to think tactically.

The dwarf scowled, looking down at the Rackow with clear disdain in his eyes. "I thought the humans were supposed to know better than to go mucking about with that kind of dangerous thing," he grumbled. "They're just as like to blow themselves up as they are to damage the enemy. And wouldn't that just be a fine thing?"

"Why were they banned, dear Arkady?" Sophia asked, leaning against him, resting her plush curves into his back. He recognized that she was trying to butter him up but chose to let the physical contact continue uncommented on.

"Blueflame scars in ways that fleshmenders cannot tend to," the dwarf said. "Its burns are irreparable, often fatal, but even the wounds that do not kill cause lingering pain that is near impossible to quell. I once saw a dwarf lop his own hand off at the wrist rather than endure the eternal singing of pain from half-functioning fingers. The fleshmender even complimented him on the willpower to follow through on the correct decision. Blueflame weapons were deigned... too cruel to be allowed for civilized usage. Most were said to be destroyed centuries ago, when the Accords were adopted, but I suppose the wreckage of some of them must've lain beneath the earth, simply waiting for some poor

sap to dig them up.”

“And what are we going to do about it?” Moonweave chirped in happily as she zipped on her tiny wings in the air before them. “Bend them over your lap and rap upon their bottoms until they learn how naughty they’ve been?”

“As amusing as that might be, little one, I somehow do not think they will be eager to engage in such ideas,” the dwarf said, annoyance in his voice. “But we need not give them a choice in such matters. The accords are *quite* clear on what any mage who encounters a blueflame weapon is supposed to do with it. So, we don’t really have any choices to be made, other than how, I suppose.”

“It appears as though they might be doing some form of parlay at that tent in the center of the battlefield, Arkady,” his elven wife said to him. “We could go and lay down the terms of the accords in front of them.”

“I’m keen to just go and destroy the Rackow, but I suppose perhaps we should go and inform the humans that what they’ve done are in violation with accords that were signed before their grandparents were born,” Arkady grumbled.

“Forgive them, lover, for they know not what they do,” Sophia said, trying to placate him.

“Hmph,” he snorted. “When has that excuse ever been good enough for anyone?”

The griffon circled in a downward spiral towards the tent, and for a moment, Arkady thought the two sides might consider firing arrows at them, but they had the Threadbinder flag painted clearly on one side of Quiesh’s carriage, and the Threatbinder flag on the opposite side, so that it would always be clear they were independent mages, and not to be brash in assuming their intentions.

“Should I go and scout ahead?” Moonweave asked, always eager to offer her help.

“No, I believe we can make our own entrances,” the dwarf said, before his wife nudged him in the shoulder. “But thank you for the offer.”

“Of course! I am in the service of my lady, who is one of your partners, so I am in service to you just as much, Lord Threadbinder!”

As they moved down the stairs and over towards the tent, there were two guards standing watch, one on either side of the flap. The two couldn’t have been more different. The guard on the left was in somewhat tattered armor, the weapon chipped and worn, no hint of a uniform, just strong protective clothing strapped together for dear life. The guard on the right, however, was in a crisp, sharp uniform with piping, filigree and inlay. His weapon was sharp and ready, having probably only seen combat a couple of times, but polished within an inch of being able to be used as a mirror. “Halt!” the guard on the right said, eager to show off his bluster and bravado. “This summit is not for outsiders to participate in.”

She couldn’t help it. Yasha laughed at the man’s staggering overestimation of his ability to intimidate them. “You *do* realize you’re speaking to a Threatbinder?” Yasha said, watching the man’s confidence wither and die within moments, the look of steel behind his eyes reduced to sand.

“Sorry, m’lady,” the man said, although all the fire and spark was gone from him. “We were instructed to keep people from disturbing the summit, but I suppose that does not apply to your kind. Would you prefer me to announce your entry?”

“No no,” Yasha said. “We can make our own presence known.”

The four of them moved through the flap, Yasha stepping through first, as the member of the party whose skillset was most relevant here, even if Arkady had far more upclose experience with blueflame weapons than his wife had.

“What is the meaning of—oh, my apologies Lady Threatbinder,” the more elegantly of the two women standing in the center of the tent said. The two women in the tent, much like the two guards out front, represented polar opposites of class and wealth. One of the women was in commoner clothing, a long skirt that had several patches on its surface, threadbare in many spots with boots that had been resoled multiple times; the other was in what could only be royal’s clothing, silk and lace and refinement. While both were likely the same age, the one in the commoner’s clothing looked so very

much older, the years having been harder on her than they had been the noblewoman. "I was unaware that my opponent had enscripted your services."

"I've never met this woman," the commoner said. "Why are you here, Lady Threatbinder?"

"One of you has an army with a Rackow in it. Which would that be?" Yasha asked.

"A whatnow?"

"The large insectoid object that was firing blueflame not too long ago," Arkady interjected.

"That would be our army," the commoner woman said. "I am Monera Bimus, the elder of the village of Pickering, and we cannot stand for their overly cruel taxations, so when they began sending their troops in, pillaging our land to cover this new 'taxes' they have imposed, we struggled to find any weapons we could use in order to protect ourselves from their cruelty."

"The announced tax increase has been on display at the castle for the past two seasons," the noblewoman sighed. "Lady Amanding Rhyphian of House Rhyphian, your Ladyship. We felt half a year would be plenty of time for those folks in our fiefdom to get their affairs in order, so that they were prepared for the increased needs of the castle, which is a dire state, and desperately in want of repair and reconstruction."

"And as I keep telling you, Lady Rhyphian, you cannot simply post notice and expect all the villages to know about it without sending messengers to each and every village. That is your responsibility, as the presiding Lady of the fief, to make sure such decrees are given ample chance for discussion. Had you brought this to our notice when you posted it, we would've informed you that it had been a harsh winter, and that this year's crop was predicted to be quite light, a rebuilding year, rather than one in which we could afford to spare our profits to gild some noble's cage!"

"If you can't be bothered to take an interest in local affairs, Madam, I'm not sure how you expect for me to be bothered to have the slightest drop of sympathy for you," the noblewoman huffed. "But because of the horror and devastation you've inflicted upon my troops, we will reluctantly withdraw and allow you to have your year of lean deliverance, with the expectation that next year, we will not be having a similar conversation."

"Actually, gentle folk," Yasha interjected. "We don't care about any of that. We're here to destroy the Rackow, the blueflame tank, and ensure that it cannot be restored or used again."

"That is our only defense regarding the lady's intolerance!" Monera moaned. "If you destroy that, she'll only march her troops in here as soon as you're gone. Her word cannot be trusted!"

Yasha looked over the noblewoman and sighed, as if realizing that such an outcome was not only plausible, but likely. Blueflame weapons had often been the tool of the oppressed, used against wildly better funded and more deadly armies, but that was also what had made them so very dangerous to behold. They were designed to inflict the maximum amount of carnage and disfigurement. The weapon had only been fired once, but the once had been enough for Lady Rhyphian. Without the threat of the weapon held over her, though, the accord would hold no real bearing. "And the word of a Threatbinder? Is that enough to ensure whatever deal you have is binding?"

"You have no skin in this game, elf," Rhyphian said. "You should remain out of the matter."

"Mmm," Yasha said. "That doesn't seem like much of an option now does it? I need to destroy the Rackow and I do not want to interrupt these negotiations. So I will come back in a year's time, and if the agreement's not been held to..." Yasha looked down at her hand, as a tiny ball of orange flame moved like a comet across the surface of her skin, the heat of it warming the tent, casting light across the surface of the inside. "I will burn your entire kingdom down to ash and let those you have oppressed take possession of the burnt land."

"Isn't that in violation of the rules you people follow?"

"We are obligated to dispatch blueflame weapons but we are entitled to use whatever sort of discretion we want for settling the dispute," Yasha said. "And I'm itching to let loose on an army, so the idea of being able to use the destruction of your castle as a selling point is rather a delicious one." The ripple of fire sparkled bright and beautiful.

The noblewoman considered her options for a moment before sighing. “A year’s delay only, yes? If I need to come back in two years with raised taxes, how will I know that you won’t descend upon me and my home like a plague of locusts?”

“You don’t,” Yasha said, a wry smile crossing her lips as the rivulet of flame corkscrewed up along her arm and then moved to halo around her head. “But you have my word that as long as a fair agreement is reached, I will refrain from interfering.”

“Ah, but fair in whose eyes, Lady Threatbinder?”

“All parties involved, or, barring that, to a neutral arbitrator. I can have one come by every year for a couple of years if both parties would feel more comfortable with that.”

Arkady had always been amazed by his wife’s level of patience regarding this sort of bullshit. It was the kind of thing that made him want to pull his beard out, people wanting to convince themselves they were too important for compromises to be made. Being a Threatbinder came with a surprising amount of diplomacy, and Arkady found it all so tedious. He was *capable* of diplomacy, but it certainly wasn’t how he enjoyed spending his time, nor did he like how long it typically involved.

“I suppose it will need to be good enough,” Lady Rhyphian acquiesced.

“We will go and dismantle the Rackow while you two hammer out any remaining details,” Yasha said, as they made their way to the exit of the tent, heading over towards Quiesh. “I can—”

“No no,” Arkady said as they stepped back up onto the carriage. “I already bear the scars from a few of these weapons on my psyche, my love. There’s no need for you to take on one while I have all the others. I have learned how to manage it and would rather you continue to sleep easy.”

“What scars is he talking about?” Moonweave asked Sophia.

“I don’t know, Moonie,” Sophia whispered back. “Ask Yasha.”

The pixie flitted over towards the tall elf’s ear, hovering near there as her tiny wings flapped frantically. “M’lady, what scars is he talking about?”

As Quiesh lifted only somewhat into the air, Yasha directed their friend to head over towards where the Rackow was situated on the front lines. “Blueflame weapons are created using dark magics, things that involve ripping souls from living creatures and imbuing them into the weapon itself. To destroy them, a mage must destroy those souls as well. They cannot be salvaged or saved; they are lost to the infinite void forever. And when a mage destroys those souls, there’s a certain amount of grief that passes through them. We’ve dismantled about a dozen blueflame weapons over the centuries, but it never gets any easier to do. My husband will be... overly dour for a while after this.”

The griffon stayed low as loads of farmers and craftsman looked up in awe, a couple of them reaching up, as if hoping to brush their fingers against the majestic creature’s feathers, even though they were far too high above them. Griffons were uncommon over these parts and Quiesh was maybe the first of her kind that any of them had ever seen. When she landed down near the Rackow, many townsfolk slowly crowded around her in amazement, although none of them wanted to get close enough to touch her, for their own safety.

“Do you want company for this?” Sophia asked the dwarf, as he moved to descend down the stairs from the carriage.

“No no,” Arkady said. “It’s probably best you don’t see any of this. It can be... taxing on even the strongest of souls. This is work for those of us with steeled constitutions and reinforced minds. It’s not work that humans are generally suited for, and I would rather spare you from the taxing repercussions of all of this.”

Sophia placed her hand on Arkady’s shoulder, holding tenderly for a long moment. “We’re partners now, Arkady. You need to let us take care of you when you’re hurting.”

The dwarf sighed, bringing his hands up to his eyes for a moment. “We can discuss this when I’m back. It won’t take all that long.” He stepped away from her, but stopped as he felt her arms wrapping around his neck, giving him a firm hug from behind before kissing his cheek, releasing him to do his horrible task.

He much rather would've preferred to let Yasha do this, but he also knew the toll it might take on her, and he wished to spare her carrying that additional weight upon her soul, because, in for a nugget, in for the whole claim. The dwarven mage could recall the first time he'd destroyed a blueflame weapon, the mental agony and torment he'd endured for the weeks that followed, the afterimages of the souls he'd destroyed lingering like the memory of lightning seen first-hand.

Two humans moved to step in front of him, guards standing at their post. They were barely more than boys, spots still on their faces and nary a decent dream of a beard between them. "Sorry, master mage," one of them said, "but we're supposed to protect this thing with our lives."

"The accords are being signed right now, boy," Arkady said, his patience already exhausted from his voice. "But as part of them, this weapon is to be destroyed. It's forbidden magic, dark and unholy spellcraft, the sort of workings that were supposed to have been eradicated centuries ago. Surely you felt that horrible tremor on your soul when it was fired earlier this day." He could see the two boys nodded, the fear beginning to seep in. "Those were the souls that were used to create this horrid thing, crying out in anguish and intense frustration, unable to die, not permitted to escape this world, but instead trapped to cause suffering and disfigurement upon others." He sighed, raising his hand to brush them away from his path. "Depart and let me destroy this cursed thing, before it wreaks any more damage upon you, your colleagues, your opponents or even just the innocent bystanders caught up in the crossfire."

The two boys looked at each other, then shrugged, stepping aside, something that didn't especially surprise the dwarf. He was used to people being deferential to him, simply because of his status as a Threadbinder. Even if he was a mage who focused upon affairs of the heart, he was still an accredited and accomplished mage, which meant arguing with him was often a futile affair. He could've put both young men in their place if it had come to that, but instead they had seen that look in his eyes that said they should steer clear of him and chosen to respect it.

Past the two men, the Rackow sat basically unattended, and seemed so much more harmless than when it was in use. The cannon itself comprised most of the weapon, although the insectoid tank around it gave it mobility, so that it wasn't an easy target. Rackows had been generally crewed by three – a spotter, a gunner and a pilot, but it was a cramped fit for three humans, and whenever the weapon wasn't in use, it was clear they wanted to be as far away from the horrific thing as possible.

Arkady moved to the back of it, sliding his calloused hand over the thing's pockmarked surface. Despite how old it was, he found it in remarkable condition. He suspected it must have been barricaded in a cave somewhere and forgotten about until desperate farmers had found themselves willing to chase down even the scantest of rumors to find something to help them turn the tables against their oppressors. But this weapon would bring ruin upon not only those who it was used upon, but the wielders themselves.

The dark end of the tank had a single curved metal panel covering the large heart of blue crystal at the center of the machine, which was easy enough to remove and beneath it was the devilish core he needed to destroy. He placed his hand across the cool surface of it and could immediately feel the anguish of the trapped souls within.

His fingertips began to summon dissolver magics to them, and he could feel the crystalline structure of the gemstone beneath his touch start to crumble, and the wailing of the damned began to choir in his ears.

The crystal turned into a mass of ember and snarled remnants but the devastating chorus of souls crackling into oblivion only grew louder and louder in his ears while it happened. No one other than him could hear them, but for him, they were the *only* thing he could hear, and not only hear, but all of his senses were being overwhelmed by the sensations of these eternal souls being snuffed out one at a time.

In the final moments of the heart of the blueflame weapon dying, a tiny figure, that of a young human girl no more than five or six appeared before him with imploring eyes, begging for salvation

that was beyond his ability to give, so he offered her the only thing he could – escape and termination.

When the flames had stopped, the memory of the little girl's dying shriek continued to echo in his ears. He could still feel her presence lingering on him as he walked away from the husk of the weapon, now completely and forever inert, and headed back over to Quiesh, walking up the stairs onto the carriage as Yasha moved to slide her arm around his shoulders, not taking it personally when he twitched and recoiled slightly at the initial contact before letting her arm fold around him.

“How many?” the tall elven woman asked him.

“Eighteen,” he whispered quietly, his voice lacking all the strength and resilience it normally carried with it. “The oldest was in his sixties; the youngest, maybe six or so.”

Yasha's breath caught for a moment before clinging to her husband even more than she'd expected to. Most blueflame weapons were created by using the souls of the old, those people who were nearing the end of their lives, but any soul served the same purpose. “Children?”

He nodded, stepping over to the front of the carriage, wanting to get Quiesh back up into the air and away from the spot as quickly as possible. “It was from the final generation of blueflame weapons, where they were being built in secret and constructed by the least scrupulous of mages,” he said, shaking his head. When he gave Quiesh the signal to get airborne, the griffon eagerly took back to the sky, as if being anywhere near the destroyed weapon was toxic and unpleasant for her.

“Savages,” Yasha said. “I can navigate us for some time if you'd like, husband.”

“I... yes. I should rest.”

The dwarf moved from the deck to head inside of the carriage, moving to lay down on the bed, as Sophia climbed in after him, wrapping her arms around him, while Moonweave moved to start braiding his beard for him, hoping it would help distract him from the horror he'd witnessed.

It didn't help much, but it helped a little.

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.

Chapter Eight

Gom Weydan hung on the horizon like a solitary jewel against the bronze of the morning.
The Shimmering City.
The Drifting Domain.

If there was any place in the seven worlds that Arkady had always wanted to visit but had never had the opportunity to, it was Gom Weydan. The last time it had been around, they'd been on their way to see it, and the city's gates had closed earlier than expected and by the time they had arrived, it had moved on to another location, somewhere outside of the seven worlds.

He'd lived on hearing such fabulous and miraculous stories about the Shimmering City that he'd doubted most of them could be true, and that many had to have been exaggerated over repeated tellings, a small thing becoming a larger thing before it became the sort of unbelievable detail that could only be said about Gom Weydan, because the city itself wasn't around to be verified.

The rules of Gom Weydan's comings and goings were well-known, but still somewhat unreliable. The city would arrive sometime within a thirty-year cycle, but never in the place it had last been in. One day, the area where it would appear would begin to shimmer and the next day, Gom Weydan would be there.

The city would remain where it appeared for somewhere between three and eight months, and then one day, at around sunrise, it would begin shimmering again. That was what was known as Last Call Day within the city limits, which meant if you weren't out of the city by sundown, you would be transported with the rest of the city to its next location, somewhere outside of the seven worlds. And you wouldn't be back this way again for another thirty years.

Sometimes Gom Weydan would be floating in the sky. Other times it would appear against the side of a mountain. Last time, it had appeared as an island inside of Peart Bay, a particularly challenging area where the constant storms made coming and going far more difficult than it had been the time before. Reportedly the residents of Gom Weydan had harnessed the heavy lightning strikes generated by the storms into some sort of power source while they were there.

That was the thing about Gom Weydan that fascinated Arkady the most – each description of the city sounded more fantastical than the one before, and yet, they also sounded so impossible that he was certain no real place could live up to them.

And he was mere hours away from finding out.

"You're nervous, husband," Yasha said to him, her voice dripping with amusement. "I do not recall the last time I saw you nervous."

"It's The Shimmering City, my love," the dwarven mage replied. "I know you've been before, but I have not, and I am eager to see with my own eyes what sort of mythical delights it has on offer for us when we arrive."

"It was centuries ago that I saw Gom Weydan, husband, and I was but a young girl, not even a woman, so those memories are certainly tainted with the folly of youth, and very unreliable."

"We shall soon see for ourselves."

This time, it seemed that Gom Weydan had appeared high in the skies, floating above a rather barren and desolate patch of desert, with a hastily constructed drawbridge extending to the nearest cliffside, where merchant carts were lined up, both coming and going, everyone eager to do what they could to profit off the unusual delights of the Shimmering City.

As they approached by air, on the back of Quiesh, Arkady was surprised at how large Gom Weydan truly was. Despite the stories, he'd expected it to be a handful of blocks, little more, and yet instead those city walls encircled an area made up of *districts*, not mere structures. In this at the very least, the Shimmering City lived up to its reputation.

The walls that wrapped around the border of Gom Weydan were also exactly as described, mostly a deep blue crystal with veins of gold running through them that glowed with whatever magical energy fueled the city's existence. There were no shortage of mages, he expected, who had booked stay

in many of Gom Weydan's hotels, in an effort to glean what they could about what powered the city, but Arkady suspected they would be no closer when the city moved on than they had been when it had arrived to discerning knowledge.

Gom Weydan was also known as the City of Secrets.

From above, they could also see the sky gondolas that traversed above the city's streets, strung up on faintly glowing golden cords, trollies zipping along paths of light, ferrying people and business from one building to another. Arkady was astonished to see it, having convinced himself that those stories must've been the imagination or exaggeration of some drunken fool several cups into his idyllic dreams and memories. The carriages were wood and steel, with loops of copper that wrapped around the path cords, with small propellers at the back that spun to push the vehicles along the lines when they needed to move. A logo was emblazoned on each of the long sides of the carriages, four letters, GWPT, each done in a neat and smart font.

The lightning pillars were also still affixed around the edges of the city, giant steel rods that jutted like spikes up into the air, even though it seemed unlikely that the desert air would provide them much in the way of energy. They looked well maintained, even if they were not currently serving their designed purpose.

Arkady noticed the skies above Gom Weydan were teeming with life, and there were even areas around the tallest spires of Gom Weydan that were marked as 'docking berths,' places where those who travelled by means such as Quiesh could let their steeds rest and relax while they did their business within the city walls. Griffons, phoenixes, dragons and drakes aplenty, flying creatures of every stripe and delight landing and resting. There were also a small number of airships drifting across the skies, a few of them moored against towers so their crews could go about their business.

The architecture of the buildings within the walls of Gom Weydan reflected dozens of various construction styles and just as many different types of building materials. Stone, crystal, wood, brick, even cloth and what looked like spiderwebs. Some of the buildings were all curves and soft edges, others still were nothing but sharp lines and harsh corners.

They could've spent hours looking at the city from the skies, but Arkady was too keen to get on the ground and walk the city streets himself, so he steered Quiesh over towards one of the skyscrapers with a berth atop it, bringing the griffon in to land before hopping out of her carriage atop her back to greet the tall avian humanoid walking towards them. "Hail and well met, friends of the skies," the figure said to them. "I'm Skymaster Hagolik, of Hagolik's Apiary Resting Place. Are you anticipating staying hours, days, weeks or longer?"

"Certainly longer than hours," Arkady said as Yasha, Sophia and Moonweave disembarked from Quiesh's dwelling, his wife gesturing for the handlers to move and secure the carriage, allowing a small cadre of dockworkers to begin movement immediately. They hooked into the secure corners and then moved to remove the straps which secured the carriage into place. Once it was lifted off of Quiesh's back, the griffon moved out from underneath it and stretched her majestic form, preening as she shifted, pausing to scratch against one of the wooden beams before one of the handlers took the hint and began to scratch the griffon's shoulder. "Let's call it a week, and if we use less, then you can keep the difference and if we use more, we'll pay the balance before our departure. Book us under the names Arkady and Yasha, with our griffon friend there's name being Quiesh. Keep her awash in fresh meat and she'll be content enough." The mage glanced at the rates on the wall, pleased to see they were still on the Interdimensional Multidenominational Platinum Standard (or IMPS), which meant rates were easy enough to calculate in his head. He reached into his satchel and pulled out a pouch of platinum coins, taking a few out before tossing the pouch to the Skymaster. "We good?"

"More than, Master Threadbinder," Hagolik said to him. "I must ask, are you here on preexisting business, seeking new business or just choosing to take in the sights that Gom Weydan has to offer?"

"Existing business, but also just getting my first taste of this marvelous city of yours," the dwarf

said, trying to hide the genuine sense of wonder from his voice. “I’ve spent several lifetimes dreaming about what sort of delights and wonders could be contained here.”

“Well then, let me be the first to welcome you to the Shimmering City, Master Threadbinder, and also let you know that should you be willing to take on new contracts while you’re here, the Mayor of Gom Weydan has an open contract for any Threadbinder who passes through our gates. I’ll receive a reward just for sending you her way, and even more should you complete the contract, so I’ll hold onto this payment of yours, and should you take her contract and complete it successfully, I will give you pay your housing fee, and it will be on the house.”

“Sounds like an opportunity I should avail myself of,” Arkady said with a chuckle. “Any idea what kind of need the Mayor has?”

“The Mayor’s niece attempted to retain the services of a less-than skilled Threadbinder several years ago, and whatever that mage attempted, it went horribly wrong, and the Mayor’s niece has been kept in stasis in gernosh crystal since then,” the Skymaster told him.

“Then after we’ve seen to our business, we’ll stop and see to the Mayor,” the dwarf said. “I would not want to be an unaccommodating guest to a host in need.”

“Thank you kindly, good mage.”

Sophia skipped up alongside him as they made their way to the stairwell leading down the inside of the tower. “We’re here looking for one of my threads?” she asked him.

“We are.” Arkady glanced over and focused at Sophia’s chest for a moment, long enough to pick the threads from one another and find the one he was looking for. “The thick and wide thread leads to somewhere within Gom Weydan, so we’re going to get to street level and then follow it along the streets until we know where your soulmate here is.”

“I’m so excited I can barely stand still,” Sophia said with a giggle, pushing her hair from her face to tuck it behind her ear. “Where can we find him?”

“We need to wander through the city, and it shouldn’t be too hard to track them down once we’ve gotten the lay of the land.”

As soon as they hit street level, it was easy enough to pick up the trail, simply walking towards the way the cord led them down bricked streets, far better maintained than almost any Arkady had seen anywhere across the worlds. There was something wonderous and miraculous about traveling along the streets of Gom Weydan, filled with residents of species he’d never seen in his life.

Each of the buildings had signs offering all sorts of services – apothecaries, quartermasters, mercenaries, spellcrafters, creature trainers, inscriptors, trappers, skimmers, jewelers and craftsmen of every stripe, shape and color.

The path wasn’t so difficult that they took a long time to find where they were looking for, but it led them to a place they completely hadn’t expected – a jail.

The group walked around the building, but sure enough, the cord pointed inside of the building, something which made them puzzled.

“Do we give up?” Sophia asked them, looking down at Arkady, who only bristled in amusement.

“We need more information before we do that, my dear,” Yasha told her, placing her hand on Sophia’s human shoulder. “And my dear husband knows exactly where we need to go for such details, doesn’t he?”

“Of course he does,” Arkady sighed, rolling his eyes a little. “You know if the universe truly wanted me to go see the Mayor before we did anything else, it could’ve simply sent the sign to us at the Skyport and saved us walking the length of the city.”

“You enjoyed seeing the city, dear husband.”

“I did, but I’d rather have the time to stop in and investigate many of these store fronts, which we have not been doing because we were on mission.” The dwarf sighed, shaking his head a little. “I should have known better. Let’s go see the Mayor. I have a feeling that isn’t going to go all that great

either, but at least I'll be able to put some practical work in there."

The trip to the Mayor's mansion wasn't all that long, simply because it was only three blocks away from the jail. The entire city ran eighteen blocks by sixteen blocks, so the trip could've been far, far worse, and as they approached the manor, a number of guards moved to encircle their small party of four, looking on at them with intense curiosity.

"Lotta balls, their kind showin' up here," one of the guards muttered to another, something that Arkady and Yasha could both hear, and both took note of.

"I'm meant to understand your Mayor is seeking the services of a Threadbinder," Arkady said, as he stepped up towards the guard who stood before the main entrance. "Arkady Gormansson, eighth rank Threadbinder, at her service. May we be announced?"

The head guard looked at Arkady and sighed a little. He was an elven male just approaching his twilight years, his hair deeply silver, the big and bushy beard on his face much more dwarven than elvish, but there was no mistaking his build, or the point of his ears, or his height, as he loomed several hands taller than Arkady. "Look, I don't know your kind from any other, so let me offer you a piece of friendly advice before we move any further. If you're a con man, charlatan or in any way a mage who is not skilled in emotions, love and lust in particular, you should turn away now and save your own hide, because the ramparts are often lined with the heads of those who have claimed they could 'fix' the Mayor's niece, and yet, all of them when put to the task failed and failed *most* spectacularly. If you are anything less than assured in your craft, friend, I would recommend turning around and leaving Gom Weydan as quickly as possible, before word of a Threadbinder's appearance spreads to our Mayor's ears, and I'm forced to drag you here, where you'll inevitably fail and join the heads on spikes collection. It's not something I'm ever keen to do, friend, so let me ask you again, what's your business here with Mayor Gilcrest?"

"I'm a Threadbinder of the eight rank, Captain, so I assure you, I am quite capable of my craft. Skymaster Hagolik told us when we docked that your Mayor was in need of a Threadbinder's services, and as it turns out, I have need of the Mayor's in kind, so perhaps I can solve this problem of hers, and she can allow me to obtain what I need in kind."

The Captain of the Guard shrugged a little. "Alright, you cannot say you weren't warned. Come on, let's go get this over with."

They entered through the main entrance and made their way down towards the great hall, the main front room of the Mayor's manor where she took meetings and met with visiting dignitaries, much the way a king or queen would, except that the Mayor's position was voted on every twenty years by the population of Gom Weydan, meaning the resident of the house shifted semi-regularly, although Mayor Gilcrest had won the last four elections and shown no sign of losing steam. She was an elf, although of a much different heritage than Yasha and her people. Gilcrest came from a stripe of elves known as the Starlight elves, who were no taller than humans, but always had the palest of skins, with ashen grey highlights for lips and nipples. They were as long lived as Yasha's people, but weren't all that common on the seven worlds, although Arkady had heard tell they were much more plentiful in one of the other systems that Gom Weydan had connected to during its travels.

Mayor Gilcrest was sat behind a desk on an elevated dais, looking down at the Captain of the Guard, her attire understated and reserved, her silver hair having been dyed with stripes of gold and copper, trying to make her look younger than she was, although the stress and exhaustion of her demeanor couldn't help but come through. "Captain Blanco, who's come to see me?"

"Your honor, this is Threadbinder Arkady Gormansson, Eighth Rank, who has come here at the behest of Skymaster Hagolik, in order to offer his services."

The Mayor stood up from her desk before walking down the stairs from the dais to come and get down to their level. "Are you now." She moved to look at Arkady, ignoring the rest of the members of the party, looking him down to up. "Your attire is at least correct, unlike the last couple of charlatans," she told him. "How many years' experience do you have in your trade, Arkady?"

“A few hundred or so, your honor,” Arkady said to her. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“The trouble is that about forty years ago, my niece paid for the services of a so-called Threadbinder, who instead cast a spell on my niece to make her fall in love with the first man she set eyes upon, except that the enchantment is faulty, and instead she finds herself insanely lusty for *every* man she sets her eyes upon, and it’s uncontrollable.” The Mayor scowled a little. “We had the con woman put to death, and we haven’t been to get the spell removed from her yet, so we have had to keep her in gernosh crystal ever since.”

“I’ve got a handful of ideas on what it could be, but before we move on to that, I have to discuss the part of my fee. I am willing to offer an alternative form of payment in exchange for me solving the matter.”

“What’s that?”

“The release of someone in the jail a few blocks away.”

“What, Regstial Prison?” She smirked a little bit, shaking her head slightly. “That’s only for short-termers, nobody’s in there for anything longer than two years. I can make that deal. Who are you looking to release?”

Arkady chuckled slightly. “We won’t know for certain until we walk inside. Hell, it’s possible it could be one of the guards.”

“But you don’t think that’s likely.”

The dwarf shrugged a little bit. “Our luck prohibits it, I’m certain, your honor.” That made the mayor smile a little bit, cracking through her harsh exterior. “Shall we go and see to your niece?”

The Mayor nodded. “If you hold up your end of the deal, I shall as well.” The group of them walked over towards a side door, as the Mayor fished a large ring of keys from the folds of her mayoral robe, unlocked the door and led them into the room.

In the center of the room was a large blue crystal with a single figure in the center of it. Gernosh crystal was usually only for keeping biological things within, so the woman was naked save for a silk bindings at her wrists and ankles. She was quite shapely for an elf, with overly large breasts despite her narrow waist and wide hips, her hair a different shade – golden blonde perhaps – than the silver locks he’d expected to see, full curls in the heavy waves of it. She was also remarkably beautiful, although Arkady knew she wasn’t threadbound to him, because he could still see the minor flaws about her body objectively, the occasional scar or blemish, recognizing them for what they were instead of internally idealizing them like he would if they were threadbound. He hadn’t expected they would be, but with the rules having been suspended, everything was anyone’s game. There was also something unusual about her positioning inside the crystal, as if she’d been struggling right up until the last moment the crystal set around her.

“Are you able to discern what went wrong with her still in the crystal, Master Threadbinder?”

Arkady pipped a little, considering. “Probably? Let me do a bit of examination first before I give you a definitive yes or no.” The mage walked over to the crystal before letting his hand drifting across the top of it, trying to discern what kinds of magics had been done to the young woman. And when his hands passed over the woman’s abdomen, he felt a sharp spike of pain jolt through his hand before he yanked back his fingertips.

“That doesn’t look good.”

“It’s fine it’s fine,” Arkady assured the Mayor. “Just... a little surprising. There’s good news and there’s bad news about your niece. Would you prefer them in some order?”

“The bad news first.”

He nodded. “The bad news is that the cure will take us somewhere between a week and several months, as I’ll need to kill all the parasites within your niece one at a time after I break the hive down first, and I’m not sure how many there are.”

“Parasites?”

Arkady stroked his beard as he nodded. “Shesterlillies. Nasty varmints. And the good news is

that you got me here in time. She's got a nearly full hive inside of her, and two or three more days unfrozen, it would've been too late. But I'm here, and I've had practice dealing with Shesterlily hives before. We encountered an infestation of them about fifty years ago, and it took us nearly six months to cleanse the entire village, between my wife and myself, but we got it done."

"And you think you can take care of my niece?"

"I can, but there's a chance I may need to take her with me when I leave Gom Weydan, which means she would be gone for thirty years," Arkady said. "That's the problem when it comes to dealing with Shesterlillies. You can never predict how many Shesterlillies are loose and ready to jump to new hosts. Thankfully, you've been killing everyone who she's been trying to mate with, otherwise this whole city would be plagued with them by now."

"Then let's get her dethawed and you can deal with the Shesterlillies," the Mayor said, "and we can get you on to your person inside of Regstia."

"I can understand your paranoia, Mayor Gilcrest, but I would ask that you keep as few people as possible in the chamber with me as possible while I'm destroying the hive," Arkady said, reaching into his satchel, pulling out a small vial of green salve. "I don't even want my own companions nor my wife here while I'm dealing with the hive. The... well, let's just say it's not a particularly pleasant encounter at first, and the risk of infestation runs high."

The Mayor frowned a little. "I don't know how comfortable I am leaving you here alone with my niece, Threadbinder."

Arkady nodded, shaking the vial between his thumb and forefinger. "Quite understandable, which is why I'm willing to leave my wife and my two consorts with you until we're done, as collateral, so you will feel more comfortable letting me work without prying eyes."

"You don't even want your wife in here to assist you?"

The dwarf offered a very tight-lipped tiny smile as he shook his head. "The hive is in a very mature state, and while my wife is trained on how to deal with Shesterlily drones, dealing with the hive is a much more complex matter altogether. And the Queen could bolt from the hive and attempt to make a run at my wife, so I would rather not put her at risk from that."

"You bear no such risk?"

Arkady chuckled. "My body is proofed against all forms of infestation, Shesterlillies included. I'm not afraid, your grace."

The Mayor took a moment and considered her options, then, after weighing them all for what Arkady felt like was much longer than necessary, nodded in agreement. "You know how to dissolve gernosh crystal?"

"I do, your honor."

"Then we will leave you to it."

"You're sure, dear husband?" Yasha said, placing her hand on his cheek.

He smiled up at her and nodded. "I'll be fine, beloved. It will simply be a grizzly encounter." He glanced over and whistled to get the Mayor's attention as she reached the door. "Your niece's name? What is it?"

"Velshia. Why, is that important?"

He nodded. "While the hive has her mind, she won't know that. It will be a question she cannot answer. But once the hive is destroyed, she will know her own name, and will be able to tell me. But I need to know the truth to run it against."

The Mayor nodded, waiting at the doorway for the Captain, Yasha, Sophia and Moonweave to join her, and after they had all filed out, she looked back to Arkady with another nod. "Get it done, Threadbinder. As beastly as it may be, simply... get it done. Knock four times in quick succession to let us know that you have succeeded, otherwise we shall assume you have failed."

"I will not, your honor. I assure you."

The Mayor stepped out and the door closed, the sound of the door being relocked settled into

place, the bolts and bars keeping the door in place far heavier than they truly needed to be. Shesterlillies were rarely violent, and even when they were so, they were never stronger than the hosts whose bodies they occupied. No, the Shesterlillies preferred to use lust and sex to spread, and with this host, they would've gotten far if the hive hadn't gotten overly aggressive too early.

Arkady moved over to the crystal, smoothing his hand along the side of it until he came across the indented groove that marked the glyph needed to cause the crystal to dissolve. He traced the tip of his thick dwarven finger along the path, and the crystal started to hum slightly, the blue substance beginning to glow as it started to slowly melt away. Within a couple of minutes, the woman, Velshia, would be awake and the struggle would be on.

With the dehibernation process begun, Arkady moved over to a corner of the room, grabbing a second vial from the satchel, a sort of amber-gold tree sap. He opened the top of the vial and quaffed the contents immediately, feeling the potion start to flit through his veins quickly, his limbs a little lighter, more nimble, hastier. Then, after tucking the empty vial back into his satchel, he placed the bag upon the ground, and stripped himself bare naked.

The dwarf laid his clothes atop of the satchel, then grabbed the green vial he'd pulled out earlier before finding a second one like it in his satchel, setting one atop of his clothes, taking the other with him as he reapproached the slowly dissolving crystal coffin.

He gave the green salve another quick shake, unstopping the top of it before slathering the thick gooey substance along his cock, taking each of his hands to give it a slight stroke, mostly to ensure that his shaft was covered completely in the substance.

While he didn't feel his confidence in dealing with the matter was unwarranted, he was certain it would be something of a workout, and one the likes of which it had been some time since he'd had. This was the sort of event that truly straddled the gap between Threadbinder and Threatbinder, and was one of the riskier things the Threadbinders typically got involved with.

He tossed the empty vial aside and moved closer enough to see the elven woman's form start to rise up from the coffin of crystal, coughing up lungfuls of the dissolved and liquified crystal, spitting it from her mouth after she sat up, turning to quickly and almost ferally gaze around the room, trying to find an exit, seeing none, before seeing Arkady. A predator's smile bloomed on her lips, as her eyes, a deep and vicious shade of blood red, focused on him.

"Mmmm..." she sneered in his direction. "Someone to *fuck*."

'Alright,' Arkady thought to himself. 'May my pick only strike true.'

Their duel to the death – his or the hive's – had begun.