

## **The Threadbinders**

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### **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 fret 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, it 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...”