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## 1. Withers Introduction

*Thou hast decided to bear witness to an end. Very well.*

*Thou shalt witness, therefore, that there is a beginning in every end and magic in every beginning.*

## ACT I

### 2. Prologue

Darkness.

She was not alone.

The chafing of cloth on cloth and carefully placed steps reached her ear. Just one person walking about, nothing she could not deal with.

She tried to move, but found herself bound and paralysed. No muscle of hers would even flinch. Someone had gone to great lengths to render her completely helpless. They feared her and her capabilities. And well they should.

Delicate fingers ran over her face, trailing the lines of her features, fingertips coming to rest at her ear. A familiar, hateful voice mewled into it, dripping poison with every word. "So confident. So careless. They follow you, yet none will help you. How deliciously ironic."

Ironic indeed. So much so, she would have laughed out loud if not for the paralysis. She had anticipated this day for years. And yet here she was, duped and humbled, with no way out. Maybe now she would find the peace she so desperately craved when she was alone with her thoughts. No amount of violence and murder had ended his constant demands, instead amplified it a thousandfold with every success she delivered to him.

In a way, she looked forward to her own death. She had tried to get a taste of it through the demise of others, but today, she would be served the whole meal.

Cold steel touched the soft scales of her neck, producing a shallow cut up until it rested beside the fingertips. She could feel her blood trickle down her body, smell its metallic tang, screaming for her to take action. The bloodlust raged within her alongside her own fury, searching for a way out, even now, fighting the poison coursing through her veins with every frantic beat of her heart – to no avail. The blood rushing in her ears almost deafened her to the maddened, exulted voice.

“When you are gone, he can not ignore me any longer. And you will make an excellent puppet.”

*No! Not that! Anything but that!* Her dreams of rest shattered. There would be no rest. Only endless servitude. A raging howl got stuck in her paralysed throat, never to be heard.

With a carelessly hasty motion, the steel slipped into her ear, setting the world ablaze with pain.

### 3. Escape

She dreamt. She dreamt of warmth, a tight hug holding her.

A distracting voice murmured into her comfortable silence. She ignored it, but it got louder, demanded her attention.

Revelling in her dream, she tried to tune it out. It got louder still, disturbing the peace, pushing her to move.

Suddenly, the embrace felt restrictive, a trap, constricting her breathing and movements.

**“WAKE UP!”**

Stuck in a cramped pod barely big enough for her, trapped by a strange, fleshy material, she struggled to come free. The room it was in swayed and buckled, like a ship being tossed around by waves in a storm, and she with it. A transparent barrier restrained her movements further, muffling all sounds from without and increasing the sense of claustrophobia. She feverishly dug into the soft interior with her claws, sought for a way to open the pod, her breath laboured with the heavy, moist air in the small capsule.

The head of a red dragon peaked through the hole in the wall. It breathed fire into the room, causing a small explosion from the pool in the middle.

Reflexively, she raised her arms to shield herself when the barrier shattered to pieces from the blast. The flesh holding her relaxed. If she ever were to be free, it was to be now. She fought herself out of the limp grasp of the soft tissue holding her.

Bitter cold gusts of wind burst through the hole in the wall, biting into her scaled skin. The only remaining light source was a burning puddle in the middle of the room, casting haunting shadows into the shifting twilight it created. Everything was blurry, her body ached, reacting slowly and hesitantly. She was confused. How had she come here? She touched her temple. Her fingers found a

slim scar, still tender. It went all the way from her ear down to her neck. But her mind refused to provide any memories to her, shrouding everything but this moment in darkness.

In that moment, her stomach lurched forward, the cold air ceased to bite into her flesh and was replaced by an uncomfortably hot breeze. Her legs would not bear her rocking body, and she fell to her knees. The sudden movement made her heave, but nothing came up. She must have been here for quite some time. She wiped her mouth with the coarse fabric of her stained and rugged tunic and investigated the room.

Everything here looked and felt organic. Her feet, clad the in the flimsiest excuse for shoes imaginable, sank into the floor as if it were thick wet patches of moss in the woods, the walls showed no angles where they joined. Ridges ran horizontally and in honeycomb-patterns through them, providing a frame for the substance growing in-between, that was soft, springy and dry and reminded her of skin. The pod she had fallen out of protruded from the ground, held alive by thick, purple veins, now cauterized by the dragons flames.

A table looking thing had been toppled over by the explosion, a destroyed body lay sprawled on the ground, the skin burnt, the skull cracked open like an egg shell, showing the soft, rosy folds of its content. For a fleeting moment, she saw herself laying in her own blood on a similar table, organs neatly arranged on the side, while she watched distant shadows prod and poke through her insides.

Phantom pain shot through her head and limbs. She felt violated, tasting bile in the back of her throat again, anger sweeping over her.

A weak and sweet whisper reached out to her, making her furiously look around for its source.

“We are here. Free us!” She could see no one and made herself ready to attack the hidden person. “Remove us from this body, please!”

The orders emanated from the corpse on the ground, she realised. From its head, specifically. And yet, its lips did not move. She reached down to examine it

further. As she touched it, the voice demanded her help yet again.

“Yes! Be careful, beautiful! Help us, and we will help you!”

This had to be an illusion of some kind, brought about by the pain and the haze of exhaustion holding her hostage. She needed to end this waking dream, so her mind could concentrate on things more important. She reached into the skull, barely noticing what she did, until the mental screaming in her head seized and became blissful silence. The brain was only pulp now and spoke no more. She looked at her bloodied, greasy hands. It felt familiar, strangely comforting. Her anger had subsided, leaving her with a cleared head. Wiping her hands on her pants – equally as coarse and simple as her tunic and shoes, and held up by a fraying hemp rope – she stumbled further, until she reached a big, gaping gash in the side of the ship.

For the first time, she could see where it was headed. It flew over a vast, deserted landscape, ash-grey, air heavy with smoke and soot, smelling like brimstone. She could see waving tentacles, sluggishly moving to swat at dragons relentlessly attacking what she identified as a nautiloid. A living ship with a coiled shell, tentacles protruding forward and sideways, equal measures vessel, weapon and tool for the mindflayers steering it through the astral plane and many others.

Through the broken hull, she briefly saw see a battlefield reaching from one horizon to the other. Countless devils and their creatures, slaves and enlisted from all planes fought alongside each other against demons in a never ending war. She cleared the gash and reached a new room, filled with more pods, which in turn were filled with dead people, mostly clad in Baldurian commoner fashion. The name – Baldur’s Gate – stirred something within her. A sprawling, rich harbour city, with vast political power by controlling many important trading routes, a honey-pot for the wealthy, knowledgeable and powerful and rife with treachery and intrigue.

Bumping noises caught her attention. One of the pods held a living woman, hammering at the barrier with her fists, and shouting. Another useless corpse in the making. Her voice could not be heard over the noises of the ship itself, but their eyes met. And she was overcome with a dizzying array of impressions. Fierce devotion branded against her own stubbornness, and she could feel the determination of the person behind.

A task at hand needed solving at all costs and this person held the abilities and resolve to follow through with it. Abilities that could greatly improve her own survivability. She decided to free the stranger if she could manage. She began searching for a mechanism, but the console on the side of the pod was a mystery to her. It would not react to anything she did, only an indenture indicated something missing. Again, the woman in the pod pounded against her barrier. She looked up and saw the woman pointing to an adjacent room. She decided to search it quickly. If she found nothing, she would leave the woman to her fate and flee alone.

The room only held a single pod with an unconscious man in it and two dead mindflayers. They looked as if someone had pulled an octopus over the head of an emaciated, sexless person with grey skin, too frail to endure any physical encounters. Which doubtlessly was why they had succumbed to the dangers of a buckling ship alone. They were quickly ransacked. A small rune, looking like it could fit the console was tucked in a small pouch sewn into the alien garments.

On her way back, she could see the man in the pod spasming, the skin slouching off of it like a wet rag, revealing new, shiny wet and grey skin beneath. The mouth and skull split open, new teeth growing, and from within, tentacles appeared as a slimy, twisting mass, unfolding until they lay on its bare chest. The newborn Mind flayer regarded her weak and dazed, not yet at the height of its senses.

So fast! The sight disgusted and unsettled her. If she failed here, such a creature would be her end.

She ran over to the console. Fortunately, the rune was a perfect fit. With a thrum, the console sprang to life, feeding off the energy canalised in the room and waiting for orders. Reluctant, she put her hand on it. And it answered. A simple request had to be made, but she did not know how. She felt a growing pressure in her head and a *thing* stirred behind her right temple, irritating and very nearly painful. The pressure ebbed away, and she could feel the console alongside her, a simple intelligence, knowing only a few states of existence, comparable to a plant. So she pictured a flesh-eating plant, opening its leafy trap, to release the husk of its prey.

And with a wet smack, the pod beside her opened as well.

The woman pulled herself out of the pod she was trapped in, a little short of breath, but otherwise looking fine, if a bit young to be of much use. She wore a breastplate adorned with the symbols of a darkness swallowing the moon with gambeson and chainmail underneath. Her long, pitchblack hair was pulled into a braid, carefully intertwined with a chain holding everything in place. Worn this way, it opened the view to her slightly pointy ears. Too much so to be human, too little for a full-blooded elf. A half-elf, then, and likely more experienced than she looked. A scar gcutting across her face under her right eye added to that assumption.

“Thank you. I thought i was gonna die in there.” The woman said.

From the pod, the half-elf took a small, faceted object, as well as shield and mace, then went with her through the ship. Small critters – brains on clawed, stubby legs and adorned with thin tentacles – scurried through the ship, ever so often stopping to order her “To the helm! To the helm, beautiful!”.

So her mind had not tricked her after all. She hoped to find a way to gain control of the ship and followed the creatures to their destination with the other woman in tow. At the helm, they could see mindflayers and denizens of the hell fight for control over the ship. Imps swarmed and distracted them, while Cambions – devils who looked like humanoid beings with wings – fought with



blazing swords. The mind flayers, in turn, felled imps by the droves with their psionic powers and tried to ambush the Cambions whenever they could. Not many were left by now and the ground covered in bodies of both sides. A bigger, older and more impressively clothed mindflayer with the unmistakable air of a habitual leader noticed their entrance.

„Thrall, connect the nerves of the transponder. We must escape.“

His spindly finger pointed to the other end of the room, to a console overgrown with tentacles, tendrils and protrusions of varying lengths. As soon as she stepped into it, a group of imps changed course and instead of attacking the constantly arriving brain-critters, flew to disrupt the humans. She dodged two chittering imps who tried to dive at her and left it to the other woman to deflect more on-charging imps with shield and mace, smacking them out of the air to the ground, where they were vulnerable to her attacks. The immediate threat dealt with, she swept her gaze through the room. No one else regarded her as an opponent at the moment and the imps were distracted. They would soon overwhelm the woman – she hoped to hold control over the ship by that time.

Leaving the other woman behind, she walked in the direction of the console slowly and carefully. Not too slow, but not fast, either. Both would draw attention. That way, she almost – almost – reached her destination. Right in front of it, a hell-boar stopped to gorge itself on a mindflayers corpse and stared at her with blood-shot eyes, ready to impale her. No one could save her now except herself. When she saw its muscles clench, she began to run towards it despite her own legs trying to buckle under her. She forced them to obey her will, and right before they would have clashed, she jumped in the air, straight over the boar to tumble down its back and hit the floor, hard.

She scrambled to get up before the boar could turn and charge at her again, stumbling the last few steps to the console. The effort left her breathless. Gasping for air, she grasped at the tendrils that could be joined together. Just in time to

see a red dragon peek its head into the Helm of the ship and breath fire into it. It set the whole room aflame, including the space around the transponder. But it couldn't stop the ship from entering the Astral plane, ready to jump anywhere, if given a location.

The nautiloids damage and exhaustion was so severe, it lost its orientation and began to coast freely, sending her tumbling across the room, hitting objects and bodies on her way, until she was thrown against a wall. Slowly, the Nautiloid tipped over in the other direction, and as soon as it did, she slid back to where the transponder was....and behind it a big opening into the vastness that was the astral plane. A floundering and screaming cambion and several of the corpses that littered the room just moments before, where catapulted out into the void.

She clawed at the floor and used everything she slid past to regain some control over the direction of her movement, using the weight and momentum of bodies to aid her own changes in direction. As she slid past the transponder, she managed to grab a hold of it, barely, heaved herself up enough to touch the tendrils waiting for the input of a destination and sent the ship to a place that was a fleeting moment in her unresponsive memory.

A jump followed, sealing the living ships fate. It had taken too much damage in this chase and now failed to go any further. She could feel her stomach drop, as the ship rapidly lost height. Something heavy from within crashed into her shoulder and she lost her grip again.

The force of the blow threw her out of the ships helm, now tumbling to the ground which closed in on her at an alarming speed. Nothing short of a miracle could save her now. While the ship crashed to the ground all around her, she was caught in gentle arms. The same arms that had always caught her falls. If her head had worked properly, she might have wondered how a person of such stature was able to catch someone almost twice her weight with the same ease and care as a toddler would have found after a brief experience of flight. But her head and body, too, had taken a beating and overextended itself today. It just

ceased to think any more.

The person let her sink down slowly. She could feel sand under her hands and see the body of the ship grimly illuminated by fires and the moon, which shone bright in the night sky.

“Sleep. Rest.” The person said softly.

And her body obeyed.

#### 4. Waking up at the wreck

The sun shone on her when she awoke. Her whole body felt sore, so she decided to reflect on her situation a little before she took on the daunting task of standing up. She riddled her brain about anything precursing the nautiloid, yet found only emptiness. The events of the day before should have been a bad dream, while the evidence of its reality emitted the first signs of the nauseatingly strong smell of rotting fish all around her. She better get moving and well away before it could grow any stronger.

She sat up in the sand and took stock of what was at her disposal. It was a very short list:

Although she felt woefully weak, she could feel the muscles working under her white-scaled skin. A good day of rest would be enough to regain her strength. Additionally, a tingling of icy power nested in her, waiting to be released. It was not much, barely enough to have an effect at all.

She had nothing more on her body than the clothes she had woken up in. A shelter for the night needed to be her priority. The nautiloids smouldering carcass had shielded her from the winds and the worst of the cold, but her thin clothes alone would not protect her.

After scanning her surroundings for threats, she followed the waterline. Steep cliffs, formed from soft brownstone, constricted the rivers bed. Lush, green trees swayed in a pleasantly fresh breeze above her, emitting the warning chitters of disturbed birds wherever she passed. Down at the beach she would find nothing, she realized. It was empty except for sand, anything useful likely sunken to the ground or stolen by the rapid current. She started to climb the gentler slopes in

the hopes of finding a vantage point from which she could see more, crested a ledge that had impeded on her view and reached the formerly hidden, shattered shell of the ship, clinging to the cliff like a parasite to its host. Through a hole, she could see the dark inside, and a light awaiting her after that. With nowhere else to go than up another steep portion of the cliffs, she decided to try her luck and entered the shell.

Rustling noises warned her of the presence of other living beings. She froze up and waited until her eyes adjusted to the darkness around her. More of the brain-critters scampered through the chunks and pieces the ship had consisted of, walking up to her and away again to the back of the hull, back and forth. She followed them and found the mindflayer-captain of the ship, a broken form lying on the ground. It beckoned her to come closer. She wanted to ignore it and walk out to the light, yet found herself utterly unable to. The creature commanded her attention, wanted her to come closer, to prove her admiration.

She wanted to...be so close, she could feel the heart beat its last, hear the last breath leave its lungs. The mindflayer ushered her closer, eagerly waving and stretching its tentacles towards her head, while she took up its head to cradle in her hand, burying the claws of her other in its throat to squeeze it shut and feel close to that bliss again. The mindflayer lashed out at her, winding its tentacles around her arm in an effort to free itself, breaking the spell it had on her.

She did not understand why she had gotten close to the aberration, but it held her arm, biting down on it with its wicked strong jaws. She could hear a cracking noise and see movement in her arm that should not move like this. Limited in her motion by her proximity to the creature, she responded by pummeling every sensitive part of the skull she knew with her other fist and found it quite soft, to accommodate the abnormally large brain in a skull that was likely part of a human body once. She did not think about the source of that knowledge, just put in blow after blow until there could be no doubt about the demise of the lacerated mindflayer any more. She worked through her pain and pried her now useless

hand from the tentacles grip. Her wrist was broken, blood oozing out of the puncture-wounds caused by the mindflayers bite. Hurt like that, she would stand no chance alone. The infection that had to set in some time soon would kill her as sure as any other fight. She had to find help, and fast.

The light attacked her eyes viciously as she left the hull of the ship, impervious to the beautiful scenery around her. Beneath her glistened the wide, calmly flowing stream she had left, a small meadow of flowers had opened to her left and the shadow of a red dragon passing high over her head. She only had eyes for the barely visible path winding its way up the tree-dotted hill. She came upon more bodies littered on the ground, twisted and crushed by the fall from the nautiloid. Nothing here was alive, not even crows could be heard cawing over the bodies they should be claiming by now. With one of them, she at least found a dull knife, better than nothing at all.

A scream cut through the dreadful silence.

“Help!”

It was not far away, just behind a bend, so she hurried to get a look. Maybe the situation could be used to her advantage. The woman from the ship stood helplessly in the choke-hold of her attacker, a pale-faced, white-haired man, who held a dagger to her throat.

“Tell me why you abducted me! And do not lie, I saw you on that ship!”

He loosened his hold to let the woman speak. He had held her too tight, and the woman gasped and coughed because of it.

Tsisk used the noise to sneak closer. The woman had already proven her worth. Maybe she would help her again.

“I don’t know what you mean!”

The woman sputtered, making it easy for her to round the attacker and put her useless knife against the side of his neck.

“Let her go.” She snarled into his pointed ear.

He immediately dropped his weapon and addressed her with a soft voice, silvery smooth and completely different from what he had used to interrogate the other woman.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, shall we? I just wanted to know-”

“Shut up. I don’t care.”

Up close, his clothes were of fine quality once, but worn out on second glance, and repaired often. He looked like an impoverished Baldurian dandy or maybe a citizen, a rather unimpressive figure with a small and slender build. There must have been at least some money left, as he wore perfume. She could identify bergamotte, rosemary, and a hint of aged brandy, and something else, something buried beneath all of the glamour: The gentlest whisper of death reached her nose, tickled her brain.

The woman quickly grabbed her own weapons, ready to join the fight, should one ensue.

“You can let him go now. He ambushed me when I tried to investigate the glowing rock.”

She contemplated the thought. Living, he was a risk. He could lurk around, follow them, attack them in their sleep. Dead, she would have certainty of his whereabouts. The thought sent a shiver of excitement down her spine. Death was preferable.

Her prey shifted, and strained her injured hand. The movement sent excruciating jolts of pain up her arm, allowing him to use her temporary incapacitation and escape her blade. He was surprisingly fast, picking up his weapons from the ground in the same motion he used to get away from her, and quickly turned around to face her and the armoured woman. She had underestimated him. A mistake she would not make again.

His exceptionally beautiful face was adorned with dark eyes, glinting reddish under the midday-sun. Their gazes met, and she got drawn into an overwhelming mixture of hunger, defiance...and fear. His fear. Cold, icy claws stripped away

every hint of warmth and left her naked and writhing like a worm on the cold ground. Her stomach was a burning pit of agonizing hunger, never to be sated fully, consuming her self instead.

Her arm had dropped low during the vision, as had the elf.

“They put one into you, too...” He said, surprised. And then, almost accusingly: “You were on the ship, I thought you were with them.”

“What did they put into me?” She asked, alarmed. The visions were disturbing and disruptive. She had no need for more. Her question irritated both tremendously, and the woman asked:

“You...did not notice how they put a wriggling worm into your eye, how it buried itself into your head behind it, twisting around?”

“Is this what I can feel? I don’t remember how it got there.” Her fingers found her scar again.

Another voice interrupted the conversation: “Help? A hand, anyone?” It came from the glowing stone, cause of this whole situation.

The woman looked around at the other two, and, when no one acted, went to investigate the shimmering and erratically sparkling stone. A forearm reached out of it, grasping at the stone surface in an attempt to pull the person attached out of it. It was obviously too weak to achieve its goal.

With a firm grip, the woman took the forearm and pulled out the person trapped in the stone. It was a man of unremarkable height, with shoulder-length brown hair and several days of unshaven stubble, beginning to hide an open, friendly smile. A dark stain disfigured his left half of the face – slender veins extending from his collar upwards. He wore the unmistakable signs of someone of the magically inclined – a robe, a staff and an earring formed like the symbol of the goddess of magic, Mystra, even though his clothes were untypically sturdy and well-worn for a man of his profession.

“Oh, thank the gods you came. I fell to my death from this ship yesterday and my portal-spell *malfunctioned*. Precisely when I needed it the most, out of all



times, can you believe it?” He straightened his clothes, then stretched out his hand to shake that of the woman and both froze for a second, locked in a mutual soul-search.

“I see. You, too, were victims of an insertion in the ocular region and I take it so where your companions over there.” He motioned to the pale man and her. “But I am forgetting myself. I apologize, you must think me most ill mannered.” The man put his hand on his chest and bowed politely.

“Let me introduce myself: I am Gale, the Wizard of Waterdeep. With whom do I have the honour to speak?”

Rattled by his long and winding speech, the woman answered pensive:

“Shadowheart.”

The man named Gale raised his brows at the pale guy next, who puffed up and proclaimed his name as if everyone ought to have heard of him already.

“My name is Astarion, from the noble city of Baldurs Gate.”

“And yours, dragonborn?” He addressed her. She scoured her brain for a name until one bubbled up from the dark depths beyond the nautiloid.

“Tsisk. I...think it is Tsisk.”

“That’s a bit harsh on the tongue, so much hissing.” Astarion wailed.

The wizard Gale replied with another long-winded explanation. “Well yes, it’s a classical example of a descriptive hatchling-name of the dragonborn-race. While we are at it, would you mind telling me if you are addressed as male or female? I never can tell with the likes of you, you are irritatingly similar to one another on the outside.”

“Female.”

He turned to speak to Shadowheart, then swiveled back around to face her as a sudden question manifested in his mind.

“Don’t you have another name by now? I’m certainly no expert in those matters, but you look like you outgrew that name a long time ago and should be having a proper dragons name.”

“I don’t remember another. I don’t remember anything before the nautiloid.”

“Maybe we can address two problems with my question, then: Is one of you a knowledgeable healer, perchance? A cleric, a druid, something of that sort? I would even settle for someone particularly adroit with a knitting needle to get out that little wriggler.”

“I know a thing or two.” Shadowheart answered. “But nothing of the sort you’re asking.”

Tsisk perked up. So she could help with her injury. She asked Shadowheart to have a look at it. While the half-elf did so, Gale droned on about this condition she needed to know more about. He painted a very vivid picture of the inexorable process he called ceremorphosis, in which the tadpole would develop in their brains, cause fevers to bring them down and gradually rob them of their own agency until they eventually became part of the hive-mind that had created the little parasites in the first place. He then took great pleasure in describing the same process of physical change she had seen in the ship in gruesome detail. His word choice aggravated Astarion, who had listened through all of it with a bored expression, until the change was mentioned.

“So I will become a horribly ugly, despicable monster?” The pale elf burst into a bellowing laughter, followed by the hoarsely asked, forlorn question “What else did I expect?”

Shadowheart, who had examined her arm with gentle twisting and prodding in the meantime, stated: “There is no point in despair. Somewhere in this wilderness could be a druid or a healer waiting for us. The sooner we get moving, the more time we will have to find someone.” The dragonborn clenched her teeth in pain.

“Your ulna is broken.”

“Is that the smaller, thinner bone?”

“Yes. So you do have some medical knowledge?”

Tsisk thought about it and dismissed the idea. The inner workings of the body

seemed familiar to her, yet she could not think of what to do in case of a broken bone or other such ailments.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Let me heal that for you.”

The half-elf put her hand over the injury, hovering just a fingers breadth over it without touching, and whispered words under her breath. Tsisk got the impression of the womans hands shadow deepening, twisting and coiling around her wrist. Her wrist hurt as if the mindflayer bit into it for a second time, then the pain subsided.

“You should not put any strain on it, or it will break again.”

“I’m under the impression you are a cleric? May I ask which god you happen to follow?” Gale asked.

Shadowheart stared at him defiantly. “It is Shar, the Lady of Loss.” Her statement caused the wizard to cover his mouth and stubbly beard with his hand in surprise, furiously thinking. He made up his mind fast, dropped his hand from his face and offered it to Shadowheart.

“Well, unlikely adventures require unlikely allies. With the tadpole in my head, I can’t think of any reason why we shouldn’t team up to get rid of them.”

The half-elf nodded to him in silent agreement. Astarion joined the proposal. “I was ready to go this alone, but maybe sticking with the herd isn't such a bad idea after all. And you seem like useful people to know.”

“Allies until a cure is found.” Tsisk agreed.

## 5. finding withers

The path lead them alongside the river, flowing as an undisturbed, tranquil band of silver to a distant sea. The soft sandstone of the cliffs was formed into ravines and caves by melt water coming down the mountain-range dominating the horizon landward. A dense forest prevented them from straying from the path, so they followed it until late afternoon, when they saw ruins built directly into the stone and approached them in hopes of a dry shelter. Other people already had had the same idea, judging by the small column of smoke rising above the walls. To Tsisks amusement, no one had thought to put up a guard watching the cliffs. When she pointed it out, Astarion stifled a laugh and went over with her to investigate the place. The people who had made camp could be heard having an argument while they crept closer.

“Why do we have to work here from dawn ‘til dusk? There’s a ship come down downstream. You saw it, too!”

“Yeah...you mean -?”

“Damn it! We should be pillaging that thing! Instead we’re bogged down in these damp’n cold ruins. They’ll never get that door open. It’s clamped shut like a whore’s legs with no jingle-jangle in your pockets.”

The other man grunted nonspecifically, long abused from the notion of getting a word in himself.

“Bet with a ship like that it’s some rich sods treasure or – or a mage! They can make things fly.”

By now, they had a good view of the two scraggly, unkempt men in dirt-stained clothing, camping in front of an old door, sun-bleached to the same warm

grey as the surrounding stones the entryway was built with. The talkative one had his hand plunged down his breeches and scratched himself ferociously. Nothing about them looked worth a hassle except the food in their hands. Tsisks stomach growled loudly. She would kill for food right now, she thought. Not even the prospect of his filthy hands having touched it could rein in its incessant demand for tribute, now that she could smell the burnt bacon-grease from their little fireplace.

Astarion chuckled and eagerly told her „Let me do the talking, I will have them leave that place in no time.”

She was unable to stop him in time, as the two had already seen him and jumped up from their seats. She decided if he wanted to go down, he would do so alone and continued to lay low in the bushes. She would have preferred an ambush.

“Ehh! Pretty boy! What are you doing here?”

“Ugh, thank the gods, people at last. I’m from the shipwreck, of course. Where else would a poor sod like me come from in this wilderness? Mhh?”

His emergence had the two men befuddled. They clearly had not anticipated an occurrence like the sudden appearance of strangers and were unprepared to handle the situation.

“You two don’t happen to have a cart, by chance? I can not possibly carry all the cargo by myself.”

“And what’s that “cargo”?” the talkative asked.

“Oh you know, this and that, a little gold, magical knick-knacks. The stuff that you carry on flying ships.” He sounded increasingly exasperated with the daft goons, who caught on at last.

The man elbowed the other one to follow his example and began stuffing his bags in a hurry. “Can’t help you with that, chap, gotta hurry. Lot’s of things to do in the woods.”

It did not take them long to vacate the place and for Tsisk to leave her hideout.

“I can’t believe they were that dumb.”

“People believe all kinds of crazy things. You wouldn’t believe how many would follow a stranger to their grave for some sweet words and a smile.”

“You didn’t even smile and they went to die anyway. The mindflayers and their pets will do the job just as well as any knife.”

“Now that you say it...How convenient. We won’t have to worry about them coming back.” He flashed her a bright and covetous smile.

“No. We won’t.”

Tsisk gathered the other two and informed them of the bandits she suspected to be in the ruins.

“They must have some supplies with them. I think we should relieve them of it.”

„That sounds like a plan. The sun is setting already and I am famished.” said Gale.

Her meticulously laid out plan, though, got averted by a lock on the old, warped door. Latch in hand, Tsisk thought about a solution to her problem, when Astarion pushed her to the side.

“May I?” He pulled out a small stiletto-knife and poked it into the keyhole. “These old and clunky locks can be opened with practically anything.” With a click, the lock released.

When he opened the door with a flourish of his hands, occupied with the grand display of his skill, he missed the drowsy, armed guard sitting beside it on the inside. Before the guard had a chance to react and shout out, Tsisk lunged past Astarion, grappling the man and trying for a choke-hold. Immediately, she could feel him slip out of her grasp again, but her manoeuvrer opened his cover, his hands flailing at her to free himself. Shadowheart followed suit and delivered a quick blow to his sternum. He doubled over, and the dragonborn gave up her grasp of him, which left his head wide open for Shadowheart to use her pommel on his temple. The guard rolled his eyes up in a last silent prayer to his god or

goddess and dropped to the ground.

In the following silence, they could hear voices from a nearby door, arguing. The door was left cracked open and the four of them tiptoed over to sneak a glance.

Five people stood in the hallway disputing loot that was nowhere to be seen.

What could be seen, however, was lots of easily combustible material in the form of several barrels of Firewine. They probably put it in the corridor to keep it cool.

How they ever thought to finish this amount of strong alcohol was beyond Tsisk.

It would take them weeks of getting black-out drunk every night.

She whispered to Gale. „Can you light those barrels up? That stuff burns as hot as the fourth circle of hell.” The prospect of badly burned corpses made her drunk on bloodlust. It irritated Tsisk. She needed to concentrate, but felt hardly able to.

“Good idea to distract them.” The wizard began to incantate a spell, whispering it under his breath. A small flame sparked up in his hands, tangibly hot. When he finished the spell, it sprang from his hands and over to the barrels.

For a brief period of time nothing happened, besides the bandits throwing insults and accusations at each other. Then, a crackling sound could be heard, growing louder and louder, accompanied by a dancing orange glow from the barrels’ direction. That caught the bandits attention, but it was too late. It got followed by a deafening boom and hot wine spraying everywhere. The burned bandits rolled on the floor screaming. All had sustained injuries to large parts of skin. Without a healer or a finishing stroke, their fight with death would take long, excruciating hours. Tsisk was no healer, and she had no time to loose. Which was a shame, since this felt intoxicating, their screams echoing from the walls as a sweet serenade of pain. Together with Astarion, she relieved them of their agony.

“That...was a bit unnecessary, I believe. Did we really have to kill them outright?” Gale asked.

Astarion shrugged his shoulders, before he commenced to loot the bodies,

followed by Tsisk, who desperately needed at least some working kind of weapon or protection, other than her butter knife. Unfortunately, these bandits had had no sense for quality material except in their choice of beverage, and what was left was now charred.

“Better them than us. I don’t think they would have taken kindly to us.” Shadowheart answered him.

A brief examination of the corridor showed them they were now alone. Gale found a small library, the old and dusty books untouched by the educationally disinterested scavengers, and immediately started to leaf through the tomes. The others found themselves back in the first room, where the bandits had left the rests of a humble feast and some simple, rickety travel equipment for them. Tsisk and Shadowheart wolfed down what was on offer, starved as they were, while Astarion looked on in fascination, only so much as nibbling on his portion.

“Aren’t you hungry, Astarion?” Shadowheart asked him.

“Don’t you worry darling, I’ve had better than this in Baldurs Gate, just before i got picked up by our ride.” But after his answer, he turned his gaze some-place else, staring off into a distance only he could see.

Gale returned with an assortment of books under one arm and a sad and tired look on his face.

„I wish there was more time. Time to live a life, get to know you lot better, or even just read all these books. But Alas! We might not be afforded any of this if we cannot get the...tadpoles out of our heads.“

“I don’t feel feverish. There’s time left.” Tsisk said.

Gale stood a bit more upright, his mouth cracked into a sad half-smile. „That's the spirit. We’re not done until we’re dead. Need to remember that part.“

When they went to sleep in their newly acquired bedrolls, Tsisk took first watch, unable to find rest. She knew her mind was affected differently than the others. She was the only one suffering from complete memory loss and a craving



for violent death. Even now, her mind felt drawn to the blanketed figures around the fireplace, demanding to utilize their helplessness in the moment, to draw blood and inflict death. The urge got more overwhelming the longer she stayed awake and before long, she had found a boning knife in the equipment left by the bandits. It was a simple thing, but well made with a long, sturdy and very sharp blade, slicing beautifully through a leather strap she tested it on. It would cut a throat just as easily, and there were three available for testing. An exceptionally bad idea she could not allow herself to carry out. This day had proven how useful each of them would be to her. She made her way out of the temple and into the moonlit night. Her blood rushed through her, her heart pounding, her body demanded the hunt. If she went back in, she might have yielded.

For quite some time, she just stood under the moon, until her teeth chattered from the chill of the night. Only then she felt settled enough to return to tossing and turning in her bedroll, the knife safely stowed away in a makeshift sheath in her boot. Tsisk noticed she wasn't the only one to have a rough night. Astarion, too, seemed to have nightmares of some kind. His whimpering and outcries were muffled, but unmistakably fearful. She relieved him of it by waking him to take on guard duty.

She must have fallen asleep, because everyone was bustling about when she opened her eyes again. Tsisk felt weak and jittery. She did not want the others to see her like this and left for the outdoors.

She had not paid attention, it seemed. On the ledge of the terrace, Astarion sat in the morning sun with a relaxed smile on his face, reading one of the books Gale had pilfered the day before. He must have heard her, because he closed it and turned his head. As soon as he did, his smile vanished and was replaced with another one: more teeth, less sincere. He looked at her, ready to say something, then closed his book and did a double-take.

„You look like shit. You're not craving brains, are you?"

“Not your brains, no.”

Only after she had said that, she realised what words had slipped her mouth in her sleep-deprived state. She watched Astarion closely for his reaction to determine if his knowledge would be a threat to her now.

„Now, now. Nothing has happened yet. But do make sure to keep it under control. I wouldn't want to not wake up one day, especially a day as fine as this. We will surely find another bandit or two to satisfy your...hunger.” His face stayed controlled, with his transfixed, unwavering smile until he turned it back into the sun with his eyes half closed. She had the distinct feeling that he watched her from the corner of his eyes until she went away.

Back in the temple, she found Gale and Shadowheart discussing vividly. Gale waved with a book and told Shadowheart

„...It's a temple of Jergal. When can you walk in the remains of an abandoned shrine like this? The knowledge it could hold! I would love to get to know more about it.“

„But we have got no time for dead deities! We must seek a cure, soon.“

Both turned to Tsisk for guidance. Behind her, Astarion entered the temple, too. Gale saw him and immediately blurted out:

„The book also talks of great treasures – sacrifices – brought to Jergal. It could aid us a great deal in traversing these hostile lands or paying a healer. And judging by that closed door over in the corridor, it is not yet stolen.“

Astarion's face lit up „A treasure! Here? Let's go find it!“. Shadowheart looked pleadingly at Tsisk, but Gale's arguments made sense to her, especially as no one looked ill already, and so she shrugged her shoulders.

Shadowheart sighed in defeat. „I will not waste more than half a day on this.“

As a group, they ventured forth into the temple to the unopened door. The explosion and following shock wave of the day before had pushed it slightly off the hinges. Before, it was a bulwark, not to be opened. But now, their united

efforts were able to open it further, until all of them could squeeze through, one by one.

They stood in a derelict chamber. In a beam of light coming from a hole in the ceiling, some plants fought for their rights to claim as much of it as possible. One of the four pillars that held the arches of the ceiling had not stood the test of time and lay across the ornately tiled floor.

Shadowheart sniffed the air and told them with disgust „This place reeks of must and decay...and a good bit of necromancy.“

Behind lay a hall with a prominently placed grave in the middle, more pillars and statues of warriors guiding the gaze to it. The lid was detailed, hewn from streaked marble to look like solidified smoke. The lifelike body depicted on it was shrouded in delicate cloth hewn of stone, so artfully cut, Tsisk would not have been surprised if it sat up to shed the cloth and go about its day.

On its sides, whole civilisations put their dead to rest, supervised by a scribe with a scroll stretching around the entire circumference of the sarcophagus until it ended back up in his hands again. The walls of the chamber were lined with urns at least half her own height, set into recesses. Other recesses were closed with stone plates, inset with swirling symbols of metal, a script Tsisk was not familiar with. Rubble lay strewn across the floor, and in between it...bones. While Gale made a bee-line for the writing on the wall, Astarion went directly to the grave. He began examining the sarcophagus closely with eyes and fingers alike. Tsisk looked around, her gaze drawn by a statue hiding in the darkness behind the sarcophagus. It was the same scribe depicted on its side, clad in scraggly robes melting into the wall he stuck out of, looking down upon the grave at his feet with his gaunt face, scribbling his findings on his scroll. From his wall, Gale declared in awe:

“I saw this writing in a book yesterday. This is devoted to Jergal, the former god of the dead, before the dead three took over his domain. And are doing a

terrible job of it, if you ask me.”

A grunt drew her attention. Astarion had tried to lift the lid and failed. “Don’t just look at my posterior. I know it is irresistible. But right now I need a good, strong shoulder, so make yourself useful. You can go back to watching when we have found the treasure.” He coaxed her. Since treasure was the only thing they had gone down for, she went over without losing a word and let him count down to open the grave. With a grating sound, the lid yielded by about a span, enough to peak inside.

“I see something glistening. Only a little bit further, and i can reach it.” He counted again, and with all their might, they shouldered the lid open. The moment it moved, an audible click resounded from the walls of the room.

“Oh shit!” Astarion cursed and quickly grabbed whatever was in reach to dive to safety behind the grave.

A chilling breeze wafted through the room, and Shadowhearts eyes went wide.

“Necromancy!”

The bones on the floor rattled with magic, drawing them together like puppets on strings. Tsisk rushed for the wall, grabbed an urn and pulled. Pain shot through her wrist again. The urn wobbled, then toppled over onto one of the newly forming skeletons. It crashed down and smashed the bones to pieces. Shadowheart went for another skeleton in the back of the room and left Tsisk standing with two more. The dragonborn picked up a stone and went for the skull of the closest one. The years of decomposing must have made it brittle, because she found it oddly easy to cave in. There had to be a lot of skull smashing in her past to notice that. The skeleton, though, did not even notice its head missing. It stumbled for a bit, caught itself and raked its fingers over her face in return. She ignored the burning scrapes and fell back. She could hear Gale incantate a spell, but found no trace of the bastard Astarion. He had left them to their fate. She had no time to concern herself with this now, as the skeleton would not relent in its pursuit of her and she had neither shield nor weapon to defend herself

against an enemy with no meat to stick it into.

As she stumbled backwards, she noticed the weightless swaying of the headless skeleton, tottering after her off-balance. She wagered being considerably lighter than her would have its disadvantages and tried her luck by ramming her shoulder into it. It tumbled into the second one and went to the ground, which she followed up by jumping feet-first into its ribcage. The brittle bones burst to pieces beneath her, but now her feet were stuck in a cage formed by her act of violence. She tripped and fell to the ground. With her feet tangled up in the ribs, she could not control her fall, and the impact with the ground knocked the wind out of her.

Gale finished a spell of his own, and three wisps of piercing blue light left his hands. They flew over in a dizzying pattern of movement and impacted on the second skeleton set on attacking the now prone dragonborn. It chipped away at its bones, but did little to stop it. She fervently kicked at the ribs holding her feet. She would not get them free in time, she knew. And yet, giving up was no option she even considered.

The remaining skeleton reached out to claw at her face as she finally managed to smash the ribs to pieces. She let herself fall the rest of the way to the ground and shielded her face with her arms in the expectation of pain. Maybe the wizard could put together another spell to destroy this thing.

Pain never came. Tsisk peeked out and found Astarion standing over the skeletons remains with a bent and rusty sword in his hands. He had used it as a club and dispersed the weakened bones throughout the room.

Shadowheart had done the same with hers and walked back over. Tsisk laboriously heaved herself up, avoiding her hurting wrist.

“Serves you right for stealing from the dead.” Said Shadowheart. “Now show that to me. This looks like you hurt it again.”

“It hurts, yes.” Tsisk spoke from between clenched teeth. The cleric was not especially gentle with her.

“That’s what you get for stealing from the dead. And I remember telling you not to use that hand for quite a while. You need to listen better. My patience runs out faster than beer at a dwarven gathering.”

Nonetheless she quietly spoke her prayer to Shar. A dark shadow crept over Tsisks scales, taking all colour with it and leaving them as pearly white as they had been before. Tsisk breathed in deeply and asked Astarion „Was it at least worth the trouble?“

“I don’t know. But let’s take a look. There is a dagger...”

“A magical dagger.” Gale interjected.

“...that I can make good use of, thank you very much... an iron coin and a bit of cheap jewellery. I guess you can have the rest.” He said graciously, while slipping the dagger and an unmentioned potion away and into his garments. The ease and casualness of it told Tsisk a great deal about how often he must’ve done some similar trick. But although he tried to claim the valuables, he had overlooked the most expensive of them all. Tsisk knew the iron coin held considerably more worth than any Gold. It held the soul of a mortal unlucky enough to die in the hells. She put it safely into her pocket.

“Can we go now? We have dawdled enough.” Shadowheart demanded impatiently.

Astarion grabbed their attention by grabbing what he could reach of them without looking away from the sarcophagus, where yet another undead hovered a few inches above the ground „It’s not over yet. He wants his treasures back, I think.“

This figure was different from the mindless skeletons. Its posture spoke of dignity and it looked upon them from hooded, sunken eyes that nonetheless held an infinity. Dry skin was pulled taut over a skull adorned with gold embellishments, resembling the swirls and arches Gale had traced on the wall. The robes it wore were mere tatters, hanging loosely from its figure, but hinted at former glory with rich colours and intricate patterns hidden under grey dust.

The group stood frozen, unsure how to react to it until it began to speak.

„So He has spoken, and so thou standest before me. Right as always. What a curious way to awaken.“

It took them by surprise. Sentient undead were very rare, most of them being consumed by rage, like the skeletons – or hunger, such as zombies. This one was neither one nor the other, but spoke with a calm and raspy voice, the death-rattle of a beloved mentor, the last wheeze of a father dying happy in his loved ones arms:

„Now, I have a question for thee: what is the worth of a single mortals life?“

Tsisk was able to shake off her shock well before the others came back to their senses. “Who wants to know that?” She asked.

“That is of no importance. Quench my curiosity and I shall let thy rest.”

“The worth of a person lies in their actions.”

It answered “Very well. I am satisfied.” and then, after a pause:

„We have met and I know thy face. We will see each other again at the proper time and place. Farewell.“

And with that, it turned and walked away, leaving them speechless once more.

”What a creepy encounter.” Was all Astarion had to say to it. Now thoroughly spooked, everyone gathered their stuff and they left the tomb and the ruins altogether.

As they went on, Gale tried to initiate a conversation „May I ask what each of you did before you were whisked away into the ship and given your little squiggly brain-lurker? I would like to know more about the people I’m sharing my fate with, good or bad.“

Both Shadowheart and Astarion did not seem keen on answering that specific question. Tsisk figured she might need the goodwill of these people for a while longer in these hostile lands. There also was nothing to hide, as there was nothing to tell, either. “I cannot remember anything before the ship. It is all lost to me.

Sometimes I get a glimpse or a hunch of a life before, but it isn't much."

"That does not sound like a side effect of the tadpole, but memory loss can come from a great variety of conditions." Shadowheart mused. „About my life: I was on a mission for my order when it got me." She refused to elaborate further and told them she had already said way more than she was supposed to.

Everyone looked over expectantly at Astarion, who answered pointedly annoyed. „What's to tell? I'm a magistrate back in the city. It's all rather tedious.“

Tsisks inability and Shadowhearts and Astarions unwillingness to talk cut the conversation short. To escape the silence, Gale instead told them everything about his studies in Waterdeep, how he had become a prodigy at the blackstaff academy, apparently famous all over the sword coast for the outstanding education of outstanding wizards and sorcerers, and much more. Tsisks mind kept wandering off half-way through his ramblings about the great renown and adventures of this wizard or that. She much rather observed how the daylight filtered through the leaves of the forest to create a diffuse golden glow all around her and made the bright white of her scales the warm tint of creamy honey, a fascinating sight to see it changed like that. Fascinating, too, to see the brawl for light unfold between the fast-growing bushes. They soon got outgrown by the slower, but ultimately bigger trees, which would then smother everything with their deep and mighty shades. Until they, in turn, got choked by vines to open up space for the shoot up of bushes once they fell. A perfect dance of life and death, conducted over generations of mortals like her.

Inbetween the foliage alongside their path she noticed an uncommon pattern. The bush was too dense, the leaves of several different trees intertwined and slightly wilted. She stopped the others and made them aware.

"Camouflaged traps, very crudely built." Astarion discounted them. "I hope they don't expect anything to end up in it. It looks so shoddy it wouldn't hold a bunny."



She pointed to a simple clubbing mechanism hidden in more twigs and leaves. “It won’t run away if it’s dead.”

Shadowheart retorted: “Interesting. Someone is hunting for human-sized bunnies. We should be more careful.”

## 6. at the gate

Not even half an hour and two more hidden traps later, they came upon signs of civilisation. A pile of stones giving directions, a clearing that was obviously used as a gathering place.

From afar, the sound of drums reached their ears. Several different types were played individually with no common rhythm or beat.

“I will go and have a look what this is all about.” Astarion said annoyed. He melted into the bushes and was gone. The rest tiredly trotted further along the path, now widened to the point where two people could comfortably walk next to each other. The cacophony closed in on the travellers.

Astarion broke out of the shrubbery just moments later in a run.

“Go, go, go!” He urged them on. “Hurry! It’s a goblin warband!”

Gale picked up the speed. “Can’t we just hide?”

Tsisk would have preferred that, too. Her whole body was sore and aching from the day before and the little sleep she got had not helped. Hiding would suit her much better than attack right now.

“Sure. Try your luck with the worg.” Astarion said and ran on.

A worg was bad news, Tsisk remembered. She vaguely pictured bonfire-stories shared between strangers to one-up and warn each other at the same time. In those stories, they were rumoured to be as intelligent and bloodthirsty as the goblins that used to ride the wolf-like beasts. Which didn’t mean much compared to most humans, but was still way above normal wolves by far. They were apex predators in their own right and she did not want to find out today how much of that was true. She ignored her aching bones and ran after the pale elf.

Ten minutes down the path the forest suddenly opened to a clearing, a furrow

at the foot of a rocky incline too steep to climb. Rocks broken off of the sheer cliffs littered the ground, some as small as childrens' heads, one even as big as a house, sunken into the ground and conquered by plants taking root in its crevices. A gate to a passage between the cliffs, easily visible from above, closed in front of their eyes.

“Let us in! Goblins are coming!” Shadowheart shouted up and hammered against the ramshackle gate. She was barely out of breath, despite wearing her heavy armour, while Gale and Tsisk stumbled onto the clearing huffing and puffing.

“You led the goblins to us? They will kill us all now!” A tiefling angrily shouted back. The drums the group had left behind closed in fast.

“We can help fight them off!” The cleric pleaded. A discussion ensued above the gate. Tsisk decided to not hope for their goodwill and hide on the big rock jutting out from the ground just a few long strides away from the gate. An obstacle the goblins would not care to climb themselves, when there were obvious targets at the gate. Astarion joined her and strung a hunting bow he had taken from the bandits the night before.

The discussion got heated, angrier. And finally, the gate was raised. But it was too late. The drumming died down, as a dozen goblins and a worg – crooked, ugly creatures – crested the hill and pelted the fortification with arrows. The tiefling at the winch got hit and the gate fell closed again. Shadowheart and Gale were now trapped between the rocks and the onrushing warband. The wizard began to weave one of his spells.

From atop the rock, Tsisk could see the goblins come down the hill and the defenders on the gate hurriedly ready their own bows. She could see their nervous fumbling. None of them seemed to have experience at fighting, while the only tiefling in armour egged them on in a foolish attempt to quicken their actions with shouting. He succeeded in heightening the frantic energy. Finally, the first arrow got nocked, the bow drawn – and the enemy missed by a wide

shot.

Tsisk cursed under her breath. This way, her companions would fall. Even if they were capable, this situation just was way above their heads. The first goblin skirmishers, armed with clubs and cutlasses, reached the bottom of the furrow at the same time Gale finished his spell. An oily sheen covered the area before him and Shadowheart. The goblins slithered and stumbled and fell in an attempt to cross it. He had bought them some time and made the goblins work to get Shadowhearts dangerous reach. Maybe they had a chance after all.

Another goblin took position directly underneath her. It was an old hag, rattling with little bones and rats skulls dangling from her clothes, reeking of unwashed feet and the rancid fat used to colour her face with the impression of a bloody hand. Her own hands clawed at the air as she hissed and grunted rhythmically to cast a spell of her own. She was an easy target. And a worthwhile one. Her death would greatly improve the chances of Shadowheart and Gale further.

She dropped from her hiding place onto the goblin shaman to throw her to the ground. Her much smaller and lighter target stood no chance. Tsisk picked her up at the shoulders and brought the screaming goblins' head down to shatter it on the ragged surface to her feet. It was not killed outright, but the pained whimpers made for a satisfying background-noise she enjoyed too much to make them stop herself.

A sturdy, humanoid femur was fastened to the shamans belt. It was a weapon to her taste, heavy in her claws and very useful to inflict painful fractures, rendering her targets defenceless for later. She shoved the limp body out of her way and stepped out of the shadow of the stone into the fray. A figure like her, she knew, was difficult to overlook. Bright scales and an unusual height attracted attention. She counted on it.

Two goblin archers saw her, alone. Tsisk let them have a good look at her, seemingly scared and confused, then quickly backed away and took cover as if

she were afraid. Made cocky, overly sure to get a kill and some loot, both moved in on her position and away from the rest of the warband.

When she felt they were close enough, she assaulted them full force with her stolen weapon. Surprised, the goblins scattered, making it even easier for her to pick a target of her liking. She went for the smaller one first.

Bloodlust swept over her, made her dance to the rhythm of her wildly beating heart. With every blow rendered it grew, dizzying and exhilarating. The dance ended, when two barely recognizable bodies lay before her. Her breaths were pumping, her vision narrowed to the slice of ruin she had facilitated.

An arrow whistled past her head, causing her to tear her gaze away from the mess. Another goblin had sneaked up on her. It had come within a distance of just two steps and could have easily buried its cutlass in her back. Now, the feathers of an arrow stuck out of its unmoving chest. Astarion had executed it from his hiding place.

Tsisk let her gaze sweep over the battle field. A small number of goblins had fallen to the arrows of the gates defenders, others to Shadowhearts and Gales combined efforts, currently turned against the worg. Outnumbered, the last two goblins turned to run. Tsisk followed them into the woods. This proved to be an exciting day.

It was easy enough to catch up to the short-legged goblins, deciding how exactly they should die was the difficult part. She took her time.

When she re-emerged from the wood, covered in fresh, red splatters of blood, she was awaited.

The armoured tiefling had come down to the gate.

“Did you catch them?” He asked, anxiously.

“They’re dead.”

“By the nine hells! This could have been a disaster! Do you know what you very nearly did?”

Rage boiled up inside Tsisk. “I fought with your people against goblins you wouldn’t even have stood a chance against.” She stated with the calm of a cat poised to jump.

“There are children here! I couldn’t risk it!” He looked frightened, but at least he had enough sense not to back away. “We lost three people in this fight, because you led the goblins to us!”

Tsisk wished to have a moment alone in the woods with this man. She opened and closed her hand several times. It itched to be closed around his neck. Here, she needed to remain in control, until the tadpole-situation was resolved.

“You would have lost more than that if we did not arrive together with the goblins.” She carefully pronounced every word, her eyes fixed on his.

“She’s right. The goblins were well on their way to this place when we encountered them.” Shadowheart chipped in from the side. “So how about you show yourself a little bit more thankful and tell us where the next healer lives in these woods?”

He exhaled a slow breath and responded. “That would be Nettie, down in the druids’ grove. Given they let you in, of course. They’re wary of strangers these days.”

“Thank you! We’ll be leaving you again as soon as our problem is solved.” The Tiefling immediately perked up. “So you’re adventuring travelers? Are you looking for that thing that came down two days ago?”

“The more befitting term might be victims of circumstance, but adventurer has a certain ring to it I like more. Our biggest concern is the healer, everything else is up to fate in my case.” Gale answered.

“Yes, yes, go down there, treat your wounds. After that, though, I could need someone to look out for Halsin, the Archdruid of the grove. He went missing. I’m sure we can negotiate a reward for your effort.”

Shadowheart interjected: “We don’t have time for that. I must return to Baldurs Gate at once.”

“I implore you to change your mind, adventurers. Too much is at stake. But to thank you for your help today, I invite you. It is not much we have, but we will share. If you need to find me, my name is Zevlor.”

An obvious attempt at manipulation, if Tsisk had ever seen one, but food was food.

## 7. in the grove

The grove itself was a series of interconnected caves in a rock-side gently sloping downwards to a druidic stone circle and opening to a small piece of shore on the other side. Fine sand covered the ground and swallowed the sound of their footsteps. Despite that, it was noisy inside. Tieflings were going about their days, children running around screaming and hollering. The walls of the cave were lined with makeshift tents and huts. Zevlor had not understated how little could be had here. Most of the people she saw did not own more than they could carry on their backs and most often even that was not more than their offspring. Some ox-drawn carts had likely carried the tents and some remnants of the last harvest. Only three bony oxen were stabled in a little corral on her way in, she remembered. The carts would have needed more to be moved here. They made their way down towards the stone circle. Tsisk felt some familiarity with this place. She had walked these steps before, in a life bygone. Longing overcame her. This place held something she wanted... and confused her. Nothing here looked worthwhile of her attention, it was only stone and dirt and people but useful skills or influence. The interesting part had to lay deeper down, then, behind the stone circle. Her descent stopped. A guard of two druids in simple garbs of linen and leather together with a bear refused them entry into the druids sanctum.

“On Kaghas orders, no one can come in until the ritual is finished!” One of them said. Behind them, screams of rage and surprise erupted and made the guards turn their heads.

„The Idol!“

„Catch the thief!“



A small child ran up to them, followed by a drove of angry druids lead by a woman. The girl dodged the guards and tried to sprint past them with a wooden idol of an old man with antlers in her hands. As she passed her, Tsisk grabbed the little tiefling-girl by the shoulders and plucked the thing out of her desperately clutching hands. The girl squealed and floundered. Which was in vain, as she was much smaller and weaker than the dragonborn. Tsisk examined the idol and ignored the protesting outcries of the girl.

Was this what she sought? It certainly did not look useful, but inherent power wasn't always obvious. It seemed to be nothing more than an expertly carved figure of a wizened old man, worn smooth and shining from being touched by many hands over many years. The dense wood felt unusually light in her hands. It had to be very old and cherished to have survived to dry out for that long. Signs of any imbued magic, though, like runes or other ominous sigils were completely missing. Just an old man made out of wood.

“You! Hand over the child and our Idol!” The leader of the drove demanded rudely. “She will die for her transgressions.” Her slitted eyes threatened terrible consequences for anyone daring to disobey her, her body wound up to strike at any moment.

Shadowheart gasped and stepped to the front, blocking the furious druid.

“Die? For what? She did not harm you in any way.”

“She foiled our ritual to bring back peace to this grove. We will need days to get it back where we were.” The woman hissed.

An older druid, leaning heavily on his gnarled staff, shuffled through the crowd to scold the woman. “Kagha! Kill a child? Here? We are to balance the forces of nature and civilisation, not to force nature on others.”

Her head swivelled around to stare the old man into the ground, who took her rage stoically.

„We will keep the grove safe and you will obey me as the archdruid, now! Halsin was a fool to go to the temple. You should accept that he won't come

back.“

“That must not mean we have to burn his legacy like a forge burns wood. Isn't it enough to deprive the Elturians of our protective presence, must you now kill them outright, too?”

The girl twisted in Tsisk's grasp until her hand held nothing more than her threadbare shirt. To which the child promptly wriggled out of the rag and slipped away. As soon as she was set free, the little girl bolted and vanished into the camp. A clever little thing, Tsisk thought amused. She would make it far if she didn't get herself killed first.

Shadowheart tried to take the idol out of Tsisk's hands to surrender it to the druids. The cleric's right hand trembled, an open wound visible on its back. It looked old, the skin around it shrivelled and red, but it had never scabbed over, glistening wet. Her face was twisted in concentration. Pain was written all over it. Tsisk briefly wondered where the wound had come from, and surrendered the idol to her.

“There. You got it back. You can leave her be now. I'm sure she's scared enough.”

Kagha took the idol with scorn and carried it with great grandeur through the onlooking crowd to place it on a pedestal in the middle of the stone circle. Sharp and loud, she ordered the other druids to go back to their meditations to finish the ritual. They did so hesitantly and with sour expressions.

“If you were not the ones to save us from the Goblins today, I would cast you out immediately. Just tell me why you are here, so you can leave sooner.” She told the group of adventurers.

“We need a healer for an affliction that bothers us.” The dragonborn told her. Kagha eyed them up and down hostilely. „Go see Nettie, she was Halsins apprentice and knows a bit more about healing than the rest of the grove. *Do not dawdle* and leave as soon as you are done. When the ritual finishes, this grove will be closed off to the outside world, free from intruders – and little thieves.”

The last part was spat out with disgust. She turned on her heels and went back to lead the ritual.

The older druid had shuffled over and looked through his wild and wispy hair at Tsisk – directly from below her, courtesy of his crooked back.

“I think I know you. How did you fare after you left us?”

Alarmed, she asked: “How do you know me?”

“You came through here twenty-odd years before, on your way to Baldurs Gate, do you not remember?”

“I do not. An accident let me forget almost everything. What do you know about me?” She inquired.

“Not much, I fear. You did not stay for long. But dragonborn are rare sights at the sword-coast and dragonborn who aspire to be druids even more so. You were troubled with something preventing you to hear the voice of nature. Very eager, almost desperate to learn about the ways of life. I remember that much.”

“I... wanted to be a druid?”

“That was your wish. You became restless and went before we could find out what troubled you. Maybe you felt the darkness coming. That winter, a lot of people died around here.”

“They died? How?”

“The trapper got caught in his traps, the woodcutter hacked into his own legs...strange accidents, all horrible. A curse, perhaps. We never found out. It stopped as abruptly as it began.”

She had a suspicion about the origins of said curse, but what had driven her to seek out the sedateness of a druids life? Dwelling in a grove her whole life, hidden away from everything outside felt too much like being trapped.

The old man smiled warmly and bade them to come in. “Maybe we can help you this time. You are welcome with me any time, no matter what that snake Kagha might say about it.”

They followed him deeper into the sanctum. It was built into the side of the mountain, carefully carved out of the stone. Close to the entrance roots and vines adorned the walls, growing in luscious cascades and making for a cosy, inviting atmosphere. He led them in deeper, into chambers washed from the stone over thousands of years, guarded by serene stone wolves, bears, elks, eagles and many more statues, big and small. Wild animals roamed the cave freely and without fear. Their curious gazes followed the group on their way in. The path formed a small labyrinth of winding corridors until they finally stopped in a room full of glasses, bottles and clay pots with ingredients lining walls, pouches and dried herbs hung under the ceiling and a wild mix of books about anatomy and magical afflictions thrown open on a table and littering the floor.

A dwarf was busy examining a drow on her table. The old man cleared his throat to get her attention.

“Not now, I need to know more about this. Come back later.” She said while continuing her studies.

“Nettie, child, I have brought guests to seek your help in a rather urgent matter.”

“You should not call me child. I’m five years your senior.”

“And yet you do not know how it is to be old and frail, youngling. And until you find out, I will continue.”

With a sigh, Nettie turned with tweezers in hand and looked at them, tired.

“You don’t look sick. Tell me why it is urgent that I see you. I don’t have time.”

Tsisk could now see the face of the drow. One eye was taken out and the socket used to access the brain. A jar was placed right next to him, with a dead worm preserved in liquid. It looked a little bit like a tiny shrimp without legs, a large number of hair thin tentacles floating around it in a revolting cloud.

Gale replied “I see you already have a specimen of what I wanted to ask you to excise from behind my eye. Your reputation as a healer has preceded you.”

Nettie visibly stiffened up when he said that, but with a cheery voice began rummaging through her ingredients. “Oh dear, would you just sit down over there, I will help you once I find...this!” She came over with a thorned bramble in her hand and took Gales arm. “Just a few questions, then a little prick with this and you’ll be healed!”

Tsisk recognized the bramble and yanked his arm away. With a cold and steely voice she said to Nettie “You will not use poison on him.” And pulled him away from her. He had naively trusted a person with a dead victim of his own condition on her table, but at least he had been intelligent enough not to mention they all suffered from the same affliction.

Nettie looked apologetic and stammered “I...I just wanted to be safe. The drow was like you. He attacked us with the goblins some days before you arrived. He was killed, but as we tended to the bodies, this tadpole left from behind his eye.” She shuddered. “We examined him and he should be changed by now. He carried it far longer than three days. Normally, that is the time a transformation takes, from infection to mindflayer. How long do you have yours?”

“So you say this one was not affected by the tadpole and remained unchanged? How wondrous and exciting news.” Gale rejoiced. “I feared after three days with the little wrigglers in our heads we were running out of time.” The dwarven lady looked horrified.

“Th-Then it coincides with what Master Halsin and I found. We suspect that there might be more out there just like you and the drow. The tadpoles won’t change them like normal. He went on an expedition to get to know more about it, and never returned.”

“How very unfortunate. Since you studied them with him, would you be able to get it out?” Gale asked.

Nettie sighed heavily “I can see how you could think that, but I am merely Master Halsins apprentice. If you want a druid who knows about difficult procedures like that, you will have to find him. Which we would all very much

appreciate. But you must make me a promise: If you feel that any of you are turning, take this.” She went over to a shelf holding little vials, took one of them and brought it back to the group.

“This is Wyvern poison and it will kill you instantly – and mostly without pain – before you can turn on your companions and kill them instead.”

Tsisk took the little flask from her and put it in her backpack. That seemed to satisfy the dwarf.

Most of her companions already filed out of the room, so Tsisk asked Nettie a question that had been on the tip of her tongue the entire time:

„Do you know if memory-loss and violent visions are part of the symptoms of these tadpoles?“

Nettie looked taken aback, but considered it for quite some time, before she answered.

“Our knowledge is shallow. There is nothing about that in the books we possess and Halsin never mentioned it. There could be other reasons still.”

Tsisk thanked her and left the room as the last of her group. On her way through the corridors, Astarion stepped from the shadows and matched her strides “I hope you do not intend to use the poison, do you?” He asked quietly.

“At least not on myself.” She answered briskly.

The elf grinned from ear to ear and said with glee “Now that is an answer to my tastes. Do you have someone in mind already? - Just curious.”

Tsisk stopped and leaned closer to him so he could hear her hushed voice more clearly. “The first one to sprout tentacles or become a pain in my neck.” Astarion answered with a high-pitched laugh. “I am sure you will find good use for it. You do not seem as heavily encumbered by conscience as the rest. And your survival instincts helped you through all of this – shipwreck, mindflayers, bandits and goblins – quite the achievement, if I might say so.” His steps accelerated and he left her to her own devices.

His behaviour puzzled Tsisk. The laughter could not deceive her, for it was

nervous. But clearly, he sought her presence. The question was: To what end?

Back out of the confines of the cave, the elder druid waited for her on a sunny bench. “Could Nettie help you already?” He asked.

“Only to ease my mind a little bit from the most pressing questions.” She answered.

“Peace of mind is important. Nature’s voice is in everything, but it is faint and easily overheard if your mind is in turmoil.”

That sentence hit her deeply. He could not know in how much turmoil she was, but maybe he had seen enough of it on her face. Even now, the urges surged with every perceived weakness, wanted her to hurt and take lives and was barely satisfied by the lowly goblin-scum she had mutilated earlier. The tieflings and druids seemed much more daring targets, and her companions, too. If she failed to quench it she might just give in some day soon. So she let him guide her through a series of meditating exercises to calm down the storm clouding her head. She got rewarded by feeling her surroundings more clearly, the teaming of life the grove was. Everything here felt like a unity, carefully interwoven by the druids until wolf and deer could co-exist in peace. And even though it did not relieve her from it, she felt the urge quieten down until she could hear the soothing words of nature in the rustle of leaves, the trickle of the stream and the chirp and chatter of its denizens.

“You should go now and meditate on your own. I can recommend you a place that oversees the coast. It always inspires me.”

Tsisk thanked the elder druid profoundly and went to the aforementioned place with a smile on her face and a bounce in her steps that had not been there before.

## 8. Alfira

When she came to the cliff he had described to her, she saw – and heard – it was occupied already. A tiefling bard had put up camp and played one tune on her lute, over and over again.

The bard did not notice Tsisk, who just stood close by, leaning on a rock and watched her struggle with that tune and a verse that would not come out as intended.

For some time, Tsisk lost herself in the music while she felt the sun on her scales, the wind that billowed her clothes and brought the taste of salt from the shore to her lips.

The singing ceased, which displeased her. But the voice which had accompanied her daydreaming cut through her thoughts instead:

“Hello, stranger! Since you were listening to my struggles for so long, would you mind helping me with my song?”

Tsisk opened her eyes and saw the bard, clad in gaudy clothes somehow made not ridiculous by her wearing them, rather accentuating her friendly cheerfulness with the tingling of bells and soft colours combined with bold patterns. A happy smile invited her in, and with the urge calmed, Tsisk felt comfortable and warm throughout in her presence. Her own face unconsciously turned into a soft smile, too.

Together, both sat on the cliffs, while the bard – Alfira she said was her name – worked on her song. She wanted to write it in honour of her deceased mentor, to remember her by it.

She told Tsisk how they had to flee Elturel, their home city, after the hells had opened and swallowed it whole, before heroes could return it back to its place in



the Heartlands of Faerûn. The people had exiled them for being descendants of hellish creatures, with the same glowing eyes and curling horns, even though they had fallen victim to the hells' horrors just as them. And on their Flight, many of the tieflings died from hunger, foes or sometimes just simple heart-break.

Her Mentor, Lihala, had died defending her from Gnolls attacking them on their way to Baldurs Gate, just before they sought shelter in the grove. Tsisk sensed Alfira just needed to vent her story to someone and happily lent her ear to her. It felt only right after she had benefitted so brazenly from her pain before. When she was finished, Alfira seemed more light-hearted and clear-minded than before.

“Thank you for listening to me. It’s all so close right now and no one seems to have time for another ones misery when they have their own to consider.”

“Any time.” Tsisk answered, and meant it.

“I call it “The Weeping Dawn”.”

Alfira began playing again, tentatively at first, but then with more passion than before. All of her grief and pain and heartache she had told Tsisk of now channelled into her song.

Whatever she had struggled with vanished, and a beautiful, sad melody floated down to the waves that languidly lapped at the rocks beneath them.

Dance upon the stars tonight  
Smile and pain will fade away  
Words of mine will turn to ash  
When you call the last light down

Moon reminds me of your grace  
All the love I can't repay  
Rest and know that I will pray

Farewell my dear old friend

Moon, sun, all remind me of your grace

Faith. Care. All the love I can't repay

Moon, sun, all remind me of your grace

Faith. Care. All the love I can't repay

Dance upon the stars tonight

Smile and pain will fade away

Words of mine will turn to ash

When you call the last light down

Moon reminds me of your grace

All the love I can't repay

Rest and know that I will pray

Farewell my dear old friend

Dance upon the stars tonight

Smile and pain will fade away

For a few precious moments, Tsisk felt free of her sorrows, free from fear and free of her urges, while she looked at the setting sun.

“I wish I could listen to you every evening, to remind me of this day.” She mused aloud.

Alfira laid her own hand on Tsisks. “Thank you for saying that. It is everything a bard wants to hear.”

When the sky began to burn in the most intense hues of scarlet and crimson, Alfira said:

“So I gather you are an adventurer? Where are you headed to?”

“I belong to a group of adventurers. We all have a common problem and are on the hunt for a solution. It looks like that solution might be the druid Halsin. After that, we will see.” Tsisk answered.

A lively, happy grin grew on the bard's face “That sounds wonderful! I hate sitting around and waiting for things to change – or not – and Halsin actually advocated for us. He would help us against that vile woman, maybe even stop her from that stupid ritual. You do not happen to have the space for a bard to accompany you, do you?”

Tsisk thought about it. It pleased her very much to have Alfira around. Her happy energy and her songs could bring her happiness unlike any she could remember. And as such, she said yes and invited Alfira to come along to their camp. Since the sky began to darken, she helped Alfira gather her meagre belongings and they set out to find the others.

They found them in a clearing at the grove. Everyone else already had set up their tents and bedrolls, a fire was burning and Gale cooked a hearty meal from what the tieflings had to spare for their saviours. It was not much, but it would fill them for tonight and Gale had wrought his magic with a few herbs and spices procured from the druid's gardens. The smell of it made Tsisk's and Alfira's stomachs growl. With everyone set around the fire, Tsisk introduced Alfira to the others. The bard played a few tunes to make the time pass faster and lighten the mood. Tsisk could see that the others were in dire need of a bit of lightening up and was very satisfied with her choice of bringing Alfira with her.

Even Shadowheart opened up and told them that she hoped to go back to Baldur's Gate once the tadpoles were under control, so she could continue her service to her goddess.

After their meal and some talking and bantering, the events of the day caught up to one after the other and they went to bed tired and exhausted. Only Gale and Tsisk were left awake when he began talking to her.

“The stars shine bright today. To think that some of them get snuffed out while we look at them and we don’t even notice...” For a while, they just sat there as they looked up, until Gale spoke again. “You think the tadpoles might be the worst threat to us, do you?”

She looked back at him. “I have not seen or heard of anything more threatening.”

Gale took a deep breath before he told her “Well, consider my...illness...I have conducted it well before the tadpole and I thought it to be under control, but under these circumstances I might not be able to keep it like this much longer. It also requires more upkeep now than before.”

“What illness?” Tsisk asked sceptical and scrutinized him for signs of such. He looked paler than the day before, his eyes sunken. The veins on his face and neck shone prominently through his skin. Had they always reached to his eye, tainted its amber hue to a muddy purple? She wasn’t too sure about it and scolded herself for not noting about it earlier.

“The magical kind. Look, if it weren’t so urgent I would not bother you with it, but it is. If I go down or loose control, I might take with me an area the size of Waterdeep. All of you included, regrettably. But – there is something to be done. If I die, you must revive me in the span of two days...”

“That won’t happen.”

“...AND I might require a magical item very soon to consume and calm the magical storm that is brewing within me. It is of the utmost importance to keep that from happening.”

His statement made Tsisk very uneasy. Magical items were not common and their owners seldom parted with them on their own volition.

“Is this the only way? Are you sure?”

Gale huffed a sad little laughter before he answered. “I have found no other solution yet. And if you insist, I can consume – destroy it before your own eyes, so you can be sure I won’t misappropriate it.”

Tsisk nodded. His magical illness sounded no more illegitimate than her own and if he said the truth, he could indeed prove more dangerous than anyone else in the camp. She wondered if she could outpace the radius of whatever would happen. But then she remembered she knew nothing about the area and could not hope to survive the wilderness on her own if a whole caravan of tieflings was doomed the moment they left the safety of the grove. So her only option remaining was to keep him alive. In spite of these news, Tsisk fell asleep easily and without vile fantasies intruding on her peace of mind for once.

## 9. Bhaals Spawn

She awoke in the middle of the night, when Alfira tossed and turned and mumbled in her sleep. Obviously, the latest events in her life would inspire bad dreams. Tsisk wanted to sit down and comfort her in her sleep, but she felt the urges grip on her thoughts. She fought it, but a looming presence followed and whispered to her in her mind. How easy it would be to quieten the small figure beneath her, to make her sleep eternally. Would it not be a mercy to never feel fear again, be free of it for ever? The urge resounded within her, drowning out every other noise until she could hear nothing more than its siren song, luring her on to destruction. Tsisk set in motion with excited, jerky movements. A dagger would be fine to carve flesh from ribs, but today, her hunger was so enormous, that she felt only a pure death and ravaging by her own bare hands would do it justice.

As she stood over Alfira's sleeping form, wrapped in her cloak for warmth, Tsisk hesitated for a brief moment.

The bard had helped her.

To betray the presence by calming the urge.

She had played a song for her.

Never for her, only for Lihala. The tiefling should join her mentor.

Such thoughts consumed the person that was Tsisk. As she laid her hands on Alfira, the last resemblance of herself fled into a corner of her head far, far away from the happenings of this night.

When she came back to herself, Tsisk was sitting before Alfira's badly mangled corpse. Her hands dripped with hot blood and gore, mixed with her sweat. Her body ached from the madness, her mind felt ravaged and raw. She wanted to close Alfira's eyes, but they were gone already, dark holes in a face

frozen in eternal pain. Instead, she took her hand and sat there, holding it while the body went cold and stiff.

Someone cleared his throat behind her and she managed to turn her head. Astarion stood at the edge of the lit area of the camp, returning from a venture outside.

“Would you mind explaining to me what happened here? You two seemed to be the bestest of friends when I went to sleep. And now you are arms deep in her guts.”

Tsisk needed some time to process his words, having to look back at the gruesome sight to confirm what she knew already.

“I killed her.” She said, matter of factly. There was no other explanation to this.

“I can see that. You are drenched in her blood, but *why* did you do it?” Astarion could not take his eyes from the mess, but seemed strangely unmoved by the sight at the same time.

“I don’t...remember.”

He grew impatient, restless even, then talked to her as if to a frightened child. In a calm, cheery voice he said:

“Look, I know I have a casual relationship with murder. I don’t remember everyone I’ve killed and why. But I usually have my reasons, however flimsy they might be. Hate, revenge – hells, fun, even. Make up your mind what it is going to be.”

He went over to his place in the camp and casually added:

“One word of advice: I might not think much of your escapades this night. But the others surely will. Rabid animals do not live very long in this world. Best make sure to hide all that evidence.” He then rolled up in his blanket.

Tsisk was not able to say if he truly slept. She did not care.

Tsisk mourned the loss of Alfira. Now she would never again be able to take refuge in the memories of this day. Instead, they would be a haunting reminder of the monster lurking inside her.

What on earth had made her do that? It was one thing to butcher goblins who would have done no better to her if given half a chance. Another entirely to maul someone whose company she had enjoyed. She could not understand what had driven her to that. The more so, as the events of the night were a blur, something that fled to cower in a dark corner of her memory, small and afraid and yet distinctly there, compared to the hole where memories should have told her of a life before the nautiloid.

She ignored the fear to draw forth what tried to escape her and found she had gotten overwhelmed by sudden hatred so intense, it tainted her thoughts even now. The next time, she promised herself, she would be prepared. She would not let it take her again, turn around to fight instead.

When the dawning sun painted the sky in the colour of her sin, Tsisk still sat in the middle of the bloody mess. She had not lifted a finger to hide what she had done.



## 10. Into the wilderness

The first person to wake up was Shadowheart. When she noticed Tsisk, she came over to wish her a good morning, until she saw what was left of Alfirmas body. The cleric inhaled sharply.

“What happened to her? And why are you covered in blood?” She accused Tsisk.

Her reaction startled Gale and Astarion awake, who now rushed to see for themselves. Astarion commented the sight with a disapproving click of his tongue, while Gale stood slack-jawed and gawked at the sight.

At last, Tsisk let go of Alfirmas hand. Nothing could hide the fact she was covered in the bard's blood and no traces of another suspect to be seen.

“I killed her. I didn't mean to, but I killed her.”

Shadowheart looked at her dubiously and asked enraged:

“What do you mean you didn't mean to? She's practically disembowelled! How could that be an accident?”

“My head...” Tsisk began, but interrupted herself. There was no need to appear like a raving lunatic without control. “I got taken by surprise. It won't happen again.”

“Do you want to say that was your tadpole?” Gale frowned.

Maybe it was. It was as good an explanation as any other she could manage.

“It seems so. Ever since I awoke, violence is on my mind. It is...difficult.”

Shadowheart threw her hands in the air. “So will you kill us in our sleep like her?”

Tsisk needed to get away from this interrogation and smooth all the ruffled feathers in one go. She gingerly wrapped Alfirmas remains in the bard's blanket and picked her up like a sleeping child, to act as a macabre shield.

“It surprised and overwhelmed me this time. It won’t succeed a second time.” The wizard didn’t lose his frown, but he relaxed slightly in guarded acceptance. She could work with that.

Shadowheart, though, watched her closely with crossed arms, barring her way. Tsisk shifted the weight of the load in her arms. It was heavy, so heavy.

“I want to bury her before anyone can find her and accuse the wrong people of doing anything.”

“It was you! Only you!”

So the cleric needed some more convincing. She guarded her secrets closely, always in fear of someone finding out more about her. Fear could be used to direct people, they tended to shy away from it.

“And you think they will not look at the people I came with closely when she is found? Let me bring her away.”

Shadowheart did not like the thought, that much was clear. Her face stayed scrunched up, her arms tangled, but she stepped aside, cast her gaze down to the ground and let Tsisk pass with her burden.

With interest, she noticed her words did not only affect the cleric, but the pale elf also. He had balled his fists and clenched his teeth while trying very hard to become one with the background. He, too, feared exposition. A useful discovery. Maybe she would need it.

She buried Alfira in a small copse, a remote part of the grove. The place she chose was sheltered by trees, warmed by the sun and opened up to a view of the ocean. She hoped the bard would have liked it.

On her body she found a Flute engraved with the name Lihala, that she took to remember Alfira, her mentor and her song, because no one else could do that for her now. Guilt tightened her heart until it felt like a heavy stone lodged in her chest, more painful than any wound she could remember. Tsisk knew the pain was bound to accompany her, for she had felt it before, even if she could not

remember the reason. She washed the flute and herself of the blood down at the beach before she went back to camp.

Coming back, Shadowheart thrust a piece of cloth into her hands.

“You forgot this!”

Its colour was undefinable, somewhere between brown and green and grey. It was plain wool, thick, but moth-eaten, without any embellishments on it, and soaked with blood. It was Alfiras cloak, heedlessly kicked aside in the struggle of the night and there it had stayed hidden until now. As she touched it she could feel magic radiating from it, emanating the menacing dark energy of this night it had drunk with Alfiras blood. It called on her to feed that magic with more, more victims, more death, to fuel its power and be rewarded with inconspicuousness in return. The thought clung syrupy sweet to her mind, evoking the wish to try it out on an unsuspecting person...She dropped it as if she held glowing coals and stuffed it under her bedroll with her foot, to get rid of its demands.

This day, Tsisk let the others do the talking and kept to the back. No one had noticed Alfiras disappearance. Or at least no one talked to them about it. The day was filled with the interrogation of Zevlor and his friends. They were only able to give them a general direction to the temple the goblins occupied. The druids themselves would not communicate with them in fear of Kaghas wrath. Most of them had not strayed from the groves surroundings for years, anyway, in fear of goblin raiding-parties, which had gotten more common lately. It was early afternoon when they gave up on their hunt for information and just went back to their camp.

Gale looked fatigued after the ordeal, with hollow eyes, a greyish complexion and dark blotches creeping up his skin from the neck. He approached Tsisk after dinner.

„I fear the time has come that I must ask you for a magical donation. Do you

have, perchance, anything on you that you could give me?“

So there was mercy in this universe.

„A cloak. Under my bedroll.“

Gale went over to pick it up and asked, astonished:

“Are you sure? This is some powerful item.” He took some time to examine it. “Powerful. And vile. Is that why you want to get rid of it?”

She growled back. “Take it off me, I don’t want it anywhere close.”

Even just sitting in its general vicinity let her feel its comforting touch trying to wrap around her to drink of the blood she would be spilling.

„Thank you, then, this should quieten my need for magic a good length of time and rid this world of its dark magic. Why is it even magical all of a sudden? I did not notice that yesterday.“

She stared at him until he averted his eyes and broke his discomfort with words.

“Alright, keep your secrets. It seems everyone has one these days. We are certainly not running out of them anytime soon.”

The process of consuming it was unremarkable. Gale concentrated on the magic that was woven into the substance of the cloak and unravelled it to add it to his own. To Tsisks eyes he closed his for a moment, breathed in and pressure lifted from Tsisks head. She felt relief when the compelling aura ceased.

This time, though, she watched his face closely. As he consumed the item, the purpleish veins faded and withdrew from his eye, nearly down to the collar to resume their work as a visual reminder of his pending demise.

This night, a guard was appointed. Tsisk quietly sat with all three through their turns as sleep denied the refuge of unconsciousness to her.

At dawn, they packed their belongings to go out into the woods in search of their only hope, the archdruid Halsin. When the group left the grove, a small crowd of Tieflings gathered at the gate to see them leave. To them, they were heroes just for venturing out of safe territory.

Not even half an hour down the road, they found a boar laying in a rut it had burrowed itself at the wayside. Boars were unpredictable, easy to rile creatures, Shadowheart warned them and advised everyone to approach carefully. Astarion did not heed her warning and walked straight up to it.

“Oh, look! It’s dead. We can go on.” He invited them to walk past. Shadowheart went around him to investigate it.

“I can’t see why it would die here.” She said, puzzled. „There must be a reason. A predator would surely have eaten it, but it doesn’t even look injured.“

Astarion rolled his eyes. „It’s just a pig. What could you even learn from it?“ Tsisk bumped the boar with her foot. A small swarm of flies took flight. It lay here for around two days, judging by the small larvae just starting to colonise the orifices of the body. A small cluster of them in the fur at its neck caught her attention. When she squatted down to get a closer look, she could see two small incisions in the skin. She brushed some of the bristles away and revealed pale skin all over the body, even on its underside, where it would pool after the collapse of the blood flow. But yet no drop of blood or spots on the ground nearby.

“It was bled dry.” She pointed at the ground. “There are grooves in the sand where it struggled, so it was killed here. Someone was very skilled not to shed a drop.” Tsisk looked up to see the reactions of everyone around her. “What creature could do that with a grown, wild boar?”

Shadowheart’s head was tilted, her mouth slightly opened while she followed her remarks. Gale watched very interested safely from afar and with his hands on his back, intend not to get too close to the decomposing corpse.

Astarion looked anxious, watching his surroundings more than them and the boar. Tsisk got a hunch that he might know more than he let on.

“What do you think, Astarion? Puncture-wounds, no blood, overpowered by something strong?”

He sighed, his eyes turned to the sky, as was his nose. “That would be the signs of a vampire-feast, my dear.”

“Vampires? The man-hunting, night-prowling kind, you mean? There are obscure books about them in the libraries of Waterdeep and half of them can’t even agree on what exactly they are and why. And now we encounter one in the wild?” Gale asked.

Astarion reassured him. “Yes, dear. Don’t worry. They only come out at night. And I will personally take first watch tonight, so you can rest easy.”

“How do you know so much about a creature even the wizard cannot safely identify?” Shadowheart asked.

“Personal interest. I investigated the matter closely in Baldur’s Gate. You would be surprised how much you can find about them there.”

The winding road brought them closer to the mountains looming on the horizon. After crossing a river, they could see a village from afar. A stonewall protected the settlement from Gnolls, Goblins and other vermin, its purpose foiled by the gates standing wide open. Silence encapsulated them as they came closer. It was not just the absence of noises a settlement would be making, but the absence of noise of any kind to make Tsisks scales itch. Nothing scurried through the brown leaves on the ground or shouted its tenure from the canopies of the trees.

Together, they decided an open approach would be inviting trouble and circled the village to find another way through. A dead end where the wall merged with steep cliffs dropping off towards the river stopped their advance. Their only chance to get through was a portion freshly toppled over to form a rockslide of bricks and debris broken off of the cliff it was built upon. At its base, a light grey dog with matted fur, mid-thigh height and guarded posture stood and observed them attentively while they closed in. It barked, once, as they approached, shambled about in a small circle and kept guarding the pile.

Astarion pulled his unstrung bow out of his baggage. “Step aside, I will put that mutt out of its misery.”

“No! No, you will not do that!” Shadowheart loudly ordered, trying to grasp the bow.

“Then how are we supposed to get past it? Are you going to volunteer your firm behind to protect ours?”

Tsisk saw an opportunity to get back in the good graces of the cleric. She was the only one with real fighting experience here and sorely needed.

“Let me deal with it.” She said and rummaged through her bag.

“Don’t you dare touch that dog!” Shadowheart looked about ready to draw her weapon as Tsisk’s hand emerged with the end of a sausage.

“Stay here, it is probably very scared.”

Tsisk put down everything else and went away from the rest to lure the dog away. Its eyes were glued to the sausage, its head sunken between its shoulders anxiously. She dropped down low in a squat to appear less threatening, offered the food without looking at it and softly called out to the dog. It slowly and tentatively put one paw before the other, sniffing the air and watching her with its head bobbing up and down to keep her as well as the sausage in view. Before long, she had lured the dog away from the rockslide to let through her companions. It was now fully focused on the piece of meat, which she fed to it in small pieces to keep it distracted.

“There’s a body under the stones!” Shadowheart exclaimed. With the help of the two men, she drew him out from under the rocks. It was a man in travel gear of good quality, a bag still slung around his shoulder. His body had been crushed by the stones to a beautiful, boneless rag. Tsisk lamented the fact she had not been here to see this, been part of his suffering in any way...

She tore her eyes from him. This had killed Alfira. She needed to get her urges under control.

The dog whimpered and returned back to the side of the body to sit down. His

calm demeanor inspired Shadowheart to scratch the filthy scruff of his neck.

“Aw, poor boy. He was your master, wasn’t he? But he’s dead now.” She tried to get the dog to leave him be, but he would not listen to her commands.

“How did you do that earlier?”

“All animals are controlled by fear, hunger and habit. I eased his fear, offered him food and told him what to do.”

“Can’t you do it again? He’s lost out here in the woods alone.”

Tsisk shook her head. “He got what he wanted. He is content and will only do as he pleases from now on. I have nothing more to offer.”

Shadowheart tried one last time, then followed them up the rock-slide into the village.

A stench of rot and decay wafted around them as soon as they entered the treacherous safety of the walls. A pig that was kept in a hutch by the villagers lay dead in the mud, its body bloated. It looked like someone had used it to exercise their thrusts with spears.

The houses they encountered were plundered and destroyed. Doors and windows were opened, furniture toppled over and everything that wasn’t of value thrown to the ground or on the street. One house even had a fresh hole in its wall one and a half men high and nearly as wide.

While examining the destruction and looking for survivors and loot alike, they entered a derelict house, dark within, as the blinds were closed, and littered with debris. Like the rest of the huts, this one only contained mice and a mess, but as soon as everyone was through the door, the room around them transformed.



## 11. Raphael I

First, it began to smell of food. Hearty food Tsisk would have given all of her belongings to eat now. It smelled of roasts and stews, exotic, ripe fruits full of aroma and a hint of vanilla. The walls of the destitute house became adorned in rich tapestries and a crackling fire burning in a grand marble fireplace wrapped them in comfortable warmth. The source of the heavenly smells presented itself as a table, laden with a veritable feast of all kinds of foods one could desire, readily waiting on gold-rimmed plates.

A tall, dark and handsome man in dapper, gold-embroidered clothing greeted them, immaculately groomed, with a life-sized painting of himself in his back.

„My, my. Look who found their way into my home. Are you travelling through to your redemption? Or your damnation? Hard to say, for your journey is just beginning.“

His voice purred like a cat and was sweet as honey to her ears. It made Tsisk feel small, insignificant and – despite being pleasant – like an unruly child in need of discipline.

„What would suit this occasion? The words to a lullaby, perhaps?

The mouse smiled brightly: it outfoxed the cat!

Then down came the claw, and that, love, was that.

Welcome to the House of Hope. I am Raphael, very much at your service. Go on, rest – feast. Enjoy your supper. After all, it might just be your last.“

He gestured and spoke with great theatricality while giving his little speech, a condescending smile on his face. Tsisk disliked him at once. His appearance, his mannerisms, his house, the food. Everything was perfect. No one put on such a show for a handful of unwashed adventurers. There had to be more going on. Obviously, this was an illusion, the house little more than a shed, painted over by her very own mind on behalf of this man, the food not worth eating, the fire no

refuge from the cold around her. In an attempt to dispell it, she searched for the edges, where her senses would be fraying. Instead, she found the smell of Sulphur and Brimstone, hidden underneath the mouth-watering assault of food aromas, something she knew from somewhere, but could not connect to the exuberance she saw. Gale outpaced her in his conclusion:

“You are a devil and brought us to your dominion.”

Before her eyes, Raphael changed from being a handsome man to a cambion. The orange glowing fires of the hells burning away his clothes and skin in a dizzying torrent of flames, only to reveal – him. The same features as before, but horns growing on his forehead, his skin reddened, his smile uncovering sharp and pointed teeth and wings unfolding from his back. The painting behind him smouldered from a stray ember, caught fire and slowly revealed a powerful devil, standing on top of his crushed foes, wielding a magical hammer amidst the hells fires.

„Very good, fallen prodigy. I intended to unveil myself a little later, but now that you found me out, I got a question for you all: What’s better than a devil you don’t know? - A devil you do. I see you and your friends are in quite the predicament.”

Despite his words, he was displeased about having the reveal taken from him. He didn’t like to not be in complete control of the situation, Tsisk noticed with interest, and it cooled off his act considerably.

“One skull, two tenants and no solution in sight.

Say yes, and I gift you the cure to your plight.”

In a superfluous gesture, he offered them his hand. Tsisk could feel a growing antipathy to this boisterous fiend with every verse of his poems.

“Then tell me what the cure is.” She demanded.

“Why, murderous lizard. It is the fire of the hells to burn away that which ails.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Then try to cure yourself. Shop around – beg, borrow and steal.

But when the change comes over you, just think of me and my deal.

And when hope has been whittled down to the very marrow of despair

That’s when you’ll come back to find me in my lair.”

Tsisk felt she had had enough of this farce, the devil knew too much and divulged too little to be of use. “One question before I go.”

“Go on, ask, little murderous lizard.” Raphael invited her with open arms.

“Are you the cat or the mouse?”

He took up a tangerine, and threw it over underhandedly. She caught it on reflex and he began to laugh, the pretentious hall with all its splendour dissolving back to the sight of the derelict house.

“Neither nor. I am the fox. Hiding in a word, patiently waiting for its turn.”

Raphaels voice mocked them.

And with a small pop, all traces of him and his hall were gone. Only the smell of food lingered and made their stomachs growl from hunger. The tangerine in her hand blamed her for it. She should have devoured that food when she had the opportunity. Now it was too late.

Gale broke the silence. “Well, at least we now know that we have something of worth to a devil. Whatever that may be. He wants something badly and all this talk of desperation merely shows his own. We should not dismiss him out of hand, because if there is one thing for certain about the denizens of the hells, it’s ambition. And if we have something he wants we have something to negotiate.” Tsisk snorted loudly at that.

“I do not want that devil to hold any power over me. Devils aren’t known for their kind and selfless acts of help.”

Pensive, Astarion answered “We might have to, at some point. Though I am all for not getting yanked around by a bastard like that.” And quietly, with disdain in his voice “Like slaves on a leash.”

Shadowheart already stood in the door and waited for them to follow “You are all right. Our best bet is to find a solution of our own.”

## 12. Goblins at village

They did not come very far before they stumbled upon a Goblin raiding party. Luckily for them, the Goblins were far too occupied with plundering to notice their approach.

The companions quickly huddled into the shadows to have a hushed discussion. Astarion gleefully announced that he found it best to murder them, while Gale wanted to go around without any fight at all and Shadowheart advocated for the goblins and to just drive them off. Tsisk did not agree with any of their plans. Not to fight them would mean additional enemies in their back, driving them off would warn the goblin-camp and killing them all meant losing valuable intel.

It was decided, then, that they would kill all but one Goblin to question it. For a while, they watched the coming and going of the raiding party, as the Goblins outnumbered them. It became apparent, that smaller groups of two or three split off to search the area, while the leading shaman and a group of guards stayed at the centre of the village.

One group at a time, they managed to take them by surprise. Gale's ability to distract them with magical illusions helped Astarion and Tsisk to sneak up and strike unseen and Shadowheart compelled any stragglers with a word of power to stand still and await their fates. Since the strength of Goblins lay in their numbers, this was the easy part. Yet Tsisk felt weakened by it. She grew tired before it was even mid day, but gave her very best to appear normal in front of everyone.

Meanwhile, the shaman and its guard grew restless. They had retreated onto the roofs to look out for the others which had not come back, pacing impatiently

and breaking into disputes from time to time. It made it impossible to pursue the same stealth-tactic they had used on the smaller, less versed groups of Goblins before.

Tsisk proposed a distraction: She would go and talk to the Goblins while Astarion, Shadowheart and Gale would seek better positions for their ambush. She left them to give the house a wide berth and circled back to it from the opposite side.

When she came close, she gave up on hiding and freely walked up as if she didn't know a thing about the Goblins on the roof. Soon, she heard a threat.

“Stop right there or we'll skewer ye like a pig for roasting'.”

She looked up to see the Goblin shaman looming over her, her face brandished with the crude symbol of a bloodied hand she had seen on the goblins at the grove already. Her guards had gotten curious and stood by her sides to peer down at her, too. So far, Tsisk's plan worked.

To stall them, she claimed that she just wanted to pass through, in peace. The Goblins erupted with laughter as if she had just told them the best joke they ever heard. Their outburst was followed by a lot of pointing, more laughter and some comments made in the Goblin-tongue, undoubtedly making fun of her. This distraction proved to be easier than she had thought.

Following the outbursts of hoots and snickering, the Goblin sneered at her.

“Ye'll be great fun when we chase ye until ye squeal!”

Tsisk felt that enough time had went by for her companions to find a good position. As she locked eyes with the Goblin to tell her how dumb she was to not watch her back, her tadpole stirred and she slipped right into the Goblins mind the same way she had looked at Shadowhearts and Astarions before. It was a simple one, chaotic and unruly, eager for gratification of any kind. Behind her right eye, her tadpole *stirred*.

She not only felt the goblins presence, but that of another tadpole, too. And it was receptive. Just like the console on the nautiloid, it awaited orders. With little

effort, her words got infused with power and carried into the mind of the Goblin:

“Attack me and you will regret you laid eyes on me today.” As she used that power, she found the tadpole easing into her mind, tightening its hold upon her. The thought of yet another presence in her head gaining more control over her terrified her, but the damage was dealt and the situation at hand needed her unwavering attention.

The Goblin immediately began stammering “T-true soul! We’re so, so sorry for not noticin’. P-please forgive us.”

All of them now changed their attitude and posture. Where they were confident and unfazed before, they now hunched and showed visible signs of fear and respect.

Realizing the potential of the situation, Tsisk asked briskly in a commandeering tone, demanding respect:

“I need to go to the camp. Where do I find it?”

With a voice the Goblin might have thought of as appealing, but came about as nerve-wrackingly whiny, it described her the way through the woods and warned her that the guards might not know her from seeing, just as she did not.

No sooner had the goblin shaman ended its description, that it got shoved over the edge of the roof by Astarion. It plunged down to street-level where Tsisk ensured its compliance for peace with a well-aimed kick to its head. The guards remaining on the roof hastily drew their weapons to defend themselves. In vain, as Gale and Shadowheart had made their way up while the Goblins were distracted and met them with full force. Following Astarions lead, Gale unleashed a small, thundering wave of power to send the two guards toppling to the ground, while Shadowheart clubbed the last one over its head and pushed it down with her shield.

The three then descended from the roof again, to meet Tsisk who waited for them a good way away from the corpses. She could feel them calling the urge

upon her and preferred to keep distance. As soon as Astarion came close, she scolded him. His unpredictable antics had left her angry:

“That was unnecessary. They would have told us more.”

“Oh it was entirely necessary. Because it was great fun seeing them fall, flailing around as if they could grow wings and fly.” He said, amused with himself and laughing about the mental image.

Shadowheart huffed at his reply and looked sternly over to the bodies, then asked:

“Why did they change their behaviour so fast and what is a True Soul?”

Before she looked back at Tsisk.

“I don’t know. She had a tadpole, and when I entered her mind, it allowed me to control it...” Tsisk mused.

Astarion became noticeably attentive. “You mean, that little worm that is buried in our heads might make us able to influence or even control other people? That sounds like a power worth pursuing.”

“Power like that seldom comes for free. There is always a price to pay.” Gale answered ominously with a dark and sour expression on his face.

“He is right,” Tsisk agreed “it made the tadpole stir and latch onto my mind. We might be falling under its control while we try to control others by it. I will not use it again if I don’t have to.”

The excited look on Astarions face died down, while Gales scowl deepened.

“Let’s find this druid so we can finally get rid of them, the longer we have them the more they seem like a nuisance.” Shadowheart said terse.

“What have we here, my comrades, is it meat or is it a new client?” Said a deep, rumbling voice from behind.

The voice startled the adventurers, who sprung into action and took defensive stances. Tsisk wildly looked around to get a hang on this new situation. While they had disputed the tadpoles, three ogres had surrounded them unseen. Two of



them looked fairly common for ogres, big burly builds combined with flat faces that looked like their mothers had punched them one too many times. Which might hold true, they were known for their brutish strength and bad tempers. They were clad in ragged leathers, furs and whatever fabric they could find. With them towering even over Tsisk and having arms like tree trunks that meant one of them used a big woollen blanket as breeches, while another had bound a blood-stained jacket over one shoulder with its arms tied around his big, bulging neck. The third one, who had spoken to them, wore a golden circlet on its head that looked comically small on him. His wardrobe was of slightly better fit than his friends and resembled real clothing the most.

Tsisk noticed that they must have used the houses as cover. How unusual for ogres. They were not known for any tactical manoeuvrers, but rather for their blunt minds and actions. Maybe a little more information on these strange fellows would go a long way, she decided then. A fight was also certainly ill-advised, surrounded as they were by these much bigger and stronger enemies.

“Certainly not meat, so what are you trading?”

“Ahh, a wise choice. We are offering protection, of course. For a pittance of merely 1000 Gold we would be willing to not only spare you your own demise, but also help you further your own goals. This is dangerous territory, as you see.” The bejewelled ogre rumbled. His friends nodded and grunted.

“Want meat, we hungry. Get your meat or buy an ox. Don’t care which.”

A dangerous smile crept over Tsisks face.

“Now that you say it, I know where a lot of meat is gathered. And we need a good friend or three for the slaughter. You come with us, I promise you all of it, as much as you can stuff your face with.”

She could see the leader of the little band was not convinced, but his two friends already rejoiced upon hearing the news, rubbed their bellies and looked expectantly at him, so he gave in.

“You got them good, there. Take this horn and blow it when you are ready to

deal with us again. You don't blow it, we will find you anyways and take what was promised to us."

He gave her a simple bone horn from a pouch he carried with him. It looked a bit scuffed, but when she tried it, it produced a sound, although no pleasant one. The three ogres already plodded their way down the street, took up two goblin corpses each and vanished into the woods surrounding the deserted village, crushing small trees and bushes in their passing.

### 13. Bite Night

Since the sun already began to set, the four of them did not wander far from the village before setting up camp. By now, Tsisk was exhausted beyond reprieve and glad to rest. Shadowheart almost immediately withdrew to speak her prayers, while Astarion made good on his word and took the watch by scouting the surrounding area. That left only Tsisk and Gale at camp. Foresighted, he had pillaged a bit of his own and found some food that wasn't rotten. While preparing it, Tsisk asked something nagging at her the entire time.

“Why did the devil call you a fallen prodigy?”

Gale sighed and for a while just stirred the food in the pot, mulling about the words to choose.

“Let me first tell you about the prodigy, then about the fallen part.”

He told her how he was a promising wizard at the Blackstaff Academy in Waterdeep. Even as a child, his powers and talent were tremendous, which often lead to troubles, but also provided him with a friend, Tara the tressym, an intelligent, magical beast that resembled a winged cat whose praises he sang until Tsisk insisted that he follow the story further.

As he grew up, the goddess of magic – Mystra – took an interest in him and taught him secrets of the arcane kept from even the highest masters of the magical arts. And just a decade later, she took him on as her lover, too. From the way he talked about her, Tsisk could hear that she meant very much to him. He revered her. He liked to talk about this part of his past. A warm smile played on his face and his voice was calm. When he began to speak of his folly, his face darkened and his voice retained a pained edge. In pursuit of Mystras favour, he had sought to heighten his magical abilities even further, against her expressed

will. She spurned him for even trying and in his foolishness, he tried to find a way to regain her attention. At this point, he broke off and ended his story.

“Let’s just say, that instead of getting equal with her, I earned the magical condition that takes away the magic from me, the weave that is my life and my purpose, and it took the love of the most endearing woman I could imagine.”

Something akin to disappointment tinted the following words.

“I am barely able to cast the easiest spells known to me now and it hurts to think about it.”

Shame. She could see nothing to be ashamed of. He had gambled, and he had lost. It was time to get up again and look forward.

He had told her about the weave and his love for it. It sounded comforting and beautiful.

“How does magic feel to you?” She asked.

The warm smile returned to his face and he took her hand.

“Like music, poetry, physical beauty all rolled into one and given expression through the senses. There's nothing like it.”

And, after a short pause, he followed it up with: “I'd like to repay your trust in me. If you want, I can show you how it is.”

Tsisk squeezed his hand “Yes, I would like that.”

“Then follow my lead.”

And he led her into a series of motions and exercises for her mind to gradually open her perception of the weave surrounding them. It was a delicate sensation, like a kind word or a soft touch and warmth on a cold winters day. Tsisk felt afloat on a wave gently rocking her to a calmer state of mind. When Gale told her to repeat an incantation, she was already deeply entranced and only speaking the words after him automatically. Mystras touch now guided her and she followed along willingly, drawn in by an almost childlike excitement overcoming her like secret giggles under the blanket.

Gales voice floated disembodied at her side.

“You did it, you channelled the weave! How does it feel?”

Instead of an answer, she tugged at the words that hung in the air on a silken string. A body became visible very slowly and in an instant, weave flowing into a form, guided by Gales will.

“I see you are taking to it very fast. We are connected now. I am channelling the magic, but you are the architect. Whatever you can imagine, it can happen here. Is there anything you might want to show me?”

On hearing his words, she realized which mayhem she could cause here. Immediately, her urge lurched forward, demanding to claim this world and claim Gale as a victim. The pain he would suffer from her imagination alone! Endless torment in a world built on fantasies. And if she ever came back to reality, she would claim his body, too.

Tsisk fought the urge, but damn near lost to its endless onslaught of viciousness. Before it could inflict itself on Gale, she dropped the pleasant illusion and severed her connection with him.

Surprised, he asked what was wrong. But Tsisk was too occupied with her very own inner battle to speak. Close to tears, she only gave him a pat on the shoulder and hunched down at the fire to regain her composure.

Distraught, she realized that her urge would never let her have any meaningful connection to another being, its only wish – its whole purpose – was destruction. No other person or even just mere happiness alone could ever come between her and this higher goal. For a moment, she thought about letting it have its way. At least killing would feel good...as good as a few minutes in Mystras arms, if not as warm and welcoming.

The memory of Alfira flit back into her mind. Killing felt good, but the aftermath decidedly did not. Her hand found its way into the pocket she kept the flute in. Holding it strengthened her resolve.

A panicked scream tore through the woods. It was Shadowheart. Both Tsisk

and Gale rushed over to the cleric cowering on the ground, holding her arms up to shield herself from a canine figure standing in the dark. Tsisk dared not go closer with her urge ready to strike. Instead, Gale knelt down to comfort Shadowheart, while she stayed back and watched the reason for the panic attack.

“The wolf!” She cried. “The wolf will tear me apart!”

From afar and in the gloomy twilight of the wood, it indeed looked like a wolf, grey and scruffy and with its tail wagging wildly. Tsisk lured it over, into the light.

“It’s the dog from the village. It followed us.” She said calmly. There was no need to scare anyone further.

“I thought it was a wolf.” Shadowheart sobbed. “Wolves killed my parents when I was a child.”

The memory visibly shook the normally steadfast cleric to the core.

“I wanted to forget, forget it all. Offered the memory to Shar, she wouldn’t take it. Took all the others, but never this. Never this.” She rambled on incoherently while she rocked herself back and forth. “I’m safe, she said. I’m safe with the Mother.” Shadowheart affirmed to herself.

“Shar will take it once I’m worthy. I need to be worthy.” The repeated mention of Shar concerned Gale, but he kept silent and held her until she calmed down, repeating the last line over and over.

When Astarion came back from his scouting trip, everyone was seated by the fire in uncomfortable silence.

“You lot look so drab, I ought to go back into the woods and find me a group of goblins. They were better humoured than you.”

Tsisk stood up to intercept and divert his brazen approach.

“Welcome back. What's that in your hand?”

Theatrically, he looked down at his hand holding two dead squirrels and feigned surprise.

“Oh look, I found food. How convenient. Though you will have to do the skinning, it is not a skill I have picked up yet – I fear for my quite delicate hands.”

With a resigned “Thank you.” Tsisk took them from him and began to remove the fur. While she did this, she noticed two things: there was not a drop of blood in the little bodies, the skin punctured by two small incisions each. He had to know she would see it. That she would know what he was. She chose not to talk about it, at least not now. It seemed no normal people had left the nautiloid alive.

The meal they shared was a simple one, but the food raised their spirits. It did nothing though, to better their condition. Tsisks skin was burning hot by now, her eyes felt dry and heavy and every bone in her body was aching. Not only she looked tired and pale, and so everyone was tucked tight in their bedrolls just minutes after the meal, dreaming feverishly.

This night, her dreams did not whisper of blood and death. Instead, a familiar voice greeted her.

“I almost was too late. You were changing, but I was able to stop it.” Tsisk rose from the bedroll she lay on and frantically looked around. She was on a rock floating through a night sky dotted with dozens of other such objects. More rocks, in the form of a broken body, she noticed. The skull of a gigantic but long forgotten being loomed at the horizon, at the end of a trail formed by the remains of its own petrified body. In between those remains, shapeless figures made from arcane energy flit about and fought against each other, releasing waves of force whenever they collided. Her own physical form felt weightless and neither heat nor cold bothered her here. She knew this place. Only few days had gone by since she had traversed it with the nautiloid. At last, she regarded her dream visitor. It was a woman with auburn hair, tied into a messy bun. Life had graced her with the creases of a habitual smiler around her hazel eyes and mouth, speaking of many years of joy and laughter, as well as a few sorrowful

ones. Her very presence radiated comfort and a feeling of security. With a smile and a soothing voice, she said:

“Yes, you know me. I have saved you before.”

Tsisk took in the aura of her saviour. It was almost palpable on this magical plane of existence. She had felt it before, but it did not strike her as much as the sight of the woman did. Tsisk was able to remember where she had felt the aura, but the origin of her faces familiarity remained a secret to her.

“I felt you in my dreams on the ship. And it was you that stopped my fall to the ground.”

The woman nodded and put her hand lightly on Tsisks head. The gesture felt painfully comforting to her and she allowed herself to lean into it for just a moment. It struck a chord in her whichs tune was not played for so long she had all but forgotten about it before she even forgot about everything else.

“And I will protect you further. But now you must help me. You must accept the power of the tadpoles, nurture it, gain more from any sources you can find. We will need all of it in the battles to come. I will keep it from consuming you, but for the sake of both of us, you must learn how to wield it.”

She bent down in front of Tsisk and kissed her on the forehead. Tsisk held the woman's hand while a single tear ran down her face and wished the dream would never end.

A stabbing pain in her neck threatened to draw her back into the realm of the waking, but she fought to stay.

The woman turned from her, watched the arcane fighters and said:

“They’re closing in. I must go now.”

Tsisk tried to rise and go after her, but the pain became worse and with it came a fatigue to make her stumble. The pain got nauseating. She could not ignore it any longer, or her weakness would render her helpless. Regretfully, she allowed her dream to fade away.



Someone was crouched over her, completely unaware of her awakening, entranced in the act of biting her neck. The person had not chosen their position wisely, since she was able to jerk her knee up and deliver a single, devastating blow to their crotch.

Her reward was a suppressed scream of pain and a curled up man beside her. She drew her knife, seized him by his hair and put a knee between his shoulder blades while she pressed the blade to his throat.

With icy calm she said: “Tell me a good reason not to kill you right now, Astarion.”

In pain, he wheezed “I swear, I did not want to harm you, but I...well, I need blood.”

“You could have drunk more animals, why me, and why *now*?” She snarled, yanked his head up and around so she could see at least half his face, before she pushed him back down into the dust. She needed to see his face to be able to tell if he lied.

“It was a dream! I dreamt my master came back to claim me and that bastard ordered me around...”

“You have a master?”

He squirmed beneath her knees in discomfort. It felt so very exciting, having him at her mercy.

“Yes! I’m just a spawn, the vampire who made me holds power over me. He forbid me, and he threatened me...”

“What did he forbid you?” His nervousness was intoxicating. This needed to end, and soon.

“Blood! The blood of thinking creatures. I’m not supposed to drink it. I just – I wanted to see if I could resist him, now. That, and my hunger.”

Resistance and hunger. She understood the trouble with both. And he was either a very good liar or spoke his truth. She released her grip on his hair and touched her neck. Her fingers came back deep red. A risk. A chance. He would

not turn on her if he felt he needed her. She withdrew the knife and stood up.

“Next time you will ask beforehand. Or I will use a stake.”

As he stood up, Astarions face showed surprise, quickly replaced with the placated smile he knew so well.

“Of course I will. I promise you. And now that you know of it, I am able to use all my weapons. Teeth included.”

Hesitant and – from the looks of it – quite shook he withdrew into the woods. As an afterthought, he turned around to thank her with an elaborate bow, then vanished to hunt down bigger prey. The blood of an intelligent creature might have made a difference, but it hardly made for a full meal. At least not if the donor had left enough to ensure a beating heart.

Tsisk took up the watch to think about strategies for their encounter with the Goblins. Weakened as she was by her near-change into a mindflayer and a vampires bite, she could not hope to fight in prolonged battles. Instead, she tried to recall everything she knew about Goblins: they were wretched little creatures, greedy, short-tempered and absolutely willing to backstab or betray others for their own gain.

And she took stock of what was available to her: her wits, first and foremost, a vial of strong poison, the scuffed horn and the iron coin Astarion had discounted as invaluable. The odds looked bleak until she remembered the three remarkable strangers she travelled with. Their talents at least promised an interesting day.

## 14. Goblincamp

With Astarion returned by first light and the dog trudging along beside them, they followed the street down to the area the Goblin shaman had described. When the crowns of the trees opened up to welcome them back into the arms of the sun and rocks were scattered on scarcely covered earth, they left the street to follow a muddy path, trampled by dozens of little feet.

It led them to a ramshackle barricade in a gorge, made from everything vaguely resembling wood, be it greasy, rotten planks repurposed from an old shepherd's hut, whole carts used to carry crop and hay or complete tree-trunks, sporting withering leaves on the tips of their dying branches. It was manned by armed goblins and worgen, and reeked of unwashed bodies, excrements and rotting food from fifty steps away.

“Ey, you! Where ye goin’!” Screamed the guard when they came closer.

Tsisk motioned the others to wait and approached the barricade alone. “We need to deliver a message, let us in.”

“Yeah well, dipshit, me cans see that ye want in! But you cans not run around ‘ere like that. Mighten get bitten by me worg.” He laughed to himself, a series of unpleasant cackles. The goblins in his back gawked in eager anticipation.

“Ye only need ta paint yerself with our war-colours and ye may enter.” He hunched and pointed to a pile of poop, grinning while he placed his other hand over his eye, where all the goblins sported the familiar blood red mark of a hand, surrounded by a triangle and smeared so as to appear like a grinning skull. The sight stirred something within her – a feeling of pride. This symbol was an accomplishment.

Suppressed giggles disrupted her thoughts. This was great fun to the dirty little greenskins and Tsisk began to lose her composure. It was time to end this indignity.

“You are denying a True Soul?” She took a shot into the dark. And struck home. The laughs and giggles stopped abruptly. She could see fear creep over the Goblins face.

“True Soul? Ye shoulda said that at once!” He wailed. “Ye shoulda looked me in the eye and made me bow and scrape and let ye pass.”

The thought of the tadpole behind her temple burying deeper added discomfort to her already flaring temper. She needed to distract the Goblins before one of them got the idea they should test her ability to do exactly that. Tsisk grabbed into her pouch and flipped the iron coin into the pile. “For your inconvenience.” She saw how the eyes of one of the other goblins lit up with greed as he saw it. But the guard just stared at it “Ye want te pull me leg, eh?” Now it was Tsisks turn to grin.

“Ask your friend. He knows what this is.”

Just in case the little bugger decided to lie about it to deceive his chum, she added: “It’s a soul coin, a hundred times more valuable than gold.”

He quickly took a look over to see the greed on the others face, then dove for the pile, his brothers-in-arms hard on his heels, weapons in hand.

Tsisk waved her companions over and went into the gorge uninterrupted, while fighting ensued behind her. Gale was impressed by the turn of events, Shadowheart seemed not to care much, but Astarion was exasperated.

“Why would you give away something so expensive?” He asked in a hushed voice, incredulous. “Why? A little staring and they would have behaved!”

He followed her to continue his rant.

“Have you lost your mind? Ever since you killed that pesky bard, you’re different.”

Tsisk stopped abruptly, seized Astarion by his collar and drew him close to snarl in his face.

“Do *not* talk of her like that, or I revoke your right for questions.”

For a moment, he stayed back, straightening his clothes and muttering under his

breath.

“Touchy subject, I see.”

Behind a bend, their destination came into view. It was the ruin of a temple full of once graceful arches, delicate pillars holding up domed gazebos, overgrown by vines and trees and overrun by more goblins and their ilk who had defiled the smooth walls with crude drawings of mostly vulgar nature. Preparations were made for a festivity. Meat sizzled over a big fire pit and barrels of fire-wine, beer and other various liquids were piled up to be consumed later.

Shadowheart took a long look, then uttered pleased: “It’s good to see a sêlunite temple in the state it deserves.” No one headed them a single thought while they picked their way through. Only the goblin manning the fire pit stopped them to offer a skewer of meat and a goblet full of liquid. Hungry as they were, they took up the offer. Tsisk only had to take a single bite to know her error.

“That is dwarf meat.” she said.

And realised the horrified looks on Shadowhearts and Gales faces. To know that, she must have tasted it before. She chose to ignore the awkward silence, put the skewer and goblet down and made her way to the temples entrance. With relief, she noticed the others following her example.

The interior part of the temple looked worse for wear than the outer parts let on. It was a wonder the worm-eaten beams held up the roof still, when parts of the floor had long since given way and crashed down into a cave below, alive with scuttling shadows and the scurrying of many-legged creatures. The congregated goblins kept well clear of it, preferring the more solid parts of the ruin. A Priestess preached in the main hall, loudly praising the Absolute for her guidance and support in this war against the non-believers. A large crowd

listened to her ramblings, interrupted by her unceremoniously dragging a screaming individual up on the pile of debris she stood on to brand the palm of their hands with the omnipresent symbol of this new god, followed by a round of raving madness by her captive audience.

Further into the central nave, another group of rowdy individuals hailed a Hobgoblin of considerable stature with cries of “Dror! Dror!”. He in turn egged them on and basked in their admiration. Emptied kegs of beer and other alcoholics surrounded him and his crew of armoured up goblins with well-moistened throats.

In order to find more exploitable weaknesses, she continued to go deeper. In a small room at the far end of the temple, a female drow – clad in full armour amidst her own troops, her sword laying ready to be picked up at any moment – studied a map. Tsisk walked up to her to get a look at this map, too. It showed the position of the nautiloids wreck. The living ship had stranded on the banks of the mighty Chionthar, the river running from the Heartlands of Faerûn down to the sword coast and the harbour city Baldurs Gate. It also marked two positions: the camp they were in and another, close to the Shadowlands and a place put down as Moonrise towers. Tsisks heart started beating faster, her fingers went cold. A place she knew nothing about and yet her mind bristled at the mere thought of it. Disturbing. Interesting.

“I hope you bring news of the grove. Too long they are evading us. Have you found it?” the drows raspy voice lashed out at the Goblin who cowered before her. The goblin had to negate that question and stammered an excuse about reinforcements and a missing raiding party.

“Enough!” The drow commanded. “It’s a small enclave of druids! We captured their leader and you still dare to come to me with excuses? How about you go back and find it yourself then, because for every hour you stay here, I will take something precious from you. A trinket, a tongue, a limb...”

Trembling in fear, the goblin scrambled to get out. The drow looked up at

Tsisk. As their eyes met, their minds connected, in the same way she had connected with her companions before. The drow was entirely inundated in a disembodied voice, whispering commands and instructions, barely audible and deafeningly loud in the absence of other noises. Admiration echoed every uttering of the voice.

The drow addressed the dragonborn.

“A True Soul. Well met. I am Minthara. And you should choose your allies better next time.”

She glared at the pale elf hostilely, before turning her gaze back. “But we are all one under the Absolute, of course. I have seen you know about the intricacies of pain?”

She must have seen that through the tadpole. A vision of Tsisks innermost being, whatever that might be.

“Yes. Pain is familiar to me.”

“Finally, someone worthy of the Absolutes attention. I am tired of the incompetence surrounding me. Tell me what she has led you here for.”

Lying seemed an unpredictable risk in the face of someone as leery as her. The drow would also not submit to her threats as easily as the Goblins did. Which meant only the truth remained to lead her astray.

“We are here for the druid.”

“Praise the Absolute! She has answered my prayers. We need the exact location and possible measures of defence of his grove. Their obliteration is long overdue. Get that information out of him and the Absolute will reward you with power as she has me. You will find him in the crypt.” And she dismissed the group with a flick of her hand.

That could only be the missing archdruid. The reason they had come here in the first place. Their chance to be free of the tadpoles and the imminent threat of turning into mindflayers.

They went down into the crypt. It was guarded by goblins watching other goblins pelting a big, brown bear with sticks and stones, ineffectively bouncing off its thick fur. The bear was caged in one of several nooks to hold the remains of priests long gone, serving as prison cells. Silvery scratches and dents in the rusted iron bars of the grid showed where the bear had tried to bash its way out. Right now, it lay on the ground, enduring the treatment while glaring at its torturers, claws flexing.

She watched the show for a minute, then addressed one of the guards.

“We are here to get information out of a druid. Where is he?”

“Get lost! Ye can’t have ‘im. He’s too much fun.”

These goblins were half her height and doubly as irritating as she was willing to suffer. She picked up the insolent creature. And drew the looks of everyone in the room.

“I’m sure you will be fun to look at, too. Minthara gave me some good ideas on how to handle this.”

The previously nosy crowd turned back around to continue their game of rousing the bear, just as successful as before.

“Minthara?” The goblin squeaked. Sheepishly, he pointed to the caged bear.

“He’s been like this since he got caught. Try ya luck.”

“Thank you.”

She put him down again, where he tried to bolt at once. She made sure he stayed in the room and asked Gale in a breathless whisper:

“Can you veil an escape?”

They knew something was up from her behaviour, but she was pretty sure they had no clue what was coming, as they would have run otherwise.

He nodded, once, then began to weave a spell. She positioned herself in the entrance of the crypt, well in the back of the small crowd guffawing at Gale.

Tsisk used her hands to sign to her companions, a simple line drawn at the base of her neck and a nod in the direction of the goblins. When silence drowned the



hollering and became bewildered, Tsisk pulled out her knife and went to work on the first of the two guards, while Astarion mirrored her actions on the other. The remaining goblins panicked and tried to escape, in vain. It was a quick execution.

A big, burly elf stood where the bear was only moments before. Big, badly healed scars running across his face made him look rugged and rough, counteracted by a chain around his neck only a child at heart would have made. Shrivelled acorns, berries and beechnuts strung together like pearls with the pendant of a bear-shaped root in the middle lay on his massive chest.

“So you have come for me. Has Minthara decided the goblins are of no use anymore?”

“Actually, we are here to free you. Minthara just decided to take a liking to our dragonborn here.” Shadowheart said.

Our. Tsisk liked the ring of that word. The cleric rattled at the very sturdy iron bars, then addressed Astarion.

“Get him out already! Or are you a one-shot kind of guy?”

“Excuse me? The lads and ladies in Baldurs Gate beg to differ, darling. But you wouldn’t know about that, would you? You strike me as the sheltered type, kept away from this bad, bad world in Shars little mansion.”

Despite his words, he did as asked and picked the lock. A back and forth of sharp tongued remarks ensued, Astarion and Shadowheart lashing at each other in increasingly hurtful ways, until Halsins droning voice calmed them down. In the meantime, Tsisk sat down to come up with a plan. The druid would need an incentive for his help, she wagered. And he cared very much about the grove and the refugees currently residing therein.

“What about the Goblins?” Tsisk asked. “If we leave them here, they will put together a raiding party to hunt us down. If we avoid them, they will attack the druids once they find the grove. we all know they stand no chance. Best case, it

takes them a couple more days to find it and Kagha can finish her ritual, but the Tieflings will be doomed.”

“Ugh, I don’t care. Let’s just return the druid so he can pick our heads apart and be done with it.” Astarion said annoyed.

Halsin looked worried. “A ritual? I did not dare ask you this, but I would appreciate if you could help us. She is right. There are too many Goblins here to fight them all. And every leader of theirs could put together a new army, especially the priest. The Goblins follow her religiously and she is wickedly smart. If it were a smaller or less formidable force we might be able to deal with it at the grove, but it is too much. And the ritual worries me.”

His words sparked an idea. Tsisk looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“Smaller force I could be able to do. Shadowheart, do you know how to heal poisoning?”

“Yes, this was part of my education. Why do you need to know?”

Shadowheart replied quizzically.

Tsisk gave them a summary of her plan. Halsin nodded along.

“Daft, I must say. But sound. I will carry out my part at once.” And he transformed into a lynx, silently sneaking out of the crypt to leave the temple.

Tsisk reached into her pocket and put wyvern poison vial and horn into Astarions hands.

“On it.” Astarion enthusiastically said and vanished into the shadows. Tsisk tried to follow him with her eyes, but although he should have been easy to spot with his white hair and extravagant clothing, she was unable to. The twilight of the ruins swallowed him whole.

She gave him some more time to finish his task, then walked from the crypt all the way up to Drors crowd, and – standing proud and tall – proclaimed:

“So you’re the mighty Dror. I have heard of you. But now that I am seeing you, you don’t look quite as much as the tales made me believe.”

The Goblins surrounding Dror shut up and looked nervously from Dror to

Tsisk. Now that he had lost his audience, Dror jumped down to Tsisk and moved closer, until his chest nearly touched hers. He was not as tall as her, but rather bulky and Tsisk knew Hobgoblins to be much stronger than they looked. His bad breath made her eyes water, but she did not move an inch. He growled at her

“You want to see exactly how much of a Hobgoblin I am, you follow me outside and we fight.”

“That sounds delightful. But why not make it even better. I saw all that booze outside and you look like someone who can take a drink or two. Let’s see who can take more.”

She could see him think about it. He visibly came to a conclusion.

“Good. When you’re drunk, I will fight you anyway... but then its twice the fun.”

“Of course.” She replied. And louder, for all the Goblins to hear: “But what lousy fun would it be if only you and me had a tankard? I invite your friends to match us in this competition.”

No one could have stopped the out-pour of goblins thirsting for booze and a spectacle. They followed Tsisk and Dror outdoors. Beer and wine-barrels got opened and the two competitors started to drink. The first tankard got emptied fast, but Tsisk slowed down for the second and even more for the third. Dror already had downed five and made fun of her for it. His gang of rowdy goblins was howling with laughter while they chugged their drinks as fast as they could. No one wanted to be the weakling who hadn’t gotten their fill, after all.

Tsisk could feel the stomach-twisting effect it had on her. Just a little more and he should, too.

He slurred his words now.

To encourage him further, she took up her fourth and drank it in one go while she stared straight into his eyes. He tried to one-up her by drinking two tankards in this way. When he finished, he swayed heavily. But Tsisk could feel the

poison at work, stabbing at her intestines and reached for Shadowheart's hand. The motion she made sent her reeling and she fell to the floor, writhing in agony. She had overestimated how much her weakened body could take and now, the poison affected her rapidly.

Dror laughed at the sight, before the poison took him at once and his head dropped onto the table he was sitting at, as if he had fallen asleep.

Shadowheart knelt down beside Tsisk and whispered a prayer while she motioned her hand in a beckoning gesture. Tendrils of darkness left Tsisk's body and gathered in Shadowheart's hands. The resulting black orb got thrown to the ground, where it oozed away.

"You may now be free from poison, but you will remain drunk. It's too much. I can not take it all off you."

"Well shit, there's Goblins left." Tsisk slurred. Her head felt soft and mushy and her mind fogged. A look around told her most of the Goblins armed force lay dazed or dead. Sardonic joy mingled with drunk elation, an exhilarating mix. She tried to get up and got violently sick.

"Don't worry, I will take up Minthara." Shadowheart volunteered. "You have done enough today." Tsisk wanted to protest. She was not too weak to do this. She tried again, and was proven wrong by her own traitorous body.

Shadowheart brought Minthara the news of the groves position and of the plans to close it off with a ritual well on its way. As planned, the drow hurriedly rallied the troops, but came short. She found Dror and the goblins, saw the signs of a feast and cursed the Hobgoblin and his antics, believing them to be blackout-drunk.

"It is time, True Souls." She addressed Shadowheart and Tsisk. "Join me and eradicate this pest in the name of the Absolute."

At last, she was able to put together a veritable, but much smaller troop of Goblins with less experience than Dror's rowdy bunch and set out to descend on the druids.

With her gone, only the priestess and her devotees remained. A horn rang out not far from them.

Surprisingly fast, the three ogres arrived, with Astarion trailing behind. They lost no time and crushed the priestess and all remaining Goblins, before they re-emerged from the temple. The leading ogre came back to Tsisk, while his two friends feasted on the dwarf-meat and the corpses strewn about. “You made good on your words. But these filthy Goblins are not worth 1000 Gold. Pay up.”

Angry about the threat, Tsisk pointed to the partly emptied barrels. “Follow the drow. She’s off to kill the druids. But if you wanna flush ‘em gobbins down, have a drink. Reckon it’s just enough for you three.”

He laughed. “A battle I don’t need to fight. That suits me. So it’s goblins today and druids tomorrow. It better be, because we’ll be there.”

Tsisk doubted that, seeing as the ogres shared the booze around. He would not see tomorrow.

## 15. The Neverending Nightmare

With copious help by her companions, Tsisk was able to join up with the Goblins again. They were a rambunctious, undisciplined bunch and it was hard to keep a fast pace when parts of the force constantly broke away to go hunting or looting.

A nights rest was made in the village, but before the sun crested the horizon, Minthara marshalled them to go on and so did the smaller group of adventurers. Tsisk felt better by now, even though her head pounded with every step she took. The drunken stupor she had fallen into that night proved more relieving than her nightmare-ridden nights before.

When Minthara halted her troops, the grove lay in silence before them while the sun slowly unveiled herself from the morning mists shrouding the vale. Such was her lust to surprise the druids with her attack, that she did not grant the goblins a break before she commanded them to attack the gate.

A tree was hurriedly cut down and carried over as a battering ram. The goblin force gathered at the gate, waiting for its sundering. But when the tree got swung against it, it grew vines, entangling all goblins nearby until they couldn't move a limb. With only a rustle of leaves and branches as a forewarning, a group of bears broke from a copse nearby, followed by a dryad swinging a strong branch grown for her by her home-tree. The very ground beneath the goblins became bogged down by water and overgrown with brambles sporting long and wicked thorns to hinder their movements. On top of the gate, Tieflings appeared, shooting arrows down into the horde, this time in a more disciplined and orderly manner than on the first attack. The goblins did not know where to run to to escape. The gate in front of them, the bears attacking their flank, or Minthara,

who stood behind them and inspired fear with her sword and threats, promising dire consequences should anyone dare to turn back.

To reinforce her threats, she attacked the dryad, a powerful spirit of the woods with the delicate and agile body of a deer conjoined with the delicate and nimble torso of a young girl, expression of their coltish nature. Had it seen the drow coming, it could have played out very differently, but the drow never gave the spirit that chance. With a powerful blow, she struck the dryad down from behind, to the anguished howling of druids and animals from within the battlements. The trees shuddered in horror and erupted in the angry chattering of countless small creatures.

Minthara commanded the goblins: “Charge!”

Her orders and the helpless anger displayed by the defenders emboldened the goblins, sent them forward onto the faltering gate.

“This is your time. Prove yourselves to the Absolute!” The drow called out to her newest allies. And they ran.

They ran to meet the drow in battle. And yet, even surprised, she proved to be a formidable foe and experienced fighter. With ease, she fought off Shadowhearts attacks and let her armour do most of the work against Astarions stabs. They tried to flank her, but she manoeuvred herself skillfully out of the pinch every time. Tsisk had underestimated her, clearly. She hoped Gale would be able to subdue Minthara, when the drow screamed for support. A group of goblins broke away from the madhouse of chaotic fighting at the gates. If the goblins would come to Mintharas aid, the others stood no chance Tsisk realised, and stepped in between. All they needed was time, and although she stood no chance against half a dozen goblins, she could stall them. They weren't courageous creatures and she intended to use that. Displaying confidence, she roared at them, using her draconic heritage to invoke carnal fear in the goblins. They slowed to a halt to measure her. Tsisk smiled the toothiest, most wicked smile and growled.

“Are you ready to fight a dragon?”

Fear and doubt crept across the goblins faces, settled down as hesitant lurking, waiting for a moment of weakness on her part to get mangled by their spiked cudgels and jagged cutlasses, inching ever closer. Tsisk drew a deep breath, concentrating on the sliver of power within her, spewing out an icy, misty white cloud, freezing the mud in between her and the goblins.

“Come closer, and I will freeze you, too!” She baited them with a malicious grin and her hunger for violence clearly on display. Her throat was sore, her teeth ached from the cold and the power used to fuel the ice was diminished. Just in this moment, Gale cast one of his more impressive spells. He had successfully closed in on Minthara and used her armour as a conductor. With a loud, crackling noise, Minthara lit up, flashes of lightning dancing over the metal and harshly illuminating Tsisks horned and battle-readied silhouette from behind. The goblins turned and ran, back into the woods. Without their leader, the rest of the force did not withstand for long. Soon, it was dispersed and the defenders of the grove let in.

Halsin had assumed the position of archdruid of the grove once more, halted the ritual and organized the defences before the goblins arrived. He had led the druids turned bears and now welcomed Tsisk and her friends. Kagma stood and watched their celebrated arrival with a scowl. She had been thoroughly reprimanded.

Together with Nettie, Halsin immediately addressed the most pressing point of concern: the tadpoles. He examined them closely with the fine senses of an experienced healer, but had to give them bad news. Although he was able to excise normal tadpoles, theirs were magically attuned to them and could not be separated by any means known to him, lest he would kill them.

He examined Tsisk last, and longest. Finally, he told her concerned:

“You say you do not remember your life before the ship?” After a short pause, he continued. “Someone did great damage to your head. Never have I seen



a brain so devastated in a living being. It is all healed now, but also a miracle that you are walking and talking at all.”

Their hopes stumped, they discussed how to proceed. Their best bet would be to go to Baldurs Gate, where knowledgeable and powerful Mages and Clerics lived. Halsin agreed with them and proposed to travel along. For on the way to Baldurs Gate they had to cross the Shadowlands, where he had unfinished business. His offer was gladly taken and preparations made for a journey of several days length.

As a thank you for their salvation and for providing a safe passage, the Tieflings invited them for a celebration. Their own journey to Baldurs Gate would be much slower, due to them having to transport what was left of their households and so they wanted to give them a proper farewell. At dawn, all of them gathered. Food was served, music played and some even made an attempt at dancing, but the dread of the events past and future prevented an outright festive atmosphere.

Tsisk enjoyed it thoroughly. Talking to strangers and sharing food and wine with them felt...satisfying, in a way. Dead set on getting a full nights sleep she took every opportunity to down one more glass. She could see Shadowheart and Gale had their fair share of drink, too. Both looked more than a little tipsy. They would be easy prey, today. Her gaze wandered over to the other attendees and immediately she noticed their vulnerability. Drunk, happy, unsuspecting. Perfect.

Her thoughts alarmed her. Getting drunk around so much vulnerable prey had been a bad idea. Now she lacked the resolve to stand against her urges. She needed to deviate her thoughts from all of this.

Astarion stood at the edge of the crowd, alone. He watched everything from afar and wore a bored and absent expression. As she made her way over, it changed to a sly smile.

“You know, I never pictured myself as a hero. But now that we’re here...I hate it. This is awful.”

Tsisk raised a brow.

“So you didn’t enjoy thwarting the goblins?”

“True. That was fun. More so because of that brilliant little plan of yours. I particularly liked how you made the cowards tremble before you. Still, I would have liked more for my trouble than a pat on my head and vinegar for wine.”

“You can’t blame them. They came here with barely a penny to their name and a world of hurt on their shoulders.”

“You do seem to care an awful lot for these wretches.”

She took a look around. Alfira had died because she wanted to help them. This took some of her burden of being her murderer off her shoulders.

“I just gave them a chance, nothing more.”

“Huh. Is that so? – I noticed you looking for me, soooo...how about the both of us making our own enjoyment?”

The urge had deviated her mind from the conversation back to all the potential victims around her and to cover her absent-mindedness she answered with a vague “Mmhh?”

“I mean sex, darling. You and me, meeting in the woods, when every one else is tight asleep in their bedrolls.”

A welcome proposal. Diversion sounded very much like what she wanted. She felt the urge inching closer and her beginning to lose control.

“I will meet you there, then.” She answered and walked away from the ever growing temptation.

She tried to meditate, but visions of what once was – or maybe fantasies of things she wished to come – incursed on her concentration repeatedly. An eternity seemed to have passed when she heard Astarions light steps rustling through the leaves. With his voice turned honey and a seductive edge to it, he addressed her.

“There you are. And I see you couldn’t even wait to be here. Understandable

– I am feeling the same, you know.”

With only two steps, Tsisk closed the distance between them and trapped Astarion against a tree. Talking was not on her mind right now, she needed distraction. He wrapped his arms and legs around her and chuckled into her ear

“Oh my, who knew you wanted me so badly.”

Without much thoughts to spare, she took what was on offer. He certainly knew how to avert her mind with skilled hands and whispered vanities, away from the alternative, and when he sank his teeth into her neck, she let her consciousness wash away into the tepid night, a welcome eradication of her existence for some stolen moments of peace.

The morning sun awakened her to a glorious view. Her rays broke through the canopy of leaves above Tsisk, golden streaks and specks of light, dancing about like fairies and leaving trails of warmth on her bare scales.

Astarion, too, enjoyed basking in her light, standing with his back to her, arms wide open as if to embrace the sun itself. On his back she could see the faint outlines of scars – several concentric circles, broken by letters. A masterwork of pain.

“That must have hurt.”

“You’re awake. I thought you’d be exhausted after last night.”

“Why is there infernal writing on your back?”

Astarion spun around “You know what this is? Tell me!”

“I recognize it. I can’t read it. Why are you angry?”

He breathed a heavy sigh, his voice suddenly small and sad “A Baldurian Noble named Cazador. My master – my *tormentor*. He carved it into my back in only one night. He made a lot of revisions as he went. To me, he said it was a poem he had composed.”

Tsisk took in how the usually cocky, undaunted Astarion had shrunken together while talking.

“You fear him.”

“And you should, too. He is the patriarch of his vampire coven and a monster obsessed with power over people. He was the one that turned me nearly 200 years ago, made me his spawn and his slave to lure pretty things to him to feed. And he does not let go of his possessions. He will come to get me and drag me back to Baldurs Gate.”

She got up to collect her clothes. “He has no way to find you out here.”

“You better belief he would. It wouldn’t be the first time he caught me running away.”

He exuded hopelessness with every word. This Cazador had a choke hold on him, a dark presence with its claws firmly lodged in his heart and mind. Another threat to hang over their heads. There was no shortage of those between her and her companions.

A spark of hope lit up his dark eyes to a vibrant, deep red, he moulded his body to hers as he had the night before, cold skin on fever-hot scales, and purred into her ear.

“But you would surely help me, wouldn’t you?”

She pried his hands from her body to dress herself.

“He sounds like someone I would avoid at all costs.”

With the passage secured, the group – including Halsin – set out for the distant mountains, to make their way to the Shadowlands.

## ACT II

### 16. Dream II

“You have not used the powers of the tadpoles.”

Her dream visitor had returned. She was...happy about it, in a way. Its presence made her feel calm and protected. The troubles and worries of her journey a distant future.

“You must attune yourself to it, become accustomed to its powers so you can use them when the time is right.”

A shiver ran down her spine. Let the brain-worms bury deeper in her head? So they could control more of her, make her decisions for her, just like the urge? She did not like the direction of this conversation. Instead of an answer, she asked:

“Who are you?”

Hoping against hope she could glean a glimpse of her former life, know why she felt so strongly about this person she would trust her just for existing.

“A fellow adventurer, in the same predicament as you. I am protecting you and your friends from the negative effects of the tadpoles. They are the Absolutes vessels of control over her followers. So far, I have been able to shield you from her commands. But our enemies grow stronger and they are searching for me. You must find the source of her power at Moonrise Towers.”

There was no love in her answer when there should have been. It was presented as caring and compassionate just as a butcher might present the most tender meat in his shop in an effort to entice a purchase. Tsisk did not feel like buying today. All comfort gone, she stared into the endless depths of the astral plane.

For several days now, they had travelled to the mountains. The closer she came, the more Tsisk noticed a voice in the back of her head, its ramblings growing ever louder, making her tadpole squirm.

By the time they reached the foot of the mountains, she could make out words, encouraging her approach, bidding her to come and join the Absolute, said to her by the same voice that had whispered to Minthara. Those words pressed on her, a powerful conviction. And yet, whenever it was close to overwhelming her, a subtle touch reminded her of her primary goal: to reach Moonrise Towers and find the source.

Away from temptations and the excitement of constant fighting, the druidic exercises worked wonders on Tsisks condition and she was able to stay calm for longer amounts of time. Chatting with her companions was a welcome distraction, as it helped drown out the invasive voices. Judging by their eagerness to do the same, their heads where invaded, too.

Tsisks contributions to these conversations were few and far between. She dared not tell anyone the true extent of what ravaged her mind, what made her lie awake at night and smile to herself by day. She felt it would not make them any more forgiving towards her and so tried to be part of it by posing questions instead. She learned much about them in those few days.

Gale, for instance, had lived alone in his home for over a year, trying to find a cure for his affliction by researching every book he could find, his pleadings to Mystra ignored when he most needed her. Only his Tressym, Tara, had kept him company and ran his day-to-day business for him. Until his stock of magical items had run out and he had to emerge from his voluntary self-imprisonment – only to get kidnapped by mindflayers.

The condition of his face indicated he soon would need another donation, the dark veins creeping ever closer to his eye. Her cloaks magic had run out faster

than he anticipated. Each passing day he grew more tired and restless at the same time until he confided his wish to depart soon to her in private.

Astarion loved to complain about the hardships of outdoor-living. The hard ground to sleep on, the long hours of walking, the food. He even tried to get Halsin to attract animals by speaking to them so he could feed on them. His arguments stopped when Tsisk pointed out that would mean Halsin should betray the trust of those that came to him willingly. Instead, he now called her his killjoy, earning him the scornful looks of the dragonborn, which seemed to amuse him to no end. It was his luck, then, that he had proven useful.

Regardless of his uttered grievances, he genuinely seemed to enjoy many other aspects of their route, even joining her sometimes in pursuit of a better view. Though that might also have been because he liked to take his meals in private. Tsisk had nothing against these outings, they gave her an excuse to talk more with the elf, find his weak points for later use. It was difficult to make him talk about anything substantial at all, but in the end she got him through their mutual experience of “hunger” as he called it. As a vampire spawn, he craved blood the same way she craved death. Nothing could ever fully sate the burning hole in his stomach. Though he persisted blood of thinking creatures came as close as he imagined possible. He did not remember how it felt without. Tsisk believed every word this time, seeing him prance about happily and full of energy whenever she answered his question with a yes.

The most, and most entertaining stories came from Halsin. His near 350 years of live had bestowed a great wealth of colourful tales on him. In good mood, he would tell of his many journeys outside of the grove and the many lovers and partners he had taken on the way. Often, even more than one at a time. He had sailed the seas, traversed the whole of the sword coast and explored the Underdark.

At other times, he would tell about his part in the war to form the Shadowlands 100 years prior. The druids of the Emerald Grove and the Harpers – a secretive organisation seeking balance of power – had defeated the general Ketheric Thorm in battle, but ultimately lost the land to a curse enveloping large parts of it, suffocating all life. Many of his aforementioned journeys were made to find a cure, but had never rendered any success. Grief tainted his voice whenever he told of it.

After some days of silently plodding along, Shadowheart eventually joined in. Like Tsisk, she could not remember much, because she had given her memories in service of Shar. Unlike her, that did not include all of them. Some habits, fears and early memories had survived. She loved flowers, especially Nightorchids and never had learned swimming. She even elaborated a little on her time in the cloister, the Mother Superiors matronage of her, driving her to great deeds and holding a protective hand over her faith at all times.

Shadowheart also grew especially fond of the dog who had scared her to tears in the woods. Grooming his fur from matted and grey back to a shining white coat, she had found a leather dog-tag with the name “Scratch” on it and the symbol of the Sword Coast Couriers on the opposite side. Consequently, she was the only person in camp to always have warm feet at night.

The path they took should have been used by travelling craftsmen and merchants at this time of year, looking for customers amidst the local villages, and tradesmen looking to sell their wares closer to the always hungry city of Baldurs Gate. Shortly before reaching the highest point of the mountain pass, a horrible smell, metallic and rotten, befell them before the person emanating it came into view:

A man with the sinewy build and tan skin of those working long and arduous hours outside, obviously armed and well-travelled himself. He stopped and



greeted them friendly and with an open, inviting smile:

“Hello, strangers. Forgive the Aroma. Powdered Iron-Vine keeps monsters and predators from eating me, but it keeps away company just as well.”

“A Monster-hunter. What’s a Gur to do out here, in the middle of nowhere? I thought you preferred the city – with plenty victims for stealing, finagling and the like.”

Surprised by his sudden, aggressive outburst, Tsisk looked at Astarions face and found him loathing the stranger, muscles tense and one hand hovering at his dagger, shielded from the strangers view by his own body.

“So you have heard of our fantastical reputation as evil witches, cut-throats and rooks. I wish even half of that where true, it would make our lives so much easier. No. I am hunting dangerous creatures.”

Astarions hand had now found the dagger, and he started to speak up. His nervousness would betray any words he spoke further, so Tsisk moved in the space between him and the Gur to establish herself as leader and spokesperson of the group.

“Such as?”

“I have orders to find a vampire-spawn. Have you heard of or seen any blood-less corpses lately? Mysterious deaths or disappearances at late hours? One has to be careful around creatures such as these. They can be quite charming, but are deadly nonetheless.”

“Nothing of that sort. But I’m curious. What will you do with the deadly creature once you find it?”

“I will bring him back to Baldurs Gate for questioning. My people would like to have a word.”

Unfortunately, that was the wrong answer. Although Tsisk did not perceive him as a threat, Astarions earlier warning of Cazador resonated within her. His talents at going unseen where valuable and him missing would hurt her own chances of survival.

Which was why she took a step back to Astarions side, wished the Gur good luck in his endeavors, and offered him her hand as a goodbye.

As an honest and trusting person, he took it, and she jerked his arm to make him stumble in her direction. In the same motion, she grabbed Astarions dagger from its sheath and sunk it to its hilt into the Gurs armpit, made vulnerable by her still wrangling his arm. A quick, merciful death. He instantly fell to her feet, stunned by the pain, and mortally wounded. To shorten his suffering and to make sure he could never come back, she stabbed him in the heart twice.

“What? Why would you do that? He wanted to go!” Gale demanded, furious.

“I could not count on that. He could have ambushed us later. A gamble I am not willing to take.”

“She is right. I know his sort, it is better this way.” Astarion looked pleased.

“Which atrocities has he subjected you to?” Gale asked.

“I told you I was a magistrate.”

“Yes. What has that got to do with it?”

“In my function as such, I delivered a sentence they were not all too pleased about. The same evening, they beat me so close to death I prayed to make them go all the way. Then they left me – to the mercy of the night and the man who would make me call him master.”

“I notice a lack of this special fellow in your story.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s done similar. They’re all the same.”

Shadowheart closed the Gurs eyes.

“Deserved or not, he at least should have a proper burial.”

Tsisk nodded. Buried, he would be more difficult to find, up in these mountains. Only small shrubs grew on this altitude and no chasms were in sight to throw him into. She picked a secluded place amidst bushes of flowering heather and piled rocks on top of his body. Shadowheart performed a small rite for him, before they departed.

Holding Tsisks gaze, Gale calmly remarked:

“I came to expect actions like these from Astarion, but I thought you had yourself better under control now.”

“I have no other explanation than the one I gave you. I think he posed a threat to us.”

“But does this warrant death to you? You could have mislead him, sent him to hunt a shadow. We would have been long gone before he realized it. I know you are capable of lies like this.” His rant got progressively louder the longer he talked.

The silence of her guilt made the whistling of the wind seem like a howling storm.

He was right. Tsisks first instinct had been to kill the Gur. She had not even hesitated for a moment to find another solution to her problem.

Halsin was the first to talk again.

“I heard you were a druid not in control of the Oakfathers gifts to us. Now I see why that would be. But – I also see the potential for a change. Maybe it is not too late to teach you his ways. If you want to.”

More of that soothing song? She agreed in an instant, before her head had a chance to laugh at this vain effort. How could someone dreaming of murder when their eyes closed ever be a druid?

“The first thing you need to know about the Oakfathers gift is this: Killing is easy and happens fast. Life takes a long time to become the beautiful abundance you can see. Disrupting it robs it of the chance to grow and disturbs everything around it.”

“Then why kill all these Goblins at the grove?”

“Good question! Right to the heart of the matter. Defending yourself and yours is your right. Going out of your way to hunt and kill is wrong. Once they turn, we let them run.”

“Now they will return to kill you another day.”

“That might happen, or it might not. I think they learned their lesson. Did

you, too?”

## 17. Monastery

Cresting the pass, a valley came into view. The unrelenting forces of water had cut it from soft stone in perpetual labour. Steep slopes descended to a rapidly flowing stream. It ran in a deep gorge, shrouded in mists, untouched by the suns revealing light. The only hint of its existence being the constant roaring of rushing water.

Abundance of water and shelter from the cold mountain winds also meant trees could grow, albeit by fighting the constant threat of plunging down into the dark depths of the gorge below. The emerald green of their leaves was crowned by a monastery sitting high atop the sun-soaked western slope, glaringly colourful. Its dome-shaped roofs and arched windows contrasted the rough cliffs it was built on, the facade a mosaic of coloured glass, scattering the rays of the sun as a thousand multicoloured spots of light onto the shadowy cliffs opposite the monastery. Magic wrought without a touch of weave.

Their path brought the group directly to the obviously abandoned building. Several of the ornate windows were shattered, soggy leaves littered the ground and made for treacherous footing on polished stone-plates.

As they passed through the front court, a person made itself known by clearing their throat. Alarmed, Tsisk and Shadowheart drew weapons, while Astarion dived for cover.

On a bench sat a cloaked figure not existent moments before. “That is not necessary. I would, however, be grateful if you invited me to a meal so I can have a proper talk with all of you.”

“Elminster! What are you doing out here?” Gale pushed his guards aside and greeted the hooded figure with a handshake. “My friends, meet Elminster Aumar, Mystras chosen and as old as any tome you will find in the libraries of Faerûn. I think we should put up camp now. As I know him, his news are of great importance and I am itching to hear them.”

The man turned out to be a grizzled and wiry wizard in simple gray robes, with a hawkish nose and vibrant blue eyes. Watching everyone around him setting up fire and bedrolls in one of the monasteries empty halls, he puffed away at a pipe. Visibly impatient, Gale began to pester him.

“Why are you here? Is there something I should know? A message of Mystra?”

“Do you happen to have a little bread, cheese and wine? It would certainly help to speak, what with my tongue dried to my palate after such a perilous and tiring journey. You know I’m not young any more. A little bit more decorum would be well advised.”

“Yes, yes. Have a bite of the dried rations and a sip of water. But would you answer my questions, please?”

Elminster made a pained face before he hesitantly said:

“Fine. Let me think about how to put it. Mystras a bit enigmatic at times and instructions can be...”

“Mystra? What does she have to say? She ignored me for almost a year now, Elminster.”

“As is her right after what you did. Have you told your friends here why you look ill tonight, what eats at your magic and could well be their doom?”

Where the others were following the conversation with half an ear, heads perked up now, eyes trained on Gale, except for Tsisk, who watched the old wizard.

Elminster now addressed the room in its entirety:

“I see you kept to yourself mostly. So let me give them the whole picture, as not to keep them in the dark. Gale here sought to enhance his magical strength by exploring a form of magic forbidden by Mystra, for which she abandoned him. In his folly he unleashed it on himself and made his body a living explosive, capable of eradicating this little gathering, the valley and probably more still. Now, she has decreed that he will be given one chance of redemption.”

Hope and bitterness fought on Gales face, neither giving in for the other.

“Forgiveness?”

“I would not call it that, but she knows of your quarrel with the being calling itself The Absolute and is ready to provide you her blessing and a solution to this all-encompassing, all-devouring evil it represents. For it will take everything if it succeeds – life, weave and hope. And it is her will that you end it, Gale.”

“The power that consumes me.”

“Precisely. The orb of netherese power in your chest. With Mystras blessing I will quench its hunger, so that you can bring it to the Absolute, then unleash it with a thought. Will you take it and this quest it comes with?”

Hope retreated and left the battlefield of Gales face to bitterness. The defeat resounded in his tired voice.

“What choice do I have, Elminster? Die in the next few days without achieving anything, or die with purpose? Of course I will take it.”

“Then I shall bestow it upon you before I leave. Do know that I don’t take your burden lightly. But there is one more thing I have to ask of you and your friends. It is of personal interest to me. This monastery once held a powerful weapon of divine origin. Now, Gith have taken seat here and are close to finding it. I would prefer you take it with you before they steal it away and use it in their never ending wars. It will help you greatly in the trials to come. This book should tell you where to start your search. And do not fret, I have obscured your presence for this night.”

Elminster delivered the promised book and blessing and left Gale to the scrutiny of his companions.

“So you are telling me we could have blown up literally any moment?”

Astarions agitated voice echoed through the hall.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I would have left you way before that to be as far away as possible from any living being.”

Harshly, Shadowheart added “But you could have at least told us. If something happened to you, no one would have known what to do.”

“He told me. I knew. And I helped him.” Tsisk said calmly, answering the stares that followed with her own until the argument ended with everyone dispersing. Gale began to read his new book studiously, Shadowheart went to the back of the hall to play with Scratch, pausing once in a while to hold her wounded hand. Astarion stared intently at the glass panes of the windows.

“What are you looking at?”

Tsisk stepped to his side and tried to see through the glass into the darkness. But the only thing she could see was her own, lonely reflection, staring back at her with glacier-blue and bloodshot eyes, grim and haggard to the point she could make out all bony ridges of her skull beneath the dulled scales of her face. Truly a sight to run from. No wonder the goblins had stopped in their tracks. She must have looked like a hungry maniac. Maybe she was a hungry maniac.

“Just thinking. You look more in control of yourself lately. In contrast to everyone else around us.”

“I feel better.”

Astarion's mouth twitched into a half-smile.

“Great. Now tell me, what do you see when you look at me?”

“Pale skin, white hair, pointed ears...” Tsisk started irritably, not knowing why he would need to know that.

“Gods, you make it sound like a tax file. I have not seen this face since it grew fangs and my eyes turned red. Be my mirror, tell me I am beautiful and be done with it.”

“So you’re after shallow praise.”

“Yes. Lighten my mood. The gods know I could need it.” Astarion added a little twirl to his request, showing off his body and inhumanly graceful motions alike.

“You look good. Flawless even. But I think your most striking feature would



be that you do not look as dangerous as you are.”

He looked at her upset and folded his arms. “And how is that good?”

“Your opponents assume your weakness. They assume you to be overwhelmed easily. And you are free to use that flaw in their thinking to your full advantage. A backstab of the different kind.”

“Somehow, oddly, that does make me feel better. Though – do exercise your compliments on my looks a bit, would you? You are awful at it.”

## 18. Lathanders Blood

“The weapon Elminster told us of is a drop of Lathanders blood contained in a vessel. It is guarded by monks and traps. I think we can safely assume that the monks are no more and we only have to occupy ourselves with the disarmament of the traps. Unfortunately, it does not say what and where they are to be found. But it does point us to a room of worship at the top of the monastery.”

The room in question was an enclosed, many-sided room with one big, singular window facing east. The ground made of a glass-mosaic was illuminated from below to cast vibrant images of a warrior's great deeds on the smooth surface of the dome, a small glass pyramid glinting right in the middle.

Shadowheart stood beneath the mural of light, looking up with a deep frown.

“You said Lathanders blood, Gale? As in Lathander, god of dawn? Is this a temple we are standing in?”

“Yes, of course it is. I thought that was implied.”

She stared him directly into his eyes, her teeth grinding.

“I would have preferred you warning me about that. Now I will have to make amends to Shar just for coming here. In the meantime, you might want to search for solutions involving light. His followers are very fond of it.” She said pointedly and left.

Gale, Tsisk and Astarion cast about the room in search of clues or mechanisms. Or at least Gale and Tsisk did. Astarion just walked idly along the wall, knocking the dagger of his pommel against the stone while he glanced at everything and nothing in particular.

Plock.

Plock.

Klonk.

“Stop Clunking around, Astarion. I can’t hear myself think if you do that.”

Gale raised his voice and glowered at the spawn.

“Actually -”

“Actually, I’ve had enough of your antics. Would you just keep quiet for goodness sake?”

“Alright. If you say so.”

“Thank you! Finally, a useful contribution.”

For an hour or so, Gale and Tsisk stared at murals, reliefs and the projection above them to find clues. Only when Tsisk investigated the floor, too, did she notice a glass tile the exact size as the base of the glass pyramid above her. It slid easily out of its mount. A cloud of specks clouded the middle, although the pyramid itself and everything in this room was made with expert craftsmanship. To her frustration, she could not figure out what it was or was meant to do, neither on the floor nor in its original mount on the ceiling.

When Gale saw the thing up close, he immediately got excited.

“I know what this is! Mystra loves illusions like these.” He turned and twisted the pyramid to look at it from all angles. “Although hers naturally would be actual illusions, not inclusions in physical objects like this.”

He put it down onto the floor again, stared at it quizzically, then circled the contraption.

“I need to see it more clearly. There’s not enough light here...”

Astarion had kept his word and stayed quiet throughout these investigations, perching on an altar, unusually interested in everything they did.

“Do you know something? How this works?” Tsisk asked the elf. He put his finger on his lips, frowned, and shook his head. His smug smile somewhat defeated the gesture, but Tsisk already had gotten another idea. The reason Gale could not see what he wanted to see was that not enough light filtered through the floor to illuminate the pyramid. She did not know how to get more light

through the floor. But she could put out the competing light coming from the window. Her thick woollen blanket hung before the window, they finally were able to decipher the form of the cloud in the glass. It reminded her of the form of the reliefs on the wall.

Only one of them fully matched the picture. Gale pushed down on it, and a small compartment opened.

“Whatever we were supposed to find, its already gone.” He looked devastated at the empty hole in the wall.

“Oh, I already found it.” Astarion smirked and held up a small amulet with a prism held by gold, silver and copper wires, artfully wrapped around it to form the Symbol of Lathander – a road leading to the dawning sun.

“Then why didn’t you say so?”

“You two seemed to have an awful lot of fun. I would not dare intrude on that with my noise. Besides, nowhere does it say it is the artefact you were searching.”

Gale opened and closed his fists in time with controlled breaths, while Tsisk hid her grin by examining the nook. She did have fun figuring this out, a welcome deviation from the drudgery of walking and the carnage of fight.

Finally, Gale just took the amulet from Astarion to get a closer look. The spawn was right. The amulet gave no clue as to its purpose or place to use.

“Was there something else in the nook?” Tsisk asked, running her fingers over the smooth insides of a recess much bigger than the amulet would have needed.

“Just a scroll of parchment, but its useless, completely empty.” Astarion produced a sheet of ivory parchment from his jacket. It was, indeed, empty of any writing or marks. Remembering Shadowhearts suggestion, Tsisk held it into the light. The parchment had been thinned in places to allow more light shining through. It depicted a plan of the temple, with blueprints of machinery in the dungeons below.

“Looks like we have to pay a visit to the Gith now.” She said.

## 19. Gith-creche

It was not difficult to find the Gith as they ran into a patrol accompanied by a red dragon the moment they left the room Elminster had prepared for them. Tsisks original plan had been to sneak into the post without anyone noticing, made obsolete now. She thought the dragon might burn them to a crisp then and there. The rider watched them with disdain, took his time to think while his dragon planned his next meal, then reigned his beast in while he bellowed orders in a harsh language Tsisk had never heard. Then he rode off in a hurry. At least she needed not think of this threat anymore, just of the one posed by a group of heavily armed, obviously trained and – worst of all – hostile guards she was left with.

The Gith led the group down long, winding staircases into the Creche, the repurposed innermost sanctum of the monastery and its vast underground portions. More Gith guarded the doorways, patrolled the corridors and went about their work in general. Tsisk wondered how many she was not seeing by comparing the plans she had looked at to the reality she was walked through. Too many to fight their way out of it. Too many, even, to sneak in unbothered. All of them showed the lean physique of athletes, the discipline of soldiers and the well-worn and well-kept weapons of prideful warriors. Every step brought them further into this wasps nest full of opportunities to get stung. She cursed Elminster and his weapon.

Eventually, they were led into a war-room. Books and maps about Baldurs Gate and the surrounding lands were gathered and haphazardly stacked along the walls and on a big desk dominating half the room. Cramped into a corner was a small, personal cot, separated by a folding screen. The place of honour took a weapon stand holding githyanki-style silvery swords under the portrait of an austere Gith-woman sporting sharpened teeth, loose skin and dark, hollow eyes.

Her gaze was intense and piercing, even as a painting.

“Take your eyes off Vlaakith, Isthik. You are not worthy of the god-queen.” Tsisk averted her eyes and looked at the Gith-commander in front of her instead. His gaze was trained on her in obvious disgust.

“My scouts tell me you were on the nautiloid.” He spit his words at her with a heavy accent.

“...do not deny it, Istik, you were seen. You were in the ship. So you know what I am talking about next. Think about your answer really good. Your life is worth nothing to us, but the information we seek will provide your freedom.”

Tsisk did not believe him. His threat of death was sincere, the part about freedom an obvious blunder from someone who saw her as nothing more than an irritating obstacle to the thing they wanted.

“The Gaikh – the mindflayers – were in possession of an artefact that was stolen from us. We scoured the wreck. We did not find it. You were the only ones to walk away from it. Where is it?”

“Do not tell him!”

The voice of her dream visitor screamed in her head, full of fear.

“I am the only thing to prevent your Ceremorphosis. Without me, you will turn!”

She kept silent, as did her companions. It did not help.

“Your refusal is most welcome. Our young need targets for training. The Tieflings and Goblins are too weak to be a challenge.” Thin, green lips peeled back into a smile. Then he ordered the surrounding guards:

“Search them!”

Resistance against so many trained soldiers was pointless. Tsisk hoped for a chance later on and let them have their way. Hopefully, they would not be guarded this closely at all times. Her companions followed her lead and did not struggle against the search. Soon, the artefact was found on Shadowheart. For the first time, Tsisk could take a closer look at it. Made from blackened,

curved metal plates with unreadable inscriptions it was formed to resemble an icosahedron. The moment it left Shadowheart's possession, glowing red spikes appeared and pierced the hand of the guard holding it. Screaming and with new, sizzling holes punched through her hand, she let it drop to the ground, where it lay unassuming as before. She would not hold a sword for quite some time. With newfound respect, the other guards looked over to their commander for guidance. He frowned and took one of the swords from the weapon stand to kneel and hold it up before Vlaakith's portrait. In this pose he remained for what seemed eternity to Tsisk. When he stood up again, he barked at Shadowheart:

“You! Take it up!”

He walked up to a wall, then slashed at it with his sword. An illusion parted from his strike, revealing a corridor leading even deeper into the rock. The group was ushered in by the guards. As soon as they had passed, the illusion reformed itself to take the form of the wall again.

Echoes heralded a big cavern before light made it visible to Tsisk. Once, it might have been a gathering place. Slightly declining to a stage-like platform it would have been perfect to host a monasteries worth of monks, watching a demonstration from above. A small alcove was decorated with two statues of monks, murals and symbols of Lathander's faith. In the middle of the stage lay a silver-adorned, blackened metal-plate engraved with symbols similar to the ones on the prism, out of place between the tributes to Lathander and his inspiring light and contaminating the humble stone beneath it by its very presence.

Rudely, they were shoved to stand before the plate.

“Put the astral prism on the plate.”

Shadowheart obeyed, but looked for Tsisk's reaction.

“Kneel!”

Tsisk wanted to roar at him, fight him in an unfair fight and see him bleed. The urge agreed, making her ears rush and her heart pound with eager bloodlust, her view blurred. A blade materialized at her throat.



“Your last chance, Isthik. You will not be missed. Kneel. And do not look up.”

Nothing could come of this now. Patience. There would be a chance. She forced herself to bend knee and head while her heart pounded on like a wardrum.

“Queen Vlaakith, I brought the thieves.”

“Leave, soldier.” Boomed a cold voice from above. It crawled into Tsisks ears like a many-legged bug, quenched her rage and replaced it with fear. She heard the foot steps of the soldiers walking away, then the final thud of the door, closing.

“You brought me my property. A deed fit for a reward. You get one chance to redeem your souls. The prism is tainted. Kill the creature within and I will free you from your parasite. Fail, and you will not only die, your souls will fuel my divinity, consumed to serve my cause. Leave the prism with the guards when you are done.”

Vlaakiths voice crushed every thought of resistance, made Tsisks body heavy as lead until she had to use her hands to steady herself and remember to draw one breath after the other. In panic, her mind raced to find a way out.

Several minutes and one eternity had passed before she felt able to move again. Slowly, she picked herself up, looking like a feeble geriatric with shaking knees and bent back.

The prism hovered before her, plates disassembled to uncover a fiery core. The swirling patterns formed by it drew her in.

She stood with Gale, Shadowheart and Astarion in the astral plane. The war around them waged endlessly.

“What should we do now? I may be familiar with this plane, but this situation is rather new to me. I would not want to trust this Vlaakith, but I am sure she is a person of her word.” Gale said.

The disembodied voice of the dream visitor answered:

“And you should not trust her. She is treacherous as a snake. The reason she wants me dead is because I know her greatest secret. It would end her empire.” It took no risk with its guests, even if seemingly friendly, Tsisk noted. She also took note of the fact no one was surprised or demanded to get to know the voice. But first things first, the situation outside needed to be dealt with.

“How powerful is she?” Tsisk wanted to know.

“Not as much as she wants you to think. She is no real god. She can not see or hear us here. I think she might not even see you in the outside world as long as her image is not present.”

“Good. According to the map, there is a hidden passage in the alcove. If we can hold up the guards long enough, we can escape.”

Together, all four emerged from their trance in front of bewildered Halsin, frantically taking action. Shadowheart immediately snatched up the now closed prism, while Gale went over to the door to hastily draw a rune on it. No sooner was he done, that the guards began hammering against it. In the alcove, the others tried to find the hidden passage. At first, they tried to move the statues, but nothing would budge, not even to Halsin's bearish strength.

Gale screamed from across the room:

“The arcane lock won't hold for long. Hurry up, gods-dammit!”

Shadowheart knelt down, looking at the alcove and murmuring to herself.

Astarion threw his arms up in exasperation. “Are you serious? Praying? Now, of all god-forsaken times?”

“Would anyone just tell me what you are doing here?” Halsin requested.

“Light, we need light. Shar forgive me.” Shadowheart said and scooted over to an engraving set in the floor. It depicted Lathanders dawning sun and a path running into the alcove. Her hands held a small, but bright flame she put down in the place of the sun, wincing from the pain her wound caused her in this moment.

“Go away!”

She waved the others to the sides. The flame cast deep, shifting shadows onto the walls. What were monks posing in fighting stances now became dancing shadows, pointing to a detail of the mural. Hurriedly, Astarion rushed in to figure out the mechanism. It took him two heartbeats before the wall became a revolving door. Gale had made his way down from the other door and was ushered through after the others before Tsisk closed the passage behind them again.

“They won’t take forever to figure out how we left. We must keep going.” She urged them on.

This part of the temple was only roughly hewn into the stone and bared any ornaments other than crystals growing on the walls and floor, blooming like sharp-edged flowers. They glowed faintly in the darkness of the tunnel, ominously lighting up along their path, beckoning to venture deeper. In a rush, they hurried down the path until Scratch jumped in their way, blocking off the tunnel with his body in front of a thickly crystal-encrusted part. Being the foremost, Astarion nearly tackled him mid-run, instead jumping over him, tucked into a roll to avoid hitting the dog. He stood as fast as he had fallen.

“Stupid dog. Better put him on a leash.”

Scratch wined.

The crystals flickered, their light quickly brightening to a glare, engulfing Astarion fully. Tsisk barely managed to close her eyes against the blinding light, and heat washed over her skin. She could hear Astarion scream before the light died down. Even so, she had to feel her way forward until she found his curled up body on the floor. Through her teary eyes she could see the crystals faintly glittering menacingly, energy converging on her and the vampire for a second burning, the crystals crackling with heat releasing from the previous attack.

“Can you walk?” She asked while already urging him up. He was not exceptionally heavy, but her height made it awkward to support him. When he

did not answer right away she just picked him up with a grunt, to carry out of the crystals reach.

“Should I heal him?” Shadowheart asked with a look on the badly burned Astarion.

“I don’t know if you can.”

Tsisk thought feverishly. How did vampires heal? She remembered his bursts of energy after drinking fresh blood and rolled up her sleeve to reveal the veins alongside the soft underside of her arm. Those carried enough blood and were easy enough to stanch again for her purposes. With the sharp edge of her dagger she carefully set a small incision until her blood could flow freely into her bowl. Once full, she fed it to the spawn.

At first, he would not drink, which worried her. But once the metallic smell reached his nose, his hunger took over and she could not refill the small bowl fast enough for him.

The burns healed before her eyes, but she could not possibly provide enough blood alone to heal him fully.

“I see no one is surprised. So you knew already.” Shadowheart snorted.

“Please. You two were not exactly subtle about it. You aren’t even hiding his bite-marks half the time.”

And, after a short pause:

“I was surprised you would be up to that. I did not figure you as the type to fall for a vampire. But I guess to each their own. He certainly looks good enough that I can see the appeal.”

Slightly wheezing, Astarion said “Thank you, darling. Does that mean you are volunteering?”

“Don’t even dream about it.”

“Good, you are awake.” Tsisk remarked weakly. The bloodloss had made her dizzy. “You need to walk on your own now.”

Twice, they had to shatter more clustered crystals before they entered a cave with curious looking machinery in it. Plates and rings of gold-plated metal hung in the room like a night sky reenacted, encircling a solid altar made of silver and gold in the centre. Lightwells funnelled bright beams of sunlight from outside into the cave so they could see. Dust dispersed to clouds of glowing specks beneath their feet to make the air itself glow. Tsisk recognized the machine from the plans, but could not glean its purpose. She suspected a trap and gave the parchment to Gale. He surely knew what to make of it.

“You are right, Tsisk. If used incorrectly, this machine would activate a series of lenses to bundle the light until it is strong enough to melt even stone. And if I am reading the calculations correctly, it would melt a very important structural part of the monastery, destroying it completely...Marvellous!”

“Alright. And which wonders would we beholden to see if used the right way?” Astarions voice teetered between hesitant and curious. A trap like that surely held a big reward.

“...it seems it would melt the middle of this room instead, freeing the Blood of Lathander.”

“I guess you will need this now.”

From the depth of his pocket, Astarion pulled out the amulet, curiosity curbed by the mention of searing hot light.

Tsisk took it and put it on the altar, following Gales directions, then hurriedly stepped back, causing her head to spin. Klicks and grinding noises accompanied the slow movement of the rings and plates, rearranging themselves in a moment of universal movement until the light from the lightwells got redirected and concentrated on the prism. She felt the heat radiating from the altar, intensely warm through and through like the midday sun after a chillingly cool morning. Silvery metal melted and released the golden parts to fall away until a curved pyramid of copper was the only thing standing. Its artfully detailed sides opened like a budding flower, revealing a mace made from steel with inset gold and

copper while the rings reverted back to their old positions.

Tsisk took it up. The handle was warm in her hand and light seeped through the cracks of the insets the moment she touched it.

She tried to offer it to Shadowheart who was much more versed in the use of such weapons. But the cleric of Shar declined the sun-gods blood fuelled weapon with a horrified look on her face. Instead, Tsisk faced Gale.

“Gale? Can I reset this machine? To stop the Gith from following us?”

Halsin cleared his throat.

“I hope you do not mean to kill all innocents in here. The Gith might be no pleasant folks, but they do not deserve outright eradication by being buried alive, warrior and child alike.”

Her urge whispered to her. From far away it told her of revenge, of its wish to do exactly that. It was faint, almost unnoticeable. Tsisk bowed her head tiredly to Halsin. It had crept up on her again. The hunger demanded victims.

Her thoughts got disrupted by terrible screams of pain echoing from the tunnel.

The group rushed out of the cave until they reached an opening onto the cliffs and began a descend into the mists of the valley, where the Githyanki soon lost them in the haze, devouring the sounds of their steps and their silhouettes as eagerly as a pack of wolves devoured a deer.

## 20. Follow the shadows

“Stay were you are!”

The group stopped dead in their tracks, taking positions to defend to all sides, hands on their weapons.

Behind a low wall on the side of the road a crossbow came in view, nearly concealing the gaunt man holding it, looking as grey and emaciated as the surrounding landscape. A second person stepped onto the path behind them, preventing any retreat.

“Make yourself known, strangers.” She said calmly, carrying a dimmable lantern in one hand, with her other on her own weapon.

Halsin slowly and with upturned hands came forward.

“I am Halsin, archdruid of the emerald grove and these are my companions. We are on our way through, if you would let us, Harper.”

“Halsin!” One of the crooked bushes called out with a gruff voice. “Why would ye come back to these gods-forsaken lands?”

The bush shook violently as a dwarf fought its way through it. “Theres no life left to concern yerself about, treehugger.”

“And yet I will try again. It is good to see you in good health, Halbror.” Halbror the dwarf huffed. “Lads and Lasses, I will personally vouch for Halsin, even if he’s a pansy elf. We fought in this bloody war a hundred years ago and ain’t no one who’s more interested to end this shadow-curse in all of Faerûn.” The dwarf waved them over to follow him.

“Now come off this path, we weren’t waitin’ for yee, ye know. We be waitin’ for one o’ those bloody convoys o’ the Absolute. Could use the provisions an’ does ne hurt to kill a few o’ them before they reach the rest.”

The group hid with the harpers in the ruins of a house by the wayside, their

lanterns darkened to provide only as much light as absolutely necessary to the huddled crowd. In their light, Tsisk could see the silhouettes of the houses interior. Everything portable of worth had been stolen away, but the rest stood and lay unmoved for a century, collecting dust. Where the light did not touch, the shadows had a life of their own. Writhing and curling against its protection, they sought a way in.

When she had come down the mountains with the others she had curiously tried to see how far she could stray from the light. Her eyes had not even had the time to adjust properly, before the shadows had crept up on her like flesh eating vines, ready to swallow her from the world and drag her into the darkness. She had felt their hunger and retreated fast.

Here, in the heart of the shadowlands, the darkness was deeper and even more menacing than those closer to the mountains and added another layer of dread to the constant whisperings of the Absolute and the urge in her head. And with everything around her dead or twisted, there was no other respite for her than the warmth of Lathanders light and her faithful companions. Their banter kept the voice at bay and her mind from wandering to bloody delights.

“There he is.” Halbror whispered, readying his battle-axe. Following his gaze, Tsisk could see a drider – half drow, half spider – its skin scarred and corroded from the spiders poison coursing through its veins, with dark, beady eyes covering its forehead and temples. Accompanied by goblins, bugbears and a few others, many of which wore amulets or brandings marking them as cultists of the Absolute, the abomination plucked its way down the path they had taken earlier.

In its hand, the drider carried a piercingly bright lantern, creating a much bigger area safe from the shadows than Lathanders light or torches could. Despite that, many of his followers carried their own lights, warily watching the shadows. As the drider reached the ambush, the harpers used the same pincer-manuever as before – except this time, they attacked immediately.



A bolt hit the drider in the shoulder, eliciting a high shriek no humanoid should be capable of. His many eyes darted around to find the culprit. He found him in the wiry crossbow-bearer, his eight legs propelling him forward with inhuman speed. Before anyone could react, he pulled him in a tight embrace in his spindly legs and used the spider-bodies chelicera – positioned just under his abdomen – to inject his poison into the flailing victim. He let the convulsing body drop to the floor like a wet rag, held his lantern up high and hissed with his horribly mutilated voice:

“Take this offering, Lolth, and protect me!”.

A rush of bloodlust had driven her out and after Halbror. A mistake, as she stood alone with him against the drider.

Skin turning into gleaming chitin, the twisted creature looked at her with a menacing grin, meanwhile mumbling words under its breath. The Absolutists had dropped their torches and fought against the harpers and her companions who were hindered by their need to carry lights so they could fight on the fringes of the lanterns blazing flare.

“I’ll be distracting him, ye’ll get the bastard from behind.” Halbror muttered to her, then charged forward with a mighty roar and raised weapons. The dragonborn followed his orders, flanked the drider and attacked it from behind. Both their attacks were repelled by its chitinous shell, ineffectively blown off. Up close, she could hear its mutterings: The drider quietly continued its prayer to Lolth despite their efforts.

A blood curdling scream resounded from the Harpers direction. She chanced a quick look. The shadows had claimed a Harper straying too far from the light. Her piercing shrieks ended abruptly the moment they drowned her in darkness. The incident elicited a pleased smile from the abomination, daring her to commence her futile actions.

Meanwhile, Halbror attacked it relentlessly, seemingly unable to find a single weak spot on its body. He fought with a grace Tsisk would have never attributed

to a stocky dwarf and with the strength of a hundred years of built up wrath. So diverted was his attention, that he missed the Harper coming shambling from the shadows again, now eerily quiet, vacant of life. She reached longingly to embrace him and take his for herself instead.

Tsisk shot forward to intercept the zombie and Lathanders Blood in her hand exploded in brilliant white light, the full power of the sun breaking through the clouds to blind whoever looked at it.

Behind her, the drider screamed its inhuman screech again and lashed out blindly at the light. She struck down the zombie just in time to catch Halbror beating the drider to a pulp, wildly laughing and cursing at the same time, as its protection was gone, the skin of its human portion returned to its vulnerable state. Surprise and fear etched onto its face, the drider succumbed to the decisive blows of the dwarf.

Tsisk caught the lantern before it could hit the ground.

“Well done, Scales. Thank ye for catchin’ that. And the lantern.” Halbror said between breaths. “Now go helpin’ the lads with that thing.”

With the lantern firmly in her hands, Tsisk walked over to the harpers, calling their attention to her price. Now they had the advantage of light. The Absolutists were met with their last choice: die by the sword or die in the darkness. Most chose the sword. Only a hand full fled, torches in hand. Tsisk took up a dropped crossbow, but let it sink again. She would rather fate deal with them than her bloodlust. Fate would not be kind to them anyway in about an hours worth of time, when their light ran out.

“That was a fight, eh!?”

Halbror took a long look at the dead and wounded harpers, packed onto the two carts they had captured. Halsin had to drag one of them as a bear because so many were wounded or too exhausted from the fight. With a suddenly sombre voice, Halbror added:

“I’ll make sure te thank the gods who sent yer here. Ye were sorely needed. But now, all o’ us deserve a break. Ye can come with us to our Inn. Bet ye could need a Stein o’ ale or two. Cause I do.”

The way to the Harpers hideout was long, so Tsisk occupied herself by examining the lantern. It was made out of wrought iron, formed into a small cage with a latch and lined with sharp thorns, centred on the light-source. When the lantern moved, the light-source flickered brighter, bouncing between the thorns. Squinting her eyes, Tsisk could see a small figure avoiding the iron by twisting and bending like a flame.

Intrigued, she asked a nearby harper:

“What is that? It does not look like fire.”

“It’s a pixie. Nasty little fey. In a few days, it’ll be dead.”

So this was a torture-device. The tiny fey inside got pricked by the thorns and released light on reflex. The urge rejoiced, pressing her to toy with it, see the light flicker until it flickered out eventually.

Tsisk knew she would find no peace if she kept the lantern. Her urge would continue to lure her with the sweet pain of her defenceless victim. And she would follow its suggestions eventually, even if only subconsciously. Giving that power to another person while she could not have it felt like torture to her.

So she opened the latch and carefully stilled the lantern until the pixie had freed itself, slowly careening around her like a butterfly with broken wings, trailing glittering pixie-dust. It fell down to the ground and over Tsisks scales in a fizzling cascade, feeling like a soft summers rain.

“Why did you do that? She could have protected us from the shadows for days!” The harper shrieked.

“You have torches.” Tsisks searing gaze made him shut up.

Defeated, the exhausted harper chose another person to walk beside and left her alone.

As she passed Tsisks ear, she could hear the pixies high pitched voice:

“Call Dolly thrice, collect your price!” Then, the fey whirred off in a buzz of tiny wings.

## 21. Last Light Inn

The aforementioned Inn sat on an island on the shore of the shadowlands. Only one heavily guarded bridge led to it. Mists and shadows prevented Tsisk from seeing more than hunkering silhouettes in the gloom behind the tiredly hunched and slightly realer shadows of the guards. She wondered how it could be a safe haven amidst the shadows. How did the harpers keep them away? Passing the bridge, those shadows became lighter and less substantial until the tentative rays of the sun were allowed to touch Tsisks skin. Even though they were so weak they could not warm her, they were very welcome. Not even two days had gone by since they had entered the shrouded lands, but she had missed the sun already.

It revealed what the mists had hidden – a big Inn, surrounded by a small Outpost. A stable was in use for a handful oxen, looking too starved to stand all day, much less pull a waggon. A small forge had been assembled and a guarded barn held all sorts of supply, most noticeably weapons and armour in various states of disrepair, cared for by a group of harpers repairing what was in working condition still. More work was delivered upon their arrival. Tsisk and the others followed the harpers into the Inn. The first floor sported a kitchen and tables with seating for most if not all people she had seen bustling about. To the side was a dormitory used as a ward, where all injured harpers were brought to.

Halbror guided them over to a half-elf woman with blond hair, interspersed with silvery streaks of grey. It was braided tight to keep the strands from falling into her face, even in the midst of battle. She stood out from all the others not only by her choice of clothing – all practical, with a splash of Baldurian extravagance in colour and foreign fabrics – but also in the way she kept herself. No doubt she was in a leading position. Right now, she overlooked the wounded

with worry on her face.

Their pained moans lured the urge out of its hiding hole like a scurrying rat in search of the source of a cadaverous smell, making Tsisk squeamish and uncomfortable until the door closed and left her with only the murmurs of quiet conversations and the sound of footsteps on creaking wooden planks.

“Halbror, why did you bring strangers? Are you sure they can be trusted?” A thick, Tethyrian accent coloured her words, together with a hint of weariness, mirrored in her slightly droopy military posture and her rumpled clothing.

“Without ‘em, we needed ta lament more losses. Be lenient, Jaheira.” Jaheira eyed the group of unwelcome strangers with disregard. No leniency made itself known on her face or in her voice.

“Prudence is the better part of valor. They will take the test just like everyone else or sleep in the shadows.”

Surrounded by frowns and doubtful faces, her features softened up a bit.

“Do not worry, strangers. We do not ask much of you. But assassins were found and we do not want to be surprised by more.”

She reached for a sealed jar on a nearby shelf and held it up for everyone to see. A tadpole wriggled in it. Its round mouth with tiny rows of pointed triangle-teeth pressed against the glass like a leech to its host, hair thin tentacles writhing to find a hole to escape through. One after the other she held it to their heads, turning the jar every which way. The tadpole in it invariably chose to latch onto the glasses surface closest to the next of them, except with Halsin.

The procedure attracted several of the harpers currently in the room, closing in to watch.

“Ugh, get this thing out of my face! What are you doing with it anyway?” Astarion tried to swipe away her hand, but found several sharp-edged weapons impeding on his freedom of movement.

He took a step back into the group. The obvious threat to one of her companions enraged Tsisk. Without thinking, she crowded the Harpers, coldly staring and

ready to defend what was hers.

To a new recruit, this behaviour would have led to inevitable violence. But these were experienced, battle-hardened men and women and so they held their ground, waiting for Jaheiras orders instead.

From a safe distance, Astarion decided to continue this fight with politeness, complemented by his usual flourishes, most notable of which was a shallow bow, executed to perfection and thus very out of place for Tsisk, who only knew him as prideful and snarky.

“I mean, what I meant to say was: Would you kindly explain the purpose of this treatment?”

Behind her soldiers, Jaheira herself had taken a more upright stance, though her eyes told of her hesitation to order the strangers’ death.

“The tadpole reacts to the other ones in your heads, which means you are agents of the Absolute. A shame, really. Halbrors report made me hope otherwise.”

“I am sure it might look like it, but maybe you want to consider a second opinion before you decide their fate. I have been with them for quite some time now. They have tadpoles, yes. But it does not compel them like it does others.”

“I honour your words, archdruid. But I would like to be sure it is not a ruse.” After a brief pause, she looked at one of the armed and ready harpers.

“Go and bring me the truth-speaking serum. And some wine to wash it down. From my stash.”

The harper brought glasses and poured a good portion of wine for each, then added a dash from a smaller, marked bottle.

“You will drink this and tell me what you want here, in the shadowlands. Then we will know for sure about your intentions. You too, archdruid.”

With dry throats and after days of tasting the same dried rations and stale water from their waterskins, they all downed the rich, red wine.

It tasted heavenly – and felt all wrong.

Not only the alcohol burned her throat slightly, but a numbing tingle relaxed her muscles and her mind, until neither fear nor sorrow interfered with her tongue's ability to speak what was on it. One after the other, Jaheira let them speak:

Halsin, Gale, Astarion, Shadowheart and Tsisk.

“I want to lift the Shadowcurse from this land and free my friend, Thaniel.”

“Mystra sent me to destroy the Absolute by killing myself.”

“Finding a way to control the tadpole in my head so I can keep walking under the sun.”

“Shar has touched these lands. I want to find out how and how I can serve her purpose.”

“Finding a cure to the presence in my head.”

Jaheira visibly relaxed and waved away the harpers, which hesitantly obliged and went back to their duties.

“So now we can be sure about you, make yourself useful. Everyone here has to earn their rations. I would suggest the cleric and the druid to help care for the wounded. Maybe one of you is able to help the poor sod we found last week. He won't wake up, but speaks and screams in his sleep.”

The meal they shared with the Harpers this evening was a simple, but filling stew of potatoes and meat. Lots of potatoes and very little meat, to be precise. Most Harpers counted themselves lucky if they found a second piece the size of a pea on their plate. Many of the men and women had tired faces and ashen grey skin. Tsisk had helped in the outpost for the rest of the day and found the pallor of the harpers was a direct consequence of their guard outside the Inn. It drained the life out of them.

And yet, the atmosphere got brighter over food and company until instruments were tuned and lively melodies chased the shadows out of their faces.

It reminded Tsisk of Alfira. Her performance would have brought the sun back into the Inn, she felt. She surely would have loved the spirit present in these



battered people.

A murmur went through the harpers, respectfully raising their drinks to a new arrival. The stairs got descended by a small figure. Her movements were slow, exhaustion had long taken the edge from it, yet at the same time she refused to bow to it. Her haggard face was lightened by a small smile, placed there to uphold the memory of hope for all looking at her. Shadowheart gaped. “A priestess of Selûne. Maybe even a Chosen of hers. I bet she’s the one to keep up the spell that protects the Inn.” With the priestess’ appearance, the grey world outside was forgotten and the same power that held the shadows at bay now soothed the hearts of everyone in the room.

A sensation stabbed Tsisk in hers. Hate. Intense, seething hatred flooded her mind and soiled the moment. It was the same presence she had felt with Alfira. Cold fear gripped her heart in an unholy union with the hate and left her unable to do more than watch that wretched creature walk between the corpses that did not know they were dead yet.

She knew her purpose. Killing the priestess would mean everyone here would die a glorious death. The thought made her stomach churn in eager anticipation and disgust for her notions alike.

With her head bowed low, she concentrated on calming herself, fought the images trying to tempt her and banned the overwhelming presence to a distant part of her mind.

The effort made her sweat and claw at her face in an effort to wipe away what would not leave her head. She heard Shadowheart and Gale talk to harpers seated close by, their gazes firmly fixed on the woman whose name seemed to be Isobel.

Astarion though watched her and her feeble attempt to appear normal.

“You look horrible. Are you sure you’re not sprouting tentacles tonight?”

“I’m sure you’re safe from tentacles.”

She was unable to hold the low growl manifesting in her voice. Abruptly

standing up, she left the table to her companions and went out into the night to watch the waves of the Chiontar slowly rolling onto the shore.

She was lost in her thoughts when someone else seated himself beside her with a groan. She did not look, but it was Halsins reassuring voice speaking to her.

“This used to be a lush, green forest, teeming with life and all kinds of spirits of nature. You would have loved to see how it was before Ketherics war.”

Tsisk half wished him to go and let her stay alone, half wanted him to stay to not be lonely. So she said nothing.

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the quiet lapping of waves.

“I see how you look at the wonders of our world. You love nature’s gifts like any druid I have ever known.” He smiled at her. “I have seen you today and I think you already know, deep down, what the next lesson will be.”

This was not exactly the right time. But one could only stare at water going down the river for so long before the wish to be swept away got overwhelming.

“Go on.” She said.

“Even the smallest things – or actions – have worth. In fact, it is the small things driving nature’s resilience, because the big rely on the existence of the small and cannot be without. Every part is important and every seed can be the beginning of a forest.” Halsin put his big paw of a hand onto Tsisks.

“You spared that pixie a horrible fate at the hands of the harpers and showed more compassion with that simple act than I have seen anyone else do, lately. My hope grew through it and that was sorely needed.”

A little more light-hearted, he continued:

“Maybe we should try to get in a little exercise, too, if you’re willing.”

Tsisk did not feel especially keen now, but nodded nonetheless.

“Let’s try to manipulate the water. It’s one of the easier affected elements.” He used his empty cup to scoop up a little of the muddy brown water running down the Chiontar.

“Try to give it a form. Whatever you can imagine easiest. Right now it is only about achieving a transformation at all, not about it being what you need it to be.”

She tried. She tried to imagine the water becoming something else, a cloud of mist, a block of ice, clear, pure water... anything. Thoughts of bloody streaks mingling with the mud until it all turned deep red kept interfering. When the sound from inside the Inn died down to sleepy silence, Halsin stopped her.

“This is enough. I see you won’t be successful today, as is to be expected from an apprentice. Every druid has their domain where they are strongest and most confident. We just haven’t found yours yet. The Oakfather will show us in time.”

He pat her hand one last time, stood up, and went away. He left her with more questions than answers, but that was fine. Sleep would not come to her that night or the following nights, so she needed something to occupy herself with.

## 22. Oliver

To avoid Isobel, Tsisk volunteered for patrol-duties as often as the harpers would let her. This way, she was not tempted to kill her, because she was somewhere else entirely and had no opportunity to do so. Her companions thought her off her rocker for going into the shadows daily. Each of them had been assigned tasks in the post, preparing for an assault on Moonrise Towers, where the Absolute and Ketheric Thorne resided. Jaheiras plan was to send them to scout shortly before the attack. Their Tadpoles would mark them as Absolutists and grant access to the towers and their defenses. Especially important to her was the knowledge how Ketheric had survived, when he was thought to be dead after the war.

Wanting some space from the largely Selûnite harpers and their open hostility to her, Shadowheart often joined the patrols Tsisk was put on. The fact the shadows affected her less than anyone else didn't help and ostracised her even further. The occasional scuffle with zombies and twisted creatures forced them to work as a team, since the harpers avoided to join their fights before they had finished their own. It was clear they would likely abandon them in the wilderness if ever their deaths could be explained away to Jaheira. The situation with Isobel and the harpers led to Tsisk eating outside, often accompanied by either Astarion, Shadowheart or Halsin.

With the first she was not quite sure if he genuinely enjoyed her company or just wanted her blood. He looked increasingly hollow to Tsisk, almost as dead as he was.

“You look as bad as I feel. What flushes you out of the Inn?”

“I'll tell you my secrets if you tell me yours.”

She hesitated before answering. But he never was squeamish about her answers.

“Sure.” He would likely take them in stride, as always. “It would be so easy

to kill all those wounded in the ward. Their moans are begging me to end their suffering. And Isobel...Whatever drove me to kill Alfira, wants her dead, too.”

“I really do enjoy a good bloodbath. But somehow I think it would be very bad for all our health if you lost control around her.”

“I’m aware. Now you.”

“Oh, it is similar to yours, really. I’m hungry. There’s nothing around here except those patients and their blood reeking wounds. No dear, no boar, no critters, even. I can’t drink the dog or the cat to death, people would start asking uncomfortable questions. And I’m not yet hungry enough to go for rats, or what constitutes for it around here.”

“You took the squirrels, why no rats?”

He nervously fidgeted with his dagger while he told Tsisk of it, disgust dripping from his every word.

“It was all Cazador would ever give me. A treat, if I succeeded to bring him a new victim. And flaying, if I refused the rotten carcasses he presented me with. Never fresh. Never enough. Never again.”

He flung his dagger against a post, where it embedded itself deeply. Impressive, provided he could wedge it free again.

“I’ll get us out of here as soon as I can.”

He put on a bright smile and asked her in a seductively hushed voice:

“My, my. That sounds charming. Tell me, what do you require me to do to work on the other thing I asked for, back at the grove?”

He put his hand on her leg in an intimate gesture that made Tsisk consider his offer. After all, he knew how to have fun and diversion was hard to come by these days. Then again, she did not like the strings attached, so she put his hand away.

“I need more information about him. He sounds like an awful lot of trouble when we should be concerned about the tadpoles.”

“What have the tadpoles ever done to you? Nothing! All I can see are

benefits. Walking under the sun, being free of Cazadors control, power over other beings. I will take every chance at being free – with or without you.” He stood up, walked away and did not speak to her again until days later, when his hunger drove him back to her. Even so, he remained distant.

Halsin, on the other hand, told her stories of the shadowlands former glory. Of his childhood days lived in peace and happiness between the trees and his friendship with a powerful local spirit named Thaniel.

He was the reason Halsin had tried to lift the curse for a hundred years. He hoped to find the spirit and restore the land with his help. But so far, he had not succeeded in either, nor found a lead on how to achieve it. His frustration grew by not being able to treat the unknown patient in the ward who simply would not awaken from his nightmare-ridden slumber.

To keep the violent thoughts in check and because she avoided sleeping – and therefore dreaming - as long as she could, she practised with Alfiras flute. One night – the wind might have brought Alfiras song to the opened windows or maybe she had just gotten good enough with it to reach into nightmarish dreams – Halsin rushed from the Inn and shouted:

“Keep playing! Do not stop until I come back!”.

Then hastily vanished again. Confused, she did as asked and continued to play the mostly mournful melodies which came to her easiest these days.

The moons milky sphere had not wandered far through the nightly mists when Halsin returned to her, beaming and restlessly pacing like a caged animal.

“Thank you. The unknown man reacted to the sound of the flute – Thaniels favourite instrument – and awoke long enough to tell us where he came from. He was thrown with Thaniel into the shadowfell and could not return until now.”

“Where is Thaniel, then? If the man came back he must be here, too.”

“Unfortunately, he was too weak. He must have stayed there. And I need to get him out fast. If he is that weak, I have to act now.”

He stopped abruptly, looking at her with unfocused eyes, his face a mask of concentration.

“But I will need your help – all of yours. Please talk to your friends. I think they will listen to your requests more readily than mine.”

Gathering her companions did not take her long. Shadowheart had wholeheartedly agreed the moment Tsisk mentioned Thaniel as a boy in need.

“A child trapped in another dimension? Of course we have to help him!” Tsisk thought it unwise to point her to the fact this child would be hundreds of years old and was, in fact, not even a child, but the manifestation of the forests inherent spirit, modeled to interact with young Halsin.

To Astarion, she presented it as a favour she would owe him. He hesitated a moment before he graciously told her it would about even the debt of her saving him in the monastery.

Gales agreement came with a host of questions about the ritual and the other dimension all the way to the ritual site Halsin had prepared, evoking a lively discussion between him and the druid.

Torches prevented the shadows from creeping up to Halsin, who sat at the foot of an old, mighty tree, dried up and crooked after decades of struggle. Its foliage would have once provided shade to the people of a small village. Now its bare, dead limbs longingly reached for the sky in silent lament of bygone times.

“Good. You’re all here. Your task is to protect the path so I can return. That much magic in one place will attract all kinds of dangerous creatures, drawn to its power like moths to light. Let’s hope the Oakfather is with us.”

He took out a collection of items: A dried, violet flower, his acorn-and-berry necklace with the bear pendant, and a broken flute made out of reed.

Carefully, he placed each one into a circle drawn into the grey soil between the trees roots. As he had done so, he lightly touched the bark and began to speak to the dead tree in elvish sing-song, an intimate conversation with its half dead

spirit, answering with rustling leaves and groaning branches. Immediately, Tsisk felt the rising energy as a refreshing breeze, carrying the faint scent of grass and wet autumn foliage.

Halsin continued and the atmosphere around her became heavy and close, the scent sweet and pungent, like the moments building up to a storm. Static shocks stung her fingertips when she moved.

With a thunderous boom, a lightning bolt cracked through the shadows and split the mighty trunk. Tsisks eyes and ear crackled with static. For a few moments she was completely deaf, before the voices of her companions cut back through. The hollow tree was filled with swirling mists, spilling onto the ground in a never ending cascade. Without hesitation, Halsin stepped in and vanished out of her view.

Waiting for Halsin tested their resolve. Mists from the tree obscured the ground of the entire lighted area, intertwining with the shadows at its edges. Shadowheart used the time to seek a favour of protection from Shar. Her goddesses power cloaked herself and her companions in an aura of darkness. The mists branded against scraggly underbrush and trees, partly shrouding the torches and hence creating a gloomy atmosphere of shifting twilight. To counter the waning light, Tsisk let Lathanders Blood flare bright. Its glow greatly enhanced the field of view, but Shars protective blessing on her shied away from it, fizzling out.

From the now clearly visible line of trees emerged an undead Harper. Shambling, the zombie approached the portal. He fell to Astarions daggers before he had even noticed the attack. The spawn used the mists to hide his approach.

From this point onwards, the number of undead and twisted horrors made of tortured wood and rotting flesh breaking through the dry underbrush grew with every passing minute.

Tsisk and Shadowheart could not fend off several enemies each on their own and



began to fight side by side, helped by Gales spells and the nearly invisible Astarion, a ghost in the mists.

They just had fallen into an effective rhythm of fending off and crushing the encroachers, when the first attack hit Shadowheart. She gasped for air in shock, then stumbled into an oncoming zombie. Tsisk could only cover her back and look out for the enemy that had hit her, but she couldn't see what had caused such a strong reaction.

The second attack nearly brought Shadowheart to her knees. Again, no cause could be seen. Only Astarion's darkened silhouette saved her from falling victim to a cadaverous deer. Tsisk fought off a bramble-infested bear, then looked back over and cursed. Shadowheart was missing her own protective blessing. She had fought too close to Lathanders Blood.

Obviously, the weapon held the undead and shadowy creatures at bay. Tsisk had to endure less attacks than Shadowheart. Which suited her just fine, because she was far better at dealing destruction than protecting herself or anyone else, but right now she needed to know what hit Shadowheart. She quenched Lathanders Blood, instantly drawing more attention to herself.

And got gripped by burning cold tentacles, winding their way up her legs, stealing away her strength and her breath. She knew enough now. Lathanders Blood flaring bright again, she stayed close to Shadowheart and bellowed in Gales direction:

“Get rid of the mist! Somethings hiding!”

She could hear him incantate a formula. It appeared to take ages until he finished. Meanwhile, the zombies poured on and Tsisk had to fight for exhausted Shadowheart, too. The light could not prevent a third drain of her strength, which made her fall against Tsisk.

Gale finished his weaving and a blast of wind pricked her with a thousand grains of sand, blinded the zombies for as long as gouging their own eyes out would take – and revealed a shadow manifested. A creeping mass of formless horror, it

fled the light, back into the woods.

“I got him!”

Finally, Halsin had returned.

“Clear the field!” Gale shouted, frantically gesturing to cast a new spell. With a well aimed kick, Tsisk shoved a zombie into another oncoming enemy, then helped Shadowheart to retreat. No sooner had they reached the mage, as a searing ember sprang from his hands. Screaching, it zipped to the middle of the clearing, growing ever bigger. A cloud of fire bloomed as it touched the earth, burning away mists, zombies and twisted horrors alike.

It was difficult for Tsisk to sit in the ward with all the weakened patients, lying helpless and still in their beds, just waiting for someone to end their misery. But Shadowheart had fainted after their hasty retreat, the last of her energy drained by the flight through the woods. Jaheira had informed her she would need a few days rest to restore her, and so she stayed at her side as long as she could manage the urge or wasn't scheduled for patrols. Scratch had made himself comfortable on a chest at the foot end of her bed, since Halsin would not let him sleep in it. Sometimes, Gale dropped by, reading a book he found in the Inn or had procured from a Harper to Shadowheart until she fell asleep again. Astarions visits were always short and conducted with a snarky comment or two. Just like Tsisk, he had visible problems keeping his mind off of so much vulnerable prey, throwing hungry glances at the wounded.

Halsin was with her most of the time, tending to Thaniel and other patients. The boy was unconscious, scrawny and deathly ill. So much danger endured for nothing. It irritated Tsisk to very nearly lose one of her valuable companions just to achieve nothing at all by it.

“He should be recovering by now, but it seems he has lost his connection to the land. As if part of him is missing.” Halsin explained worried.

“Is it possible you left it when you got him out?”

“No, I made sure of that.”

“Then...he left it here to begin with.”

Halsin ran his hands through his hair in exasperation.

“Yes, but how can I find it here? I can’t leave for long.”

“I can look out for it. My next patrol is tomorrow.” Maybe she could turn this disaster into something useful still. “How will I know it?”

“As long as he is in this form of a little boy, his other half will be, too. The shadows sure will have changed him, but as long as this land contains a sliver of life, he can persist between them. - And everywhere Thaniel stayed, flowers started to sprout.”

Days went by with her not seeing any of the signs Halsin had mentioned. The druid got increasingly desperate, seeing his childhood friend and only hope of the curse removed and land restored fading away before his eyes. At the same time he was unable to leave his bedside, as he was the only thing keeping him alive. His obvious, deep sorrow for the boy touched a spot deep in her heart. The notion of losing a loved one choked her up, made her indescribably sad and evoked the same kind of devastation only children felt tripping with their favourite, sticky sweet in hand, knowing full well they were not supposed to run. She asked herself what might have caused such feelings in her life before the nautiloid.

In a last attempt to help, Tsisk went with the most experienced Harpers to the outermost regions of their territory, where the shadows were darkest.

“We will not follow you there. Get lost for all we care, but we will continue on our path.”

The grey skinned, burly leader of her little group did not trust her. She had destroyed a moon lantern, fraternized with a cleric of Shar and always kept to the side at dinner like an outcast.

“The boy Halsin searches might be somewhere around here.”

“I don’t care about that little rat. This is Thormes making, killing him will end all of it. We won’t set foot into this wilderness.”

And with that, he ordered his group marching on and left Tsisk standing. She had noticed small, drooping plants spotting the side of their path. The half wilted herbs sported tiny violet blossoms. With Lathanders Light shielding her from the shadows she set out to find a little boy.

The flowers led her to a small house, perfectly preserved into picturesque perfection when everything around was left to decay.

Undecided, she stood before the door. Should she knock? Or try to make her way in like a thief, potentially provoking aggression?

“Are you a guest?”

Tsisk flinched. She had not heard or otherwise noticed someone approach her. Behind her stood a small boy, about Thaniels height. His skin was the warm grey of wood bleached by the sun, but on him it looked natural. His unkempt, shoulder length hair was full of debris, leaves and little thorned twigs, although a stem of violet flowers also had found its way into it, stuffed into the crows nest which posed as his hair and sticking up like a feather. His clothes were too big for him and dangled on his small frame.

“I guess so. Are you Thaniel?”

“Why do you want to know that? Better turn off your light now. It makes the shadows angry.”

“It protects me from the shadows.”

“Naah, the shadows are behaving. Look at me!”

And he jumped out of the lit area before Tsisk could grab him.

Nothing happened. Sceptical, she extinguished Lathanders Blood, ready to flare it right back up. But the boy was right. The shadows stayed put and ignored her, even though her skin crawled from their proximity.

“Would you answer me some questions?”

“Only if you play with me. Mom and Dad don’t like to play. I love hide and seek.”

“What will happen if I say no?”

He knocked on the door. It cracked open and began seeping darkness until two vaguely humanoid shadows stood before her. Cold fear ran down her spine and made her sweat slightly.

“I will tell Mom and Dad to devour you, dummy. Boring guests aren’t welcome here.”

Presented with this choice, she nodded. Hide and seek with a child would be easy. She would get her answers and leave this place.

And with a grin from one ear to the other, the boy vanished in front of her eyes. Startled, she began to look around for him. The shadows followed her around, hungrily reaching for her, but never touching. She remembered the boys warning and did not use Lathanders Blood to drive them off.

Being invisible, she had a hard time finding him in the garden surrounding the little house. She searched systematically, hands outstretched to find him and reaching into every crevice. He was not in the disorderly tool shed full of rusted tools, not in the immaculate kitchen garden and not in the bramble-encroached meadow of violet flowers behind the house. She dared not stray further without light of her own. Who knew how far the boys influence reached?

The noise of a groaning swing, slowly swinging back and forth in the wind, disrupted her thoughts and made her angry.

Except there was no wind. She stopped the swing and whispered:

“Found you.”

Oliver appeared with a giggle.

“That was fun. Your turn. Ask me your question!”

“Are you Thaniel?”

“No, I’m Oliver.”

Again, he vanished.

This time, she did not bother to feel her way around. Instead, she took in the garden itself, noticing every detail. She went to lean on the slightly bent fence of the kitchen garden, bending it even more.

“How long have you been here?”

“Oooww, that one was too easy. The next will be harder.” Oliver wailed and pouted.

“I was here for as long as I can remember!”

The two shadows crept closer when he disappeared. Tsisk fought down an onset of panic. Acting out of fear would not help her. Her questions did not bring her closer to figuring out if this truly was Thaniels missing half. She needed a new approach.

His third hideout took her a long time to catch up on. Nothing in the garden was out of place or unusual. Eventually, she found herself wandering through the meadow to think. Mom and Dad circled closer, their insubstantial tendrils stroking her horns and the fabric of her clothes. Their touch made her shudder, but she ignored them and plucked herself one of the blooms Oliver had worn in his hair, alongside the thorny brambles. She very nearly laughed.

A small crouching tunnel led into the big jumble of dense shrubs grabbing and ripping at her. Mom and Dad howled in rage. Oliver sat in the middle of a hollow, hugging his knees, proud as a peacock.

“Took you long enough...I was considering if I was bored already. How’d you find me?”

“The bramble-twigs in your hair.”

He put his hands up and patted down his head until he found one and reproachfully looked at it.

“This time I would like to play something for you.”

She got out Alfiras Flute, gaining his full attention and played her mourning song to him. He listened to her politely, following her every move until she ended.

“That was nice. But you’re no good at this. Let me.”

The sounds he elicited from the flute were beautiful, enchanting and freed guilt and grief for Alfiras death out of their carefully crafted prison until tears welled up in her eyes. Had he played longer, she would not have been able to keep them from rolling down.

“You look sad.”

“Yes.”

“Is it because you are lonely? I get sad when I feel lonely.”

Tsisk smiled and wiped at her face. “No. I have not felt lonely since...I am travelling with my friends.”

“I have no friends...how is it to have friends?”

Tsisk needed a moment to calm her raving emotions. Never before had she thought of her group of ragtag companions as friends, but the truth of that word reverberated in her mind and gave her peace.

“We do not always agree. But that is fine, because sometimes I need someone to tell me when I am wrong. They care for me...Somehow I find that to be very important.”

“That sounds wonderful. Do you think I could have friends, too?”

“I think it is time for my third question: do you want to come with me? We might just be able to find you one.”

Oliver bade his shadowy parents farewell. Together, they set out to travel back to the Last Light Inn. Although Oliver's presence let the shadows ignore her, she used Lathanders Blood as soon as she had lost sight of the house.

Hours later, when the darkness of the night settled around them, she had to admit to Oliver and herself that she had lost the way. The boy looked tired, shuffling more than walking.

Tsisk let him sleep and gazed into the hostile night, filled with the twisted silhouettes of gnarled trees and the screeching and groaning of creatures born of nightmares.

As soon as the night was ended by the creeping, cold light of a mist-veiled dawn, she roused Oliver and took out her dagger.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“Hoping my friends are searching for me.”

Tsisk cut her hand until blood trickled from it in a small, but steady drip and sliced her shirt into bloodied ribbons. Leaving a trail of glistening red droplets on the ground and a ribbon at every crossroad, she walked the paths of the shadowlands in hopes of seeing a familiar sight.

The sun's faint glow had already begun to descend when they found her. Shadowheart looked drained and tired, her weapon and shield carried by Halsin.

“You’re alive! I thought we would find your bones if we were lucky. But I guess the wicked never die young.”

“With all the blood around that seemed quite probable. A shame you had to waste so much so I could find you. Could have left something for me.” Astarion said while staring at the ground dejectedly where her blood had formed little clots of wet dirt.

“What in the nine hells made you think you should go out here on your own? Was damn near getting killed with all your friends at your side not dangerous enough for you?” Gales hugged her with a wince in surprised agony. She had never thought of a wizard being able to do so much as bruise her, but he seemed determined to prove all prejudices about weakly wizards wrong.

“What are you doing here, Halsin? Is it too late for Thaniel?” Tsisk asked, worried.

“I couldn’t see any way to help him now. But when the harpers came back with a tale of you leaving them in the middle of nowhere I saw how I could help you – and I hoped you found something. Is he...?”

“This is Oliver. I found him in the shadows. I think he would enjoy a ride on a bear.”

“A bear! I’ve never seen one. Are they fast?”



Hope smoothed the frown lines on Halsins face. With Oliver clinging to his back he took off as fast as he could manage in his bear form while the boy cheered him on from above.

The rest of the group followed in his trail much slower. *Friends*. The thought conjured a smile onto Tsisks face and eased her weary steps all the way back to the Inn.

### 23. Bhaals price

Halsin held her head between his big hands and kissed her. Right on the mouth. It took her by surprise and before she had decided how she wanted to react, he let go of her.

“Thank you! You saved him. With Oliver close, Thaniel woke up and now I can help him. The shadowlands will have a chance at healing.”

“I would have been lost without you.” Tsisk said.

“Don’t sell yourself short. There are few chances to be called a hero and a hero is what we need against Ketheric Thorm.”

Tsisk turned to see the source of the unfamiliar voice. It was the wretched creature protecting this ruin of an Inn. She stood directly in front of Tsisk, just close enough to reach for her neck. One slice with her knife and she would crack open a second smile along her throat. A smile so bright, it would darken her moon-bright eyes forever. Dozens of ways to kill the priestess flooded her mind, pushing her to choose. Or not choose, but do it all. She had not enjoyed a murder for so long. The presence was inconsolable.

Tsisk forced herself to take a step back, but could not tear her gaze from the pretty corpse-to-be. It reached out a hand, begging for its death.

“I wanted to get to know the people who achieved so much in such a short span of time. Well, the rest of them.”

Gale bowed beside her and greeted. He would distract the corpse, while she....prepared herself. An excellent idea. Plans made everything better, smoother.

“You tell her, I have to go.” Tsisk mumbled to him blearily.

“Of course, you should go rest now. I’m sure you’re exhausted. Have you even slept in the last three days? - Don’t bother answering, just go.”

Tsisk stumbled out of the Inn. She should get away – and think about how she

could get to her victim without anyone noticing. Preferably with enough time to savour her death, as it should be.

“Why are you looking like a cat that found the cream?” Astarion emerged before her. “You look...hungry. Shit. You are losing it, aren’t you?”

“Get me away from here, please.” Tsisk whispered hoarsely.

“Is this...an Alfira-situation?”

“Yes!” She snapped.

She wanted to bite into soft flesh, feel blood running down her throat until its warmth and the excitement of the kill filled her stomach.

“I know exactly where to go to, dear. Go ahead.”

His voice was soft and calming, while he gently pushed and guided her from behind.

Her hands were shackled to a brick wall. Bewildered, she looked at the iron around her wrists. She must be on the nautiloid again. She could feel it swaying.

No.

She swayed.

In a cold, damp room, lit by a single candle on the tamped floor. A basement, she concluded after slogging her brain about the meaning of those clues. Her blood rushed through her veins to the pounding of her heart and compelled her to take action instead of thinking. Her urge sang songs of yearning to its beat and she craved to dance with the priestess to its tune until her inevitable demise.

A movement in the dimly lit room caught her attention. Astarion sat in the corner, occupying his hands twirling his dagger while never losing sight of her. He had restrained her here.

The presence in her head ceased to speak of the priestess. Its attention instead turned to the pale one it had ignored for so long. Her friend.

She had endured its demands regarding the Selûnite. She would not let it do the same to him, make him an abomination in her eyes, a prey to kill.

“I would enjoy you being cuffed and at my disposal more if you weren’t in a murderous mood, but maybe let’s do this again another day – Mhh?”

The edge of fear was well hidden between his enticingly performed words, but it was ambrosia to her urge. The presence in her head spurred it on. Her wish to hurt Astarion got overpowering. She wanted to add her own marks to his back, let his screams lull her into her sleep and get drunk on his pain.

She would do none of that.

With her voice strained and trembling from the effort of keeping herself together, she told him:

“Go away. You are tempting me.”

“Oh, I know I am, darling. Such a daring treat and completely out of your reach. But I would be a rude host to bring you here and just leave you alone, wouldn’t I?”

Alone. She always was alone. Visions of a past life flooded her mind. She was strong, cunning, a killer of remarkable skill and she needed no one. She did as she pleased and took what she wanted. Strong men fell to her dagger and no mother could save her child from her claws if she set her mind to it.

Every death pleased her and – moreover, the presence.

Until the day she had forgotten.

Because no one was with her.

The taste of blood brought her back. Panic hit her.

*Whose blood was it?*

A small whimper escaped her before she noticed she had bitten her own tongue in a desperate attempt to escape her past.

Astarion stirred in his corner. Relief brought her to her knees. She was not alone.

“This is not you. Fight against the hunger. I know you can do it.”

She had done what no one had done before her. She should feel pride. She was beloved, the greatest success in a long line of failures. Death was her destiny and her purpose and she would inflict more of it onto this world. Death by her own two hands and by her machinations. Body after body piled up until the mountain would reach the sky, blood flowing until the sea turned red. Murder was perfection. She was perfect.

Shackles held her, prevented her from fulfilling her destiny. She tore at them in wild rage. The rusty iron would not bend nor budge, her bloodied claws repeatedly catching in the keyhole.

A key. Someone must have a key.

Her hungry gaze found the one in the corner of the room. His death would award her a key. Freedom. Freedom from doubts, freedom of conscience, freedom of the need for a crutch like him.

*A crutch. Something to lean on – or someone.*

She sagged against the cold wall and wished it was a shoulder. The presences assault had left her agitated and strained. Every touch would send her over the edge again and so she settled for cold, hard stone.

The presence felt betrayed. By rights, death should have long filled this chamber. She could feel its frustration with her and growled in defiance.

“Don’t you growl at me. Use your words. I can’t let you go back like this.”

After years of travelling to run from the person she would become, she had returned. It was a fresh and sunny morning in spring. Everyone in Baldurs Gate was outside, roaming the streets to escape the stuffy houses and to enjoy the first tentatively warming rays of the sun after months of overcast skies and coldness. The streets were full of noisy people bustling about. The perfect backdrop to cover her own deeds.

She had closed her hands around a woman's throat. Her auburn hair, usually tied into a messy bun, had come undone. Her hazel eyes were creased already from a

long life full of laughter and joy and few sorrows in-between. Tsisk had been one of them, joy and sorrow alike. The eyes silently pleaded to her in an attempt to avert their fate. But it couldn't be, no one could know who she was.

The presence spoke truth in such matters, its visions guiding her to true greatness once she accepted them. Unrecognized, she would be the dagger in the dark, the looming threat. People would fear each other, fear the unknown. And fear inspired violence, the first step to indiscriminate murder in the name of one faction or the other.

It didn't matter who killed who, just that it happened so this doomed world could die the death it deserved. She indulged herself in thoughts of a city fallen to chaos while the woman's writhing grew weaker underneath her weight, until it seized altogether. She knew she had to hold out a few moments longer until the brain knew its defeat and would no longer try to breathe. The woman never deserved to suffer. To die for her refusal to welcome the new world order, yes, but suffering seemed unnecessary. She felt a sharp pang of grief. For the woman, and for the person inside, silenced forever now there was no one waiting for her any more. It would go over, she knew. No bigger pain could ever befall her now. She kissed the woman on the forehead and ruffled the hair of her little brother, nearly grown up while she was away. His sheets had taken on his favourite colour: bright red. He would have liked that.

On her way out she hugged her father goodbye. He had drunk his tea, as every morning. And silently he had fallen asleep, succumbing to the sunset rose poison she had put into it. If only her mother had not refused to drink it today. Her death would have been peaceful as well.

Closing the door behind her was final. These were the last people to have known her. She was as free as a bird to go and do whatever she wanted. No love would burden her on her path to become murder incarnate.

Tsisk opened her eyes. It was incredibly difficult to do so. Her body was sore,

her eyelids heavy as lead. Above all, she did not want to see, to exist.

Dust and dirt surrounding her where scarred by claw marks as far as she was able to reach. The sour, acrid stench of terror filled her nostrils and lay thick on her tongue. The visions the presence had subjected her to haunted her.

“Are you with me now? Or will you try to kill me again?”

The voice startled her. She had to warn it.

“Leave me. I killed them. I killed them all.”

The presence had not achieved its goal despite throwing everything it had at her. It withdrew in a flurry of anger and left her laying soiled on the floor.

“How many can you have killed? I must have brought Cazador a thousand victims to feed on.”

“Everyone. Everyone I ever loved or cared for. Dozens before. And hundreds more in the decades to follow.”

“Well, that puts it into perspective. I guess we’re both monsters, you and I. I never thought we would be so alike.”

A monster, yes. Only a monster was able to do what she had seen herself do today.

“Thank you, for staying with me. I don’t know if I would have stayed...”

*Sane? That word sounded horribly wrong, wildly inappropriate in this context.*

“...me, otherwise.”

“I know how the hunger makes you less than, robs you of yourself until it is sated. Guess I’m too good to look away. Don’t tell the others. I got a reputation to protect.”

“You asked me to help you.”

“Indeed I did.”

Tsisk hid her head in her arms, resting on her knees until she could muster the strength to move again.

“Whatever you need help doing. Consider it done.”

A huge commitment. But she knew she would have lost everything tonight if he

had not stayed with her. And so she owed everything to him.

Surprised, he asked: “Whatever? Why?”

He did not believe her.

“Because I wanted to kill you tonight. I would have killed you given the chance. It would have been easy for you to go. But you stayed.”

A high-pitched and bewildered laugh came from him.

“And to think I did not even have to sleep with you again.”

“Have to -?”

“Don’t think about it. It’s not important.”

His cheerful demeanour made Tsisk sad. She might not have broken tonight as the presence intended, but she, too, had failed. The presence in the back of her head was not banished, only dormant – for now. She feared its re-emergence, felt it inevitable. And she could not evade her friends the way she evaded Isobel, did not want to.

“Be careful. I might lose my mind still.”

Her warning did nothing to dampen his mood. His grin got so big, he flashed his pointed teeth at her.

“Darling, if you manage to kill me, I had it coming. It means I have grown sloppy and complacent.”

Plunging herself in the Chionthar helped clean her of the stench of this night, but the water refused to wash away her sins and its chill was useless in numbing her mind.

“You won’t get rid of the filth this way. Trust me, I tried. And water isn’t exactly friendly to vampires.”

Astarion had stayed as she shambled out of the Inns vault, hewn into the rocky shoreline. She stood shuddering in the ice cold water, but the temperature had nothing to do with it. Her hands trembled when she thought of the things she wanted to subject him and everyone else to tonight.



“Sleepless nights filled with nightmares, erratic behaviour, that hungry look whenever you perceive weakness...you even told me of him under the truth-serums influence, though I did not notice, then. How long have you endured Bhaals influence, dragonborn?” Jaheira stood at the shore, accompanied by Gale and Shadowheart. Her voice was calm, compassionate, even. Bhaal. God of murder. A name well known to every Baldurian. A name used to conjure fear in their hearts.

“What does he have to do with me?” Tsisk asked, too tired to think.

“You do not need to hide from me. I have known a Bhaalspawn like you. Helped him on his quest to break away from his fathers influence. How long?” Gale and Shadowheart exchanged irritated looks. Fear flit across their faces. Bhaalspawn. The ravenous children of Bhaal, made to murder in his name. Horrible defamation, terribly fitting. Tsisks chest suddenly got too tight to breathe. Jaheira could tell her more about her problem. Maybe even help her.

“Decades.”

Jaheira drew in a sharp breath.

“And you held out for so long?”

“No. I was his.”

“But you aren’t, now.”

“I’m...not sure. I think he wants me to kill Isobel. When she is close...all control is gone.”

“That bad.” Jaheira folded her arms. “We need not tempt the beast. I think we should send you away. You go to Reithwin and find out more about Ketheric until we are ready to attack in three days. Find the source of his immortality so we can be rid of him for good.”

Tsisk grabbed Jaheiras arm, feeling her stiffen at her touch. It was good she did not flinch.

“How do I get rid of the urge?”

“You defy it. You defy Bhaal until he relents.”

“He won’t. He wants me back.”

“Then you have to go to his temple and do it where he is strongest. The next one is in Baldur’s gate, behind Ketherics army. But he hid it well. The harpers never found it.”

A straw to hold on to. Nothing more. More than enough. She would find that temple and be rid of his – Bhaals – influence.

“Soooo. A Bhaalspawn? More parents scare their kids with stories of your kind than mine – who would have thought. Can you also turn into a powerful, almighty monster? The stories do tell of that, too.” Astarion asked curious.

“If she did, she would be lost as a person. The slayer is controlled only by its urges.” Jaheira answered him. Disappointment flit across his face.

“I’m sure you got this under control. You do, don’t you?”

Shadowheart had secured herself a rare bottle of wine from the harpers and seemed set on emptying it by herself.

Tsisk inclined her head. “For the moment.”

“Good. Because I have grown to like you. I don’t see the rabid beast from the stories. Let’s keep it that way.”

Gale took the bottle from Shadowheart and drank a hearty mouthful himself before he spoke.

“I think it wise we do as Jaheira says and keep you away from anything that could worsen your – condition.” He wildly waved about the bottle in an outburst of nervous energy. “We have seen you do enough killing to know you are dangerous. Also, if I have to help the cook peel potatoes one day longer, I might just loose all appetite for cooking ever again.”

Jaheira clapped her hands together. “So it is decided, then. We will give you supplies to last you three days out there. Food, light and what we can spare in armour. You can leave Scratch with us, he is well liked and will be cared for.”

## 24. Reithwin town

Reithwin's former glory was whispering through its streets in the same way all broken things tell hushed stories full of life. The century of abandonment was not able to destroy the work of its once renowned masons. Husks of beautiful stone houses lined the streets, sturdy houses in the human fashion, adorned with decorations made to resemble delicate elven architecture, while the broken roofs invited the elements to enter where mortals dwelt no longer. Vines of stone were intertwined with real ones, looking lifeless and limp against their artificial counterparts. Marble birds chirped inaudibly between their leaves.

The silhouette of Moonrise Towers jutted into the sky above the town, reaching for their namesake, hidden from its silvery glow by the shadows. Piercing lights kept them at bay, while they branded against the towers as a boiling mass of thick, oily clouds.

Jaheira had given them directions to properties the Thorm-family once held in town, in hope of finding clues about the General there.

Directly behind the town gate lay the Tollhouse, source of Reithwin's wealth. Its lavishly big entrance hall was filled with the rustle of papers, memories of past riches slowly fading from every page.

"How in the name of Mystra and her egotistical, self-absorbed ways are we to find anything about Ketheric in this mess? Not even I can read through rooms full of ledgers in just three days."

Astarion sighed heavily. "I hoped you knew a way to spare us from the dusty files. I've had enough of them back in my days in Baldur's Gate."

"I thought you were a vampire. Aren't they supposed to live in grand palaces, waiting for their unsuspecting victims to stumble into their lairs?"

Shadowheart had taken up a book full of numbers and positions, leafing through it without actually looking at it, intently listening.

“Vampires, yes. But I am a spawn. Powerful, but not as frighteningly powerful as their masters. And he was not waiting, he sent *us* to find his victims for him. If he went out at all, he came back with a new addition to his...collection. But before he made me part of it, I files were part of my life. Not that I remember much of these days, anyway. There wasn't much worth remembering I fear...”

“How about we look at the other locations first. So we can decide which one is most likely to contain anything of use.”

Shadowheart threw in, turning the attention of the two bickering men to something else and steering away from a monstrously menial task. A brilliant move, Tsisk thought.

Next on their list was the “Waning Moon”, Reithwins tavern and brewery. A nearly washed off scribble in chalky paint on the cracked door demanded “Moon-worshippers keep out”. Inside, it reeked of lost hope: old, stale beer and unwashed bodies.

Behind the bar, a grotesquely big man stood and wiped at it with a rag as if it were his whole world. Only when the group reached the middle of the pub, did he look up. As no one reacted, he went back to wiping. Then, he looked up again, blubbered:

“You! I told you to get lost!”

He came at them with splashing steps. Tsisk noticed he was more aware than the shadow-zombies they had encountered in the woods.

“Really! Next to 200 years later, you're dead and still sulking?” Astarion asked while walking backwards. The man following him certainly was not small as he lived, but now he was a wet, bloated corpse, his skin stitched together in patches and ballooned to the point it had become translucent. His seams, strained close to rupture, leaked fluid while trying to reach for the pale elf.

“Don't touch me! I'm waiting outside.”

“But my pale friend. Be my guest instead. Rest assured he won’t lay a finger on you as long as I’m here.” A familiar voice purred.

Raphael in his human guise filled the doorway and sauntered into the pub, forcing Astarion back into the room, then seated himself at the bar, casually avoiding little pools of mysterious liquids spilled on the counter, seemingly not noticing them.

“Join me, would you? I have a humble proposal for you. And your friends, of course.”

“Why would I make a deal with you, of all fiends?”

“Why is the mouse leaving its hiding hole? Of course for the honey-pot. Do you want to hear about your scars or not? Yours tell such an exquisite story, but its not at all about poetry.”

Astarion hesitantly seated himself beside Raphael. Tsisk chose to sit on the other side of the fiend, flanking him. She assumed even devils would feel discomfort, trapped like this.

“What do you have in mind?”

The barkeeper served everyone a shot glass of fuming liquid, even to Gale and Shadowheart, who leaned against the bar a short distance away.

“I’ll tell you what they mean when you pull the thorn that is the devil in the Mausoleum of Thorm. And to give your unlikely company a little bit of motivation: Shars favourite cleric surely would love to explore it, too.”

The devils head came forward to bridge the emotional distance with a physical gesture. “Seize the opportunity.”

He toasted to Astarion and Shadowheart, ignoring the dragonborn in his back, then stood up to leave.

“You should go outside with him, Astarion. His exact words were: as long as I am here.” Tsisk warned.

Raphaels sly smile deepened. “Observant. But you’re spoiling all the fun.”

Tsisk lifted her arm, toasted to the cambion and downed the liquid fire. Not

coughing was quite an effort, but she managed. He nodded smugly, knowing he only needed to patiently wait for his mouse.

She followed slowly. She did not want to appear weak before Raphael.

Behind her, the barkeeper took up his sloppy rag and began wiping at his counter, smearing wet patches of gooey liquid all over in the process.

Outside, Gale asked:

“So, what was that about? Why are you suddenly interested in Raphaels offer? I thought you despised being “yanked around on a leash”?”

“Because our tall, scaly friend here told me it was infernal writing. And now I would like to know what it says.”

“Infernal scars? Unusual. Were you pledged to a devil or something? - Actually, I don’t want to know. But just out of curiosity: why did the dead man throw you out of his establishment?”

“Oh, you know, some people just can’t take the truth.”

His words raised brows all around.

“I...might have called him a porcine publican. To my defence, that was almost 200 years ago and I promise I am much more mature now.”

Could eyebrows have ascended further, they would have done so now.

Travelling to Reithwin had taken them most of the day and the dim light now waned with every minute. The group took up camp in one of the deserted houses. As usual, Shadowheart said her prayer to Shar and Tsisk settled to watch if she could not settle for sleep. It kept her eyes away from her friends, even if not helping against the thoughts themselves.

“I suspected you carried your burden, too. I just didn’t expect it to be Bhaal. Comes to show you how we’re just playthings for the gods, really.” Gale said from behind.

“Surprised me, too.”

He placed his hand on her arm, sparking a shudder of excitement. She evaded his

touch.

“You should leave now. It’s harder to control when any of you are close.”

“Just from one doomed person to another. I thought I’d give you something to occupy yourself with. And if it can’t be my person, which is quite a misfortune, because I think there is a lot of personality to lose some time to, I will just leave you to an illusion. A good one, if I dare say so.”

Tsisk drew the corners of her mouth into a wan little smile.

“You’ve got my attention.”

“Close your eyes – and don’t fight the spell.”

When Tsisk opened her eyes again on Gales command, the ever present shrouding shadows had parted to reveal the sky clad in a gown of gently flowing colours – green, blue and purple – beset with twinkling stars. Tsisk had never seen anything like it – it was mesmerizing. She would have to force herself to keep watching the surroundings instead of the sky.

“A very poor representation of the place she used to take me to, painted onto the clouds.”

“Mystra?”

“The very same.”

“I see why you couldn’t resist her...allure.”

“The sight makes me yearn for the wonders she didn’t show to me. All the countless things she deemed beyond my understanding.”

“It is beautiful. Thank you.” And with a small delay, she added. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Oh it’s nothing, just a simple trick...”

“You don’t have to kill yourself. I’m sure we will find a way to get rid of the Absolute. Even gods can be killed, and I don’t believe this to be a god.”

Gale sighed. “I am not entirely sold on us solving this crisis single-handedly, but I admire your confidence.”

With a squeeze of her shoulder, he left her to the night and the unreal beauty of

his Illusion.

Hours into her watch, a breeze tickled her neck. She reached for her knife, then got hit by faint hints of bergamotte and rosemary.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on me like this, Astarion.”

“Raphael is right, you know. You are a killjoy. You could at least pretend to be surprised. But I meant to ask you about a small donation for a hungry friend.” The thought of him being so close excited her. The knife lay in her hand, muscles ready to pounce when she stopped herself.

“No. And you should keep your distance.”

“What? Why?”

The betrayal in his voice was a slap to her face. Its impact made her slump.

“Isobel isn’t the only one I – Bhaal wants killed.” The next sentence she choked out: “I can’t trust myself any more.”

“I guess you should go then. Because the look of your neck makes my teeth itch and it is my turn to watch anyway.”

She avoided looking at him. His annoyed tone enraged her. It could only have inspired more violence. Thankfully, the sleep deprivation of the last days knocked her out as soon as she curled up in her bedroll.



## 25. Tempel der Shar

Since it was on their list already, they decided to stop by the graveyard and see what the devil wanted of them. The Thorm-mausoleum was the biggest building around, and yet tucked away in a corner in such a manner it was hard to find, even with directions. Its outside looked plain compared to the over-boarding displays of masonry art that were the other graves and mausoleums. Inside however, it more than made up for the apparent lack of decor. On the column supported ceiling, painted branches overhung the open-spaced mausoleum. A circular skylight would have caught the rays of sun and moon to shine on the dead below, where it not painted black after the fact.

The Mausoleums walls of graves held Thorms of several generations, hidden behind chiseled tombstones depicting their lives. Several of them had been robbed of their corpses, but one especially caught Tsisks eye: Thisobald Thorm. A big, proud man received a wagon load of barrels in front of his tavern. Not the shadows doing, then, but necromancy.

Three sarcophagi stood in the middle of the room, facing each other. The first – Ketherics – was mostly plain stone, hastily assembled and unfinished by its builders. The other two held detailed lids, carved from the finest marble. The second sarcophagus was covered in symbols of Selûne: silvery moons waxed and waned around the silver coated, gleaming figure of a woman named Melodia Thorm, chiseled life-like into the stone. The artist had outdone themself by catching warmth and compassion on her face, normally reserved for the living.

The last of the three was opened and empty, the gilded lid heedlessly shoved aside, partly laying broken on the floor. Though it was just as ornate as Melodias, this one missed all attributes of Selûne, displaying no signs of worship. On its headstone, the name Isobel Thorm was written.

Astarions voice snapped Tsisk out of her contemplations.

“I don’t see any devils around. Why would Raphael send us here?”

“I don’t know. But he was right about my interest. This place is fraught with Shars Symbols if you know where to look. Even though it seems like a place Selûnites would build.”

Shadowheart stood before a mural of swirling vines and branches deeply shaded by the trees holding up the painted sky. She kneeled and intoned her prayer to Shar for everyone to hear instead of whispering it to the night, as she had done so often:

“Blessed Nightsinger, witness my adoration. I have come to walk in your darkness, empty my heart of all falsehoods and abandon the treacheries of life and light. In darkness you shall show me your truth. May it protect me and guide me to your victory. Shar’s will shall be done. As sure as night will fall.”

Shadowhearts prayer drew the shadows closer, flowing around the lights, congealing around her and the mural. In the flickering light they created, the swirling pattern shifted until it no longer resembled plants, but the tendrils of night, draining the shadowlands. The darkness devoured all seeming of life, forming emptiness in the shape of a woman, then expanding until the wall itself became a maw into nothingness.

“An entrance to a holy place of Shar.” Shadowheart said with adoration. “I never knew there was one here. But then, she is the goddess of secrets. Best make sure to snuff out that pesky Mace. She would surely punish you for that one.”

Shadowheart walked into the darkness and got swallowed whole by it in front of her eyes. Tsisk followed her advice and took up a torch instead. She would be damned if she entered it without anything to hold on to.

On the other side, her friend awaited her. Shadowhearts posture was rigid, her expectant looks and alertness spoke of barely concealed excitement. As soon as

Astarion and Gale came through the entrance, the cleric strut down the corridor. Shadows clung to the walls like phlegm, sluggishly avoiding the light, revealing the masks of empty faces, each one different from the other, each one void of personality, until the images before Tsisks eyes converged into a single being, endlessly replicated onto these walls, glaring at her from above.

“These are the face-masks of Dark Justiciars. They leave behind their identities in service of Shar. I wonder if...”

Shadowheart accelerated her steps.

Finally, the corridor opened up into a room. Walls and floor were smooth stone, its only feature a border of irregular bumps. Shadowheart had closed her eyes in deep concentration, one hand on the wall, and slowly walked along. Tsisk heard her mumbling:

“Your tongue may claim to have complete faith in Lady Shar, but does your heart follow suit? Enter Shars womb. Leave love and light, for they are illusions, and let faith guide you. Forget, and be welcomed in her darkness. Discover her secrets to hold them as your own. Purge the light from her realm to become a Dark Justiciar. Best her three challenges in the gauntlet of Shar.”

The half-elf gathered herself before breathlessly proclaiming:

“I thought this place was lost – to think it was hidden here, the entire time... We had no dark justiciars for a century. And now I have a chance to become one, be Lady Shars warrior.” She looked at her friends directly. “Whatever else we find here, I must finish this gauntlet.”

Fascinated, Tsisk looked at the walls, tracing the border.

“Is this writing?”

“I’m supposed to keep it a secret, but you already figured it out by yourself. Yes, writing that needs no light to be read. Do not ask me how to read it, I won’t tell you *that*.”

Gale took a look at the passage leading further down into the teaming darkness.

“You’re not going down there, are you? I think we have gone far enough.”

“I think you should accept the fact that Mystra’s not the only important goddess between us. You were her chosen. Now I want my chance.”

“Besides, there is a devil waiting for us. And I really would like to know what he knows.”

Astarion went after Shadowheart. Tsisk and Gale had to hurry to keep up. The further down they went, the thicker the darkness became until it was a solid thing, lurking just at the edge of their torches light. So wary were they, none of them noticed the trap. With a silent thud, a stone slab came down and cut off the way back. The light fled and left them alone in Shars smothering presence. Only the heat of the torches betrayed the magical source of the darkness.

“I would like to tell you “I told you so.”, but I didn’t see that coming. I would also like to inform you this darkness is the consequence of the shadow weave, which stands in direct opposition to Mystra’s weave, which means my magic is next to useless right now. Anyone ideas on how to solve this conundrum?”

“This clearly is meant to be a solvable problem. We should trust the cleric it was intended for.” Tsisk said.

“Well thank you. I trained half my life for a chance like this. We should probably hold each others hands and touch the wall at all times, so we don’t loose each other or our path.”

This way, Shadowheart led them through a labyrinth of corridors and small chambers in silence, until she tripped over an object and fell in a clatter of bones and metal.

“I’m alright. Just fell over a...another aspirant, I guess.”

While Shadowheart got up, a small creature scuttled over Tsisks feet. Out of reflex, she stomped on it. Its high-pitched squeak got answered from all around before she was swarmed by dozens of rats, clawing and biting their way up to her face. She ripped them off, but several followed where she had rid herself of one. Confusion exploded around her as her friends met a similar fate.

“Stop. And keep together!” Tsisk roared.

She opened a flask of oil and spilled it in a wide circle, ignoring further bites. The scuttling intensified where the oil hit the ground. She lowered her torch. Immediately, the blistering heat of fire washed over her, as well as pained and panicked squeals. She helped pluck the remaining rats from her friends and her own body and threw them out of her burning circle of protection with all the force she could muster, then put out a fiery sting on her leg. Breathing heavily and bleeding from dozens of bites, she waited until the heat died down again. The worried voices of her friends wrapped around her, soothing the pain of her burns and scratches.

“You know, I would prefer it would you not waste so much of your blood all the time. It really harms your complexion, darling.”

Shadowheart drew in a sharp breath. “I can heal you.”

“No. Spare it for an emergency. I’ll manage. Are all of you alright?”

“Just scratches. I think they concentrated on you.”

Gale piped up from her right:

“I suggest to take a look at her as soon as you can, she has a rather irritating habit of downplaying her injuries.”

The labyrinth soon ended and with it the magical darkness. Never had Tsisk been happier to see faces again. She was relieved. They had been right, she had taken the brunt of the attack and burnt herself with some spilled oil, all of them looked comparably unscathed.

While Shadowheart looked her over as suggested, Gale went on to explore. No way led out of the room they were in. Only the entrance to the labyrinth broke the smoothed walls. In the middle of the room, a hole edged in blackened silver absorbed all light.

“What is this? It oozes shadow-weave.” He said, while staring down at the floor.

“Don’t look into it!” Shadowheart shouted out, alarmed. “It’s a mirror of loss. Once you look in, you will have to sacrifice a memory in the name of Shar. She will only accept those of worth to you.”

“How often did you look into one of those?” Gale asked concerned.

“I...the mother superior used it when I violated the rules of the order, or even...Shar’s doctrines.”

“You are telling me it is an accepted punishment to rob you of all memories of worth? How are you not absolutely fuming right now?”

“It is Shar’s way. She is the Lady of Loss, after all. And I will have to give more to prove myself worthy.”

Shadowheart stepped onto the mirror – a deep, dark pit of shining black glass. Its surface rippled for a moment, drinking in her image until she was reflected on it. Insubstantial Ghosts, their form long forgotten, wafted around it like hungry hyenas do a piece of carrion, until they took the form of Astarion, holding his dagger to her mirror-images throat. Suddenly, he eased backwards into Tsisk’s violent embrace. An inaudible conversation ensued, until Shadowheart freed Gale from his magical dilemma. Sated, the ghosts retreated into the black depths. The mirror now reflected the room, and a door – made of the same black silver as the mirror’s frame – opened. Shadowheart’s image walked through it. When Tsisk looked at the wall, black silver framed a gaping hole.

“You gave her the memory of how you got to know us.” She remarked. A sad smile crept over Shadowheart’s contorted face.

“I couldn’t bring myself to forget what all of you have done for me since then. I would like to hold on to them just a little longer.”

“Maybe you should consider other gods, because this seems very unhealthy.” Gale frowned.

“And look who talks. I wouldn’t consider blowing up in the name of Mystra peak health. But go on.”

“Whatever she chooses to do, I trust it will be the right thing.” Tsisk

intervened.

“There you have it. The ingenious Bhaalspawn says I am right.”

That was not what she had said, but Gale only answered with a glower and so Tsisk let it slide so they could go on.

The following corridor looked just the same as all others had, until Shadowheart, leading the way, broke through the ground with a surprised scream. It ended abruptly the moment her head vanished under the tiled floor.

Tsisk dived after her. For a moment, Tsisk believed her lost until she found the cleric's hand with her own, clinging to a ledge she could not see, cut off by an illusion mimicking the floor.

The heavy armor tried to pull her down, but with the druid's help she heaved Shadowheart back up.

“Thank you!” Shadowheart exhaled between two panicked breaths. “I saw myself dead already. Thank you...”

Her shield and sword were lost, as well as some of her equipment, but that could be remedied later, Tsisk decided relieved. They would find something for her, somewhere, or just share what was available.

Having regained her breath, Shadowheart steeled herself to conquer this trap, too, feeling her way forward with her foot outstretched and tapping the ground with it. Just half a normal step in, she stopped again.

“This brings us nowhere. Gale, give me your staff.”

“If you would be so polite as to give it back afterwards?”

The look she gave him made it abundantly clear how fast her patience was running out, and the end of the tether was not only in sight, she clung to it with only one hand, ready to let go.

He wordlessly handed her his staff, which she used to knock its end on the ground, until it broke clean through, vanishing from sight.

“There is probably a way over. Try to find it.” Tsisk encouraged her.

It took some time and lots of tapping the staff to the ground to figure out the

safe path through this passage, even a few short jumps from one platform to another. Once safely on the other side, the illusion shimmered into nonexistence and revealed a gorge beneath, lurking darkness waiting for victims to fall into it. Paradoxically, bones awaited them behind the obstacle, heralds of doom. Heedlessly thrown to the sides of the corridor to create a narrow path, not one of them was with their original body. The further they came, the higher the piles grew.

“I don’t believe this is part of the gauntlet.” Shadowheart whispered. Fortunately, they had someone skilled in unseen exploration at hand. Astarion was made to investigate the way, to which he protested, but not very convincingly.

He came back very excited.

“There is a huge, hulking devil just two rooms over! And its sleeping. We could ambush it right now.”

“I’m sure that was tried and proved to be deadly.” Tsisk answered with a nod to the heaped bones.

Shadowheart agreed:

“Clerics of Shar are well versed in ambush-tactics. They are, in fact, preferred.”

“So how do we kill him, then? Even Shar’s favourite princess can’t just walk past him.”

“Can you describe him further?” Tsisk asked.

“He’s large, with red skin, overcompensates with his tusks and horns, obviously, metal plates bolted to his body, some infernal runes cut into his skin and crawling with maggots.” He rattled off in one breath, to follow it up with a disgusted:

“Hideous! It’s an absolutely, unabashedly hideous bastard!”

He made it sound like an affront to himself to have been in the presence of such an ugly entity.



“Gale, do you know something about devils like this?”

“According to Devils Dogma, this should be an Orthon. War devils who love the fight so much, it puts them in a joyful frenzy, can see through illusions and hide in plain sight.”

“Astarion, tell him to go up. You are more convincing than me.”

“Don’t you have some devilish plan? You know Raphael said to kill him.”

“This is my devilish plan to kill him. Lie to him, deceive him, tell him whatever he wants to hear, but send him to that gorge we just crossed.”

Astarion grinned like a child surprised with a new toy.

“I like how you plan. This shall be fun.”

Gale approached Tsisk as soon as Astarion left.

“He’ll not fall for the trap. He’s lived far too long down here to not know what it is. And I can’t disguise it. I just told you -”

“And I understood.” Tsisk interrupted him. “Just make the edge unstable. He expects magic. He won’t be looking for more.”

“Why are you here, little elfling? Do you want to die like all the others?” The Orthon rumbled with his deep voice. He stood up to reveal his bed of bent and broken Justiciar armor, filled with the shriveled remains of their wearers.

“Raphael sent me to bring you a message.”

“And why would I believe you, puny man? This wretched bastard is the reason I am dyeing of boredom down here. I was meant to kill all Justiciars. For 100 years no one has wandered these halls and yet I am not free to go.”

“Which is precisely why he sent me. To inform you of a force coming to conquer these halls. Strap on your big devil boots and get moving, Raphael’s not of the patient kind.”

The Orthon’s eyes glittered greedily.

“But I must stay down here until my terms are fulfilled.”

And he recited a contract undoubtedly written by Raphael:

*Spill all the blood sworn to the night.*

*Silence all prayers; smother each rite.*

*Wander Shar's halls; hungry to slay;*

*Leave no Justiciar alive to obey.*

*Leave none to hear it, then be set free;*

*This song is your oath, swear, swear to me.*

“Yes. Perfectly clear. Which is why I lured them in already. You just need to surprise and kill them. Isn’t that fun?”

The orthon rumbled a deep-chested laugh.

“Ha! Raphael found another crazy. I’ll see you in hell.”

And he waltzed to cross the gorge, clanging and clattering. He eyed Shadowheart suspiciously, advised her to take up the mask with a beaming grin, checked the gorge with another look, and then broke through the hollowed out edge, his face briefly showing surprise, before vanishing into the darkness.

With the Orthon dealt with, the group entered a hall of considerable size. Shars indifferent face loomed twenty feet above them, the eyes of her statue covered against the light, her hands holding a spear much too small for it. At her feet, a plate with similar relief as the first room awaited Shadowheart. Her hands flew over it, eager to glean its meaning. The further she read, the slower she got. Aloud, she said:

“Silence the Nightsong like Shars night silences all creatures of the day. Banish Selûnes misguided illusions along with her followers. Be Shars instrument to bring the peace of oblivion into this world and become her Dark Justiciar.”

She had barely finished, when the spear fell from Shars hands and shot down to

Shadowheart, where it sliced deep into the stone, coming to stand upright. Its blackened silver tip was formed into a long and slender blade, engraved with the depiction of a total solar eclipse where it was fixed to the shaft. She extended her hand to take it up and darkness fell.

Tsisks felt like tumbling out of the nautiloid all over again until her feet hit solid ground. She stood in the same room as before. Or – at least it looked the same on the first glance. On second glance, this one was much older, its ground marred by deep grooves and stained with dark spots. A ritual circle covered most of it, a hungry presence stealing the warmth of her breath, making it visible in little clouds.

In the circle sat a woman of strong build and proud posture, radiating a soft glow, her back towards the group.

“Have you come to kill me again after a whole century? To become your wicked goddess’s servant until she inevitably discards you, too?”

“I have come to claim my place as Dark Justiciar at Shars side.” Shadowheart proudly answered.

The woman rose with stiff, weary movements.

“Do you not realise Shar has no side to offer? She cherishes no one in her hate for everything.”

“Your lies won’t help you, Selûnite. I will finish what I have worked all my life for.”

“Not just a Selûnite, but Dame Aylin, Selûnes daughter!” She shouted at the top of her lungs, lunging for the hated Sharran, provoking the hasty drawing of weapons.

As she layed eyes on Shadowheart, she stopped dead in her tracks and her voice became soft.

“Your whole life? A lie between many more, little cub. Alone and afraid in the dark, surrounded by wolves. The last Selûne saw of you.”

“And what do you know of it! She wasn’t there when I needed her, when the wolves took my parents. It was Shar who took me as her own and guided me – to you!”

“Yes, she took a cub from it’s parents and your life under the Moonmaidens guiding light. She took you from them and them from under Selûnes gaze. And just how she made you forget about the light in your life, she will make you forget about anything other than her.” The woman took a long look past Shadowheart at the companions standing at her heels, measuring them in their silent guard. “You know what she will ask of you eventually.” The woman kneeled before Shadowheart with her head held high, holding her gaze.

“Choose what your future holds for you. For in this moment the choice is completely and truly yours.” The spear in Shadowhearts hands trained its tip towards Aylin’s chest. With a pained expression, the Sharran lifted it high over her head before she closed her eyes and let it plunge down.

A flat voice boomed through the chamber. “You disappoint me, daughter of the night.”

Shadowheart screamed in agony and held her hand. Shars statue fixated her with its blank face.

“Daughter no more. Your pain shall remind you of your failings, as it ever did. Never again will darkness protect you.” Her stone features gained back their stillness as the shadows in the room darkened and became solidified horror, smothering the light with their presence.

Aylin seized the spear Shadowheart had driven into the stone before her.

“Your decision saved me, lost daughter. Now extend your hand as a Sharran to a Selûnite, to break the curse holding me and I will see you out of here safe.”

With a tremble, but without hesitation, Shadowheart took Aylins hand and pulled her free of the ritual circle. As soon as she left it, Aylins glow intensified, her blemished skin cracking open to reveal the cold sheen of a full moon on a harsh winters night, piercing the eyes with its intensity.

“Moonmaiden, Our lady of silver, hear me!  
Let your light fall on me once more,  
That I may vanquish its enemies!”

A single, blinding ray of silvery Moonlight fought its way into Shars darkness and lit up Aylin. Its light uncovered her true nature as a winged Aasimar, flowing around her in the form of gleaming, silvery armour. With a jump entirely too delicate to do so, she soared high above and spread her wings laughing in wild joy. And laughing she took Shars lance to slice the shadows apart, more and more moonlight embracing her in a halo of silvery light as she did so. When she was done, she lightly landed beside the group, kneeling again and offering back the spear to Shadowheart with both hands. The tip now gleamed with the same ferocity as Aylin herself, the eclipse replaced with Selunes watchful eyes, surrounded by seven stars.

“I have cleansed it for you. It shall be forever yours to wield in Selûnes name.”

“You said she took my parents, too?”

“Yes, cub. And I shall tell you where they are when I have driven Ketheric off this land.”

Shadowheart took the spear and clutched it to her chest.

“Now close your eyes or my mothers light might blind you.” She said while looking at all of them.

The light she talked about seared Tsisks eyes even through her lids. Only slowly the perception of her surroundings came back to her in colourless

silhouettes. Aylins distinct form stood besides the solid block of Isobels grave, wings hanging limp. Her voice was cold, anger and grief and hatred compressed into sound, her words a promise to the perpetrator.

“I had hoped I could see her again...But he doesn’t even allow me a proper goodbye at her grave. What has Ketheric done to her...?”

“I think I know what happened to her.”

Aylins head whipped around to look at Shadowheart.

“Her grave is tainted by the same necrotic energies as the circle that held you. He must have raised her from the dead. Last time we saw her she was protecting The Last Light Inn, by now she must be on her way to Moonrise Tower.”

Aylin laughed hoarsely. Scorn oozed from every word she spoke.

“So he has fallen even deeper. He turned his back to Selûne, caught me as a punishment for loving his daughter and used me to fuel his sinful life. A favour to Shar, so he could forget the love he held for his deceased wife. But who would take him, the traitorous soul, the fallen general if even she has turned against him?”

Aylin addressed Shadowheart directly:

“I will honour your sacrifice. When I am done with Ketheric, I will tell you what the Moonmaiden saw in that night you lost your parents. But first, I must see Isobel.”

Determined, she strut out of the crypt, the quickly fading sound of her flapping wings telling of her departure.

## 26. Moonlight Towers

At the dawn of the next day, the group set out to scout the Moonrise towers before the force of the Harpers could arrive. A coldly gleaming comet passed over their heads as they approached.

They stood before a bastion. A solid tower in the middle served as the keep, surrounded by slender spires only accessible by the keep and protected by a stone wall, rising high against the city of Reithwin and the Chionthar river. No wonder the city had risen to wealth fast. It could control the passage of ships up and down the river much in the same fashion as Baldurs Gate itself and would have rivalled it soon in influence.

A guard stopped them at the gates, but quickly stepped down once the tadpoles made themselves known to them. Unchallenged, they were able to enter the fortress, once built to Selûnes glory. Her face had been erased from every statue, her symbols covered and defaced. Time had taken an unusual toll on its structure, with cracks running through the buckling walls looking like bursting any minute from the pressure within.

Despite the shadows teeming around the towers, they could not touch upon them. The light of Moonlanterns and torches shielded the inhabitants from their deadly influence. Guards patrolled the perimeter, and the docks at the feet of the walls were bustling with busy workers, unloading small ships and big boats moored along the shore.

The number of people visible unsettled Tsisk. The harpers would have a hard time overcoming them, if the sheer amount of supplies was any clue.

Inside the towers, their easy approach came to an abrupt end.

“I hoped never to see your face again, dragonscum.” A green-skinned woman

with a squat face spit words and spittle at her through her diminutive tusks, marking her as half-ork. Weaker than one half of her parentage, less intelligent than the other and the least favourable facial features of both. Her robes identified her as a devout follower of Myrkul, her well-used, practical blade as a capable fighter.

“Now hush, General Ketheric receives news from the emerald forest – or don’t, and I will silence you.”

Her demeanour grated Tsisks nerves. The half-Orc wanted a confrontation and so did she.

A ragged group of Goblins stepped up to the throne in the centre of the hall, hunched over in fear and forcefully pushed forward. On the throne, a man with lifeless skin and limp hair sat, staring down at the squirming messengers. Myrkul’s skull in a triangle adorned his breast plate, the skull’s teeth closed around a remarkably big crystal, exuding power Tsisk had never felt before. Its sight made the tadpole in her head wiggle uncomfortably to its ebb and flow.

“Minthara promised me an army and the grove dealt with. Neither has happened. Tell me why.”

Ketheric’s voice was raspy, dry and very calm, almost bored. The goblins in turn sputtered their answers, talking over one another in an effort to please the grim man.

“An ambush! We were ambushed!”

“The archdruid found mighty friends, killed ‘Thara.”

“Yes, yes, three mighty warriors. And a dragon!”

An amused huff came from Ketheric. The Goblins stood up straighter, deeming themselves out of danger. They failed to see how his face stayed the same bored expression as before, the danger unmitigated.

“If a dragon roamed these shores I would have heard of it. And three people, however strong they may be, can not take out an army.” After a bit of consideration, he added: “Kill them, I have no use for cowards.”



Screaming “You bastard!”, one of the Goblins snatched up a battle axe from his guards and hurled it at Ketheric with enough force to lodge itself deeply in his neck, unprotected by armour.

Unmoved, he grabbed it by its hilt and pulled it out in a single, effortless motion. Tsisk's mind began to race. They had freed Aylin, how could he be immortal still? Then she remembered the comet. Aylin must have given in to her anger and challenged him alone. Now they would have to find and free her again. Ketheric rose from his throne and walked up to the Goblins. Frozen in fear, they barely reacted as he swung the axe and beheaded the guard who so brazenly failed its duty.

“Get rid of the waste of light, Z’rell.” He addressed the half-orc.

His gaze came to rest on Tsisk. Brows furrowed, he ordered:

“Use our guests considerable talent. I’m sure she’ll enjoy it.”

A nasty smile on her face, Z’rell told Tsisk:

“You expected to be treated like royalty last time you pranced about here, but now we are one under the Absolute, aren’t we? It’s time you show me what you are capable of in her name. So close to her, your power over them is complete.” As much as Tsisk hated to do this – open her mind to the tadpoles influence – everything else would blow her cover and get her and her friends killed. Besides, the Goblins knew who had sabotaged the army and eliminated Minthara. She could not afford to let them utter any more words.

With a snarl, she walked over to them, inviting the eager tadpole into her mind to connect with the ones of the Goblins.

“Dragon!” Screamed one of them, causing the other to cower whimpering.

“Silence.” She tested her influence.

The Goblins followed her order immediately. She felt their quiet fear through the connection, stirring up the urge. Anticipating its rise, she willed their hearts to stop beating before she could think of more vile methods. Even so, she was not able to take her eyes from their faltering bodies, the paradoxical struggle for

air when it wasn't even the problem. Her urge made her take in every moment and still demanded more.

"How...disappointing. After all these stories about you I expected more. Next time you let me interrogate them beforehand. It seems they had viable information after all." Z'rells eyes were glued to Tsisk, looking to escalate the situation.

"Show me what's in your head! Now."

Her voice carried power, demanding to be let in and compelled the tadpole to lash out with a piercing headache. In an effort to satisfy the half-orc without giving away anything of importance, she scraped together every violent memory and fantasy of the recent weeks and threw them at her instead: Alfira, Isobel, Astarion... For good measure, she added the desire for Z'rells destroyed body to the gallery of impressions. Fighting off that particular urge was not easy, but doing so had become second nature by now and that helped. She could feel Z'rells unnerved mind slip out of hers.

"Ha! A broken killer and nothing more. Don't stray too far. Killing is a valuable skill we have use for."

With a satisfied smile, she tended to her other duties.

"Did you really let her talk to you like that? I hoped you would take off her head or something. You certainly looked like you would." Astarions disappointed voice said from behind her.

"I will. In time."

There was no way around it. The half-orc was Ketherics second-in-command. And on top of that, Tsisk couldn't deny looking forward to it.

"I for one would like to know why everyone around here seems to know you – and resent you. You wouldn't happen to be able to tell us why that is?" Gale asked.

"Must have been a particularly agreeable person in my first life. But I don't remember this place."

“This means they are at a considerable advantage, knowing more than us.”  
Shadowheart worried.

“They think you and me the thralls of the Absolute. We will use that until we cannot abuse it any longer. Right now I must know how many troops are in this keep. Do the rounds and report your findings to me.”

Separately, they explored the keep and its towers as far as they were allowed. An hour later, they met on the battlements, where they were mostly alone. The reports of the others in tandem with her own numbers confirmed Tsisks growing apprehension. The harpers must have had wrong information or it had changed drastically in the meantime. Ketheric had droves of Goblins, bugbears, ogres and Myrkuls cult at his beck and call. They would stand no chance this way. The urge inevitably turned her gaze over to a row of strategically placed Moonlanterns, bleeding light for them and onto the uncaring stones. It relished in their inhabitant's constant struggle while she mulled over the new information.

“Astarion, Gale, I need your help.”

“Don't send me back in there alone. There's a drow there following me around. She smells rank and looks at *me* hungry.”

“Don't worry. You can stay out here. And I'll even get you some help.”

Into the void of the shadowlands she whisper-shouted:

“Dolly, Dolly, Dolly, I call thee.”

A whirr of twinkling wings circled her head, tickling her nose with fairy dust.  
Tsisk sneezed.

“Don't waste my time. I just found a cute owlbear-cub and I wanted to see how long I could ride it until it throws me off.” A small voice proclaimed, greatly displeased at being robbed of its pastime.

“I offer you a deal, fey. I reckon you'll like it more than the owlbear-cub.”  
Tsisk sniffled.

Gale and Tsisk hurried through the ruins of Reithwin to intercept Jaheira and the harpers. He had been able to sneak her and himself out of the keep by means of an invisibility-spell.

Shortly after crossing the bridge into the shadowlands, the lights of a contingent of people became visible, lead by Isobel. Determination in every step, she would not stop at their sight, instead just marching on, Harpers in tow.

Riled by her mere presence, Tsisk turned to Jaheira.

“You have to stop her. We need time. Or at least timing.”

“She won’t, I have tried. She will not stop until Dame Aylin lies in her arms again.”

“Gale?”

“What do you expect me to do? Hold her in place with my magic?”

“Excellent idea. Do that to me in a moment.” Tsisk hissed.

She closed the gap and grabbed Isobel’s arm, halting her movement.

“Think, priestess. He needs her. He cannot afford to kill her. But if you run into that trap without looking, you get killed and she is his in eternity. Wait for your moment. Mine always comes...”

Isobel’s face, contorted with pain, was such a moment. Tsisk had waited for this far too long. She contemplated the blank weapons drawn on her. How to deal with these?

The sudden stiffness of her muscles alleviated her of the choice. Gale had done as directed and cast a holding spell on her.

“Get Isobel out of her sight. That will calm her.” Jaheira ordered.

Rough fingers pried the priestess from Tsisk’s rigid hands. Isobel vanished behind a wall of hostile faces, ready to tear into her the moment she made a wrong move.

As the holding spell wore off and the march on Moonrise towers came to a grinding halt, she explained to Jaheira, Halbror and Halsin what they had found.

Worried looks where exchanged until she added her plan.

“I won’t follow a Bhaalspawn to my death!” An anonymous voice crowed from the crowd. Heads nodded and loud whispers buzzed in agreement.

“I do not require you to follow me. Just wait until I am done with my part.”

“A trap, I say!”

This time, Jaheira spoke up.

“Very right. And you were ready to walk right into it. Now we are prepared.”

Halsin joined her cause.

“There is no denying her thirst for blood. But in my time travelling with her I have seen enough evidence of her sincereness. And so have you.”

The muttered conversations grew quieter, silenced from within. Isobels quiet, quivering voice declared:

“I pray to Selûne you are right. Now go and do what you must.”

“I sure hope you don’t need more magical miracles from me today. You are draining me faster than a Nishruu.” Gale complained after getting them both back into the keep unseen.

Bewildered, Tsisk asked: “What is a Nishruu?”

“Its a magic-devouring mist! Sometimes I forget that for all signs of intelligence, no one around me has had the tremendous advantage of education...”

Tsisk sighed.

“Make sure Dolly and Astarion are done and help them set up. I will go to Z’rell.”

“Are you sure *you* don’t need any help?”

Tsisk hesitated. Her position in this was important. And very dangerous. Better they stayed safe.

“Yes.”

She positioned herself close to Z'rell and did not have to wait long for her time. A goblin rushed into the room, babbling about an attack. Impatient Z'rell was unable to get a coherent report out of it, became frustrated and went to see for herself. Tsisk had anticipated to have to coax her on, so the series of events pleased her massively.

She followed Z'rell onto the battlements where she had a good view on the torch-lit Harpers troops. All in all a sorry lot against a whole castle and half an army in it. It certainly didn't impress Z'rell, who talked down to the dragonborn towering above her:

“Looks like work for you.”

“Alone? You might want to rally the troops.”

With murderously slitted eyes, the half-orc grumbled through gritted teeth.

“Of course I do.”

A pulse roiled Tsisks tadpole and soon the battlements were occupied. The harpers awaited their fate in plain sight, gathering for their attack on the fortress.

“Now you can go alone.”

Tsisk turned to go, her knife ready to be plunged into Z'rells back. But Z'rell had not become second-in-command by being overly trusting. She followed her with her eyes, never giving her the opening she looked for.

Inwardly swearing, Tsisk instead swung Lathanders Blood at her, flaring its light to become a beacon in the unfolding darkness.

Chaos came over the battlements as the pixies left their prisons and rose to the skies like stumbling stars. All of a sudden, only islands of light remained.

Shadows billowed over the walls. Screams erupted, where they touched life.

Tsisk had no time to take all of it in. Z'rell immediately tried to subdue her via the tadpole. This time, though, the piercing pain subsided to a slight pressure at the back of Tsisks head before it could overwhelm her. With scorn in her eyes, Z'rell brandished her sword.

Being only lightly armored meant every hit of the half-orcs sword had the potential to seal Tsisks fate. Likewise, a well-handed blow with Lathanders Blood would shatter Z'rells bones under her robe.

But Tsisk never stood a chance at hitting her. Z'rells experience and lighter weapon kept Tsisk on the defensive. And so their confrontation looked like a chaotic dance: circling each other, closing the distance, disengaging, back and forth.

A feint she hadn't seen coming turned into a gash along Tsisks arm. It made holding and swinging the mace much more difficult and soon got accompanied by more cuts. Z'rell knew she had the upper hand and attacked with a hateful fury, aiming to wear Tsisk out and to mock her in the process.

Following a particularly heavy blow, the weapon slipped out of her slickened, tingling hands, clanging to the ground. Its light went out, replaced by an irritating blinking far above their heads, barely enough to fight off the encroaching darkness. Z'rell ignored it.

“Your reputation made you look much more impressive than you really are. Kressa's done a number on your pompous ass, didn't she?”

Tsisk gathered herself and willed her pumping breaths to steady.

“I don't know what you're talking about. My work is done.”

With a sweeping glance, Z'rell looked over her surroundings, noticing her headless troops, running around in confusion and without protective lights, thinning by the second as she watched. Harpers had found their way up onto the wall, telling Tsisk her plan to open the gates during the shadow-fueled chaos had, indeed, worked.

It should have worked better, because she had not intended to die in the process. But that couldn't be helped now. She readied herself for a last-ditch effort at evading Z'rells stroke, when the blinking light zipped at the half-orcs face, blinding her.

From behind, she heard Shadowheart shout:

“Drop the weapon!”

Had she not lost Lathanders Blood earlier, Tsisk would have followed the order herself, the conviction felt so powerful. Z’reil – as the intended target – must have felt it even stronger. Her sword fell and a series of arcane missiles wound their way around Tsisk, detonating to sizzling sparks on the half-orcs chest.

Grunting, Z’reil reached for her sword, only for it to be kicked out of her reach.

“Na-ah. You’re not going anywhere.”

Astarions daggers finished what Gales magic had begun.

Dolly giggled from above her.

“You were right. Pestering the meany-biggies *is* more fun.”

“The Gates are opened, but tell me again you didn’t need our help. Without Dolly we wouldn’t even have found you in this chaos.” Gale told her triumphantly.

“I – might have overestimated myself...”

Tsisks field of view rapidly shrunk and her legs buckled as the Adrenalin wore off.

“I need a healing potion. Please.”

Astarion reached into his vest, but got interrupted by Shadowheart.

“Save it for later. I want to try something.”

She took Tsisks hands into her own and bowed her head.

“Moonmaiden Selûne, forgive my demand. We need your guidance and protection to help Dame Aylin and banish Ketheric. Bless us with your light so we can carry on in your name.”

Warmth spread from Shadowhearts hands up through Tsisks arms, closing every wound in its wake and coming to a searing rest in her chest, a burning fire, radiating confidence and assurance.

Shadowheart in turn was hunched over her eternal wound, her face a contorted smile, her voice breathless.



“She heard me! She answered my prayer...”

Tsisk wearily leaned against Shadowheart, steadying both herself and the cleric.

“Good for her.”

Astarions voice burst into their small bubble of peace.

“As much as I hate to interrupt this promising display of intimacy, I believe this is neither the time nor the place.”

A deafening rumble shook the keep, proving him right.

## 27. down into the rabbit hole

The closest of the towers collapsed to rubble before their eyes. Stones hailed down on attackers and defenders alike, laying bare what had caused the eruption. The towers insides had been overgrown to bursting with a soft substance, slimy to the touch and faintly smelling of festering wounds. What remained of the tower was almost entirely filled with it, slowly contracting from the cold air.

“You have to go down and find the Absolute.” Directed the voice from her dreams.

Tsisk approached the tower, staring down into a fleshy maw, ready to swallow them. They looked at each other.

“So. Do we go down – there?” Shadowheart asked.

“We saw everything else when we took stock.”

Crawling down the towers damp innards felt like being eaten alive and vomited out again. An experience Tsisk intended to avoid at all costs in the future.

The underground reminded her of the nautiloids interior. Organic matter webbed over the walls. Her feet sunk into the soft, yielding ground and the stagnant air tried to drown her lungs with moisture.

Intellect devourers – the watchdogs of mind flayers – scuttled along on missions unknown, ignoring their tadpoled presence. Very soon, they encountered pods. Some held people, some newly fledged mind flayers, which they promptly killed before they could become a threat.

“I can smell your blood. It’s stale, but I would know that bouquet in a thousand.” Astarion pointed out as they went down a corridor. He indicated an adjacent room to her as the source of the smell.

Upon entering, a bone chillingly cold prickle went up Tsisks spine and nested

itself into the back of her head as an unpleasant tingle. A table stood drew her attention to the middle of the room, with grooves carved into stone, rings set in to strap unwilling patients to. Old, dried blood flaked from the table and fresh, recently added red coagulated in shallow puddles on the ground. Her hands closed around one of the sharp metal instruments strewn about every surface.

Two people entered the room, while Shadowheart and Gale examined its other contents. And while the sight of Raphael never delighted her, it was the woman in his company which made her want to cower behind the table. Luckily, she had not noticed her yet in the back of the room. And for once, she was thankful about Raphaels ingratiating behaviour. He threw his arms wide and turned to Astarion with all the noble dignity only a man of complete self-importance could muster.

“Aah, my favourite adventurers. Yurgir, my Orthon, is cursing you up and down the hells now that he was returned to me. Delightful. Which means as the honourable devil I am, you get your information.” He pranced around the room, drawing everyone's attention to him. “The infernal on your back is part of an ancient, diabolical, never before performed ritual to create the Vampire Ascendant. It will exempt him or whoever finishes it from his vampiric weaknesses, as well as strengthen the vampiric nature to new heights. To do so, the ritualist must only offer the meagre price of 7000 souls to the devil he bargained it from. What setback indeed when one of the seven tethers went missing. Rendering two hundred years of work completely useless until he obtains it back.” His story had engrossed the strange woman completely. He took her arm and guided her over to where Tsisk was standing.

“May I introduce you to Kressa Bonedaughter? I believe I saw a sparkle of recognition when we entered.” A slow, seemingly soft smile spread over his face. He had her trapped. He kissed Kressas hand and bade her farewell. “Now, if you'll excuse me, our business has hereby concluded.”

With a snap of his fingers, he was gone, leaving Tsisk in full view of Kressa.

Wide-eyed, open-mouthed and with a breaking voice, the woman cooed.

“My pet, you are back with me...”, staring at Tsisk. “After all these weeks, you’re back with me!”

The sound made Tsisk rigid and her heart and mind raced each other to an overwhelming crescendo of utter helplessness. No matter how much she wanted to move, her limbs felt strapped to her body.

“So you know our friend? Can you, mayhaps, tell us more about your time with her?” Gale asked, oblivious to her peril.

“Of course. She was my Pet, my indomitable. So much fight in her, I had to have her for my experiments.”

She walked around Tsisk, studying her like a butcher measures a horse to see how much meat it would yield.

“Her head was broken, but I can fix everything. And with the new tadpoles the three provided, she was so well-behaved. The first to survive the procedure.”

Kressa looked at her scar, then reached for her ear.

Her memory, so blessedly empty otherwise, provided Tsisk with a whole slew of unwanted feelings: cold, thirsty stone in her back, sucking every bit of warmth out of her body, cold steel parting her flesh, cold fingers ripping, prodding, poking. The same cold fingers now reaching for her.

“Don’t touch me!”

Tsisk bellowed, torn from her rigour by the wish to escape this room, this situation. But flight would make her seem weak. She could never be weak. It drew in predators like her, like flies where drawn to the stench of a corpse. Her fist closed so tight around the metal in it, her claws cut into her palms, making them bleed.

“My pet! You talk! I thought you were too damaged. But I fixed you alright, I see.”

“You...fixed her?” Shadowheart asked.

“Oh, yes. She was so broken when they gave her to me so I could try

Gortash's new tadpoles. *Find a way so no one will ever be able to remove them*, he told me. It is why so many died before. But not her. Not her, my beautiful pet. I would open her up and look at the tadpoles work and finally, finally I understood what went wrong.”

The eyes of Kressa glinted with excitement, her mind no longer dwelling in this time, but teleported back to a table draped in scaly skin, peeled away to allow for easy peeks at a living, breathing specimen.

“I learned so much, I had to do it again and again. I will learn even more of her now that she can speak.”

Shadowheart went white as a sheet as the woman droned on.

The woman took Tsisk's hand and crooned:

“You can leave her with me now. I will take care of my pet. Just like before.” The wild roaring of anger, shrieking fear and the wardrum of her urge combined to a cacophony of need in Tsisk's head. A need so overwhelming, Bhaal's touch sent her in a frenzy. How long she had missed this! To drench herself in the blood of her victim, to feel their lives slip through her fingers. To be their last memory so their souls could carry her image to Bhaal himself.

She relished on the sweet taste of blood licked from her lips when she remembered three more sacrifices could be made. She found them huddled at the entrance, ready to depart. She hated that thought. She could not be alone. It would be her end.

Instead, she strangled her anger, silenced the fear and pushed the urge into its hiding spot to seize back control over her body. The fight for control left her sweating and breathless in a puddle of rapidly coagulating blood.

As glad as she was the woman was gone she also knew she had just lost another fight to Bhaal. He now knew when she would follow his call. She expected him to use that knowledge against her. She certainly would.

No one said a word when she left the room. Surprisingly, she saw no accusation in their faces. Though she bet it would follow her next murder.

The passage lead to a gate, made entirely of flesh and shut tight against intruders. The hum and whispers of the Absolute, an invisible, hardly recognisable companion of its own for such a long time, was now pressing in on her mind with constant requests. Tsisk found herself following the voices ramblings if she let her mind wander on its own and steeled herself against it. Her dream visitors voice interrupted her efforts.

“It is more difficult than ever to shield you from the Absolutes influence. The source is behind that door. This is your chance to kill her.”

Gale put his hand on her arm.

“This is the moment Mystra saw coming. It is time I use the orb to purge this false god from the face of Faerûn once and for all.”

“Are you serious? You’ll kill us all!” Enraged Astarion hissed at him.

“I don’t see why you would owe her anything more than you already gave her, especially since she demands your life. For one mistake? Doesn’t seem better than Shar, come to think about it...”

Gale looked conflicted. Shadows of doubt crossed his face, chasing the lingering feelings of dedication to his goddess. The tiniest nudge would be enough to tip the scales in either direction.

“We don’t even know what it is. There might be other solutions to this situation.”

The corners of his mouth tiredly tugged at the wizards body, straightening him up just that little bit to bring his form to warily optimistic instead of darkly desperate.

“Leave it to you to find a sensible approach to this dilemma. Let’s go in and see what it’s all about before I unnecessarily blow us all up.”

Tsisk looked at the door and searched for an opening mechanism. She did not have to look for long, as the door yielded to her touch, opening in complete silence to a cavern filled with the acrid fumes of acid, stemming from a pool of

liquid behind three people arguing.

She could make out Ketherics voice, but the others seemed strangely familiar, too. One brimmed with confidence, sincerity in every carefully worded phrase, chosen for impact.

“You said it was under control.”

“I don’t answer to you, Gortash. Do not concern yourself with my part in this.”

“But maybe I should have. First, your daughter we so laboriously unearthed for you runs away and allows the harper-pest back onto your lands, then they even find the courage to bug you. And, judging by the uptake in activity above, they are successful.”

The other, female, mewled like a strangled kitten, shifting from delight, to anger, to desire and back in mere seconds. It made Tsisks scar pucker uncomfortably.

“He’s crawling with failure like maggots on lick-wet carrion. I want to carve out that shining weakness of his – I wonder what colour the moon bleeds?”

In the following scuffle Tsisk inched further into the room, using the distraction to find cover in the folds of the membranes. Now she could see that it were actually four people in the room. Ketheric, the man named Gortash, the mewling woman who just now held a blood-red blade to Ketherics throat and a dark-skinned man, kneeling between them, constrained by ropes. He followed the altercation from his prone position, his surcoat bearing the symbol of the Flaming Fists – esteemed guardians, police and standing army of Baldurs Gate. Gortash told the woman off with restrained annoyance:

“The slayer versus the undying. A sight to behold. But not now, Orin.”

Orins face was full of angry disappointment before she snapped back her blade and distorted her lips to the ugliest facade of happiness Tsisk could imagine.

“Yes, he must lead the murder-march to Baldur’s Grave.”

“This concludes your dispute, then. Might I suggest we carry on as planned and leave, as to not distract *General* Ketheric further from his duties?”

He positioned himself in a pattern etched into the ground and raised his hand, clasped in an ornate golden glove and sleeve, holding a faintly glowing stone just like the one in Ketherics breastplate.

An uprise in powerful magic made the scales in Tsisks neck stand up.

Now, Orin raised her blade, revealing a third stone in its hilt.

The surface of the pool behind them stirred. Tentacles rose from the viscous liquid, hovering before Gortash and Orin like snakes, ready to bite. A big, misshapen blob followed, liquid slowly running off through the ridges on its surface.

The pressure behind her temples rose, became a throbbing headache and painful certainty: She was looking at the Absolute.



## 28. Ketherics death

The Absolute was a monstrously big brain, ensnared by a mass of metal, which, for lack of any word better suited to describe it, could be called a crown. The metal seemed to bend and twist and flow around it in an infinite loop. Its existence defied reality itself, just like its wearer.

The brains struggle against the imposed will of its two captors could be felt in waves, washing against Tsisks self, trying to flush away all sense of individuality and pull her into the vast ocean of creatures under her influence. The strained faces of Gortash and Orin told her they, too, had to fight to stay put in its current. Ketheric watched everything unfold for several heartbeats before he reluctantly joined the ritual. His contribution tipped the scales, damming up the surges coming from the Absolute.

“The crown of Karsus! I read it was lost, but here it is. The power it holds! And to think I’m so close to it...”

Gale had made his way over, staring intently at the brain. Or rather what was on it.

The brain itself reached into the pool with one of its tentacles, drawing forth a tadpole and put it on the face of the protesting man. He was held still by Orin, visibly enjoying his futile resistance. Moments later his struggles ended, as he slumped to complete surrender in her hold.

She looked up and stared directly at Tsisk. Her face twisted in surprised anger before she put on a wide smile that had nothing to do with joy and everything with the promise of pain at her hands, before she turned her attention back on the cowering man as if nothing had happened.

“Now that this is done and over with, we will go back to Baldur’s Gate and leave you to lead your army, General. After all, you got a city to besiege. I will prepare to save it. See to it that you get rid of all those little distractions around

you.”

Ketherics face was so clenched up with hate, it made Tsisk wonder how the others were still alive.

A quiver went through the brain, a powerful command pushed Tsisk to move – to Baldurs Gate. And suddenly, all opportunity to use the orb was gone. Gortash, Orin, the strange man and the brain had teleported away.

She and her companions stood in the middle of the doorway before they came back to their senses. But it was too late, Ketheric had noticed them.

“Why does it seem like you are the undying one and not me? I thought you taken care of. Several times over.”

“One can never truly get rid of vermin. It keeps crawling back in.”

“How very true. So which carcass attracts you maggots?”

“Your daughter sent us.”

Ketheric laughed. It was an unpleasant laugh, full of disdain.

“And why would I believe a gutted Bhaalspawn, diminished to the sad state of mere existence, without sense or purpose? You are nothing.”

“That nothing just handed your keep to the harpers. And she might not be acquainted with your daughter, but I am. Isobel would like you to know there is no love lost between you and her anymore.” Tsisk had never heard Astarion talk with that much contempt.

“She will come to me regardless. I have what she wants dearest.”

Ketheric gestured to the far side of the room, where Aylins winged body was flung into a dark corner. A hastily drawn ritual circle surrounded her, drained her of her life just like the one in Shars temple.

“Can’t you see? She is the reason I can’t go back to you. You will never accept my love to her.”

Isobel joined them from behind.

“So you choose Selûne over me? The goddess that would take Melodia, the light of our life from us? I sold my body and soul to get you back, and this is how you thank me?”

Isobels face was grieve-stricken, but she stayed were she was. When she spoke, her voice was quiet, but clear:

“I loved my father with all my heart. I adored his strength in the face of the death of his beloved wife. I forgave my father when he sought obliviousness with Shar. I can not forgive or forget how you soiled her memory and me by resurrecting me with Myrkuls wretched magic. I will choose Aylin over your empty love – your obsession – for me every day. I owe nothing to you or your gods.”

General Ketherics proud stance shrank until nothing but an old and tired man, bent by his life-choices, remained. His voice had turned into a weak whisper, laden with the regret of years spent in pursuit of a forsaken dream.

“So be it. I will spare you my fight. I have nothing left. But Myrkul wants you dead, and I cannot deny him.”

With these words, he let himself fall into the pool behind him.

Isobel shrieked and ran to the edge, searching the murky liquid for signs of her father. Froth formed on the surface where bubbles slowly rose and melted away again. When a hand emerged, she eagerly grabbed it. Only to fall backwards, tearing the flesh from the bones like long boiled chicken meat. The stumble saved her, as a scythe cut through liquid and air where she had kneeled just moments before.

The bony hand heaved a body from the pool. It was Ketheric, and it was not. His skin and flesh tore from his bones in swaths, half dissolved from the acid. They smacked to the ground with wet slops, exposing the skeleton underneath. An unholy aura surrounded it. Its cruel touch stole the breath from Tsisks lungs, the heat from her body and every hope at victory from her mind.

“Shit.”

Shadowheart was faster than her, but Tsisk couldn't have said better. An avatar of Myrkul, god of death and necromancy. An army of skeletons and zombies would have been preferable to that.

Isobel had stood up and faced what was left of her father. Tsisk would have taken her sacrifice and gone to live another day, but Shadowheart already readied her blackened spear to join the fight.

Even Astarion had unsheathed his weapons at the sight. There was no turning back now.

Myrkul's blows were bone-shattering. Shadowheart tried to take as many of them with her shield as she could, but soon the sweat ran off her face, trailing down her face. His scythe seemed to be everywhere at once, keeping Tsisk and Astarion at a distance, lest they be cut in half by its razor-sharp blade.

Gales spells hit the skeleton without lasting impact. He was drained from the previous encounters of the day and could not muster more powerful magic. At least the effect of Myrkul's aura was lessened when Isobel started a prayer to counter it with hope, lent by her goddess.

With a low swipe Myrkul bypassed Shadowheart's shield and dealt her a deep cut to the calf, ripping her foot from under her. In turn, Tsisk was able to land a strong hit of her own through his momentarily opened defence, breaking Myrkul's right arm clean in half, leaving his remaining left hand to hold his weapon. For one short moment, his right dangled at his side by the sinews. A surge of power arose, Aylin groaned in her corner. And Myrkul's arm was righted. All in all, they had gained one deep breath's worth of recovery. He picked up the scythe again and advanced on Tsisk, ignoring the short-winded cleric swaying behind her shield.

"Astarion? Your potion!"

"I'll bring it to Shadowheart!" He sprinted over, rounding Myrkul in a wide circle.

“No! To Aylin!”

And then, Myrkul was upon her. Blocking a scythe with a mace was next to impossible. Myrkul had the advantage of range on his side and used it well. Tsisk had to rely on her quick feet to gain room. It was only a matter of time she took a devastating hit and the skeleton knew it. Swings to her head and torso were closely followed by attacks at her legs. Every sweeping blow aimed to bring her off-balance.

The uneven ground nearly spelled disaster when her heel caught on a bump. She stumbled right into an enveloping cloud of cooling fog. A quick change of direction saved her from losing her head. Instead, the tip of the scythe lodged in her right shoulder. Agonizing pain shot through her arm and back, followed by numbness. The scythe wedged free and she scrambled to get out of range. When she emerged from the cloud, she could see Gale tiredly stop frantic hand motions and the fog was gone again.

Tsisk made her way over to Shadowheart. Together, they maybe could hold out just a little bit longer. The avatar looked at them, unfazed. To him, they were nothing but flies to be swatted away. Isobel's prayer was the only noise to ring through the cavern. He stretched out his hand in her direction and closed his fist. With a strangled sound, the prayer ceased and hope fled before the icy grasp of despair.

An enraged scream made her look up. Aylin leapt through the room with one powerful flap of her wings. It carried her all the way over to the avatar. Her brightly gleaming sword swatted his hand aside and for the first time, Tsisk saw the skeleton jump and jerk in sudden, hurried movements, trying to escape the wrath of the Aasimar. Aylin made him look troubled, matching his pace and force, but even she was unable to break into close range combat alone. As a living being she would grow tired, whereas the undead had no such weakness. Hopelessness kept its claws firmly closed around Tsisk's heart. Shadowheart had

sunken to her knee beside her and stared at the opponents in sheer horror. Astarion seemed to have no such trouble. He heaved Isobel to her feet and fervently spoke into her ear.

Isobels croaking voice commenced with her prayer.

Alone, Aylin stood no chance. Tsisk let her mace drop and took up Shadowhearts shield with her remaining good arm. The clerics leg would hardly support her against the avatars swift and heavy attacks.

Shadowheart let out a muffled scream when she pulled herself up, using her spear. She tested her leg and nodded to confirm she would hold up. As a team, Tsisk and Shadowheart closed in on the avatar.

Pressed from two sides, he was forced to divide his attention. Whenever he turned to Aylin, Shadowheart had a chance at stabbing him. Did he attack back, Tsisk was there to shield her and Aylin was free to have a go at him. His downfall came, when Shadowheart managed to wedge her spear in his ribs. He nearly shoved her to the ground before Tsisk dropped the shield to hold onto it, too. His movement severely limited, he could not block Aylins sword in time. The skull fell to the ground, bouncing off with a hollow crack and rolling until it came to a halt.

The Aasimar pulverized it under her foot with a fury unlike anything Tsisk had ever seen. The lust for violence made her face darken up like a moonless night, perfect for a hunt.

“Take his stone.”

She had to break the spell Aylins outburst put on her to follow her dream visitors instruction. A pang of regret ran through her. A wave of relief followed. This could have ended in a place she did not want to go to.

## 29. Übernachtung Last Light Inn

Tsisk looked at the horizon. Ketherics death the day before had finally cleared the skies above the shadowlands. They were no longer shrouded in gloomy mists. It had not bettered the view, though. From atop Moonrise Towers she could see the blood red bellies of dark clouds hanging low on the way to Baldurs Gate. Billowing plumes of smoke rose from amidst an encamped army, covering the land in front of her as far as she could see, burned and plundered houses, barns and a temple cowering under the dark clouds.

It would take a miracle to stop this chaotic mass of creatures normally held in check by their tendency to go for each others throats. Or control over the brain.

“Here you are. And I thought Halsin told you not to extend yourself so much after healing.”

“I couldn’t stay with so many drunk people. Their weakness begs to be taken advantage of.”

“I agree. The table is set with abundant choice today...”

Astarions voice trailed off in silent enjoyment. He was relaxed and completely unaware of her trembling hands, itching to kill. She had not caused a death since she had stabbed Kressa and the constant call for more ate at her. She fought down the thoughts. But how long could she hold them before one of them slipped past her guard and became reality?

“I know I gave you a promise, but I’m not sure I can help you. No god stands by me, I command no magic and am no master of any weapon.”

He laughed at her. From the sound of it, he felt thoroughly entertained.

“Are you kidding me? Clearly, your most striking feature is that despite all you said, I would never believe you to be less than dangerous.”

“Which is why Isobel would be the safer choice.”

“Dripping sweet words into her ear and being fabulously entertaining might

have saved me from work – but alas, her heart firmly belongs to Aylin and can't be swayed by pretty boys like me. You, on the other hand...you gave me a promise and I fully intend to hold you to it. A little risk just makes everything more fun.”

Tsisk snorted a short, joyless laughter. A little risk for fun, indeed. She just didn't enjoy the stakes.

Paws clattered on the stone in bounding leaps before a wet nose pressed into the hollow of her knee and a wildly wagging dog weaved through her legs, announcing Shadowhearts coming.

“Aww, he missed you, too. Thaniel brought him from the Inn. He wants to talk to you.”

“Scratch?” Tsisk asked, irritated.

“No, you dummy. Thaniel, of course. He said he has something for you.” Just as the numbness in Tsisks arm would need several days to fully wear off the effect of the necrotic energy used to inflict her wounds, Shadowhearts leg could not be fully healed before then.

Which was why she leaned on Gale as a support. He craned his neck to see past Tsisk.

“What a gruelling sight. Let's hope we never need to stand against it.”

“According to Gortash -”

“Adventurer's! Help!”

The distressed voice of her dream visitor thundered through Tsisks mind. A portal flickered into existence between them, volatile and sputtering.

The urgency of the call made not only Tsisk jump straight to action. Everyone hurried to make it through the portal. The scene unfolding before them on the other side immediately confirmed they had made the right choice. A group of Githyanki had cornered the dream visitor on her floating island, about to deal death to her, judged by their hateful looks.

“Can't a wizard enjoy a nice and quiet evening without imminent death and



murder?”

Gale dumped surprised Shadowheart on Tsisk, who scrambled to hold her and herself upright with only one working arm.

Meanwhile, Gale marched over with brisk steps, rolled up his sleeves and reached into his pouch.

The dream visitor saw him coming over and vanished, reappearing a short distance from her assailants. Not enough to save her if no one came to help. But enough to alert the Gith to a change of situation. It was not difficult for Gale to gain their full attention. Not that he tried to be stealthy in any way. In fact, quite the opposite.

“Hey you, frogfaces! Go in peace or go to hell. I don’t care either way.” The worn out, slouching visitor no obvious threat to them when a confident and capable seeming person strut over, all of them turned to face Gale, taking position to fight him.

“That’s what I thought.”

Tsisk heard the familiar screech of a fire so hot it made the air scream in protest, then saw a cloud of fire bloom and collapse, while her ear crackled with static under the pressure of the following deafening roar. The Gith never stood a chance. And Tsisk made a mental note to never cross a disgruntled wizard. Or at least kill him before he had a chance to retaliate. Her face must have betrayed her thoughts. When Gale came back, he asked:

“What?! Normally you’re all standing in the way of a good magical bonfire like that. And humanoid creatures have a bit of a tendency to be prone to burning. Unlike demons, devils and gods, who *couldn’t care less if they knew how to do that.*”

Silence filled the moments after this very personal explosion.

“Does anyone know where Astarion went? I...didn’t exactly look for him before I blew everything up...”

A body dropped from the boulder hanging right above them. It was another Gith, pale green from being bled dry.

“Thankfully, you missed one.”

“I have to thank you for your swift action. They would have killed me if not for you.” The visitor sat on a stone, dishevelled and visibly exhausted. Tsisk put her hand on the womans shoulder.

“Why did they attack you?” She asked with a soft voice.

“I told you, I know their dirty little secrets. They want what you have through me, your fate means nothing to them. But I am so proud of you. You used the gift of the tadpole. You will need every advantage in your fight against the Absolute. You are ready to become even stronger with this astral tadpole I could...” Tsisk put her dagger to the neck of whatever she was looking at. One move and she would slit her throat.

“And now you tell me why you are disguised as a person I killed with my own bare hands.” Her voice remained dangerously calm and soft. She needed to know the motives of this imposter

The person heaved a deep sigh, then *changed*. One moment, the familiar face of her foster mother looked at her, the next, she almost recoiled. She could hear the exasperated gasps of her friends in her back.

A mindflayers expressionless visage stared back at her from small, beady eyes. Between its tentacles sat a maw, rimmed with sharp teeth, made to penetrate skulls in search of brain-matter to feed upon. No word would ever leave that hole. Despite that, a pleasant and tranquillizing voice answered to her question.

“It was a calculated risk, given your memory loss. A familiar figure lifted off your subconsciousness. You would never have trusted my true form without it. I am sure you understand the necessity of all parts to fit for a plan to work. And my plan is and will be to be free from the elder brains influence. For it to work, I

need you.”

“Is that what it is? An elder brain? I thought they were less...monstrous.” Gale wanted to know.

“It was, until the foolish followers of the dead three enslaved it with the Crown of Karsus and made it more. The term no longer describes what it is capable of. Netherbrain would be more accurate.”

“Do not deflect.” Tsisk hissed. “I am willing to take the risk and kill you. Why trust someone who lied to me?”

“You can’t. But you felt the power of the Absolute and you saw her influence even on those without a tadpole to relay her orders. My offer to give you a stronger tadpole still stands. I am willing to share more knowledge in the future, be more open, now that you know my true face. In the meantime, you need me.”

“Stuff it. I don’t need your tadpole.”

He was right. She hated this fact, but he was right, she could not risk killing him. With a frustrated growl, she sheathed her knife and left the astral plane.

The harpers celebrated as if nothing had happened. Music echoed through the broken castle. A few more years, and the cracked and tumbling walls would be a quarry for the next nobleman’s ambitious endeavours. The mindflayer-colony below was destroyed, the curse lifted, but the damage they had done to building and people would be lasting.

She found Thaniel and Oliver sitting with Halsin and Jaheira.

“Tsisk! You were right. It’s great to have a friend. It’s so much fun to play with Thaniel.”

Halsin groaned.

“First thing they did was create a thicket around Moonrise towers so that no one will enter this forsaken place. They didn’t think one of us would want to leave. I worked the whole day for a narrow trail.”

“There is a whole wood out there waiting to be tended to. Better you get used

to it again.”

Thaniel stood up with a serious face.

“It is not customary for feyfolk to say thank you. Instead, I will offer you back your memories. Your mind rejects them, but just as you rejoined me with Oliver, I can heal you to regain what is lost to you.”

Tsisk looked at the table, her jaws firmly locked. It took her some time to work out enough tension to be able to speak.

“No. there is nothing there I want to see. And a million things I don’t.”

“Then you take this.” He put a seed in her hand, about the size of a walnut. “It grew in the other dimension. It takes a special kind of plant to survive there, under the influence of magic.”

Oliver quipped:

“Oh. I guess me strengthening it wasn’t necessary, then.”

Thaniel looked at the seed in Tsisks hand, and frowned. He closed her fingers around it.

“Be careful. Now it is special and powerful. Unpredictable.”

A heavy hand landed on her shoulder. Tsisk turned and immediately felt Aylins other hand fall into place on the opposite shoulder.

“You weren’t here when I thanked your friends, so I will do it again: You have my eternal gratitude for not only saving me twice, but also ending a hundred year long nightmare. Isobel and I will follow you to Baldurs Gate. It will need all the help it can possibly get.”

Her hands fell from Tsisks shoulders and her face turned serious.

“Isobel asked me to tell you something, too. She said you remind her a lot of her father when he was younger, before fate and his decisions broke him – I hate that she makes me tell you this.” Aylin slumped for a moment, averted her eyes and had to draw herself back upright before she continued. “But she’s right. He was another man back then. A loving husband and father, a brilliant and passionate man. His work made Reithwin what it was before he unmade it

again...Let him be an inspiration – and his downfall a warning.”

Tsisk eyes wandered over to where Isobel sat. Bhaals hatred towards Sêlune’s cleric had not relented one bit. Aylins gaze followed hers and her previously friendly face froze.

“Another warning, just from me to you: Touch her again and you’ll follow his fate.”

## ACT III

### 30. Ankunft in BG

From the boats they could see the devastated river banks to their right. The passing army left nothing untouched and devoured everything in its path. Where it went, trees and villages burned in its fires, sending up black ash and soot to snow on the passing boats for miles. Even though the region was not known for its abundant animal farms or wildlife, the wind carried the mouthwatering smell of grilled meat. To avoid the armies hungry grasp and the gaze of Baldurs's Gates myriad eyes, they landed in Rivington, on the left side of the river. The sturdy towers of Wyrrest hold, the protective fortress built on a rocky island to guard the great bridge over the river Chionthar, greeted them in their best dress – ceremonial flags where hung all over, flapping in the mild breeze coming up the river.

The city of Rivington sat on the other end of the bridge, its softly rolling hills – growing grains and wine in abundance – normally a warm welcome to any weary traveller looking for some respite before entering the teaming city. Jaheira paid the ship registrar and some workers an insane amount of money to keep their mouths shut and the ships out of the books. At the sight of all that money, the leader of the docking crew took it upon himself to issue a warning:

“I'd keep my head down if I where you. Strangers aren't welcome the way they used to be. Refugees are everywhere and since they been 'ere it's murders 'n beatings at every corner. And damn Flaming Fists do fuck all to help.”

He looked disappointed when no one got upset over his news. Maybe he had wanted to offer his paid protection to the scraggly and ill-looking bunch of Harpers disembarking, but when he saw Halsins massive figure followed by a

towering dragonborn with cruelly piercing eyes, a battle-hardened half-elf carrying her full, heavy gear in her arms with ease, a wizard in scuffed and singed robes and a dubiously looking pale man, vigilantly observing the docks and a hand at his dagger at all times, he just waved a dismissal to his crew and went on his way, muttering profanities under his breath.

Jaheira addressed the group with a farewell of sorts:

“I need to sort some things. News about the city are indeed grim. The Harpers need me and I trust you will find a way in. Follow the man’s advice, I think it wise not to stand out right now. Contact me when you have found the brain.”

The group of five made its way through the streets of Rivington. Refugees from Elturel and the war-torn areas in the army’s wake sat begging on every corner, lost souls with empty faces and too many horrors on their minds, hoping for some crumbs or a copper to find its way into their opened palms. Many of them were children, seldom accompanied by adults. Baldurians – easily identified by their colourful, dust-free garments – hurried through the streets, throwing angry, fearful or even hateful glances at everyone less fortunate than them, including the travellers in shabby, ragged and beaten clothes and armour.

A station of the Swordcoast Couriers attracted Gales interest.

“Isn’t Scratch a courier dog of the Swordcoast Couriers?”

Shadowheart eyed him suspiciously.

“He was. And now he is with us.”

“Don’t you think someone would be missing him? He’s such a good dog, surely someone’s heart would break if they never saw him again. And we should let them know about the fate of their human courier, too.”

Shadowheart folded her arms and tried to pierce him with a deathly stare. Tsisk could not interpret that look any different.

“Fine. If there is someone heartbroken about him, he can stay. If he wants to.”

Inside, a dwarf fussed about a number of letters, nervous desperation in his movements and all over his face, while a customer impatiently waited.

“You lost my letter again? How can you lose pigeons from Felogyr’s to Rivington? It’s just over the river. Ridiculous!”

Having frantically searched more stacks and boxes full of letters, the dwarf finally admitted defeat.

“Thank you for using our services. Delivery not guaranteed.” He declared with a tired voice.

The man threw his hands in the air and left the station in a huff. “Fine! Send it to my house if it miraculously turns up again!”

The dwarf wrought a harried smile for his newest customers as he greeted them flatly:

“Welcome to Swordcoast Couriers – to send and to serve. Delivery not guaranteed.”

Shadowheart walked up to him with a scowl and asked in her sweetest voice, edged as sharp as Astarions daggers: “Aren’t you missing more than just letters?” His face went white as he stammered.

“Ye...Yes, Miss. The pigeons, of course. They don’t return.”

Gale pushed Shadowheart slightly to the side and inclined his head in a respectful nod.

“I am very sorry we frighten you. What my horribly uncourteous friend wants to say is: We found one of your couriers up the Chionthar in the wilderness. He had with him a dog belonging to your company, I believe. His name is Scratch. Would anyone have missed him, perchance?”

“Poor Gomwick, then.” The dwarf briefly looked sad before hope crossed his face. “Have you brought his letters with you?”

“No.”

The dwarf sighed. “Bring the dog to the kennels outside. The dogs are Mar’hyah’s responsibility.”



The kennels where a bunch of cramped boxes fit into the yard of the station, filled with dogs as matted as Scratch when they had found him. A woman loudly berated a young gnome she had grabbed at his scruff about dog-feed.

“You will give them what I order and not an ounce more!”

Gale interrupted her tirade: “I suppose you are Mar’hyah? We would like to ask you some questions.”

She abruptly turned around, letting go of the gnome who fell on his butt.

“Get the broom and start sweeping where I don’t have to look at you!” She screamed at him, then mustered Gale up and down, while the gnome scurried away.

“I don’t talk to underlings. Who is your leader?”

Her condescending tone appalled Tsisk. She stepped forward and crowded the woman so much it had to be irritating. Mar’hyah was not phased by her attempted intimidation. She cocked her head, began twirling a loosened strand of hair around her fingers and smiled brightly.

“So, what brought you to me?”

“Are you missing a dog?”

“Yes. Leave him with me. I will put him back to work. And Danzo inside can pay you a finders fee.”

Tsisk took a look at Scratch. His tail and head hung low, he hid behind Shadowhearts legs. Shadowheart herself tried to comfort him. Tsisk made a decision.

“Your dog died up the Chionthar.”

“This dog is the property of the Swordcoast Couriers! Hand him over now! Or I will get a Flaming Fist to do it for you.” Mar’hyahs anger became sudden, sniggering amusement. “They are hunting an artist, sniff-sniff-sniffing for freshly spilled blood among the strangers in town.”

Irrational anger made Tsisks blood rush until it drowned the noises of the

busy street outside. Her heart pounded in her chest, ready to rush at the woman. Halsin put one of his hands on her arm lifting Lathanders Blood to crush the insolent creature.

“You won’t even let go of a dog? How soft you’ve become, slaughterkin. And still you can’t escape your habits, scrambling for information before you make a move, because you are pathetic as always.” Mar’hyahs face melted, her skin sagged. When she pulled it taught with her hands as if she was gathering her hair to pull it back into a braid, the face had changed.

Before Tsisk stood Orin, Bhaals Chosen. Up close, she almost resembled a human being. Her skin made a conscious effort to stay in the form of a beautiful, young woman of just the right proportions, skin and face as fair as could be. Her soulless eyes regarded Tsisk with unveiled hate. She held her deep red daggers – glistening with fresh blood – relaxed, while she played with them. It could not fool Tsisk. She noticed they always happened to be in a position from which Orin could readily take a jab at her, if she just came a little closer. The wish to kill one another was mutual.

“Haven’t you missed me? Oh, but where are my manners. Let me introduce myself to your company: I am Orin, your lie-sizzling lizards sister in Bhaal.” Orin mocked a curtsy. Tsisk could see her hesitate for a split second, before disappointment seeped through the cracks of her pretty mask. She recovered it as fast as she had lost it and continued:

“You told them? I wonder what you promised them to help you. It can’t be much. You’re barely even alive. Maybe I will make them a better offer. An honest, beautiful death, a painting in lifeblood red...More than you will ever get from the conniving worm-food.” A drop of blood ran down her blade and dripped on her hand. Absent-mindedly, she licked it off, shuddering in bliss.

“Today, my blades already had their fill. But there’s always the blood-shed of tomorrow to look forward to. The bloody, gory glory of Bhaal, for everyone to see. There is no place for you here. Give me the bone-mans stone and do your

crude work elsewhere, bloodkin.”

She held her hand out expectantly. Bhaals meddling must have screwed with her head even worse than with Tsisks, because she truly believed what she had said to be convincing. Even through the red veil of bloodlust and anger clouding her judgement, Tsisk was flabbergasted.

When nothing happened, Orins mask fell apart. Her beautifully crafted face distorted to the ugly likeness of hate.

“Be careful who you keep around, slaughterkin. Perfect canvas’s like you scream to be painted in scarlet and crimson.” Orin slowly walked backwards until she stepped into a crowd of people passing by, disappearing from view.

The gnome came running into the yard, panting.

“Wh...Where is she?”

“Gone.” Tsisk answered, eyes fixed on the gate.

“I found her body in the shed! But I just left her with you...”

The look of confusion and growing fear alerted Tsisk to the very real problem of the boy calling out. She had no doubt as to what the “body” he mentioned was. Orin bore all evidence to it in front of her eyes. He would draw attention to them, and the moment someone found out she was a Bhaalspawn, the question of “Who did it?” would be answered, no further questions asked. She started for him, only to be tripped up by Scratch, barreling through her legs.

“Scratch!” The gnome cried out happily, hiding his face from the dogs wet licks. “Stop that! Sit!”.

Scratch obeyed, tail wagging, tongue lolling out of his mouth in a doggish grin. Shadowheart deflated a bit at the sight, patted his head and said:

“How unfortunate. We found a person that really cares about you. I’ll miss you, buddy.”

The gnome regarded her with the dog, accepting ear-scratches from the strange woman, leaning into her with his whole body.

“I mean...y-you can’t have done it. No way you did that in the time it took me to get to the shed. And the Bhaalists are at it again, I heard. Everyone’s talking about it.” His face shifted from confused stare to uncertain determination.

“She’s...gone. Good. Now things can change – take him with you, I’ll tell them you never came here.”

Shadowheart could not believe her luck.

“You don’t want him?”

The gnome already opened the small cages to get out the other courier dogs and bustled about to get food and care to them, unhindered in his work by the demands of another person.

“Oh, I do. But he is getting older and slower. In about a year they will retire him with the club if no one buys him first. Best he gets a new home now.”

### 31. Midday Carnival

Gale and Shadowheart bade the boy farewell. Tsisk was happy to leave the place. Orins appearance had aggravated her greatly.

When a small, four-legged shadow dropped on Gales shoulder, she wanted to lash out and rip the animal to pieces. The effort to keep her muscles from moving made them cramp painfully, all the while Gale greeted his attacker with much enthusiasm. It was a winged cat with silky smooth, brown-grey coat, just like the one he would not shut up about on their journey to Baldurs Gate, and Tsisk began to understand why that would be so.

“Tara! How very good to see you! How did you find me?” He greeted her.

Tsisk could feel the low, vibrating purrs of Tara, looking smug as any cat could be.

“Mister Dekarios. As always, one only has to follow the magic. And the letters about magical occurrences, of course.”

Gale laughed. “So it was you intercepting the missing mail?”

“A most welcome side-effect of following your travels via the incoming news is the extraordinary supply of never-ending pigeons. I shall miss them dearly. As I missed you.”

With Tara the Tressym perched on his shoulder, Gale followed the group, chit-chatting with his friend about Waterdeep, his mother and his latest adventures.

The pleasantly warm, sunny weather had drawn out the whole population of Rivington, it seemed. Every other step someone bumped into Tsisk, foiling her attempts at settling the urge. She trudged the street with her head hanging low to avoid their gazes. Too late she realised they had gotten stuck in a crowd of people too dense to escape.

At a junction, a circus had set up a small stage to advertise their program. The passer-bys cheered at a clown and his burly watch-dog, doing small tricks and

jokes. Screams and hollering echoed through her head, amplified until it filled her very being. For it to become a song, only cries of pain were missing. She did not hear how the clown asked for a participant in his play, nor did she notice how he beckoned her to join him on the stage, while she composed a masterpiece in her head. Astarion, however, did notice her absent gaze, the glistening beads of sweat on her brow and the slight panting of a strained body. Very careful not to touch her or draw attention, he turned to Halsin:

„Halsin! It seems he wants to do a display of some kind. Go on, he probably wants you to do a trick with that dog.“

“Are you sure this is wise?” Halsin asked. “I don’t know about the customs around here and don’t want to do something rash – or inappropriate.”

“You‘ ll be fine, just be a little silly for the kids, will you? They will love you. And the Moms too, you know...“

“Very well. Oakfather, shield me in the trials to come.” With a little sigh, Halsin sidled through the onlookers and walked up, where he stood in front of the clown, unsure what to do, while the performer loudly proclaimed:

“Ah, what a special guest. A druid travelled far and wide! Get him and Buddy a round of a-paws!”

While he circled Halsin with exaggerated gestures of flailing arms and a weirdly distorted face, Halsin looked increasingly desperate. The clown took the space behind Halsin, so the audience had a good view of both.

“I’ve got a message, just for you and your friends. And since the most important part of a message is the delivery...”

The clown reached into his comically colourful clothes and drew something forth, hidden by Halsin’s broad back. He leaned forward and hissed into the druid’s ear:

„Praise the Absolute!“

In the blink of an eye, the knife in his hand produced a bloody gash in Halsin’s shoulder, just inches away from his artery. The onlookers gasped in shock, but

while most of the guests paused, Astarion could hear Tsisk inhale sharply, before her eyes went wide in anticipation and exhilaration for a carnage to come.

Buddy the dog sunk his teeth into the druids leg and the clown tried to get a second stab in. Halsin responded with his best defense. He turned into a bear. The audience became a boiling kettle of panic, the masses unable to move from the junction until the edges had frayed into the streets. Since everyone wanted to escape the unfurling violence on the stage, the crowd parted for Tsisk to rush forward and jump onto it.

While Halsin subdued the dog, she hacked and slashed at the garishly colourful man, adding more red to his costume, as befits anyone before Baal and his spawn.

Shadowheart sprung into action as she saw what happened and did her very best to guide the retreat of the surrounding people. Two men from outside fought their way into the jumble. But instead of helping Shadowheart, they immediately attacked her, too. It was her luck that Astarion seemed to have passed their notice. As they flanked her from both sides, he stabbed one of them and quickly made an end of him, before the man had a chance to distract Shadowheart from the other target. With his help the second one was no challenge for her.

The dog, as big as he was, was no match for a bear, quickly surrendered and left the site, leaving Halsin free to turn back. The druid watched in horror as he saw the work of a frenzied Bhaalspawn first-hand. Tsisk tore apart the badly mangled corpse, his innards spread over the stage in an explosion of intense hatred for life itself. She had dropped her weapon and used her teeth and claws to rip and rend, the world around her forgotten.

As Halsin moved, she growled at him in a low, threatening rumble.

“Oh, Oakfather, what is it with her?” He asked.

Astarion shushed him to silence and told him not to move. When he hopped up on stage, the rumbling growl could be heard again. She watched him with

intent and hungry eyes, crouched over her prey.

“I know that hunger. It eats you alive, doesn’t it? You loose yourself to it until you are nothing more than the wish to sate that bottomless hole inside of you.”

A flicker of recognition sparked, and she returned to her work.

“That is what he wants you to be. A poor shadow of yourself, unable and unwilling to fight back. Have you given up already?”

In her outrage, she lunged after him. She would never give up! Her rage-fuelled attack carried her past him as he dodged to the side, and into the dust of the road. She would never give up. She could not allow herself to.

She looked at the shambles behind her. Only a matter of days from one uncontrolled murder to another. The thought frightened her.

She stumbled away from the damning evidence of her loss to Bhaal.

Whatever time she had left, she would have to use it wisely, before he could wear her down enough to celebrate his last triumph over her friends corpses.

“Mr. Dekarios, these must be the most curious creatures you ever collected. And you brought quite a lot into the house if I remember correctly. Are you sure you are travelling safely with them?” Tara commented the sight.

“I wouldn’t be here without them. Your introduction might not have happened in the best of times, but I trust them completely.”

“If you say so. I will elect to watch from a safer distance. This is all too exciting for me.” The tressym weaved through Gales legs and rubbed her head on his shin before she effortlessly hopped and fluttered up the next facade to enter the roofs.

The group decided to join the disorderly tent city to vanish, growing by the hour on the hills surrounding Rivington. What only simmered in the city was frothing here. The handful of guards tasked to register the refugees had long since resigned and stuck to a barn from which they watched the camp organize itself. Various groups of thugs openly roamed the site to recruit new members



and then alleviate the other refugees of their last belongings. The group slipped into the camp without resistance. Here, they were travellers amongst hundreds of similarly worn out souls, nothing special or noteworthy about them.

The last of the food brought from the shadowlands went into the pot and made a bland mush, barely edible even with Gales talent at cooking. Even so, hungry faces eyed the food until Halsin took pity and divided his portion between a handful of scrawny children. Shadowheart followed his example. When they came back, Tsisk wordlessly heaped a big spoon full of hers into their bowls. She wasn't all too hungry after her episode with the clown.

“What's next? How do we find the Absolute?” She asked.

“We need to search the city. Aylin told me my parents are alive and held captive. We need to find the temple of Shar. The Mother Superior holds a network of spies, she might have information.” Shadowheart answered.

“That won't help us. We should kill Cazador. The moment he knows I'm here he will hunt me down. Besides, becoming the vampire Ascendant will make me stronger, able to command armies of critters and move unseen. It will only benefit us.”

“Following your stories, he is a powerful and dangerous foe best avoided. I'm sure we can evade him. But we need to find out more about the Crown of Karsus. Without knowledge of what we are going against, we will run to our doom. Who knows what it enables the brain to do.”

Tsisk immediately regretted her question. Everyone believed to have the most compelling argument and so the conversation quickly devolved into a quarrel, with her trying to mediate. The mounting tension seeped through the cracks of her already damaged control and made her ever more aggressive until her face twisted in a vicious snarl.

“Enough. Don't you see what you are doing?”

Halsin asked, moving slowly and predictably, as if in the presence of a predator, poised to strike. Which wasn't that far from the truth.

“Every one of you is right. This problem has to be tackled from all angles for you to succeed.” The soothing voice of the Emperor rang between them.

“Before I freed myself from the brains influence, I dwelled in Baldurs Gate. Rumours about Shars presence were always loudest in the south-west of the lower city. I think it worth a try to gain more information.”

“Then we should go there tomorrow and see what we can find out.”

Halsin looked puzzled at Tsisk.

“The Emperor.” She said, terribly tired by now.

The encounter with Orin and the following loss of control had deeply rattled her. She needed a way to Bhaals temple, so she could defy him once and for all.

“Halsin, do you think you can do what Thaniel offered me? Heal me, so I will remember?”

“I’m not sure I can do that. He is far more powerful than me. The side-effects could be severe, and -”

“I don’t need to know everything. Just where Bhaal’s temple is.” Tsisk interrupted him.

“A guided meditation to seek for visions of a former life. It could work, Oakfather allowing.”

Halsin stoked the fire to emit a warm, radiant glow, cautioned everyone else to keep quiet and bade Tsisk to sit down.

„Rest easy, now. Close your eyes and feel how you become one with your inner self and everything that is and was you.“

Tsisk fought with herself for a bit before she found the murmur of the camp: sleepy rustling, hushed conversations, the crackling of small fires. She felt the tug of a trance, felt herself falling into the depth of her mind and stopping just a hairs breadth before falling to sleep herself. Her mind now floated in the abyss between wake and dream, close to her unconscious thoughts, so much closer to everything she felt and wished and desired. Thoughts wafted around her like thick fog, almost palpable.

She stood in the house of a family, very visible by the number of toys strewn about. Someone – her – had added to the mess: six figures, limp and twisted, discarded puppets after she had played with them. Her mind revolted, wanted nothing to do with it. But she needed to hold on, to go deeper, even.

A set table, silver and gold and delicate china, and cowardly masked people in the distorted shadows of one singular, weakly sputtering candle. No mask obstructed her view. The meal served was a delight, a composition of food down to the tender meat. Human, her memory served her. Fresh, young human meat, not yet as pork-like in taste as mature human, but finer, with a veal-like quality to it. She fled from that memory, too.

Closer to Bhaal was a dangerous path, one her mind rejected. Whenever she tried to go on further, it would recoil and twist to avoid the memories found alongside.

Halsins voice reached out for her, merely a distant echo, instantly forgotten like the sighing of the wind:

„Your god calls for you. You killed as he bid you, but now you must turn in your tribute. Go where he calls you to.“

She let the urge take her, let it lavish in her helplessness and let it inflict its sickly elation on her.

She came back to Bhaal, back from her holy work in the shadows, anointed with blood. And into the shadows she went. Down, ever down her feet lead her. Cold metal bit her hand. The stench of rotten egg and mould hit her nose so strong, it almost made her wretch. She let go of the metal above her head and a bang announced her descend to the scurrying vermin beneath her. Confidently placed, her feet mastered the wet and slick pavement. She could feel

a tingle of excitement. Her urge, rejoicing in her return home. It enjoyed every step leading her closer to Bhaal.

Time was of no importance.

She could not say how long she wandered this place until the set stones gave way to a roughly hewn path and patches of dirt and gravel.

Her hands grabbed a coin or medallion with the well-known relief of Bhaals skull, surrounded by a ring of blood droplets, to set it against a wall. A chafing noise resounded into the empty room and she continued on her way. As she did so, the urge grew stronger. The stench of blood and death filled her nostrils, flaring wide in anticipation. The urge flicked out her tongue and tasted it as much as it smelled it. With glee, and in expectation of Bhaals gratification, it followed a sloped path, feeling watchful eyes on its back, knowing full well that none of them would dare to step in her way for fear of what she might do in return. She was the High Priestess, the Mistress of this temple and everyone here was frightened of her. Everyone but one person. She could feel her jealous gaze stabbing her through her shirt, burning into her skin, and it amused her. One day, she would get her just to herself to toy with.

Tsisk could feel a presence pressing into her head, trying to gauge her mind. She held against it, knowing it in an instant.

“I came back to you, so you might at last inherit what is rightfully yours.” Her own, traitorous voice spoke.

Panic erupted from her upon hearing those words, and the presence now pressed in with more force, brutalizing her thoughts with more pictures of death so vile and beautiful, she could not believe they were her own memories. It robbed her of her sanity. She lost herself in a wild chase with only one goal: to get away as fast and as far as she could, without a place to run to, Bhaals presence approaching relentlessly.

“Come back!”

A far away voice whispered to her from beyond. She recognized it. She trusted it

to lead her the way. Tsisk moved towards it, just moments ahead of falling to her own, old self. When she thought she had lost her direction, she could hear it again, guiding her:

“Fight that bastard. He doesn't deserve you!”

It was close, so close. With the last of her power, she followed the voice back to the makeshift camp and her friends.

While she slowly regained control over herself, she breathed fast and shallow breaths of panic, her heart hammering away at her ribs. With her head spinning, she staggered past all of them to embrace the sturdy trunk of a tree to hold her up while she emptied her stomach and wished she could empty her head of what she had experienced today just as well.

If her vision held true, she would fall to the god of murder in his temple. She had no doubt who her first victims would be if he took her.

“Have you found a memory of the temple?” Halsin asked her.

“Only impressions. It was all so confusing.”

“Can you tell us something about it, at least? Anything?”

She told them of the vision. Of the what she had felt, and smelled and heard.

Astarion followed her report. “Well, that sounds like the canalisation to me, the stench really is a monster of its own. A charming place for a charming god. I hope you are good at finding your way. It is a labyrinth of hidden passages and underground structures. Very useful to move around unseen. Or trap ignorant victims.”

She shook her head.

“I have not experienced enough to pick a path. I need more information.”

Besides, the others could use her help a little longer. She would only set foot into the sewers if she saw no way around it. Dissatisfied with the conclusion, they went to sleep.

She dreamed of wandering the beaches of the blood-sea under Bhaals hunters moon, brittle bones crunching under her feet. Its serene beauty called to her, its perfect silence only broken by her steps.

She ascended a mountain, climbed to its highest peak. On its top, she was awaited. Four skulls impaled on stakes followed her approach with hollow sockets, silently demanding her to join the circle. Between them, her knife gleamed. A silvery provocation, her final destination. An offering for her to take her place of honour among them.

A foot got shoved painfully into her side. Shadowhearts urgent whispering tore her from her dreams back into the world of the living.

“Wake up. We’re being surrounded.”

Tsisk stood up, fully alert. She was thankful for the fact she had not taken off her leathers in fear of being robbed, and drew her knife. The glow of her mace would only wake the greed of half the camp.

Several people had taken position around the tents, silhouettes in the dark. An elderly woman entered the half-light caused by the remaining embers of the fire. Most women her age would already have stooped down, but she carried herself with the grace of an experienced hunter and the pride of the survivor, an impression only reinforced by her many visible scars, most of them healed longer than Tsisk was alive. Her eyes swept over the group before they came to linger on Astarion, unsuccessfully trying to become invisible with no cover to aid him and trapped in their carefully placed ambush.

“So the impossible spawn has returned. The question is: For which reason? To serve your master, or to serve your own goals?”

Astarion gave up his attempt to escape her piercing stare, inched further into the group and shot back.

“What do you want from me, old hag?”

“The children, of course. We sent Gandrel after you to interrogate you and

find out where they are.”

Tsisk stepped up to her, blocking her view and answered in Astarion's stead.

“The vagrant monster hunter? He did not have the time to explain himself. I offer you the opportunity he didn't have. Ask. Then leave.”

“The spawn took our children and brought them to Cazador. We tried to free them once already, attacking his palace at first light. Even then, it was too well-defended. If he has truly broken free, we demand he help us. In turn, we will let him go unbothered.”

Tsisk relaxed. A reasonable demand, an offering of peace. Astarion, however, seemed to feel different. His words were dripping with ire and well-fermented regret.

“You don't know Cazador. your children are already dead. Fed on the night they were brought to him, like all people claimed for him in the last two hundred years.”

“But you don't know that. You didn't see how he killed them. He could keep them alive for weeks and you wouldn't know. All we ask of you is to bring us into the palace. If they are alive, we will find them.”

Astarion frowned, torn between his dislike of the Gur and his wish to end his masters reign. Tsisk decided to take the opportunity. The Gur looked capable. If nothing else, they would be useful as a distraction or just to buy time. She would make good on their presence.

“We will get you when we are ready to attack Cazador. Just tell us where we will find you.” For the first time, the clan-leader of the Gur looked at her closely.

“Ahh. I thought you his puppet. Be wary of his manipulation, it is the spawn's way. And act soon. If my family loses hope, revenge is inevitable. My cousin's son works as a waiter in the Elfsong tavern. He will relay your message.” She produced a folded piece of paper from her pocket. “To speed up your arrival, bring this message down to the piers of Rivington and show it to the boatman of the swanky swan.”

Astarion unfolded the needlessly creased paper.

“This is just a map!”

“Nothing is just one thing, spawn. The bridge got closed off for strangers. This will buy you a way in.”



## 32. Getting in

A whole forest of masts watched over their passing to the countless docks, small and large. Mooring fortified frigates, bulgy cogs and a fleet of smaller fisher boats like the one they rode in on. The screams of seagulls and advertising fishermen resounded far onto the river, but the most prominent noises were metallic clanking and a deep hum, tangible as a slight tickle in the stomach region. Wide open to all kinds of trade, no one even bothered to note the arrival of the small, dingy boat in Baldurs Gate.

The boatman looked at the map with a concentrated frown, counted creases, counted again, and steered his boat straight to a certain dock, where a cog got unloaded. Once disembarked, Tsisk was able to identify the source of the clanking and humming. It was a series of walled in warehouses, guarded by giant metal constructs, standing statuesque at the front gates or patrolling the perimeter.

“Don’t go over there. Those damn tins claim to serve justice. But they don’t care ‘bout the breathin’. Executed Oyster-Jack on the spot yesterday for bringing in his cousins kids from outside.” He spat into the water and showed the map to the workers. “Claimed he was a traitor and all that, and the kids trained thieves.” He tore two corners off the paper and shoved it into Tsisks hand.

“Never know when ya need a map. Good luck!”

The fisher untied his boat as fast as he could and steered it back into the river.

Covered by the loading crew and their leader, who looked much alike the Gur matron, they managed to leave the crowded harbour without attracting attention and dived into the chaos of the streets. Where water lines on every house marked the floods of the last years, no one bat an eye at the scruffy strangers passing through, but as soon as the fishy smell of the harbour got less noticeable, the

clothes more colourful and better put together, their appearance garnered attention. People changed the side of the street to avoid them, never taking their eyes from them while doing so. But it wasn't just them, Tsisk noticed. Small groups of people had hushed conversations, throwing hostile looks full of mistrust at every unknown passer-by.

After picking their way through the city for about half an hour in this way and not getting the wiser about the curious behaviours, Gale decided to satisfy his curiosity and approached a pair of elderly men playing chess on a small front-porch with a bow.

“Hello, gentlemen! Me and my companions are asking ourselves why the great cosmopolitan city of Baldurs Gate would be so unwelcoming to adventurers these days?”

“Someone with manners, how very unusual these days.” Said the first one with a raspy voice.

“Yes, yes, used to be more of the kind roaming the city. I wonder where they all went. Gortash probably got rid of the filthy scum. A fine boy, that Gortash.” Mused the second, completely entranced in his game. “He got rid of the troublemakers when the murders started. Sharp boy that.” He took up a figure and placed it back down on a different part of the board.

“Murders?” Gale asked.

The first sat up straight, happy to have an audience for his sensational story.

“Well yes, brutal, ritualistic murders. First, no one had an idea, but word goes its probably one of those wretched Bhaalists. All signs point to that murderous bunch, I heard. Can't read it in the newspapers, though. They are afraid to write about it, mark my words. Frightened like little children, those Journalists.”

“Gortash will flush them out with his Steelwatch. Now stop talking and make your move, or we'll both be dead before this game is over.”

“Excuse me, lad. Obligations.” And thus, the old man dismissed Gale and hunched back over the game. “Have a fine day.”

On a corner, they stopped to discuss the matter.

“What’s the Steelwatch?” Astarion asked. “I have never heard of them.”

“I think we’ll know shortly.” Tsisk said.

One of the big metal constructs, accompanied by guards, walked up to the group. It buzzed and clicked and whirred from the movements of hundreds of little gears and transmissions. Though it looked like a construct, its movements were fluid like that of a living being, giving it an uncanny effect.

It became even more disquieting when Tsisk could feel her tadpoles reaction to it, implying it was alive and thinking, somehow. The Watcher had no mental defenses like every other person with a tadpole she had met. She just slipped in. Another entity already held control over it, so trying to obtain it for herself would surely attract that ones attention.

The construct scanned the group as a whole, relayed the information to the other entity – and received a list of offences against the Absolute. Beginning with destroying an army and ending with a fortress left in ruin. A separate message was attached regarding her person.

“The individuals rogue wizard, rogue cleric, druid Halsin and rogue rogue must be detained for questioning. The individual most-wanted dragonborn is marked for special treatment...awaiting connection.”

Some passer-bys stopped to look at the gathering, while others hurried to get away. Tsisk put her hand on her weapon, ready to fight. Behind her, she could make out the subtle movements of Gales spellweaving, hidden by her and Halsins much more imposing figures.

“What a surprise to get this notification. I never expected to see you again.”

The voice sounded tinny through the Watchers organs, but it was Gortashs, proud and lordly. He sounded relieved, which made no sense to Tsisk. Why would he be happy to see her? She cursed herself for having forsaken her memories. They would have helped a great deal to understand the situation. But

how could she have known she would be recognized by Baldurs' Gates finest at every corner?

"You are invited to Wyrrest keep. Bring her in." Gortash ordered the guards, not unfriendly, but firm. Tsisk did not want to find out for what he would have her brought in. Not to mention the lack of reference to her friends being brought with her made her ready herself for a fight. She was not the only one to think this way.

Glowing embers were thrown, hypnotically dancing to the ground, trailing twirling wisps of smoke and drawing the eyes of all bystanders and the guards, staring at this spectacle dreamily. Gale tucked at Tsisks belt.

"Move! It won't hold long."

They ran away, down a winding street. The heavy footsteps of the construct followed them, echoing from the walls of the narrow lane. At every crossing, they changed direction, hoping to lose it and almost succeeding. It had grown ever more distant by the time they arrived at the much more affluent part of town they had set off to go to in the first place. Houses here had spacious yards with manicured lawns and the street got wider with less junctions. As soon as the Watcher got out of the alleys, he would spot them. In an attempt to avoid certain capture, they sprinted down the street, when a tiefling woman frantically waved at them.

"Here! Come here!"

She ran over to a gate and pushed it open. As soon as everyone had entered the walled backyard, she closed it again and put her finger to her lips. It was difficult to quieten the panting and huffing of five exhausted people, but as soon as Astarion muffled Gales gasps for air with the fabric of his puffy sleeve, they could hear the clanking of the Watcher, briskly walking down the street. When it had passed the gate, Tsisk dared to breathe again.

The strange woman only had eyes for Shadowheart though.

“You are back! Were you successful? Where are the others?”

Shadowheart mustered her from head to toe. “Who are you?”

The tiefling deflated, her watery eyes turning up to the sky.

“They erased me again, didn’t they?”

She inhaled deeply, seeking Shadowheart’s eyes and testing a small, sad smile.

“I-I’m Nocturne, your best friend and confidant in the enclave.” Her words didn’t cause the reaction she wished for. Instead of looking at Shadowheart, she mustered the rest of the group with a blank face. When she found Scratch standing beside Shadowheart, her face brightened to a grin from ear to ear.

“You found a stray again. You’re never going to change, are you? No matter how often they take your memories to make you harden up.”

This time, Shadowheart smiled back.

“Is that so?” She looked back at the group. “Am I pigheaded and soft?”

“In the best ways possible.” Gale answered diplomatically.

Nocturne let out a little squeal of excitement and flung her arms around Shadowheart’s neck, who immediately stiffened up.

“I’m sorry. I’m just so happy to have you again...” She took a step back.

“So...was your mission successful? The mother Superior won’t be happy if I bring you to her and you got nothing to show for.”

“I have not come back to give her what she wants. But I need someone to show us the way to the enclave.”

“What for?” Nocturne enquired before she swiped the thought aside with a wave of her hand. “Nevermind. You always were a bit suspicious of strangers. Which is why – some day – you’ll have to tell me how you picked up these folks. You seem to trust them a great deal.” Envy darkened her face for a split second, until

Shadowheart answered: “I will. Some day.”

Tsisk saw potential in this godsend of an ally. Played right, she could be of great use, especially as trusting as she seemed towards Shadowheart.

“Shadowheart needs access to the Mother Superiors information.” She said.

“So to her office?”

“And the dungeons.” Shadowheart added.

“I don’t know where they are. Everyone knows they exist, but everyone also forgets about them as soon as they say it out loud.”

“Then we will find them ourselves.” Tsisk said. “When is the enclave at sleep?”

Nocturne looked at Shadowheart for guidance. The cleric hesitated, then nodded her agreement.

“Of course never. Not all at once. Down there is no night or day, just light or no light. Mostly no light, so we can cleanse ourselves from its influence and learn to appreciate Shars gifts.”

“How much are you willing to do to help Shadowheart?”

“P-Pretty much anything...”

“I know a poison that kills quickly –”

Halsin interrupted her.

“Do you really know no other solution?”

Tsisk seamlessly continued with an aggressive growling undertone:

“...and I also know one that will make people sleep and tastes like nothing. We only need someone who would put it into the food.”

She couldn’t deny she had looked forward to the first possibility. Bhaals presence pressed on her constantly like a heavy weight ever since they had come closer to Baldurs Gate and it took a toll on her composure.

Nocturne took a peak out the gate, then back at Shadowheart. “Your friend is ruthless and sly, did you know that? They would be right at home in the enclave.” Shadowheart took Nocturnes hand. “Please. It’s important for me.”

“...I’ll put myself on kitchen duty. Bring the poison to the House of Grief two streets over at five. And get something more Baldurian to wear. You stick out like a sore thumb around here. Figaro’s is just down the street.”

The mentioned tailor had a window full of the most exotic fabrics and well-tailored clothes Tsisk had never considered wearing. The prices weren't even a question. She could not afford any of this. And apparently, it was the same for Shadowheart and Gale.

Astarion was on his way in when he noticed no one was following.

"I thought you would be happy to get out of your sweaty rags? I can't wait for it, personally."

"We can't pay for this." Tsisk said bluntly.

The spawn laughed a laugh so loud and full, his voice was hoarse from it when he spoke.

"Don't you tell me after all that killing, looting their dead corpses is where you drew the line? What use does gold have for the dead anyway?"

Gales face turned a bit sour when he answered:

"Guess no one really thought of pilfering the poor souls."

"You sweet, sweet, unbled children under the sun. You should learn to take all chances life offers you." Astarions mouth twitched into a malicious grin. With a patronizing tone he added: "Fine. Be my guests. You can dress up as my retainers."

As soon as the tailor knew who would pay and saw the money, Astarion got whisked away into a back room while his assistant scrambled to find three readily made outfits of simpler make. Gale ended up with a new robe, specifically ordering "No violet or blue.", as it were Mystras colours. He instead got fitted into a black robe embroidered with some small silvery details.

Shadowheart and Tsisk agreed on the fact the prettier choices would mostly hinder their movements and just chose simple shirts and pants of a more fashionable style than what they already wore, accentuated by slightly more elaborate belts.

After much lamenting, Halsin chose a boldly patterned elven inspired garb he

could drape over his druidic leathers.

When Astarion re-emerged, Shadowheart gasped. He had chosen a white brocade suit with heavy gold embroidery and a red shirt, complementing his complexion. Instead of sickly pale, his skin now looked a lustrous white, elevating his beauty even further.

“This will cost a fortune!” She whispered.

“Lucky me Ketheric had one stashed away in his chambers.” He corrected his collar, then looked at Tsisk. “You should really think about a vibrant red, my dear. It would look stunning on you.”

“No.”

Red would only serve to make her stand out. If the last encounters had taught her anything, it was that she didn't want to stand out. Who knew who else remembered her old self. Who knew what she had done to them that required revenge.

“You're such a killjoy. Again.” Astarion sighed. “Gale! Since our friend here is so phenomenally bad at giving compliments it hurts, you tell me how I look.”

After he had received his appraisal, Astarion was ready to pay. Disguised as a group following a wealthy Baldurian, it was easier to move through the city without drawing the wrong kind of attention. Astarion still made heads turn all around, but his presence really just served to distract from everyone else now. They carefully avoided all Steelwatchers and found an apothecary where Tsisk could purchase what she needed just in time to get back to the enclave.



### 33. House of grief

The House of Grief was one of several similar villas, perfectly mediocre for this part of town with its perfectly manicured yard, absent of any real nature, not even a stray bug in sight. The pillared front entrances scoffed at everyone less wealthy and important than them and heavy curtains did their best to keep out the squalor of the surrounding city.

Had Nocturne not nervously waited for them, they would have never found the place in time. She told them to take a walk of about an hour before returning, then enter through the front. Shadowheart would be awaited. Tsisk recommended her to eat of the meal, too, if she did not want to get exposed.

“It’s fine. I’ll meet you afterwards in the Elfsong tavern, whenever you can drop by.” Shadowheart had to reassure Nocturne, before the Tiefling accepted the advice.

The trees lining the street were late to come back into leaf, which made it possible for Tsisk to enjoy the sound of spring: The crackling explosions of opening buds, sounding like gentle rain on leaf only dreamed yet by the slowly awakening trees. It helped her greatly to calm the rushing beat of her own heart, eager for death again.

The guard placed at the entrance had trouble holding her head up. A half-eaten plate was put aside on her table. When Shadowheart entered, a catty grin appeared on her face. Her words were congealed jealousy, slipping out of her mouth in lumps like slop, slick and slurred.

“I heard you are in biiig trouble. Go in. The Mother won’t tell us what you did, but a week alone in the darkness won’t cut it this time.”

Astarion just stepped behind her and held her keys in his hand before she could finish. She was so far gone, she didn’t notice. She wanted to protest the

group following Shadowheart, but her tongue had gone numb moments before, Tsisk knew. Her head was wrapped in fluffy clouds now, perfectly soft and impervious to its surroundings. Another minute or two and she would lay it to rest on her table for the rest of the night.

Shadowheart's intimate knowledge of Sharran places drew her down, into the basement. A small side door awaited them in a ritual room not quite Sharran enough to condemn the house as a place of worship and yet so eerily reminiscent, her presence seemed to lurk in every dark corner and hide in every shadow. The guards' keys granted them access to the pitch-dark depths under Baldur's Gate. Shadowheart let them take her hand again and guided them through the first level of the basement, following her instincts and years of habit, burned into her subconscious.

A second door opened to a dimly lit area, clearly meant to house a great number of people. Elves, humans, half-elves, dwarves and gnomes aged from child to young grown up lay sleeping at sturdy tables or in their cots. Tsisk could see no older folks between them. This seemed to be a training post for the Sharran.

The following rooms confirmed her assessment. They contained all kinds of training equipment: obstacle-courses, a library full of books about politics, diplomacy and its subversion, as well as other ways to sway opinions or beliefs, even a dressing room full of handy, ready-made disguises.

The one room that stood out, though, caused Astarion to recoil and Gale to plead:

“Please tell me these are just here for illustrative purposes.”

Her hand gliding over stained wood and cold, polished metal, Shadowheart weaved through a number of torture-devices, her face unmoved by the sight.

“No. This was training. To withstand even the harshest interrogations, so we can carry out missions in enemy territory.”

Full of Disbelief, Astarion blurted out:

“You did this willingly? What in the nine hells would make you do that?”

“Her title is not “Mother” Superior for nothing. She was the only mother I knew, these people my only family when I had lost mine. Harsh love, but love all the same.”

“I would not put what they did to you into that category.” Gale said. “In fact, it is entirely undeserving of the name and should not be mentioned in the same breath.”

“I am beginning to see that, yes.”

Shadowheart went on, through a set of doors with increasingly intricate opening mechanisms until she stood in a study. The drow seated at the table wrote in a notebook, the plate in front of her untouched.

“Welcome back, child.”

The drow didn’t look up. She had skin the colour of dark granite and a face as hard as the stone itself. Her dress was immaculate. The pleats and folds so plenty and sharp, the person cleaning it had to spend days to iron them flat every single time. Of course, a person as important as her wouldn’t do such a menial task by herself, so she couldn’t care less.

“Mother DeVir.”

The Mother Superior closed the book, straightened her posture until everything about her was precisely angled as she wanted it: hands laid flat on top of each other, back upright, her head slightly askew and loaded with a disapproving stare. She directed her cool gaze at Shadowheart alone and ignored everyone else.

“Let me be frank, child. Shar is angry at you. And she has every right to be. You betrayed her. But – I put in a good word for you. Repent, sever your ties with these people who have misled you and she will let you come back.”

“I have come to get my parents.”

“Of course. Follow me.”

DeVir stood up, got a complicated looking key out of her drawer and turned to the wall. Her body covered what she did, but with a click, a portion of the wall

parted. The unexpected lack of resistance caught Shadowheart off guard. It unsettled her and made her hesitate. Tsisk put her hand on her shoulder and gently pushed her to go on. It would not do to stop now.

She would have to look out for traps and trusted Astarion to do the same. DeVir had them in the perfect position to lead them directly into their doom.

Shadowheart on the other hand was in no condition to pay attention, focused on her parents as she was.

The mother Superior led them deeper into the roughly hewn bedrock Baldurs Gate was built upon, down into dank, musty dungeons. Eventually, she reached a cavern with cells built into its walls.

“Stay at the entrance, heretics. Her parents are timid and easily frightened. You would scare them.” DeVir ordered the rest of the group, then picked her way over uneven ground to the cell farthest away, dragging Shadowheart after her like a disobedient child.

The reverberation inside the room carried their voices back to the group as if they stood beside the two:

“Free them, now!”

“The only one who can do that is you. By taking Shars curse fully onto yourself. The pain, harsh and sweet, to follow you everywhere and remind you of your sins against Shar every moment you draw breath. You decided against it every single time I brought you here.”

“No!” Shadowhearts voice cracked under the weight of realisation and tears.

“Then take it from them, you are free to do so.”

A weak voice whispered and moaned words to the echo that distorted them beyond recognition. Even so, fatigue and pain carried over clearly.

“They are right. Leave them. Come back to Shar, hand over the prism and we will once again erase the pain of awareness from your mind.” The tone changed from patronizing to alluring. “As we did before. It must not be a burden you

carry.”

Shadowheart vehemently disagreed.

“Don’t be foolish. You are gifted. My student, almost a dark justiciar.”

The emphasis very clearly lay on “my”. DeVir saw herself as deserving praise for her great deed of teaching Shadowheart, Tsisk realized.

“They led you astray, but you can be Shars chosen still! Just forget them already!” The last words were practically screamed and prompted Scratch to bark aggressively, jumping left to right in frenzied rage.

“Never!” Shadowheart screamed back and a scuffle ensued between the two women.

Halsin had a headstart, but Tsisk followed up close to help, when darkness fell. She could hear him shout out in surprise. His voice quickly moved away, down, then stopped abruptly.

She skidded to a halt, also stopping Astarion and Gale in their tracks. With her foot, she tested the ground. There was no ground. But DeVir had gone over...carefully picking her way. Tsisk snatched Gales staff and began the search for invisible ground. It didn’t take her long to find it, but every second dragged on like eternity. The screams and fighting noises tried to rush her forward blindly. She had to stay calm. One mistake and she could end up like Halsin, dropping to her death. Or worse, causing the other two she guided to drop. Careful, she made it to the other side. Once there, the darkness lifted and she was able to see DeVir holding Shadowheart forcefully over a mirror of loss while the cleric desperately fought against her hold. A big owl fluttered over the drows shoulder and hacked away at her with its beak. It didn’t do much, but kept DeVir off-balance enough so she could not continue to push Shadowheart further down. From behind her, Astarion fell into a sprint, putting hares to shame with his speed. Halfway there, he got overtaken by a volley of violet stars, smashing into DeVirs chest. Thoroughly rattled, she took a step back. She found herself in a dangerous embrace involving razor-sharp blades caressing her throat.

Shadowheart backed away from the mirror on her hands and knees and gasped for air in big gulps and deep breaths like a drowning pulled back onto safe land. When she had calmed herself down, Astarion asked her:

“What do you want to do with her now?” And immediately followed up with:

“Personally, I would recommend beheading. Very effective, almost no one comes back from that.”

“You are in over your head, toy boy. Your master is already searching all over the town for you.” DeVir hissed, and then hissed again, when Astarion's dagger drew blood.

“You are very lucky I don't want to take the joy of killing you from the little princess. Now behave yourself.”

Shadowheart had crept back to the cell and held the hands of two people, barely resembling an elf and a human. Hunger, pain and desperation had taken over their bodies for decades. Where Shadowheart's hand had a small scab, never allowed to heal over, the skin of their arms was covered in similar wounds. The weak, trembling voice of her mother greeted her.

“My little cub. She told us you were dead.”

“No. I...I found my way back.”

The twig-thin fingers of her father cupped her face. “Just as we taught you, all those years ago in the wood. We are so proud.”

“I can free you now. We can leave this place. Go back to Selûne.”

Shadowheart's tears rolled freely down her face and onto her armour, leaving trails through the dust covering it.

“It is too late for us. We have not seen her light in decades.”

Her mother faintly whispered to her, visibly weaker than her husband. “I want an end. To the pain. End the pain.”

“I don't know if I can bear this much...” Shadowheart began, but got interrupted by her father.

“She does not mean to take the curse onto yourself. We don't know how to

live any more. Let us go.”

Shadowheart hung in her parents embrace in an effort to make it last an eternity, then quietly asked:

“Tsisk, how do you control the urge? How do you live with it, all the time?”

“I don’t. I just...live with it, try not to think about it.”

This was not the answer Shadowheart was looking for and her shoulders collapsed under it. She needed something more helpful. A truth which, spoken aloud, could become a weapon, a lever to dislodge Tsisk with. Which, spoken aloud, would give that power to the people with her. For some seconds, she wrestled with herself, then spoke it.

“I concentrate on things I enjoy more. A ray of sunshine on a cloudy day helps temporarily, well-loved memories carry longer. But I would have given in a long time ago were it not for you four.” The last part Tsisk only whispered, missing the strength to speak it out loud.

“You are everything that keeps it at bay.”

Three. Only three were left now. She turned abruptly and went back where a now visible chasm marked the place Halsin had fallen. Now that the dire situation was resolved, she could feel the grief building. Very soon, it would need somewhere to vent. She considered the person who caused all of this a good place to start. After that, the rest of the enclave would pay for this transgression, too, or they would continue on their path. And because only a city of sin and madness could be home to such a place, Baldurs Gate deserved to fall.

“What are you thinking? It can’t be pleasant, the way you look.”

The voice startled her into a little jump. Very dangerous, given her precarious position on the ledge of the abyss. A big hand steadied her, the owner of said hand impervious of the need for venting intense emotions.

“You! I heard you fall!” Tsisk accused Halsin in an outburst of righteous rage, the claws of her right hand buried in his lower arm.

“The Oakfathers gifts to me include a feathered form. I thought you had

realized that, or I would have changed back sooner.”

He spoke calmly to the wild-eyed dragonborn currently fighting to control her breathing – and the raging urge within, robbed of a perfectly good reason to drive her to a killing spree of enormous proportions.

She dislodged her claws from the wincing druid and apologized.

“It’s fine, I’ll just heal it.”

He sighed. Tsisk looked out for Shadowheart. She lay moaning in front of her parents cell, obviously in great pain. Hurrying over, Tsisk noticed her wrists. Wounds had opened on them, vanishing out of sight under her sleeves. The constant chafing of fabric on irritated skin had to be excruciating.

“Why did you do that?”

Shadowheart had just crippled herself while she had looked away. She was baffled.

“You said you can endure because you’ve got someone to do it for. And so do I.”

“You barely know them. You don’t even know if they will survive the next night!”

“I know enough! They held out for me all these years. Now it’s my turn.”

Her logic was impeccable. Tsisk hated it. It meant she would turn from her at some point, if her parents would not follow her prediction. A devious thought worthy of Bhaal, one she pushed away.

She helped Shadowheart get out of her mail and gambeson, then watched as the clerics pain-fuelled ire directed itself at the Mother Superior.

“You subjected them to this for decades? And me to a life without them, thinking I was left unloved and uncared for...”

She took one of Astarions daggers and drove the drow to the edge. With ice-cold calm, Shadowheart told her to accept oblivion and embrace the darkness, as she would gift her both. Then she pushed her to tumble down like a stone thrown into a well. The darkness refused to acknowledge her passing by forgetting to



make a noise as it swallowed her whole.

With Shadowhearts parents in tow, they made their way back, looting DeVirs study of everything promising information, when an earthquake shook the building. That alone was bad enough, but the mental assault coming with it left Gale, Astarion, Shadowheart and Tsisk holding their heads in agony until the Emperor stepped in.

“The Netherbrain tests its chains. Two stones are not enough to contain it. I hope your excursion reveals some information about its whereabouts.” He sounded tired, his voice flatter than usual.

### 34. Just a normal day in fantasyland

“Don’t force it, the power is already here and waiting for you. Gently invite it in and encourage it to be more.”

Halsin had decided to take her training more seriously, now that the brain was so close. While Gale worked through DeVirs notebooks, Astarion read a newspaper he had picked up from the paperboys swarming the city and Shadowheart cared for her parents, he pushed Tsisk to control something that utterly defied her attempts to grasp it. The small seed he had brought in together with a handful of dirt lay inconspicuous before her, untouched by her efforts.

With some struggling, clearing her head, settling the urge, she was able to feel...something. Something existed and something evaded her with the energy of a frolicking lamb. Adorable, if she were not actively trying to catch it by the tail. Such as it was, her capricious patience gave way to her anger and with it the urge, eagerly chasing what she had found until it retreated into the safe slumber of the dormant seed again.

Hours later, Halsin sighed.

“I think you should give yourself a break. You are trying too hard when you should let nature run it’s course.”

Tsisk ignored him. She only needed peace. Immeasurable amounts of peace and patience, enough to surmount the urge foiling every attempt at success.

All on its own, her hand found the small, wooden flute in her pocket. The first notes were Alfiras Song, mournful and slow. Nothing to stir the energies of life themselves and heavy on her heart. Another song fought its way up through the haze of her mind to mingle with the notes of the weeping dawn, a light-hearted, easy-going melody children would play to dance and be merry to. For a few precious moments, her mind went back to a time it could not picture, only feel, unburdened and warm with joy and laughter.

The little something followed her invitation this time, winding and turning to the melody. With closed eyes, she listened to the echoes of the song reverberating in her mind, growing more distant with every repetition, until it faded away into silence and with it the ghost of a memory. She opened her eyes. Before her stood a sapling, stretching its first leaves in search of light, clutching at the dirt with its thin roots. Pride about her accomplishment enabled a short rest from the demands of her urge. She would need to find it a place to grow, she realized.

“Mhh...music to support the channelling. Unusual, but not unheard of.” Halsin said, pensive. “We should definitely follow that path. For now, you should rest.”

A knock on the door turned everybody's heads. It opened awkwardly slow, revealing the questioning face of Nocturne, peaking in. Shadowheart smiled and beckoned her in with a wave of her hand. The terror on Nocturne's face to follow that gesture was not what she anticipated, though. The tiefling closed the door behind her quickly before she rushed to Shadowheart's side and took her hands.

“Who did this to you? Did they force you...?” She asked, shooting daggers at Gale and Tsisk with her eyes.

“No, I did it myself. To free my parents.”

“Oh...let me bandage them. It will help with the chafing.”

Tsisk took up one of the notebooks they had taken from DeVir to try and not intrude on the time between the two. It contained information about a vendor of hellish things and connections, marked as “possibly useful”.

The notes could not hold her attention for very long, and so she witnessed Nocturne gifting a Night Orchid to Shadowheart, whose face softened to a peaceful smile upon the sight. She hugged Nocturne tightly.

“Will you come back to the enclave? It is a hostile place without you.”

“No, Nocturne. I will help to turn away the Absolute. And, given we survive, find a place to live with my parents.”

“Do you think there could be a place for one more person?”

“For a friend? Of course.”

The mentioning of the word friend seemed to make Nocturne enormously happy.

“I wish I could really do this. They will search for you. And for me, too, if I leave.”

“You can’t stay!”

Nocturne smirked. “I’ll be a spy. Then I can warn you.”

“Only if you help me bring them down.”

“Done.”

Nocturne took Shadowhearts braid up to gently stroke it.

“You should do something about your hair. You wanted it that way because you adored Shar and wanted to feel closer to her. I guess that has changed, now.”

Shadowheart agreed and with only a handful of herbs Nocturne had brought with her and a few buckets full of water they lifted the old black and lightened her hair colour to a silvery blond.

Nocturne waved her goodbye to the whole room instead of just Shadowheart when she left.

Sleep came late this night to Tsisk. Unrelenting nightmares kept it light and prevented it from becoming a restful refuge. When a foreign voice promised her more of what she craved but did not wish for, she refused to follow its call.

Tsisk awoke to shouting.

“Get the Hells away from me!”

She instantly jerked upright. She could see two strangers – a man and a woman – who had entered the room make reassuring gestures to Astarion. The rest of their companions must not have heard him, since no one else stirred.

„Peace, brother. We’re here to take you home. The master needs you for the ceremony. Come with us and be reborn.“

He answered tersely: „How did you find us?“

„Master Cazador knew where you were the entire time. He knew you would return back. The master needs you. Come with us. You must attend.“

Tsisk could see a shift in his bearing and demeanour. He stood more upright, got closer to the strangers and spoke in his softest ear caressing voice. He wanted to lull them into a sense of safety, demonstrate his superiority.

“I know what the master wants. But don’t we deserve better? Centuries of torment, do you really think he will spare you his peremptoriness, his capriciousness, his cruelty? *I* know what you want. More than power, more than to walk in the sun.” He closed the distance to his spawn siblings and hissed the next words directly into their faces.

“You want to see him dead!”

His own face harboured the hate he wanted to evoke in them, turning his ravishingly beautiful features into the snarling grimace of a ravenous beast.

“I know of his Ritual and it will be mine. He won’t see a scrap of it’s glory when I take it from him and become the Ascendant in his stead. Name me your new Master and I shall get you revenge.”

Tsisk rose, unnoticed by the two spawns, who stood hypnotized and deeply focused on Astarions speech. She slowly and silently grabbed Lathanders Blood in a fluid motion, less likely to be noticed from the corner of one’s eye than normal patterns of movement.

“And why would we risk that if we could be immortal by tomorrow? Walk under the sun, eat real food again and drink blood to our hearts content? Your little rebellions never brought you anywhere, except into his torture chambers.” The mention of torture sent a fleeting expression of desperation across Astarions face before he caught himself and started to laugh like a maniac, dropping the facade of benevolent master.

“Because he lies. He lied to all of you. You will die so he can ascend. He alone and no one else beside him.”

Slowly, doubt nested itself in the womans face. She started to believe, but

rejected reality still.

“He does not need to lie to us. He controls us fully. Why would he give us hope?”

The other spawn stared into the distance, hope a long lost friend he only knew from afar by now. “Because its more cruel...” He said flatly, as convulsions took his body from him.

The woman watched, horrified, then convulsed violently herself. Their motions became puppet-like, unreal and over-emphasized, as if a child made them move this way and that by tugging at their bodies. With the last of her own will, she groaned:

“We must obey. Brother, get out of here!”

Two more figures Tsisk had not perceived before stepped out of the shadows, trapping her and Astarion.

Had they attacked her, she would not have had the time to react, but they foolishly ignored the dragonborn in her light nightwear, not thinking her a threat, going directly for Astarion instead, overpowering him and pinning him to the ground in front of her eyes.

Anger formed knots in her stomach. Anger about the transgression of entering this place of rest in an ambush, anger about the attempt of abduction and anger about the ones who had no right to meddle in the lives they ruined any further. The knots tightened to a ball of furious rage, tugged ever stronger, then burst open in a rush of violence. She clubbed, and she shoved. She pulled the other spawns from the only one she cared about, oblivious to the spilling of generous amounts of blood and their screams of pain she caused. Bhaal did not care for their already claimed souls, their long since stilled hearts awoke no desire in her as the living did. And yet, violence and the will to end their existence altogether followed her. From under the pile, Astarion screamed.

“Use the light!”

She followed his command and flared Lathanders blood, immediately followed by the eruption of tortured screaming, abruptly ending when all four spawns vanished in a red mist, hungrily swallowed, then carried away by it in a hasty retreat.

Astarion picked himself up from the ground, warily eyeing her for signs of mindless bloodlust.

„That was...rather impressive. How are you feeling?” He tested the murky waters of her fickle temper.

Tsisk wanted to say “Fine.”, but saw it to be a lie. She had hoped to be free of such urges if ever she found a way to rid herself of Bhaal. Her splattered garments and sticky hands told her this would never be. For his touch had already altered her so profoundly, it was part of her very being, and had been even before she awoke on the nautiloid, she realized.

Her eyes didn't rise from the small puddle left on the ground as she weakly stated “Beaten.”. How cruel a fate to make her believe she could best Bhaals storm, ravaging her mind, when this lurked just below the surface.

It was only then Astarion abandoned his cautious probing and made the rounds to check on the others.

“I can't believe they're all fast asleep. Like little babies in their cribs.”

He looked back at her and found her staring blankly. He looked disconcerted, lost even, confronted with her sudden unresponsiveness. Irritated, he just blabbed on.

“Well, at least now you've met my family.”

“Do you think they deserve to die?” Tsisk asked abruptly.

Wasn't he supposed to care even just a little for them? The people he shared his fate with for centuries? What did that say about the people he shared his fate with for only a few weeks? He evaded her question nonchalantly, never noticing its importance.

“They're only spawns. I'm sure nobody will miss them.”

“Like no one misses you?”

“No one ever looked out for me. No one ever said a kind thing to me. You’re the only one who ever offered to help me.” He snarled at her.

“She warned you. Did you even try yourself to be of anyone’s help?”

His eyes narrowed into hateful slits of glistening red. He lost his composure completely.

“How dare you judge me for what I did or didn’t do under his influence!”

His arms flew wide in an outburst of rage, immediately drawn close again to shield him from an invisible enemy.

“There was no way out. Once – In my first decade of slavery, I tried to save a darling boy I found too precious to bring back to him. So I ran.”

He made a pause, to brace himself for the next part.

“And when he inevitably found me, he tortured me until I begged for him to end me. After that, he threw me into a tomb for a year, all by myself. Starving, I tried to get out, scratching my fingers raw for months. More months of not moving at all, wishing for death to end my torment...” His voice broke, as he said that.

Tsisk found herself seething. Bhaal might not have cared for the other spawns, but this one he demanded be killed. He took her discomfort and tried to twist it into hate, her irritation into burning fury. She noticed his touch and steered away from it. Of course Astarion had helped. Her, at least. If that was anything to go by, he must have tried before. A wonder he had tried again. The silence in the room was a massive beast, one her words refused to overtake by fleeing her mouth, meek and small.

“How could I, of all people, judge anyone’s past?”

She looked around. No one had awakened from the ambush, or their argument. Dawn was at least an hour away still and there was no way she could go to sleep again. They might as well use the time she had left in a constructive way.

“Let’s talk about his weaknesses for a change. I have a feeling we will need



everything there is to know about him.”

It earned her a huff and a fierce stare from under knitted brows, but he sounded eager for the change of topic.

“Yes, let’s talk revenge.” He said.

In his mind, Cazador was an almost almighty, omniscient being. His fear, combined with the almost feral lust for revenge he exuded, made for a troubling mixture of intoxicating feelings for Tsisk. Concentration proved difficult and more than once she found herself vividly envisioning violence instead of listening. After much prodding and coaxing and some scrutinizing of his answers she cobbled together that Cazador had the same weakness to light as his spawns, loved to be in control of everything, to put down everyone he deemed unworthy and had an ego of the gargantuan size – as well as the cruelly explosive temperament – of a Tarrasque.

He also was smart and powerful enough to thwart the Gur at every turn for centuries and paranoid as a thief in a dragon’s lair. She would need to be on her best performance for this one. Small tricks or exploits of good will would not work against a vampire who mistrusted even the people he could control completely.

### 35. Karsus' Crown

After they had seen the devastation they had slept through, it was not difficult for Astarion to convince the rest Cazador needed to be dealt with. They felt wholly uncomfortable with the presence of a vampire-lord who could make them sleep through a fight and was about to become even more powerful.

Because it lay on their way, Gale propositioned a visit at sorcerous sundries, so he could research for books on netherese artefacts, which he believed they owned.

With dramatically rolling eyes, Astarion proclaimed:

“Only if it will make you shut up about those damn books. I can not bear to hear one more word about it.”

Halsin dreaded the place. It was too stuffy and full of theoretical ideas with no claim in reality, he argued. He offered to inform the Gur, observe Cazadors palace and fly reconnaissance in case the vampire deployed any of his human guards throughout the day instead and was gladly seen off to do so.

Sorcerous Sundries was a shop for all things magical, an impressively big, yet elegant building crowned by a dome of colourful glass, looking way too fragile to be of entirely mundane origin. The interior was dominated by a broad, spiralling staircase, leading upwards.

The wizard in question, Lorroakan, supervised the hustle and bustle of his business from the gallery above. From there, he had a good view into the quiet library-section, prowled by wizards, apprentices and collectors, quietly hunting for knowledge or the latest addition to their own libraries; the vast collection of magical knick-knacks, presented to the crowd and preserved behind glass; and a small menagerie of unusually intelligent or magically gifted creatures, the most favoured pets of all wizards who could not stand the thought of something

mundane associated with them. From there, he saw Gale making a beeline for the book-section, a small group of adventurers in tow, a detail much too unimportant for him, who only engaged with customers reeking of gold or promising influence.

The opinion of the lady tending the books reflected that of her employer:

“Yes, we do have books on netherese magic, most notably the Annals of Karsus. But as long as I am working here, no one bought them. And you won’t either.” She said with the utmost conviction.

Taken aback, Gale blurted out:

“Why not?”

She mustered him with the soul-piercing, all-exposing stare only few well-ripened women manage to master into an art of its own, took his measure with puckered lips and said, matter-of-factly:

“You’re not looking like a king or a dragon. So as long as you don’t conjure a pile of gold worth this city twice over, the vaults doors won’t open for you.”

“Madame...”

“Tolna.”

“Madame Tolna, the city is about to be destroyed by an army of Illithids, Monstrosities and other feral creatures if the elderbrain controlling them cannot be defeated. This book is of the utmost importance to the cause against it.”

The woman’s thin brows climbed higher and higher on her forehead the longer Gale spoke. By the time he had ended his little speech, all books on her counter had magically evaporated out of his reach.

“Firstly, this is a matter you should bring to lord Enver Gortash, not the very busy wizard Lorroakan.” She carefully enunciated every word spoken, working very hard on a calm and measured delivery. “Secondly, I want to encourage you to leave this establishment before I see myself forced to call the elementals for a cleansing burning. I would hate to do that, since they are naturally inclined to burn more than asked for, but rest assured, I will.”

Distraught, Gale turned around. Astarion looked at him in utter disbelief. A hushed conversation ensued, as they slowly crept back to the entrance.

“That’s it? You’re leaving?”

“What else can I do? I do not have enough gold to pay for any of the items on display, much less something as valuable as the Annals of Karsus himself!”

“I thought you were smart. It’s just a vault. Go in, get the book, vanish before they notice. Easy.”

“We don’t even know where the vault is!”

An enervated Astarion took a good long look at Gale and wordlessly went back into the book-section. Between one step and another he became the embodiment of a dignified gentleman, hair smoothened, casually worn shirt and jacket straightened out. An aloof, slightly bored air about him completed the look.

Tsisk watched, as the book-lady forgot all about her art of measuring the moment he leaned on her counter, blinding her to any impeding danger with his brightest smile, ensnaring her with his flawless appearance and charming words. Judging by her flattered smiles and hasty attempts to get her own looks in order, very charming indeed. If he told her where he resided, she might just turn up to fling her arms around his neck and never let go, Tsisk thought. With a kiss on the back of her hand, he took his goodbye and vanished behind the staircase, much to Madame Tolnas disappointment.

“The entrance to the vault is upstairs, accessible through a portal in the wizards office and safeguarded by traps accessible only through a grand-master of wizardry.” He told, loosening his garbs and tousling his hair while speaking. A proud, boyish smirk graced his face and before she knew it, Tsisk found herself smiling along. An unusual feeling, to be dragged to happiness this way. A good one.

Shadowheart had watched his performance quizzically.

“What...did you offer her, exactly, to get this kind of information?”

In mock horror, he exclaimed:

“Please! What are you thinking!”

The smirk, though, fell off his face. It got replaced with his usual haughtiness.

“Nothing, of course. Never underestimate the willingness of people to appease a wealthy, good-looking noble. A hint at a title and the offer to store a powerful, inherited staff in the great Lorroakans vaults for good money and she couldn’t part with the details fast enough.”

“I guess I could grant us invisibility to get us through the guards and into the office...” Gale mused.

“Then what are you waiting for? This had better be finished before noon or we won’t have enough time left to confront Cazador.”

Lorroakans office was a grand affair, walls lined with bookshelves, expensive exhibits scattered in between rows and rows of books, arranged to an aesthetically pleasing picture of an office that seemed otherwise unused in its flawlessness. Busts of great wizards like Elminster and Khelben Arunsun stared relentlessly down from their pedestals directly under the ceiling. Lorroakans statue joined their ranks insofar as he looked down from the same height as the greatest wizards known to the sword coast, yet stood out as a full-bodied depiction with what Tsisk was sure he believed to be benevolently outstretched arms and an obscene amount of gold-trimmings, highlighting his hubris and bad taste alike.

A plaque was installed on the block of exquisitely veined marble he was standing on, a poem-like text on it written in a script foreign to Tsisk. Staring at the plaque, Gale asked flabbergasted:

“Who, by the nine hells, would need the portal-spell for his own home engraved? In one of the common arcane languages, no less.”

He then started weaving said spell, producing a warping field of shimmering air, forming the faint mirror image of a room. Stepping through felt like leaving

the house in winter, as the chamber beyond was cold, damp and dark, until small fires lit up in lamps along the walls.

The dancing flames revealed a chequered floor, a chess game abandoned mid-play, the door guarded by black queen and rook. The door was closed when Tsisk checked on it. Gale already had begun circling the playing field, his brows furled, contemplating the game. The white bishop standing openly prone on the field made him suspicious. Restlessly, he circled the room, touching all figures at least once and walked left to right in systematic searching patterns, looking increasingly lost.

“This is too easy. There must be a catch to it. Or a trap, or...something. But I can’t find any, not even a hidden spell.”

Astarion took up a few of the pieces to take a closer look himself.

“No hidden mechanisms.” He put them back down. “Sooo...if there is an obvious solution and no problem at hand, we should take it.”

Gale picked up the black queen to attack the white bishop and check the white king. The door unlocked with a reverberating click.

The walls were scorched, a broken Golem leaning against it and a clutter of bent rusty weapons and armour heedlessly thrown aside, fit to equip a small group of adventurers. A tome of epic proportions awaited them.

Made of thin parchment, the tome held hundreds, if not thousands of pages filled with small scribbles and writing in the same foreign script the plaque was engraved with. Gale leafed through it, one by one, studying page after page until he gave up.

“These are all spells to open locks, and all contain minor errors. I suppose one of them is real, but it will take me a lifetime and a half to verify which one.”

“Let me take a look.” Tsisk said.

She closed the book, put it on its spine and let it open itself. Without looking

at them, she turned pages back and forth, testing them between her fingers. The parchment of most of the pages was a little stiff, producing more pronounced rustling noises. A number of pages close to the position the book had opened up, though, was worn soft from frequent handling and hardly made any sound at all. She examined them closer. Only a handful was lightly smudged, with faint, greasy fingerprints on the edges and minuscule scratches on the page from fingernails following the lines of text religiously.

“It’s one of these.”

It took Gale no time to find the true spell on those pages and he opened the next door to a room devoid of any flooring.

A platform floated nine feet away from the door in mid-air over an abyss without visible ground, holding several displays of assumedly powerful magical items, books and scrolls.

“Any suggestions as to how we get over? I did not anticipate the need for a flying spell, hence why I have not prepared any.”

“Yes. Step aside.”

Astarion waved the group away with an impatient hand movement. He used the resulting space to run up to the edge, then leapt clear over the abyss, landing safely on the platform and ended with a small bow to his audience.

“Great. Now find the oldest, strangest looking book you can find and touch nothing else.”

The rogue went through the collection of randomly assorted items and picked up a couple to examine, while Gale droned on.

“I don’t want to find out if he collects hellish or cursed artefacts. Both would be a pain in the behind to deal with, almost impossible to anticipate the unwanted side-effects – unless of course you want more dealings with devils and eldritch creatures. I trust you don’t, after what you came to know about your former master...Uff!”

The book Gale desired was unceremoniously plopped into his arms.

“So you do remember we are on a schedule today. Let’s leave this dank hole, I can’t wait to commence our tour of Baldurs Gate by visiting his palace, before he can throw my siblings at me again at night. Or whatever else he has at his beck and call. I dare say he must be furious beyond measure they weren’t able to deliver me.”

While he sounded worried about the delay, having thwarted his masters plans amused Astarion to no end.

Leaving the place was more difficult than going in, since Gale had exerted himself by making everyone invisible. Once more, Astarion basked in the attention of people in his role of a nobleman looking to lose money, excusing it as a distraction. Tsisk suspected he loved those little stints way more than he let on, but who was she to complain about his way of having fun when everyone benefitted off of it? Without problems they slipped out of the building, where Astarion rejoined them moments later.

“Greetings, Gale.”

The brittle voice of Elminster the not-so-brittle drew their attention to a nice, shady spot under the canopy of a greening tree, part of the extensive plaza sorcerous sundries was built at. Sitting on a bench facing the peacefully burbling fountain in the middle, he fed a swarm of pigeons, growing larger with every hand full of corn he threw from a little pouch. Gale sighed and sat himself beside his old friend.

“Greetings to you, too. Since you aren’t known for friendly visits without reason: What brings you to me, Elminster?”

“I implore you not to read the book, Gale.” More corn was used to summon pigeons.

“What book, Elminster? Be a little more accurate, this city has thousands of books. I just saw a whole private library full of them. And they were all for sale.”



The dodderly wizard shot Gale a side-eye to darken the sky and make commoners pray to their gods for forgiveness.

“You know very well which book I mean, boy. Do not repeat the folly of the man who wrote it, he payed with his death and the world with the collapse of the weave. Mystra is already wroth with you for disregarding her order. This can only anger her more.”

“She ordered my death. I will take every chance at understanding my condition I can get, so I can best it. Have a good day, Elminster, I need to help a friend.”

“Wish I was that young and hot-blooded again...Not that obstinate, though.” Elminster mumbled, then said, louder:

“Mystra wishes to see you. She will await your arrival in the stormshore tabernacle. You, my friend, would be well advised to heed her call.”

The pigeons now covered every surface around Elminster, feeding off little heaps of corn, each as big as the pouch he held in his hand. The earth beneath their feet shuddered and with it came the familiar calling of the Absolute, amassing her followers. The panicking pigeons took flight as a cloud of furiously flapping wings, taking the wizard with them, it seemed, for he was gone, only feathery fuzz hanging in the air where he stood only seconds before.

Astarion raised his hands in mock relief.

“Finally you are standing up against her. I thought you would be pining until she took you back or you died of old age. I would have bet on death, though.”

“You are exceptionally skilled at making me regret the decision to stand up at all today. I could have used a little more sleep. My new book won’t study itself, after all.”

Gale gave Astarion a hearty pat on the back that made the smaller rogue stumble, then motioned him to lead the way.



### 36. Cazadors Palace

Halsin in his owl-form descended upon them in perfect silence when they came close to Cazadors palace.

“I have found a single guard, watching a side entrance.” He reported. “The Gur will attack shortly from the front portal, binding his footmen.”

The guard he had found put up little to no resistance, instead looking very pleased to be in their hands. He leaned heavily into Halsins hold of him, his face brushing against the druids broad arms and purred at Tsisk. “How come they all follow you so sheepishly into their deaths? Do they not know how you killed so many like little lambs on the chopp-chopp-chopping-block? How you gain their trust, so they will run into your knife all on their own to spill red for you?” The mewling tone left no doubt as to who really stood before them, even before she rearranged her face.

Shadowhearts spear was trained on Orins chest in a heartbeat.

“Do it, cleric! Now that the golden child has gone insane, Bhaal bestowed his greatest gift to me. Give me a reason to use it. I beg you!”

Tsisk put her hand on the spear to turn it down. There was no time for this pointless fight. It was already past noon and no one knew how long it would take to kill a vampire.

“Go, Orin. Whatever you are now, we are five and you are one. I will come for you soon enough.”

Orin bared her perfectly white teeth in a repelling smile, arms thrown wide, promising a deadly welcome.

“Hurry, sickly sister! The wiggling maggots in Bhaal’s pits rasp your name between dry bones. They shall feed on your festering flesh, while I make a tablecloth out of your skin.”

“You know he wants me back, don’t you? He made you stronger, but he wants me, weak as I am.”

Tsisk could see Orin sway and bend and break under her words. Her voice cracked from the pain, a writhing little thing, trying to hide behind screeching.

“Yes, weak! *I* made you weak, I bested you. Come, and he will see how I do it again.”

She walked away with measured strides, daggers in hand. Someone would pay for Tsisks insolence. The dragonborn ruminated on their fate for a second, found she could do nothing about it in this moment, except wishing them a fast and easy death, then opened the entrance.

The body of the real guard was pinned to the wall, the skin of his back cut and splayed like wings. Grotesque tapestry, not at all out of place.

The Palace was richly and decadently decorated, with an abundance of paintings, ranging from portraits of sternly watching nobles, scenes picturing sensually sprawled bodies to full on carnal acts of desire in all its forms. Some even spoke to the urge with their depictions of people relishing in blood and death. It marvelled at the leather upholstery, much too fine to be cattle or pigs skin and too big a piece for goat or sheep, loved the bone-white chandeliers, carved with and from delicate hands and took a deep breath to catch the underlying scent of decay, buried underneath the heavy, sweet smell of enormous bouquets of white Lilies. The windows were darkened by velvet curtains, so as not to let any sunlight touch the interior. As if to make up for its missing glow, everything was trimmed with golden embellishments, gleaming coldly in the candlelit twilight. Before long, the alarm was sounded, and servants became easier to avoid. The Gurs attack proved helpful, as everyone they came across just took one look at Astarion and instead of questioning anything, hurried to help avert the attack instead.

Tsisk could see how uncomfortable Astarion was by returning here. She herself felt out of place, far from the soothing song of nature, in the territory of another predator.

And yet, he quipped:

“Ahh, Home, sweet Home. How I have not missed this. Let me give you a tour around while we go into Cazadors lair.”

Tsisk could feel the fear and nervousness radiating off him. The constant talking helped deviate his thoughts from the confrontation at hand, so she just kept quiet through all of it. Halsin, Gale and Shadowheart followed them, disconcerted by Astarions cheerful demeanour.

On their way to Cazadors chambers, they came across the main hall, “Where he would host his lavish balls to influence rich people or just people with useful information and have us seduce anyone who showed interest to gain power over them.” The door to Cazadors private chambers was closed, so they turned around again. Astarion was sure he knew where to find a key.

Close by, down the hallway, the even more excessively decorated guest rooms followed. Filled with every amenity desirable, from normal looking to torture-chamber themed. More play area than sleeping accommodation, massive beds dominated all rooms.

“Entertaining the guests was our job in this whole charade. And, of course, getting whatever Cazador wanted from them. Be it information, blood, or a prized possession.”

The servants quarters, deeper still into the palace, persisted of two rooms without doors, exactly opposite each other. Six beds with threadbare linens were crammed into a little room, “Here we spent our days, fearing the setting sun for having us do another nights work at Cazadors behest. Though he wasn’t the only one to bully us. Sometimes, the other spawns liked to partake in his cruel jokes for a moment of his appreciation. Of course, they would be next in line, because no one was allowed to feel safe with him.” His voice trailed off a bit, here. He carefully put it back on track and continued, although his quick-paced steps got progressively slower now.

“But, his favourite spawn du jour would get *this* room all for themselves. So

we could see what good behaviour would reward us with. Mostly it was Leons.”

He motioned to the doorway right on the other side of the Hallway, where a twin to the first room existed. Only this one held a single bed with a canopy, covered in silken sheets, a wardrobe with a choice of finely crafted clothes and a bath sporting a warm water faucet. With a sigh, he added:

“I never got to sleep in that bed.”

Astarion clapped his hands together.

“That concludes our little tour of the lovely upper palace. Now let’s enter the dungeons, shall we?”

He bounded down a flight of stairs to belowground. The dark and rich tapestries of the upper floors became cold, rough stone and the chilly air bore the smells of mould and must.

They crossed a wine cellar, filled with the most expensive bottles from places all over the known world: Amn, Calimshan, Evereska and many more, waiting to be drunk dry by guests desiring an illusory night of joy, a theatre-play, performed just for them, directed by Cazador.

At the far end, a metal door awaited them. Astarion hesitated to open it, standing with his hand outstretched, staring into the distance beyond the door, until Tsisk stepped to his side and nodded to him. He straightened up and threw the door open.

“Behold the kennel, playground of Godey. Always his masters eager executor.”

Behind it lay a simple room, barren of furniture. The rotting wood of stacked up coffins lined the walls, overgrown with spongy fungi. The air was stuffy and old, trapped between stone walls and low ceiling. Astarion entered the empty room.

“Watch out!” Warned Shadowheart, as a skeleton stepped out from behind a pillar, clad in heavy armour about as well maintained as everything else in this chamber. It looked ready to attack, until it recognized the spawn, and its stance instantly changed to a more relaxed slouch, full of confidence to have gained

back a victim, not an enemy.

“So the little boy has returned. The master awaits you. He will not be happy with you. And I will hear your sweet, sweet screams again. Yours always were the best.”

Stepping in, Tsisk noticed an alcove in the corner of the room that wasn't visible from the door. Shackles were mounted to the wall, the stones in its vicinity scratched deeply by hands trying to wrest themselves free from the merciless iron grasp. She shuddered to think of how desperately bare hands must have tried to escape to leave grooves in granite stones.

“I am not here to do the masters bidding, Godey. This time, he holds no power over me.” Astarions eyes lit up, as he realized what he was able to do now upon speaking those words. “This time, *you* will give me the keys to his rooms or me and my friends will take them from your rattling bones after dismantling you.”

“Ha! Do you think you can hurt Godey? You have been away for too long, little boy. Did you miss me, like I missed you? The others won't visit me as often as you do. You know how to rile up the master. And I love that in you.”

Astarion suddenly and with an outcry of rage threw all his weight against Godey to drive him back and forced him into the alcove. Tsisk followed, leaving Godey no way out. Vexed by the burning light of Lathanders Blood drawn on him, he howled in anguish, not even noticing Astarion putting him into the cuffs and cutting his keys from his belt.

“How can you walk in that light? The master will have you flayed! I will flay you!” Godey howled.

Astarion spat on the ground in front of him and wanted to leave the room, but Tsisk held him back. She could feel the hole Godey represented in the webbings of nature. A hole that could be mended.

“Halsin? Would you undo this one?”

“Yes. But you will help me. You have learned to direct the forces of life

yesterday. It's time to use that knowledge.”

Halsin instructed her about the use of the energy of life to unravel necromancy, while Godey cursed them out. He spit out his words in such a way, Tsisk had to be happy about him being just a skeleton. She would have been soaked with spittle by now were he a living being. It made it much easier to ignore his fit and concentrate on the elvish tune Halsin sang for her. It followed the awakening of a bear in spring, shaking off winters fatigue and rejoicing in the return of life.

She let herself be drawn in by the melody, and soon found the dead of winter, the spell to discourage life from taking what should be rightfully returned to the circle. Life already lurked at the edge, so she lent it a little bit of her warmth to overcome the coldness. It did not need more encouragement. Too long it had waited for this very moment. It followed the path she created, and broadened it until the cold shied away and left the terrain to growth once more. Godeys fungus-eaten bones rattled to the ground and burst into dust and splinters. They could rot in peace now.

“That was too easy on him, but I will take it.” Astarion said wistfully.



### 37. Into the dungeons

With the key to Cazadors chambers they returned. It opened the door to an office filled with expensive, but overall unremarkable furniture, heels clicking on polished tiles. Most notable, though, was the absence of any door beside the one they had come through and that of Cazador himself.

“I can see no vampire here. Are you sure you showed us the entire house?” Gale asked while looking around.

“Actually, he never did allow me to go further. Or even come in uninvited. I brought his victims to him into this room, then never saw them again. There *must* be a door somewhere.”

Together, they started looking: Gale trying to find a spell or illusion, then taking books from the shelves, one by one, to have a peak inside. Shadowheart went around, touching and moving random objects. Astarion looked for hollow walls with growing impatience, getting more aggressive by the minute until he tore a lamp fixture from the wall in an effort to find a hidden lever, startling the others. Frustrated, he threw it to the side and sat down, brooding.

Tsisk took a look at the personal things Cazador had left on his desk. A bottle of coagulated blood, another one with an expensive vintage wine, looking deceptively like the other. One for Cazador, one for his guests. A newspaper, filled with eye-catching headlines like “Refugee Crisis: Murders in Baldurs Gate!”, “Steelwatch to the rescue” and “Tonight: Gortashs coronation in Wymrest Keep”. It was barely touched, judging by its pristine, off-the-press look.

Everything in this room looked pristine, perfect and untouched, now that she noticed it. No personal items or hints that Cazador spent all his personal time in his office.

“How often and how long was he in here, Astarion?”

“He was a bit of a recluse, actually. If he had no business torturing us or attending a ball, he was scheming his powerplays in here.”

Astarion was right, this looked like a ruse, a facade for people to see if he needed it. And if he barely used this room at all, he must have had a place that he actually considered his own, were he went far more often.

“Can Scratch sniff out where his smell is the freshest?” She asked.

Halsin squatted down to have a word with the dog, then led him to the chair, where Cazador was seated more often than not, following Astarions descriptions. Scratch sniffed it, circled the room, his nose close to the ground and zig-zagged his way around until he came across a massive engraved stone-slab, set into the floor. At the point where the stone-slab met the tiled floor, he scratched the ground. The stone was set so expertly, no considerable groove could be seen. Astarion licked his finger to hold it over the seam.

“A cold draft. There is something under this stone.” He patted the dog, took his head between his hands and told him to his face “You’re such a good boy. That’s a treat for you tonight.”

“Mmhh...I do recognize that language engraved on the stone.” Gale went over to one of the book shelves. “I flipped through a book with signs such as these here. Where was it again?” He went through a number of books looking remarkably similar to each other until he found the one he searched for.

“That would be the one – Kozakuran, a long dead language. Smart choice, I barely heard of that one, didn’t even know there were dictionaries like this around.”

He opened the book to compare the signs to those on the stone.

“Now give me a little space and I will translate the engravings in no time.” Five Minutes later, Gale had found out that the engravings were a spell to set the stone in motion. When he spoke it, the stone-slab sank smoothly down into a room beneath the palace. Cold, pungent air wafted up to them and enwrapped them in the fetid smells of must, decay and despair.

“An elevator. I never knew there was something down there.” Astarion wondered.

The room beneath was set up much more intimately, and, as Tsisk had guessed, personally. Where the furniture above was grand, imposing and rich, the setup below was old, withered and used. No one had cleaned here for centuries and so some of the lesser used items had accumulated a thick, brown coat of fine dust. A skull with a scroll in its vampire-fanged mouth overlooked the room from a place of honour, bedded on a moth-eaten cushion. It was free of dust, the velvety material threadbare. As Tsisk stared at it, wondering about which weapon would put these kinds of serrations on its otherwise smooth surface, its eyes began to glow in a faint red, drawing her in, recognizing her predatory nature. And approving.

She was Vellioth, Vampire Lord of Baldurs Gate and she gave her gift to Cazador. An unruly man, but with promising talents at manipulating people, who could easily sway his prey to do his bidding. A welcome and valuable addition to Vellioths clutch of spawn if he wanted to gain more influence. Of course, Cazador had to learn his place. And so he taught him the rules of vampiric existence.

The first rule to be established was: Always dominate. There shall be none equal to you. To ensure the subservience of the spawn, punishment was necessary. To ensure Cazadors subservience, he made him watch the draining and subsequent death of his friend, whom he had turned to for help.

Another lesson had to be taught to him to show him the meaning of the second rule. Power lies in solitude. Sharing with others creates weakness. When Cazador strived for more power, for Vellioths place even, he made him suffer through eleven years of impalement, because he failed. To be weak meant to die. Or at least wishing for death, since spawn were bound to their masters and their power in eternity or until they could seize the mantle for themselves. There was no salvation for them, no respite, no mercy.

Which was a wonderful base to build the third lesson upon. Do not haste your actions. A near-immortal got nothing but time to scheme, plan and act. Careful consideration of this would ensure others paid the price for it.

And with his lessons learned, Cazador was ready to kill him in the Rite of Perfect Slaughter. What a day to die. They both had laughed. One in anticipation, one in desperation. Cazador then had cut off Vellioths head and boiled the meat from it to mock his former master, placing him here, guarding the scroll in eternity.

No place of honour, then. But a way to triumph over his tormentor, making him look on his scholars successes, outshining his own.

Tsisk found herself back in her body, staring into the skulls eye sockets while the red glow grew fainter and flickered out. She could feel Vellioths glee and his thirst for bloody vengeance, his eagerness to see Cazador fail in the same way he did. She had to shake that feeling off of her physically and therefore did not notice the skulls mouth opening, scroll coming loose, tumbling down and falling right into Astarions outstretched hand.

He rolled it open and read it, eyes going wide.

“The Rite of Profane Ascension! With this I can take Cazadors place and ascend in his stead.” His voice was full of hope, relief – and lust for power.

The thought of him ascending terrified Tsisk. What she had learned about Cazadors life before becoming a vampire mirrored Astarions situation too much for her tastes.

“You mean you want to take his place and become his successor in everything but name?”

“I will never be like him!” His rage swept over her, tugged at her to draw her into its current. “I will be the strongest vampire in all of Baldurs Gate, maybe even in the world. And no one will be able to stop me.”

She regarded him coldly, fighting back her own boiling hot rage, ready to scald him.

“Because power brought us here?”

“You don’t understand. I will never have to fear anyone any more.” Astarion said, almost pleading. As if he needed her approval. She refused to give anything of that sort, briskly turned around and started walking deeper into the underground complex.

“You are right. I don’t understand how you would be willing to exchange one hunger for the next.”

The place underneath the palace was huge. It consisted of a whole system of caverns, hallways and rooms, all man-made with smooth, angled walls. One of the caverns they found was deeper than their lights would reach, more doorways leading into it as far down as they could see, but no way to reach any of them. Inset into all walls was some type of glowing stone, a decorative band leading them deeper, carved with foreign symbols. Gale and Shadowheart discussed its origins, but could not agree on any historical or religious group to build in such a manner. As perforated as the rock proved to be, they settled on a really strange mining operation of unknown origins.

For the most part, the air smelled clean, if a bit stale. So when the stench of rotting flesh hit her nose, she motioned everyone to be more cautious. The corridor they walked down held dozens of steel barred rooms. It’s floor wasn’t smooth stone like all the others they had walked before, but gravel and dust.

Not gravel, Tsisk had to correct herself. Thousands and thousands of little rodent bones, scattered here and left to be trodden into a fine powder. Frantic scuttling all along the corridor was caused by their crunching footsteps.

A second wave of scuttling came about when they stepped in front of the bars. Arms greedily reached for them, hungry, haggard faces pressed to the steel in pursuit of hot blood, more pale faces and hollow eyes watching their passing from deep within the shadows of the rooms.

“They’re all dead.” Halsin remarked. “And they look worse than most corpses

I've seen."

"I know an awful lot of these faces." Astarion stepped closer to have a look at them. "My...conquests, all those people I seduced and lured to him to feed on...he hid all of this from me – and the others. He must have made them all spawns. They can not die, really, just suffer here." A hint of remorse ran with the horror in his voice.

Another face appeared between the bars, just a short way down from where they stood. It spoke, calmly, softly and with a voice unused to think aloud, raspy and weak and stumbling over its words as if it just found them laying in the dust, long forgotten tools to an activity it barely remembered.

"You...I know you. My name – lyric on your lips."

Curious, Astarion squinted at this face shrouded in shadows and distorted by time and destitution.

"Sebastian?"

"You...seduced me." Sebastian had found more words in the dust of his memory. They were pure accusation. Astarion deflated almost imperceptibly.

"Yes, you were one of my first. And I...was yours."

"How long ago?"

"One hundred and seventy years, give or take."

At first, the number evoked no reaction at all, then realization dawned slowly.

"They're all dead. Family. Friends. All. Dead." A wail of pure anguish wrested itself from Sebastian's throat, he threw himself forward and weakly grasped for Astarion.

"Give it back! My life..."

As his head pressed between the bars, a meticulously cut and badly healed scar on his once handsome face was revealed by the flickering light of their torch. It looked just the same as Astarion's, though it depicted only a fraction of his. A glance at the other faces verified: they all bore similar scars.

"Cazador marked you as his sacrifice. All the seven thousand souls, bound

through me and the other spawns. But we have come to kill him.”

The outburst had exhausted Sebastian and he had sunken to the ground, unresponsive. If anything, his face showed doubt, not hope. Astarion tore his gaze from his body and walked on, further down the corridor, past dozens of similarly filled rooms, away from the blame it represented.

The last filled room cursed at Astarion in high pitched voices not yet silenced by decades of hunger and neglect. They had found the children of the Gur. One girl, probably the oldest of the bunch, had the rest stand back and loudly challenged the spawn.

“I’ll kill you, ‘napper! My parents taught me how! If we get out, I’ll hunt you and I’ll kill you!”

“Oh no...” Astarion’s steps sped up.

“Eugh!” His flight stopped abruptly, as Shadowheart snatched him at the back of his suit.

“You brought the children to him?!” Shadowheart lashed out.

“Cazadors orders! It’s not as if I had a choice. Every spawn has to obey its master. And if they for some reason find the strength to go against it, there’s always torture to be considered...” He mumbled meekly. “I kinda...might have forgotten I had to capture them for him. Didn’t feel anything when I brought them to him... It’s a bit hazy, that night.”

His eyes wandered through the room, desperate to find something to hold onto that wasn’t Shadowheart or the children. He found Tsisk.

“What blessing if I could just...forget it all.”

Tsisk was not at all sure about this. Too quickly she had discarded her memories as harmful and unimportant, to avoid the pain and excitement they carried with them, yet they had not found any more hints at a temple of Bhaal and people she knew nothing about kept recognizing her. Her decision had doomed her to passiveness and ignorance when she needed to fight.

Shadowheart regarded Astarion through slitted eyes, then addressed the children with a soft voice Tsisk had only ever heard her use with Scratch, if at all.

“Well, we are going to kill Cazador. Which means you will be free. And your parents are probably fighting their way through his palace right now to get to you.”

“My parents? I miss them. But we’re sooo hungry...We’d probably hurt them and our families.”

“Do me a favour: look at that sorry ass over there. Real good.”

“Yeeeah...what’s with him?”

The deep scowls of a dozen children and a sulking cleric condemned Astarion to wither before their eyes, to which he at least did them the favour of nervously rocking from one foot to the other, if with his chin turned up.

“He learned to control the hunger. And he’s not got that much control at all, let me tell you. I’m sure you will do better than him.”

“Huh. I guess we can try. You’d have to take Cazadors staff. It controls everything down here.” Said the girl without ever turning her scowl away from Astarion.

The corridor opened into a cavern of enormous proportions. Smells of rot and decay got overlaid by the subtler but nevertheless much stronger scent of blood, a testament to the amount Cazador had spilled onto the floor. Discarded bodies, flung aside like unloved dolls, marked the perimeter of a ritual circle etched into the stone, its grooves filled with the viscous liquid.

The six other spawns kneeled in it, evenly spaced except for one opening, just big enough for yet another spawn, their naked bodies locked in place, the skin of their necks punctured, a steady stream of blood trickling down their chests to join the circle. Only the eyes spoke of the panic they lived through in this very moment. Some locked onto the newly arrived group, some closed in resignation, some trained at Cazador in a silent pledge for mercy he would never give. More



figures lingered in the background, barely visible as lumps in the darkness. Cazador himself stood at the centre beside a massive stone sarcophagus, vexingly, spotlessly clean in the midst of this mess, his posture and motions just a touch too perfect to not be rehearsed. He was bigger than Astarion, but smaller than Tsisk had expected. A pretentious staff of deep black jutted out over him, twisted at the top into the hideous form of a lesser devil, awash with a deep orange glow.

“Ahh, the prodigal son has returned. Why don’t you spare us the whining and take your place amidst your family. Be useful, for once.”

“I will take my place in this ritual. And it will be yours!”

Tsisk readied her weapon and her harper issued shield. Beside her, Shadowheart did the same.

“Oh little boy, do you think you can usurp me? Do you think you can ascend in my stead? You will never be free, if that is what you think. Come over here.”

Astarion marched over in a semi-circle, until he could see both Cazador and the others.

“You should not have brought your conquests, boy. Now they will die, too. I thought you had learned yo...”

Cazadors speech got interrupted by a lightning fast sucker punch Astarion threw at him and almost succeeded to land. It had surprised Cazador, but that was not enough. The staffs glow reflected and thrown back through his eyes – now smouldering in hellish orange, too – Astarion had ceased all movement, standing still as a statue. Tsisk began to run, but it was too late. With a flick of his hand, Cazador sent the lumps out of the shadows to meet them in fight. They revealed themselves to be a motley crew of undead and controlled creatures: shambling zombies, a pack of wolves and more skeletons like Godey.

“Didst you think I had only one method of control, boy?” He mocked Astarion, while he puppeteered him to the open place in the rituals pattern.

Tsisk had not seen this coming. Luckily, one of them was well versed in matters

of magic. It only meant the rest had to fight twice as well when he was occupied.

“Gale! The ritual!” She screamed and parried the first zombies lunge. She need not have worried, as he already hurried over on his own.

Cazador had Astarion kneel down, wrenched jacket and shirt from him and tore into his neck greedily with his fangs, opening the skin with abandon. The circle pulsed to a beat every living creature knew and Cazador craved to regain. It drank the power provided with the spawns blood, every pulse drawing on seven thousand souls, a countdown to their demise.

A loud roar announced Halsin had joined the fight, challenging the pack of wolves. Gale used the resulting opening in the lines to slip through.

Tsisk followed him. If anything happened to him, the spawns were doomed.

Cazador just stood and waited. He could afford to do so. He awaited the wizard because he deemed him the only real threat in this room.

It was time to teach him otherwise. Tsisk flared Lathanders Blood to blinding white light shortly before they reached the vampire lord. Her own eyes teared up in response, momentarily blinded, but a shrill shriek told her everything she wanted to know. Cazador got burned and it hurt. Badly. When she could see again, red mist clouded the area. It stretched thin in an effort to enwrap Gale, branding against the light of her mace, unable to touch him. She chased the mist off until it reformed further away from her in the shadow of the sarcophagus. A quick look told her Shadowheart and Halsin fought back to back against Cazadors minions. Shadowheart grimacing with pain, her hands clawed up to not drop her shield and spear, Halsin swarmed by wolves, his dark fur glistening wet in places.

Cazador saw it, too, and smirked. He would get what he wanted if he just stayed where he was.

“I see why you need to Ascend. You are pathetic.” She taunted him.

His eyes narrowed to slits, but he did not move.

“I expected more of a vampire. But you are hardly more capable than your spawn.”

“The boy made you believe he was capable of anything?” He laughed. Through it, Tsisk heard the quiet patter of paws on solid stone and saw Cazadors eyes widen with greedy glee before a wolf tackled her from behind. She let Lathanders Blood slip out of her hands and clang to the ground, extinguished. That same moment, her neck was clasped in the iron grip of Cazadors hand. He was unable to let go of this conceited humiliation. His thumb found the puckered twin-scars of Astarions bites.

“I see. You bear his marks. Did he promise you eternity? Love? The boy cannot give you any of that. He is a coward, weak and sheepish. He does only know the agony of being too weak to achieve anything by himself.” His thumb smudged over the scars as if he could wipe them away. The gesture made Tsisk angry. She was cattle to him, branded for ownership. Thrashing wildly, she tried to come free. His grip around her throat did not loosen a bit, instead tightening until stars danced through the cave and the stone-lights began to darken.

“Fighting still? Your friends die soon. Give up and I might spare you.”

She could see Gales robed silhouette hurry to get to Shadowheart and Halsin through her diminishing focus. The moment she had fought for had come. Cazador could not be allowed to get distracted now. Fighting every instinct she had, she bared her throat to him, making him believe he had subdued her.

“I thought I would miss his antics, but you will be a wonderful replacement.” He rejoiced before he bit down on her neck. The bite immediately set her nerves on fire, ice cold pain surging up and down her body until she believed in the mercy of death again. Darkness came to swallow her and through it, a comet drew his blazing trail to smash into Cazadors head. With a last pang of pain she was set free, laying on the ground, coughing and retching despite her sore throat. Above her stood Astarion, watching the cloud of

red mist aimlessly wander about. He had dropped Lathanders Blood and wrung his burnt, red hands. Slowly, she heaved her body upright.

At Halsins and Shadowhearts feet, bodies were piled up. Her friends looked exactly how Tsisk felt herself, which was to mean tired, dishevelled and overall like shit. But very much alive.

Astarion jumped after the red mist as it disappeared in the coffin at the centre of the ritual-circle. Frustrated, he heaved it open.

“No, no. No healing sleep for you!”

He yanked Cazador out and threw him to the ground, where his master awakened dazed. His movements were sluggish, his eyes darting around.

“You worm! I will stake you!”

Through clenched teeth, Astarion replied:

“You are the one crawling in the dirt before me! I will take the ritual from you, I will ascend to become the most powerful vampire in the world! And then I will never have to fear you – or anyone – ever again.”

His voice nearly broke with the last few words, when his anger fizzled out and fear took him over once more. Cazador sat up straight, seeing his chance to pull on Astarions strings and mocked him, slyly smiling.

“And how exactly will you do that? The thousand spawns are bound to you and you alone by your markings. Complete the ritual and you will die with them. As always, you have not thought it through, boy. You can never become like me! You need me. Without me you are nothing!”

Astarion watched his master from above, standing still and clenching his hand around the hilt of his dagger until every muscle and sinew in his arm became visible from the strain. Finally, he lifted his head, looking forlornly over to his friends and pleaded to them:

“I need you to help me. I can’t do this alone.”

“What do you need?” Tsisk asked.

“I need you to open your mind and be my eyes to look at my back while I

carve the infernal runes in his flesh.” She was taken aback by his demand. She was not sure if she could restrain herself through such a procedure.

“You promised me: Everything!”

“I already helped you defeat Cazador. That was what you asked.”

“That doesn’t help. He needs to die.” His fist squashed an imaginary bug. “He needs to die and I must ascend so I will *never* have to fear anyone like him, ever again.”

She wished she could go back on her promise right now, but Astarion was so agitated, she feared he would leave her to herself after. Revenge was everything he had wished for and she would lose either way.

Everything, she had told him.

“Are you really sure you want to do this?” Gale interjected. “Seven thousand spawn, sacrificed to uplift a single person? This is madness, you’re mad!”

He agitatedly gestured to drive his point home, but Astarion wasn’t in the mind to take any advice. He was fixated on Cazador – who followed the conversation bewildered.

“You can’t let him kill the children.” Shadowheart pleaded with Tsisk. “You have to -” She stopped, looked at Tsisk’s pained expression, then touched Gale lightly on the shoulder and turned him around with a soft push.

“Come. Whatever follows next, will happen with or without us. And I don’t want to see nor hear what he does to him, however justifiable it may be.”

Reluctantly, Gale followed Shadowheart, shooting searing looks at both Tsisk and Astarion. Bear Halsin looked torn, as much as a bear could look like it, but ultimately decided to pad along after her.

When they were gone, Tsisk opened her mind to Astarion, showing him the scars on his back through her eyes. Immediately, he began carving them in his master’s back, working furiously. The tortured screams of Cazador drew out the

urge, demanding she partake in this. Just looking on did not satisfy its cravings. It was pure agony. She wanted to pace, but forced herself to stay still. She could feel Astarions own hunger and lust for power tear at her resolve. If he felt that connection just the same, her own bloodlust would add to that to produce a vortex of madness, drawing him and her under, she feared.

Cazador cursed in-between screams, laughed madly, and lastly begged and pleaded, but it only fuelled Astarions rage. Every jerk by his former master caused him to pause, then cut deeper than before, carefully tracing the lines Tsisk saw.

A vampire only served his own lust for power, his hunger, his need to control, Vellioth had shown her that. Better to kill him now than when he succeeded. She could see the merit in this reasoning and it took everything of her not to follow it. By now, her face felt hot from the strain she put on herself. Fear clutched at her heart and made it pound painfully against her ribs. To distract herself and in an effort to escape the inevitable, she fled to cherished moments to bring her comfort: Secrets kept between strangers, two telltale squirrels for the hungry, much needed company during a violent night.

The carving neared its end, only few runes were missing. Cazador had slumped to the ground in a vain effort to escape Astarions iron grip and his screams had died down to a mere whimper. Astarion himself had slowed, his strokes less sincere. He stopped in the middle of carving his next rune and huffed.

“Your thoughts are...rather distracting.”

Tsisk stared unwaveringly at the scars on his back. Her mind was a jumble of incoherent thoughts. She felt numb. To pain, to fear, even to her urge, and so she just stood and stared.

Astarion spoke to her. Before Tsisk could process what he had said, he lifted the dagger again, causing her to jolt forward, terrified.

And with a guttural scream, he hoisted up Cazador so he could look into his eyes and stabbed him over and over again until they finally glazed over.

Only now did what he said to her trickle through her fogged mind, slow like tar:

“You are right. I can not become him.”

Done, Astarion dropped to his knees and cried out in grief and relieve alike. This time, she did not fight the immense satisfaction she felt when seeing Cazador die, naked, cold and curled up like a worm on the stone floor. Tsisk closed her eyes and let relief calm the trembling of her limbs. She felt like a newborn fawn, staggering to do her first, tenuous steps. When she opened her eyes again, Astarion stood before her, sprayed with Cazadors blood.

“You would have let me do this. You even helped me, despite you hating every second of it. Why? Why would you subject yourself to that...for me?”

“I...promised.”

He went from incredulous to sad.

“I could feel how it nearly took you over.” A sly grin formed on his face and he told her confidently “At this rate I just have to believe you can take on a god and win.”

Taking up Cazadors staff, he asked her.

“And what do we do with this? They will be hungry, ravenous. They could cause thousands of deaths, ten thousands, even.”

Tsisk paused to think. Astarion meanwhile studied the intricacies of the staff, waiting for her answer. On one hand, it would condemn an immeasurable number of innocent people to death to save vampire spawns who already had died long ago. On the other hand, the seven thousand spawns were innocents in this, too. Unlike her, who already had killed hundreds on her own. If she deserved to live, so did they.

“I don’t want to judge them before they even did anything wrong.”

“Commendable. Nevertheless will they need to be reigned in for quite a while. I will have to follow the other spawns to help control them.”

There was a problem she could easily answer.

“I will go with you to help keep them under control and find a place for them to live, given we survive until then.”

Maybe he did not realize how highly unlikely that was or he had just needed an excuse to do what he already wanted, but with a smile, Astarion broke the staff in half, freeing the prisoners and his spawn-siblings from its influence.



### 38. Aftermath

The six other spawns gathered around Cazadors corpse. All of them looked tense, not yet fully convinced of their new freedom, until a foot shoved Cazadors body unceremoniously into the pools of blood and no punishment followed. One after the other, their faces relaxed.

“You did it, you killed him. But what are we doing now, where will we be going?” An elven woman asked, looking to Astarion for guidance.

“Take the others, Dal, as much as will follow you and go into the Underdark. When everything is sorted, we will come, too.”

“We? Do you intent to bring this one with you? I hope you don’t like them too much, it will be bled dry the moment you look away.”

“I recommend anyone not to try that, it tends to hurt quite a lot...”  
The female spawn met Tsisks gaze, mustered her, and then said:

“Yes, I saw that. Very smart of you to bring a distraction. I didn’t expect that from you.”

He wanted to retort something, but Tsisk butted in before he had his chance to speak.

“Very smart, indeed. I would do it again.”

Their view of Astarion seemed to mirror that of Cazador. Better it changed soon, if he wanted to lead them. Additionally, she preferred them to underestimate her. It would add to the shock when they eventually found out. And shock would drive home any point she needed to make then.

“Where do you always find such devoted contributors?”

“Pure charm and good looks, Dalyria. I thought you knew me.”

His answer satisfied her curiosity, and the spawns filed out of the room, slumped from exhaustion, brimming with hope. Tsisk and Astarion followed them to the dungeons, where they were awaited already.

“I must admit, I never thought you’d go through with it, spawn. Killing your master and not taking up his power. We might need to write down it was even a possibility for your kind.”

The leader of the Gur stood amidst the ravenous spawns, reaching for her and her clans-people in a desperate attempt to end their decades lasting hunger.

“You should get away from those bars. I just deactivated the magical safeguards.”

That revelation made her draw her weapon and look around to assess the situation anew.

“You plan on setting them free?”

“Well, yes. And bring them to the Underdark, where they cannot harm you or anyone else.”

“You can’t control them all! They will kill people all the way to the Underdark!”

“So you’re saying I should kill your children?”

“They’re here?”

“Down at the end...”

The Gur squeezed by the group of naked and blood-dripping spawns as if they were contagious, then hurried through the corridor to the last cell and stopped horrified.

“They’re spawns!”

The girl sat on the floor, doubled over and clawing at her stomach, the others not in any better condition.

“I’m hungry. I want to go home, please.”

“You need to decide what you want, I guess. There’s a lot of blood down in the cave and we will wait until you are gone before we free the rest. Better hurry, before they become impossible to contain.”

They watched, as the Gur argued with one another, then decided to feed the children before they threw them ropes to tie up themselves. The ferocity with

which the children gorged themselves on the blood visibly sickened several of the Gur, who just had fought a bloody battle through a palace full of fanatic guards to get there. They would have to get used to the sight, Tsisk thought. When they were gone, Astarion exchanged some details with his siblings, before he beckoned Tsisk to follow him.

“Let’s go, too. This place is full of Blood, Death and Hunger. It is intoxicating. They would kill you if you stayed. And I...want to take you someplace else.”

“This is where I awoke after Cazador had turned me, after the Gur-incident. Six foot down in the ground, clawing my way up. Where he waited for me, while I was retching up dirt and congealed blood. I never once returned here since then.”

They were standing in front of an old and withered tombstone on Baldurs Gates oldest graveyard. The engraving on it was barely readable after 200 years: Astarion Ancúnin, 1229-1268 DR.

“I do not remember much of the man that was buried here. There is almost nothing left of him, maimed and twisted, unrecognizable.”

The grave looked lonely and unkempt to her, forsaken. No one had cared to maintain it. For once, she wanted to create, not destroy. The song in her head joined the steady rhythm of her heart, a questing melody like a murmuring stream. Tsisk stretched her senses and found seedlings, roots and bulbs, lying dormant in the ground. She coaxed them awake with a smidgen of power, a promise of light, prompting them to grow and break free of the earth in their quest for light and air, as Astarion had once, 200 years ago.

Tsisk felt most of them would break their buds to flower in the next few days, creating a small, but colourful patch for all to wonder about. One of the species was night-blooming and only needed a small nudge to break open. All across the grave, small, white, star-shaped flowers bloomed and released a

faint, but sweet scent of vanilla into the night's air around them.

"You're getting better at it. At this rate we will be able to bound across a field of flowers to get to the brain. It shall be a sight to behold."

"Has anyone ever told you you're no good at compliments, either?"

He breathed in sharply.

"How dare you say that! I would praise your beauty to all the bachelors in Baldurs Gate if I would not need to warn them of you in the same breath, darling."

Tsisk chuckled and watched a small, iridescent beetle land on a flower to get drunk on sugary nectar. A sliver of peace hung in the air and she enjoyed it wholeheartedly.

"Thank you." Astarion spoke solemnly into the night. "For being my mirror. I would have lost myself in that ritual. The hunger was overwhelming me and the power was more than just a little tempting. But now and here I can see how it would have changed me – and I am glad it didn't."

"Me too."

Astarion regarded Tsisk for a moment, then said:

"Though it does sting that you even thought of killing me."

"Me, too."

She was not prepared for him to take her hand. The last hours had exhausted, overwhelmed and brought her to the edge of what she could take, physically and mentally.

And it was his fault, it whispered through her head. How much of a friend could he actually be? She should teach him a lesson for subjecting her to all of that.

She used his hand to control his body, swiped his legs out from under him with her own, and used her knees to trap him, face up, so she could see the fear in his eyes. He didn't disappoint, his eyes were widened in shock. He tried to wind his way out of her grip.

Cazador was right. He was weak. He could not help her, he couldn't even help himself. She was just as vulnerable with him as she was alone.

He pleaded her to stop.

How could someone like that ever be of help against a foe like the netherbrain? All he could do was talk. He would die. It was inevitable. She at least would be merciful and give him a quick death. Afterwards she would carve up his body to sate the urge, maybe even more than that. The night was long, and she had withheld joys like these from herself for such a long time, she would savour every last bit of him.

Her imagination alone provided her with enough imagery to loose herself in, and Tsisk chased down these thoughts, revelled in them, because they meant it had not happened yet. In her daydreams, he twisted and writhed under her in the blood draining from cuts all over his impossibly white skin, trying to get free. And then, he was gone from her grip. In an instant, her dreams shattered. She felt the cool blades of grass press against her cheek, smelled the rich, musty scent of earth close to her face and steel on her neck.

"I'm sorry." She said, giving up all resistance.

"What was that?"

"He found a way in. I lost control."

Slowly, he eased his weight from her back. She stayed where she was. The throes of her imaginary bloodbath had not completely subsided and she feared she would take another chance.

She could hear Astarions light steps fade away into the night. When she could hear him no longer, she rolled over. Her weight crushed the delicate flowers, releasing the penetratingly sweet scent of vanilla in their demise.

The branches above her blurred before her eyes – a tangle, darkening the sparse light of the moon.

The day had come she could not trust herself any longer. Bhaals temple was nowhere to be found. It was time to arrange for her own disappearance.

“A wonderful night for a moonshine walk.

I think it’s high time we two should talk.”

She had not heard him approach. Of course he would come when times got desperate.

“I don’t think so. There is nothing I would give to you.”

He casually sat on a tombstone, legs crossed, bent forward in anticipation, his head resting delicately on the fingers of his left hand, staring down at her.

“That is very unfortunate, where you have so much to give.

Let me give you this pause to decide which life to live.”

He purred.

Raphael snapped his fingers and suddenly her thoughts went blessedly quiet. No whispering Absolute, no pressing urge, just...silence.

“You have forsaken everyone's power.

Your friends weak because you’re a coward.

And their worst malady.

The irony! The tragedy...

Sign over the crown to me,

and you shall be set free.”

“Do you think I would be that stupid? Give you what made the brain so powerful in the first place?”

He sighed theatrically.

“I really hoped we could strike a deal. But if you insist on being stubborn about it...”

He snapped a second time and everything came rushing back. Now she had been alone in her head, it seemed louder than before, unrelenting noise demanding insanity. Raphaels voice sounded harder, harsher, now. Very businesslike, just as his sudden upright pose.

“...option two it is, then. I am willing to expend a strong servant to your

cause. One that could turn the fate of your friends in the battle to come. And you only need to sign over yourself. One simple favour should you live. Your soul, should you die.”

He regarded her solemnly, then continued, when she didn't react.

“You need to know, as a child of Bhaal, your soul is bound to him until you reject him successfully – OR – until you pledge it to someone else. I am willing to attract his ire in exchange for yours. Cheat him out of it, little lizard, or go back to him and his eternal realm of violent death. It is your choice.”

It was no choice, and he knew it.

“Deal.” She said. “Now go. I'm in the mood to try and take on a cambion today.”

The self-satisfied grin appearing on his face made her regret her choice immediately. She had sold herself short. He should have taken the deal through gritted teeth, but it was too late to renege on it. She had accepted without thinking and his smile told her how much he intended her to regret it.

“Just remember, child of Bhaal: Don't speak about a deal with the devil. It grabs their attention. And they feel very much obligated to dispose of witnesses to such things. Ta-Ta!”

Hell-fire blazed bright and hot to the point she averted her face. When she looked back, he was gone, the tombstone darkened to charcoal-black. She thought of another person much too interested in her. If she was right, he would be a formidable ally. If she was wrong, she need not think about how to disappear herself.

### 39. (The big Gatsby?)

It was not as easy to find a Steelwatcher at night as it was in daylight. She succeeded after wandering into the more affluent parts of town up on the rocky slopes Baldurs Gate was built upon, the parts where a restless class of merchants and craftsmen periodically sought to influence the politics and power plays of the even richer and more powerful merchants and nobles residing in the walled in parts called upper city.

An honour guard of a Steelwatcher and two Flaming Fists rushed her to Wymrest hold, up a broad flight of stairs and into a ceremonial hall, hung with banners just like the outside walls.

It was full of people in rich robes of fine silks, decked with glittering gold and gemstones. The elite of Baldurs Gates upper city and the most influential of the lower city gathered in one place, outdoing each other on the stage of political theatre. More Steelwatchers monitored the hall, and every exit was guarded by Flaming Fists in heavy armour, making an escape impossible. The attending nobles followed her entrance and the walk up to the platform. Some recognized her, she noticed, more often than not with fear in their eyes, or downright abhorrence.

Gortash stood elevated above everyone else on a stage, wrapped in more gold than she could see on any other person in attendance: chains, cuffs, buttons, rings. What was not clad in black and gold Brocade was wrapped in solid gold, bar his shining black hair. A small dragon would be proud to call the jewellery he wore its treasure. His dark eyes glued to her, he followed her every move. Caution on her side was advised, then. The man from the mindflayer colony was with him, clad in ceremonial armour and with the insignia of the Marshal of the Flaming Fists. Her arrival had interrupted his coronation by the only person



accepted to perform such an act.

“Crawling back in from your bloody disgrace, Gwyn? I hope you have come to keep your dearest sister in check. Her contribution to all of this endangers our hard work.”

Gwyn? That name from his mouth stirred up unwelcome feelings. Pride, affection...resentment. She needed more information.

“What did she tell you?”

“That she made a fool of you. A plaything for the Absolute to enjoy, discarded as a pawn in her army. But here you are, refusing to go down, as ever. Even though you look like hell spat you out five minutes ago. Tell me: Is it true you lost your memory?”

She hesitated for a split second, creating the evidence he was looking for.

“Let me clear some things up for you. You and I, we have history. This – *this* was our plan to unite the dead three and succeed where our predecessors failed. First we obtained the crown to then enslave the brain.”

He came closer and grabbed her by her upper arms in a gesture of camaraderie that confounded her. She was not prepared to feel comforted by it.

“Sow chaos and mistrust in the streets of this city – your part of the plan, inaptly carried out by Orin now. Gather an army and march it to the very gates to ensure fear guides the decisions of its populace, craving a strong and charismatic leader. Which brings us to now: In mere minutes *I* will be declared said leader.”

“Why are you telling me this in front of all of these people?”

“Please, Gwynreshoth, you always were more observant than this. You tell me!”

Tsisk recognized the name. It was a dragons name, adopted by grown up dragonborn to demonstrate power and maturity. A prideful tradition, since the bigger and much more powerful dragons tended to think of the dragonborn as lesser.

“My name is Tsisk. And they are your puppets. Tadpoled, or otherwise under

your control.”

Gortash laughed.

“You go by your hatchling-name nowadays? No wonder we didn’t hear from you until you stood on our doorstep. Hardly strikes fear in the hearts of your enemies. Doubtlessly what you were going for, to keep hidden from inquisitive minds. And it worked!” He kissed her hand, sending warm tingles up her arm. “It is good to see Orin was unable to rob you of your most valuable asset. We will once again put our minds to the task and achieve greatness.”

He dismissed her back into the crowd and faced the Marshal to receive his title.

After he had lied about his vows and promised to protect the city “from enemies without as within”, his demonstratively unadorned head was decorated in precious metals also.

He attended the rest of the event just long enough to receive his congratulations, watch a display of fireworks that would have cost enough gold to host a feast for the entire lower city lasting a whole month, then went to his office with Tsisk.

The room was guarded by four Steelwatchers covered in engraved and gilded plate mail, sporting gems in their intricate designs. They did not stand out between his monstrosity of a desk, the likewise gilded collection of skulls – such as dragons and minotaurs – above it and the exquisitely framed, overly large paintings of important historical moments of Baldurs Gate, mainly depicted with a hero in shining armour saving the city, looking deceptively like him.

“Do you like the Watchers? I commissioned them from the engineers. The entire Steelwatch – my design – brought to life by the power of the Absolute.”

“You wanted to speak to me. Speak.” She requested.

“You haven’t changed a bit.” He said with a pleased smile. “Always to the point. Let’s say there is a problem with the brain. It is not as cooperative with only two stones to control it. I propose you overthrow your sister to get hers and we can join forces once again to rule over it as intended.”

“So you know where I can find her? Bhaals temple?”

“Frankly speaking, I hoped you knew where it was. You never told me. But it should not be too hard to figure it out for you. She leaves trails of dead bodies all over the city and my informants assure me she’s heavily using the canalisation and undercellar, the streets beneath the streets. We keep loosing her there.”

She didn’t have time to play cat and mouse with her sister. But she needed to make sure this man with two armies at his fingertips would pose no threat to the cause of her friends until the Absolute was dealt with.

“My allies will take all the information you can give them. I will instruct them to work with you, even in my absence.”

“You are working with hired adventurers? What are you planning so you need them? Do you need them as scapegoats? Or will they be pawns, like the last ones?”

He waved over one of his watchers to serve him a glass of wine out of a bottle opened right in front of his eyes, looking ridiculously small and fragile in the hands of the construct.

His notion threw her off. Was he unable to see her allied with someone else than him, or was that a general lack of trust on his part?

She looked around and noticed a lack of human servants and guards. Now that she thought about it, she had seen only cultists of Bane and the omnipresent Steelwatchers on her way to the office. And even though he had had conversations with the nobles, he had also held as much distance to them as courtly conduct allowed him. Together with the apparent grandiosity he surrounded himself with, he appeared to her a small and insecure man, scrambling to climb to the top of a hill made out of shattered lives just so he could feel big.

“Why didn’t you try to find me?” She asked a nagging question from the back of her mind.

“We had an agreement. We wouldn’t meddle in the affairs of the other. Your

god and mine being at odds with each other would create...friction. The plan was too precious to risk conflict over you going missing.”

The fondness she had felt for him in the great hall died then and there. She could trust him to climb upwards, and nothing more.

“I would send an informant. But Orin keeps bragging to me how she will dupe you once more, this time for good. Knowing her, she has already infiltrated your group of retainers. I would recommend you get rid of them. With her around, they are a liability.”

Tsisk abruptly stood up, startling Gortash.

“What’s wrong?”

“I left Ketherics stone at the Inn.” She lied. “Halt your guards from me and them, I will flush her out.”

## 40. Gales detaching from Mystra

She hurried through the dawn, ignoring her burning legs and the onset of dizziness. The waking city ignored her existence just like it might have all the other times she ran the streets, covered in dried blood. No one felt obliged to act as long as the Steelwatchers ignored her, weaving through tradesmen opening stalls, carriages full of much needed supplies for a hungry city – drawn by oxen, donkeys, sometimes even goats – and people on their way to work. It was a blessing she did not need to evade the constructs, or it would have taken her at least thrice the time to reach the Elfsong Tavern.

Scant of breath, she burst through the doors, scaring the innkeep and his staff preparing for another busy day, and ran upstairs to the dormitories. Stopping at the small wooden door to their rooms, she steadied her breathing before she pushed it open with caution, tense in anticipation of a bloodbath.

Shadowheart was waiting for her when she entered.

“I see you found back home. I knew you could get through Astarions thick scull, but did you really need to vanish afterwards? We were worried sick.”

She came to greet the dragonborn, who dodged the clerics attempt to hug her.

“I needed to walk off the ritual.”

“I’m sure you did. Don’t do that again, though!”

The conversation woke up Gale and Halsin, who repeated it faithfully for their own benefits, down to the dodging. A look around for Astarion revealed him hunched in a corner, reading a book. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. If Orin was already among them, she needed to get them going, so she had a chance of catching the shapeshifter in the act.

“Its time we tackle your problem, Gale.”

Mystras altar was located in the Stormshore tabernacle, a house of worship

for many of Faerûns gods and goddesses near the Basilisks Gate, one of the four main gates of the city and the second busiest after Black Dragon Gate.

It was a smaller temple, but the group fit into it easily enough, their conversation echoing between solid stone walls, lined with statues of gods of all alignments. With satisfaction, Tsisk noted the absence of the dead three. They were removed from the eyes of the public. No one dared worship them openly. The altar Gale went to lay to the feet of the statue of a beautiful woman with long, smooth hair and a kind face featuring inquisitive eyes. An aura of weave lay around it, manifesting as flickers of dancing light, playing over the stone-surface of Mystras image, giving it the illusion of life on first glance.

“I will be unresponsive for a while. Time works different in the weave, so it should not take me long to get back to you, even if I get myself into an hours long debate.”

Gale informed them with a forced half-smile, looking uncomfortable and lost.

“At last I will see her again. There was a time where I would have given everything to get this chance – now, I’m not sure if I even want to.”

He closed his eyes and concentrated. Tsisk could feel the energy of the weave rising, but this time it was not warm and inviting. She could feel Gales presence lingering just beside her. It felt tense, hopeful, a little bit angry. The presence of the weave had gotten so intense, it carried an echo into the outside world. Tsisk opened herself to it how Gale had shown her, and listened.

“You discovered what lies behind the Absolute and yet you disobeyed my instructions?” Resonated Mystras voice in the weave.

“I discovered Karsus’ crown and figured I could use it to heal myself if I knew...”

“This kind of knowledge is not yours to hold.” Mystra disrupted him coldly.

“You know what happened to the last person who used it. The power holding you never was mine. It is the Karsite weave, brought into this world by his

hunger for power and ever hungry it will remain. It consumed your gifts, all magic you fed to it and now it is feeding on the weave itself because I allow it to – so you can have a chance on setting things right. This can not continue for much longer or it will consume all magic again.”

“This is precisely why I got the book.” Gale said. “With the knowledge contained I can learn to control i-”

“Control it? Did Karsus’s demise teach you nothing, Gale?” Mystra scolded him. “He held that power in his hands and his arrogance ended him and the weave. It took decades to reconstitute it and all wizards are the weaker for it. It ended my predecessor, Mystryl. What makes you think you will fare better than him?”

“What makes *you* think I would be like him?”

Her voice got softer again.

“If I thought that, I would not talk to you. I believe in you, still. Your actions doomed this city, but you can save everyone else their fate. Detonate the orb as soon as the brain shows itself and be redeemed.”

“I trust in the abilities of me and the people I am travelling with to find a solution and mitigate this scenario entirely. The brain will be defeated.”

“Your trust is blinding you. She is closer to fading than you ever where.” Tsisk could feel a ripple in the weave, a gentle brushing against her mind. Mystras voice echoed through her skull, friendly, but firm.

“You are curious. A commendable quality. But this is a private conversation from here on out.”

The weave left her standing next to her friends, just a blink away from when she had gone to listen.

One thing was for sure: Gale could not be Orin. Mystra would have noticed. Was there something similar that could be done for the others? Shadowheart should be able to invoke a favour of Selûne, but what made Astarion unique in a way she could not copy? All his vampiric traits were suppressed by the tadpole.

And then it dawned on her. The tadpole. All of them should have one. And her sister could not put one inside her own head to keep up the ruse or the Absolute would get to control her.

Next to Tsisk, Gale groaned, coming back from his foray into Mystras magical realms.

“I’ve never felt so dumb before. Of course this magic was not actually part of the weave, but something else entirely. How could I have been so blind?”

“Well, happens to the best of us. I’m sure you’ll have plenty opportunities to surpass yourself in that matter.”

“You’re not helping, Astarion!” Gale burst out. He nervously ran his hands over his face. “Tsisk. You heard it. Do you think me selfish for willing to live?”

“I think it natural to be willing to live. We already plan on killing the Netherbrain. Getting the crown seems like a small feat after that.”

“So you think I should seize that power and become a better god than she ever was?”

Astarion instantly perked up. “A god? Yes, by all means, show her!”

“No. I think that would be a terrible idea.”

“Then please elaborate why you are so vehemently against it.”

“Because I won’t trust any god, ever again!” She roared, her volume amplified by the resonance of the temple, hurting her ears. Her outburst had made everyone take several steps back and left her standing on her own.

Unsettled, they exited the temple together. Tsisk let herself fall behind to keep everyone in sight, opened her mind to the tadpole and addressed the Emperor:

“Would you know if someone of us wasn’t with the others?”

For some time, nothing happened. She already thought he ignored her when she finally heard him, weak and faint.

“Not exactly, as long as no one leaves my reach. Is there a problem?”

“I need to know if one of them got replaced by a shapeshifter.”



Another long pause followed. He must be very busy or very tired, she thought.

“Their tadpoles are all functional. You can try to speak to them directly to see if they react.” And that was that.

*“We need to talk.”*

She sent her message to the others. All of them looked back at her, except Halsin, who only belatedly noticed the reaction. As was to be expected. Tsisk was relieved. Three of four had cleared themselves.

“Go on. I’m right behind you.” She said aloud to keep everything seemingly normal.

*“I’ve received information this night. I got told Orin might have infiltrated us. It can’t be any of you, since she has no tadpole. And I think I know how to rat her out if she’s here at all.”*

*“Oh no. Do you mean she killed Halsin?”* Shadowheart asked anxiously.

*“I know as much as you. But I need to tell you more.”* And she recounted her meeting with Gortash and his promise to help. The parts of her being his accomplice or even the instigator she left out. She ended her tale with a warning:

*“I trust him to be faithful to me and to follow the plan. No more. Should something happen to me, be cautious of him.”*

She could not quite bring herself to advise them to get rid of Gortash in that case, even if that would most likely be their best option once they garnered his attention. To him, they would only be useful pawns to be disposed of in his schemes.

The floor shifting under her feet interrupted her thoughts. Another earthquake shaking up Baldurs Gate. The following wave of commands nearly overwhelmed her and the others. It beckoned her to follow, lured her to join the inevitable, be part of the change. Be whole, a part of many, acting as one. She longed to go. And then the voice stopped.

*“Find the missing stones. Your time is running out.”*

She could barely hear the Emperors voice above her own thoughts.

A deserted house seemed her the best option to test the last two members of her group. She did not know if Orin could also mimic animals, so she wanted to test both Halsin and Scratch at the same time.

“It is time for your last lesson, Halsin. I want to learn to speak with animals, like you.”

“Are you sure this is the right time, now the Absolute is about to break free?” She shrugged her shoulders.

“We won’t get a better one. This is a good place.”

He sat down, cross-legged and asked her exasperated:

“Then why don’t you get your flute out?”

“I found a way around it. What do I need to do to understand an animal?”

Tsisk pressed on.

“Oakfather preserve me. This is novice level knowledge. How do you not know about it? You listen, of course. You *speak*.”

“But how?”

“With your voice, dumbling.”

“This is not very convincing, Orin. You can not copy Halsins peace of mind.”

“How you could ever be Bhaals chosen is beyond me. Despair wrapped in skin, failure down to your greasy marrow.” Orins mewl in Halsins deep voice was quite unsettling. “But now I am his favourite, I get to be his Slayer. You will never learn to control the chaos you call nature. It doesn’t become a Bhaalspawn.”

This time, she stayed in her disguise, flaunting the form she had taken with the man.

“Where is Halsin?” Tsisk hissed, barely containing her anger.

“With Bhaal, of course. In his temple, waiting patiently for me to fillet him so I can send you the best parts. You always loved the tender ones, don’t you

remember?” Orin mocked her. “I always preferred my meat a little more... robust. Unless...unless you bring me the two other Netherstones, especially Gortashs, that paranoid bastard! Then you can have him back. Whole and healthy.”

Tsisk believed not one word out of that maniacally grinning mouth.

“Where is Bhaals temple?”

“You don’t need to know that! Just kill Gortash, I will hear and I will come.”

“So you will head my call? I find that very appropriate.”

Tsisk tried to provoke her in hopes of a slip.

Halsins big body uprighted until he stood completely straight, eye to eye with Tsisk, staring at her with the hatred of decades of jealousy.

“Now that you say it. Look for the temple. I can wait a little longer. Your friend...probably does not need all his parts when you get him back. Promise me you bring the others? They are so sticky-sweet together, I want to play with all of them and make them watch your butchering. It will be a murder party.”

Orin blew her a kiss and pranced away in a body not made for the languid, seductive walk she forced upon it.

“Astarion?”

“Yes?” He asked, carefully keeping his distance.

“You hunted people in Baldurs Gate. Do you know its underground?”

“Well...yes? Why would you want to know now?”

## 41. searching for orin

“Then let’s go down, I might remember more when I’m there.”

Tsisk hoped she would not lead them to their doom. She was not certain at all that she could find the temple. But time was of the essence. Orin was too happy about the turn of events, too happy about Tsisks failings. Maybe she could surprise her, maybe she could broker a trade-off between her and Halsin. Orin might not be able to withstand a chance to humiliate her, see her fall deeper still.

An entrance to the sewers was not hard to find, they just had to follow the faint smell through the streets to one of the many manhole covers and barred entrances. Unseen in the dim light of a setting sun, they climbed down into the underside of Baldurs Gate. The stones under her feet were slippery from the muck and condensing water, treacherous cobbles leading to her fall. Whenever they came to a crossing, she would stop, close her eyes and let her old murderous self pick the path. Much as in the vision, the anticipation grew and it made her stomach churn.

Soon, they reached the rough stones and dirt-patches. It was a hallway, carved into stone and hidden away in a far part of the sewers, behind an unassuming passage.

Symbols of Bhaal adorned the walls. As he came closer, Astarion wrinkled his nose.

„They painted them in blood. Some new, some old.“

Tsisk found the wall she had felt, but nothing to put into the recess crudely hewn into the stone. She took a step back to take a look around.

Following an inkling, she also looked up. Two corpses were hung from the ceiling, partly flayed and left to rot. One must have been a Bhaalist themselves,

because a medallion of Bhaal hung from their neck, its chain correlating with a strangulation line. Jumping as high as she could, she caught the medallion and tore it from its previous owner, who followed the source of the force to the ground. It swiped her shoulder and left blood and other fluids dripping down from her side. Disgust and nauseating exultation overcame her, and she brushed it aside. This was more important. The medallion fit perfectly into the recess and the door slid back.

„Watch out. There might be guards here. Or an ambush, even. I doubt they will accept me with open arms, now that Orin is their leader.“

The path widened into a huge cavern, its walls covered in ancient ruins, hanging over a bottomless chasm cutting the cavern in half. The open path led down to a narrow bridge spanning the divide. If there was an ambush, this would be a prime spot, she thought.

“I will go out and draw attention. This way you can discover their hiding spots. Move fast.”

She said while readjusting her armour for maximum protection. Shadowheart came forward and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“May Selûne protect our endeavour and your hide from their blades.”

A warm, radiant glow stretched out from the spot she had touched and engulfed Tsisk before it died down again, leaving her with a touch more confidence than before and a blessing of protection. She inclined her head to say “Thank you.” and touched the warm spot Shadowheart's blessing had left on her shoulder. It felt good on her hands and in her head, that ran cold with fear. Then she strut out into the open to meet the cultists.

“Assassins, Priests of Bhaal, I have come back to claim my rights in this temple.”

She shouted into the ruins while walking right into the middle. Standing on the bridge, she offered herself as an easy target for all sides. They would be tempted to shoot at her. She counted on their compliance. And indeed, on the far

end, cloaked strangers stepped into the light. She could see more shadows moving around, even a face here and there, too curious for their own good. And she figured her friends could see them, too.

“You have come, but you are no longer his Chosen one, nor even the second in this temple. You must reclaim your right in the Rite of Slaughter.”

A bodiless voice declared. From all sides, arrows came whirring, many flying past her, some striking her. But for the most part, they were fired from too far away to do much more than scratch her armour or bang against her uplifted shield.

A terrible scream caused her to lower it and take a peak. High above her, a heavily hooded assassin had stabbed another man. With pure, ecstatic frenzy, and jerky, but effective motions he cut and tore at the torso of his still living victim until he reached his heart. The screams ended abruptly, replaced with a prayer to Bhaal, resounding through the cavern.

Dread came over Tsisk. Her mind recoiled from the words spoken, cold sweat breaking out all over her. The prayer was a request to Bhaal, to slay the unworthy on the spot.

“Kill him!”

She shouted, breaking into a sprint herself, through the hail of arrows. One of them hit the back of her thigh, slowing her down. She ignored the pain and ran on, roaring to ensure all attention was firmly placed on her. Which provided Gale the time needed to whisk Astarion over with one of his spells. Between one moment and the next, the spawn burst out of the shadows right next to the chanting figure, ready to wreak havoc.

He cut and sliced and stabbed.

His actions achieved nothing more than to splatter blood all over himself and his surroundings. The fanatically chanting assassin did not acknowledge his existence, carrying on into the last verse of his prayer with red foam and a maniacal grin on his lips. Tsisk dragged herself onto the balcony. There was only

one chance of stopping this now. The assassin had to go down with the next attack.

She kicked him in the back of his knee, causing him to fall down and dug her claws into the soft flesh under his jaw, forcing his head back and revealing a sliver of unprotected skin between his leather collar and chin. His prayer ended prematurely in undignified coughing and gargling, when Astarions dagger took his ability to speak.

Once he was dead, a voice boomed:

“The Rite of Slaughter has passed! Welcome Bhaals worshipper!”

All fighting ceased and she heard the scurrying of many feet throughout the ruins, vanishing into hidden tunnels and pathways.

It was way harder to get down than it was to get up. By now, her leg was on fire, the arrow broken just above the skin.

“We must press on. I doubt they will put up more fights. An assassins kill should be surprising and in one blow. Orin will know of our approach and I cannot let her prepare herself.”

“Let me heal this for you, first.” Shadowheart demanded.

“Just get it out. It won’t kill me.”

Shadowheart did not need to waste resources and time she might need later on, Tsisk thought.

The temple of Bhaal turned out to be an old underground dwelling of interconnected caverns covered in the ruins of a small city. The ruins lay derelict and defiled by the usage of the assassins, used as sleeping quarters or waste dumps, containing trophies stolen from their victims. Jewellery, Toys, keepsakes of all forms and sizes and even the skeleton of a once beloved dog had found their way down here and were discarded as insignificant before the eyes of Bhaal.

They followed a serpentine way down to the ground level of the cavern they

were in. It felt like coming home after a long, arduous day. Here, she would be understood. Here, she would rise to be the last shadow on Toril. Unknowingly, subconsciously, she started to quietly singsong verses she knew by heart:

In the year of the turrets, a great host will come from the east like a plague of locusts.

*So sayeth the wise Alaundo.*

When shadows descend upon the lands, our divine lords will walk alongside us as equals.

*So sayeth the great Alaundo.*

The Wyrms shall wander the earth and such a pestilence will follow in his wake that all who know of his passing shall be struck down by the plague.

*So sayeth the wise Alaundo.*

When conflict sweeps across the Dales the great lizards of the north shall descend with fire and fury.

*So sayeth the great Alaundo.*

The Lord of Murder shall perish, but in his doom he shall spawn a score of mortal progeny. Chaos will be sewn from their passage.

*So sayeth the wise Alaundo.*

Only when they reached the ground and she said the last words, she looked up to the others and noticed their stares. She was confused, until she became aware she had just recited Bhaals Prophecy.

Gale walked beside her and asked:

„I can see this takes a great toll on you. Are you sure you are ready to defy him?“

Tsisk answered in a flat voice. „I am not. If I run, he will claim me regardless. I want it to cost him. I want my chance, as small as it may be.“

In silence, they walked along a broad and imposing passage on polished



ground to a great arch hewn out of the same rock Baldurs Gate was founded upon. Someone had added Bhaals symbols with a great deal less craftsmanship than the original builders. A god of death, existing on the fringes of society, could not be very particular regarding its followers and servants, it seemed.

“Ugh, this place reminds me of Cazadors palace. It smells of decay and the decor is just as obtrusive.”

Tsisk had to agree with Astarions assessment. Nothing here was subtle. A little paradoxical, as his followers relied heavily on subtle approaches. Then again, what they left behind never was.

Left and right of the path bodies were draped on Altar stones. Cut open to satisfy the curiosity of the novices, or just for fun, as some where mangled to a degree their humanness could only be gleaned by examining the bones.

More bodies and piles upon piles of white bones lay abandoned in alcoves, the meat rasped away by the ubiquitously found maggots.

To keep her head clear, Tsisk had to close her eyes and let the footsteps of her companions be her guide. The Bhaalists themselves respectfully made way for them or scampered off when the group came close, an echo of her past. Some began whispering in hushed voices, wondering what Orin would do now.

When they came to the innermost sanctum, Orin already waited for them in her favourite form, the fair maiden. She stood on a stone platform seemingly defying gravity. It was held above an abyss by arches looking too fragile to hold up that much ego.

At her side on the main altar lay Halsins body. Hurriedly dragged there, Tsisk could see, because her appearance-obsessed sister had not had the time to drape it for best effect yet. More Assassins stood in a circle around her. They were dressed up in impractical but impressive robes with ornate daggers, made to tangle up in everything when one should be swift and forgettable.

“Here I am, little sister.”

She said to Orin, knowing the diminutive title and calm disposition would

make her mad. She wanted her mad. She wanted her seething in anger, boiling with rage. This way, she might even forget she had a victim at all and focus her attacks on Tsisk entirely.

“And you have come without the stones, I see. He won’t be happy about you.” Orin purred in fake compassion. „His favourite daughter fallen out of his graces. Now I am his chosen first. But there is yet a way to redeem yourself, *sister*. If you kill him in his name...” She motioned to Halsin, nearly choking on her next words “...you might be able to come back into his fold and be a happy little assassin under my guidance.”

Tsisk was relieved to hear Halsin was not dead, doing her very best not to let Orin see that. Yet Orin herself had opened an avenue to vengeance for her.

“A kill in Bhaals name to assert control over the temple?” Tsisk asked while entering the platform. “But why choose an inferior offering if we could fulfil our lives destiny and decide this once and for all between us two?”

She took Halsins body by the arm and dragged him from the Altar, dumped him as far away as she could manage. A wave of bloodlust swept through the temple, approval by the highest authority therein.

“Your artless killing would see this temple wither away because his name will be forgotten in all of Baldurs Gate. I made them dread it, speak it in whispers or not at all. Everyone will know his glory when I am finished!”

What fool she was. If Bhaal had his way no one would be alive to sing his praises. Instead, they would wander his bloody realm under the cold hunters moon, bemoaning the day their lives got snatched from them. Tsisk placed her last thrust with precision.

“Bhaal always respected my capability to kill by the hundreds more than your art.”

She could see Orins white skin turn an ugly shade of grey and her face disturbed by a snarl. The shapechanger spittle-screamed.

“I will kill your little pets when I am done with you and I shall skin you alive

to make me a new rug from your scales! - Clear the circle!”

The surrounding assassins hurriedly followed her instruction, forming a circle around the platform. Her friends got rudely ushered out of the way, hindered by Halsins big body. Astarion exclaimed “Go for her throat!” with a wicked smile. A little sliver of hope like the song of birds, greeting the dawn long before she was able to perceive it. This was her chance to gain freedom and she would seize it. Or die trying.

The gathered cultists began a chant to make her skin crawl, a dissonant singsong, broken by harrowing screams, mimicking the last utterances of the people they murdered.

“If you leave the platform before one of us is dead, your friends will be killed like little lambs.” Orin giggled happily. She then placed herself in the middle of it and invoked Bhaal:

„Come to me, Father. Set my flesh to your unholy purpose.“

Tsisk did not wait around for her to finish what she had just started and instead tackled her full-body in mid-change. She sunk her knife deep into the vulnerable flesh under Orins ribs while the changelings bones cracked audibly, her limbs elongated, new arms grew and her face twisted itself into a hideous mess, gaping maw rimmed with dagger-like fangs, a head beset with ridged horns to impale, and small, deeply sunken eyes as dead as any corpses. Tsisk knew this to be the most revered form for a Bhaalist: the Slayer. Every aspect of it deadly, a body made of muscle and sinew, a mind set on one goal only – to kill.

Before it realised it could use its new, razor-sharp claws to shred her to ribbons, Tsisk rolled away from it and dived behind the Altar. To beat a slayer would be much harder than going for Orin herself.

The gangly monster scrambled to get all its limbs in order, scratching and clacking about the stone. Meanwhile, Tsisk prepared her next move by sheathing her knife, and slipping her arm out of her shield-straps holding it in place. And not a moment too early, as the faint patter of blood and the clicks of claws on

hard stone next to her head where the only warning she got before the slaving maw followed her way over the hunkering mass of stone and came down to rip off her head.

She slammed her shield upwards and was rewarded with the crunching sounds indicative of severe damage to bony structures. Tsisk sacrificed the shield to the wrath of the creature tearing it apart, drew out her knife while dashing around the altar stone and in between its hind legs. Its second set of claws ripped into her back, right through her leather armour, as if she wore none at all, but she herself managed to cut through the tendons of the slayer's right leg in return. The Slayer roared loudly in pain and frustration. Leg buckling under its weight, it tried to jump after Tsisk and fell short.

The dragonborn hobbled along the outer perimeter of the platform to see if she could find any weakness. Spikes grew from the neck and back of the creature and made it impossible to attack from these angles. The four hands, tipped with razor-sharp claws, guarded the front, to which Tsisk's back could attest. An anxiously whipping tail threatened pain through more pointy protrusions should she get in its way by foolishly attacking from behind.

The slayer followed her path with its ugly head, made uglier by a deformed jaw. It had given up its futile attempts to use the hind leg as normal, instead using two arms to make up for it. Tsisk saw an opening caused by this loss of motion. She braced herself against the flaring pain in her own leg and ran a few steps to the left, then made a turn to round the Slayer, gathering every bit of momentum she could put into her strides. Unable to use its right leg properly and having lost a lot of blood through the wound in its abdomen, the slayer turned sluggishly and too slowly to prevent her from slamming into its side. Its balance broke, and together, they tumbled to the ground. The body of death curled around Tsisk in a flurry of claws and teeth and horns and made it impossible to get away. While the claws raked at her in wild fury, she got ahold of a horn and one last opportunity. Holding on to the slayer's head with all her might, she drew her knife

and slid it up its side in a shallow cut, until it lodged itself into a small indentation. She then slammed it to the hilt into the Slayers ear, where it ended the struggle between the two Bhaalspawns.

Drunken on her victory, Tsisk whispered into the other ear:

“Thank you. For setting me free.”

She did not care if Orin heard her or if those words died with her. They just tumbled out of her head as there was no place for them in between the immense amounts of relief and joy sweeping over her. Tsisk lifted her head to take a look around. The platform was covered in streaks and smears and puddles of fresh, bright red blood, arranged to Bhaals glory. On the other side, assassins fought her friends, who were clearly putting the fear of the gods in them, now that there was nowhere to hide. Shadowheart must have healed Halsin, for he furiously fought with them. She watched it unfold, entirely too tired to join the fight. It would not take them very long to decide it in their favour anyway, she could see as much. Then, her gaze dropped down to her belly and noticed something wrong with it. It eluded her mind exactly why it was bad that it was torn open, but rather chose to steer her thoughts to the fact that they would be safe from the murderous lunatic that was Orin. Now only one monster remained. And it, too, would be gone soon.

## 42. defying Bhaal

Mortally wounded and cut up, Tsisk sat in a rapidly growing puddle of her own blood. It was difficult to move, so she simply didn't. A ripple in the gleaming red mirror surrounding her caught her attention. The surface of the pool of blood distorted her image reflected in it, dragged it into Bhaals realm. And it spoke.

At first, she could not make out what it said, but it became louder, more demanding, taking everything that was herself and forcing it into submission so Bhaals vision became the single one thing on it.

Under the hunters moon it wheezed like a breath pressed out through broken windpipes, bubbling like blood on paling lips.

“You are my chosen one.”

Her gaze swept over the landscape, for the first time taking it as it was: empty, the solemn perfection of eternal stillness, the absence of song and joy and...life.

“I expected the other one. But you live, and her blood is returned to me. You are my Chosen.”

The red sea lay flat at her knees, no movement but her own to disturb it.

If it went his way, she would enlarge it until it swallowed even the last of his children. They were pawns to him, readied for the time they would bear his presence, made to be broken so their own consciousness would vanish when he inevitably took over what was left of them. She had to hold onto that thought while he tried to whittle her down with every word.

“The living will betray you. Have they not all done it? The ones you called parents turned from you when you just so much as mentioned my name. The Aasimar threatened death to you. Your companions will leave you when you will have given them everything they desire. What good does life do? Only the dead will be faithful forever.”

She kneeled and watched the unchanging sea and didn't answer. He was right, and he was wrong. They would, and it would hurt her.

“Be my chosen, child. This must not be your end. Take my gift, then bring me their life in return.” Bhaal stole her voice once more.

The peace of mind he offered felt hollow, like the world he offered her, perfect to the last piece of gravel, and so empty it ached her deep within her bones. Through his dominion over her voice she forced out the one word he would not allow her to speak:

„No.“

“You refuse me? Your life is mine.” He snarled through her teeth. “Accept your inheritance or I will reclaim it. My gift can save you and give you more power than you ever wielded in your life before.”

It was imperative that she now reject him again, she knew. Otherwise he might choose to just take her body when her mind grew too weak to defend it. So she took all the power she could muster and hurled her last word at him.

„No!“

His fury shook her to the core.

“You were made to Conquer. To Devour. You reject me and so I will take what is mine and make another who is worthy.”

It made her blood boil in answer, fleeing her – the perpetrator, the traitor, the disappointment – to join the red sea.

The realm of death and murder dissolved to silent grey before her eyes. Her only consolation was that Bhaal would not be the one to claim her soul. Flames started to lick over her body languidly, hungrily. The hells came to get her, and they weren't pleasant about it, crackling searing hot and blazing bright until she dropped in agony to get dragged to her new fate. And then it ended.

The flames stood frozen and still, silenced. Soft footsteps fell and she raised her head to see the source of the noise.

It was the withered one from the temple high above the banks of the Chionthar, mustering her curiously.

“Thou hast defied Bhaal, thine liege and father. And thou art willing to barter thy soul away to the behoof of thine friends. A trait of Champions and Heroes.”

“What do you want, Lich?” Another power had come to meddle with her. It enraged her quite a lot she wasn’t even allowed to be tortured by choice.

“Aaah...What wouldst I want. Peace in my olden days, although it flees me for the choices I made. As for thee: the sole way to atone for thine actions is to do better, in a new dawn. That dawn has come. Bhaal tried to extinguish thee, but his wrath is imprecise. He only succeeded in killing the part of thee he had formed himself. The urge that drove thee to terrible acts. The spark of brutality that made thee his. But there is a new part of thee that hath grown during thy travels.”

“What do you want?”

“Thou hath challenged a god and overthrown the order of things. I have come to offer thou a choice to take or to leave, as thou wishest.”

“Surely you want something from me for it.”

“A decision. Thy companions rely on thee to pick the path. Without thine guidance the direction is unclear. The price for my service will be thine servitude in aiding their cause until it has concluded and another lifetime of pain, as it is the privilege of the living to feel.”

“Is that a trick?” It had to be, no one would halt a devils bargain and resurrect people just like this.

“I assure thee it is not.” He said seriously, his shrivelled face not betraying any thoughts he might hold. They both stared at each other for quite a while before a sigh wheezed its way through his dried lips.

“I assure thee to be a pawn in the plans of the gods. And thy purpose ending with the Absolute, upon which thou art free to choose thy own path again.”

This was absolutely, infinitely more believable. All of this being a powerplay



between the gods. Tsisk did not know how the Lich fit into all of it, but he was right. Her friends relied heavily on her. Even if she believed them to be fully capable to end it all on their own, the results of their decisions would not be to her liking. Gale only needed an excuse to detonate, Shadowheart was determined to endanger herself for strangers she didn't even know, and Astarion might have rejected Cazadors legacy, but let fear be his ill-gotten advisor still.

“Bring me back.”

The withered Lich rounded her with precise paces.

“The heart of a saviour hath overshadowed the mind of a murderer. Thou hast vanquished thine urge. This intervention, the reclamation of thy soul, is beyond mine ordinary remit. But thou art extraordinary, and so are these times.”

The eternal grey around her shifted and warped, forming splotches of not-quite colours and billowing clouds of vague form.

“I still hold some power, and I invest a portion of it in thee, who hath challenged the gods and now liveth to tell of it.”

Her body got heavier and heavier, until she could not hold it up any longer and sagged to her knees. Meanwhile, the surrounding splotches solidified into something more real, congealed into red and grey and black and flickering light.

“Rise, Challenger of Gods, and prepare for battle once more. Death will not claim thee whilst I endure. Today, thou art born anew.”

Her eyelids fell closed against her will, too weak to lift them again. Her lungs burned, desperate for the next breath, yet utterly unable to draw it. She fought for control over what was hers all along, forcing her unrelenting body to move. The fear to have been revived only to die again grasped at her, making her fight harder to escape its cold fingers clutching at her heart. And finally, she was able to take a deep, shuddering breath. With a jerk, she sat up straight from her hunched stance, causing scrambling around her. She blinked her blurry eyes several times before she was able to make out the carnage she sat in. The Slayers body was surrounded by dead Bhaalists and her friends stood and watched down

on her with furrowed brows, wrinkling foreheads and suspicious looks. The accusation “You were dead!” was the first thing she got to hear. Gale, ever careful, answered.

“Yes, she was. So we should make sure it is actually the right person in the right state of mind occupying this body at the time being. Who knows what a god of death and murder is capable of in this case.”

Grunting, Tsisk tried to stand up to speak. Her numb, tingling foot caught on something and she planted her jaw firmly to the ground.

“Oww...” She groaned. Her skin felt too big on her, all prickly and in the way of everything. Her tongue was too thick and stuck to her gums, her teeth ached from the impact with the ground. She dearly hoped this would be temporary. With the stench of blood in her nostrils and the maimed bodies surrounding her, she also had to notice the absence of the urge to ask for more. She dearly hoped this wouldn’t be temporary.

“By the Oakfather, I don’t think she would ever willingly choose this way to deceive anyone.”

She rolled onto her back with great effort, so now their faces stared at her the wrong way around and moved the unwilling lump of flesh in her mouth to form the words.

“Bhaal’s got nothin’ t’do with it. T’was the wrinkly undead from the tomb.”

“Do you mean the corpse walking about in its tattered robes, all ominous, and talking like a lousy theatre actor from those ancient tomes of bad plays?”

Astarion inquired.

“That one, yes.”

She waited a little, and when no one made a move and her body made less progress on the tingling and twitching as she would have liked, she begrudgingly uttered the words “I need help.”

Tsisk felt it only just to fall from one pair of arms into another, even after her legs would have done the job on their own. She might have leaned a little bit

more on them than necessary, too. It felt glorious to be weak.

The moment Astarion grabbed the netherstone from Orins dagger, another Earthquake rattled the caverns, stronger than any before.

“Hurry! The brain is about to break free!” The Emperor warned them.

### 43.To the brain!

“So why are you trusting a scheming despot who just put a whole city into his pocket and started a godsdamned war to do it?” Gale wanted to know.

“Because he has an army. And we don’t.”

“Right. But just as Gale, I burn to know how you persuaded him. You know, for research-purposes.” Astarion involved himself from the other side. “Were you threatening him? Baiting him with something? Misleading?”

She should have had herself better under control, but her enervated look over caused Astarion to dig deeper.

“So what could you mislead him with? Lies? No? A promise!...Knowledge? ...”

Shadowheart suggested to stop the interrogation, which Tsisk appreciated very much and Astarion ignored completely. Since all of his prior suggestions failed to elicit any reaction at all, Astarion reached for one he clearly felt was way off the mark. “Sex.”

“Please.” She snorted.

And revealed more with this one little reaction to him even mentioning some kind of relation, than a lengthy justification beforehand would have. It told Astarion exactly were more juicy details would await him. Which meant the nosy spawn was unstoppable now.

“You filthy devil. You had – have? - something with the Archduke of Baldurs Gate, the chosen of Bane? Not that I would judge you, but could we not use his influence more, somehow? He has an army, after all.”

She stopped. Four pairs of eyes were glued to her face, awaiting her response, ready to assess her. She could see the questions amassing and decided flight forward was the wisest choice here.

“I don’t think anything good will come from me telling you more about this relationship. If you insist, I will tell you all I know after this is done and you can tell me what you think of it. For now, I want to assure you that I think whatever we had is over. Though I did not tell him that.” She turned abruptly to determinedly limp down the street, towards a Steelwatcher who could bring them to the newly crowned Archduke of Baldurs Gate.

Gortashs Steelwatchers moved erratically. Their weirdly organic movements had become more mechanical and impossible to foresee as they set off to do one task and changed midway through into another motion entirely. It prompted Tskisk to scour the one escorting them to the upper city, gleaming new and without any scuffs or scratches, unlike the others she had seen. Apparently, opposing orders made for their unreliability, as two sources of influence fought over the constructs control. And amidst it all, tattered memories clung to what little space was left in the ensuing chaos.

The little boat rocked heavily, as a Steelwatcher grabbed it by the bow. She tried to steady the load, the precious load, with her callous, tanned hands. Several arms full of Oysters from downriver went overboard before her eyes.

She followed the stream of impressions: Guards surrounded her, their leader giving her a rueful look as he spoke his verdict: the girls she had hidden in his crates were no citizens of Baldurs Gate and would be thrown out the gates to the other refugees. She was to be brought to the foundry for investigation. She reared.

The foundry had to be the noisy warehouse at the docks, she deduced. What would they need a fisherman for in a heavily guarded metal workshop? She dived back into the memory fray.

Her body hurt so much, she had trouble walking. The warehouse she stumbled through was filled with Steelwatchers, half-assembled, hanging on a line like fish to be dried while Gnomes worked on them, sneaking glances at her,

then hurriedly returning their attention to work, all frightened. The constructs she could see missed a part to be put in, something about the size of a small bucket.

Tsisk got a bad feeling about this. The foundry was rank with fear. She wanted to stop. But she needed to know. This was Gortash's project and she needed to know him better if she wanted to be able to predict his thoughts and actions, to not be dependent on the bits of information he threw at her, surely heavily redacted to his advantage.

She was strapped to in a windowless, cold room. Two men in robes awaited their turn, holding painful looking metallic instruments, just the kind you needed to gut fish. On a desk nearby sat a glass-container about as big as a small bucket, filled with goey liquid, right next to a whole host of pots and glasses, filled with smelly salves and salts. The smell reminded her of the curing salts she used to preserve fish and meat with. A tadpole was lowered into her eye. She screamed and pleaded and tried to tear herself from the chair. She tried to close her eyes and found she couldn't, her eye held open to ease the passage of the squirming tadpole, worming its tentacles in between eye and lid, then forcing its way through, too. As soon as the tadpole had burrowed itself behind her eye, her head was forced back, the cultists began chanting and cold metal bit her neck.

She did not know what she had expected. Not this. Based on the knowledge Kressa had extorted from her body, Gortash had built his dream, his army. He had found a way to use her pain for his profit. When she limped into his quarters in the High Hall, he was nothing more than a stranger. A dangerous one at that.

"Congratulations!" Gortash greeted her. "I had my reservations about your ability to kill your sister in time, but I'm glad you've proven me wrong." He came close, wrapped her hands in his and murmured to her: "Give me the stones and we shall rule over this city in an unprecedented liaison of Bane and Bhaal." Tsisk freed her right hand to bury it in his hair and pulled him closer until her

lips brushed his ear. He let her have her way, seemed to enjoy it, even.

“No. They’re mine now.” She said, then let go of him.

“Have it your way, then.” He smirked. “But you will have to give them to me eventually. It only works if all three are put together.”

“You mean like Ketheric and Orin put their stones into your hands in Moonrise Towers?”

“You were there?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Good on you to not let me fool you. I still wonder how Orin did it.”

“So do I. But she is dead, and I am here. Now bring us to the brain.”

“You want to bring the hirelings with you? I’m sure they were wonderfully useful until now, but you really don’t need to bother yourself with them.”

“Hirelings?” Astarion and Gale piped up.

“Yes, we discussed this.” Tsisk interjected.

Gortash already looked a little suspicious and he need not know the amount of power he could lord over her.

“You will get your pay when this business is finished. And more, if you require it.”

She inclined her head in a shallow bow exposing her neck to them and hoped they recognized the plead for mercy. Everything stayed quiet and she breathed out in silent relief. Her answer had settled Gortash. Squabbles for money he understood.

“Gwyn here seems to think a great deal of you and she knows when she has got the right people for the job. I am of a mind to hire all of you myself. There is so much that needs to be done, and my rewards are better than hers by far.”

“You will not.” Anger formed a lump in her throat, wanting to escape as a growl and difficult to hold in.

“Since when do you like standing in the way of a good business-deal? It will be beneficial for all parties involved. I promise you can have them back to do as

you please, once my business is done. You do not need all to play with, do you?”

“You can’t have them. Now or later.”

“So uncharacteristically unreasonable. It seems this ordeal changed you after all. Lets talk about it when we have regained control, I’m sure we can find a compromise.”

Tsisk had to remind herself he was useful yet, and needed, before she carried on as if this was a normal conversation to be had.

The way to the brain led them back down into the cool rocks beneath Baldurs Gate, past guards comprised of Baneite cultists and Steelwatchers. The water systems under the High Hall were considerably cleaner and more sophisticated than the sewers of the lower city. Gale could not stop himself to remark about the intricate architectural features, the precisely sloped subterranean streambeds and spacious cisterns he saw that separately distributed sewage as well as clean spring water in an extraordinarily complex manner for all citizens of the upper city. The way he described it Tsisk felt in awe about this wonder she walked through, even though Halsin harrumphed at Gales statements, complaining about the unnecessary harnessing of natures gifts.

The acidic smell of the brine the brain lived in announced its presence long before they reached it. It dwelt in a cistern big enough, the light of the torches and lanterns they brought did not reach the end, leaving them standing in a miserably small puddle of light, at the edge of a body of water, oily and black and glistening darkly from beneath the gloom of the cavern. Tsisks felt the waves of psychic commands surging out from the pool as ripples under her skull, tickling her brain and rolling down her spine to drop off of her.

As Gortash revealed his Netherstone, water lapped against the stone of its basin slowly and quietly. The water rose to the edge, rising with every oncoming wave. It soon churned and splashed at his feet, as he held on to the stone for dear life.

“Get your stones out and help me!”



Tsisk gathered the stones from her friends and joined him. Through them, she could feel the roiling consciousness beneath the surface, throwing itself against the constraints of its mental prison in a measured effort to wear it down. Gortash tried to strengthen the barriers, ignoring the holes it had already torn. Tsisk did as commanded, but she could feel the structure crumbling, the brains consciousness leaking out, probing her mind for weaknesses it could use. Even two people were not enough to dam it up, as it just found another weak spot, and another after that. Every wave of commands grew stronger, more confident, until it broke through in full, a crushing wave of thought breaking over her, too much to comprehend and suddenly cut off. The water of the cistern flooded the floor they were standing on ankle-deep while the brain rose from it, gargantuan now and wrapped in the warped crown, shattering the acid-weakened rock above it with its grotesquely big tentacles as if it was nothing more than plaster.

“Gwyn...”

She looked down at Gortash, laying at her feet. Blood and clear liquid ran steadily from his nose. She squatted down beside him and could see his dilated pupils, unable to focus at her. The brains attack or his fall to the ground must have damaged his brain.

“Cleric – heal me, Gwyn.”

Tsisk knelt down and took his hand, stroked over it softly with her thumb in an echo of times bygone.

“Gwyn died the day you left her to Orin.” She said. “And I won’t meddle in your affairs.”

Shock and pain washed over his face and stayed there as he breathed his last breath. Tsisk let his hand fall away carelessly. He wouldn’t feel it any more, anyway.

“Remind me to never cross you.” Shadowheart said.

Tsisk could hear the disapproval in her tone.

“He would have used you.”

“You know that? How?”

“Experience.”

“We have no time for this. The brain is free.” She heard the Emperor say. He stood just beside her, more battered, gaunt and thus even more alien than she remembered him.

“There is only one last chance I can see. The human mind is too weak to capture that of a Netherbrain. But a mindflayer could withstand the psychic assault and provide the connection between arcane and mundane needed to contain it.”

“A mindflayer?”

“Yes. You made great progress in connecting with your tadpole since you arrived in Baldurs Gate. With this knowledge, you are ready to evolve and become an even better version of yourself. I can drop the shield preventing your ceremorphosis for a split second so you will change, then shield you again.”

“The only chance, you say?”

“I want to remind you -” Gale got interrupted by Tsisks hand placed on his chest.

“No.” She raised her voice and, without looking over, addressed the Emperor. “You already are a mindflayer. You can do it.”

“So you trust me, now?”

She bellowed a laugh.

“No. But you could have left us to the brain at any point on this journey and you haven’t. Take the stones and end this, so everyone can return to their lives.”

“Then follow me.” The Emperor invited them with a sweeping motion of his spindly arm, opening a portal close by.

## 44. Endkrampf

He already awaited her on the other side. Tsisk looked back, where the Emperors silhouette guided everyone through and flickered out with the portal itself.

“Weeks of shielding you from the Absolute have weakened me, and on my own, I can not leave this plane, except as an illusion – or a dream. But you need more than that. Which means I must now use him.”

An illusion fell and what used to look like a rock, revealed itself to be a Githyanki, covered wholly with tattoos resembling irregular stripes and dots concentrated on certain parts of his body, and converging on his head. He was floating unconscious, bound by several silver shackles to hold him in place. Even his mouth had been sealed shut with silver, engraved with runes, glowing with the deep orange flame of hellfire.

“He looks like he is a conductor for something.” Gale remarked.

“Your observation is correct, Gale of Waterdeep.”

“What is he conducting, then?”

“The Githyanki favour the psionic powers they are born and trained with over the arcane, just as the mindflayers. He is an especially powerful specimen among them, strong enough to withstand the will of the Absolute. It is his presence that shields me, and I found a way to extend its protection unto you, back on the nautiloid.”

“He is the reason the Githyanki seek the artifact, isn’t he?” Tsisk asked.

“That is also correct. The Githyanki rebels believe him to be the deciding factor in their uprising against the god-queen Vlaakith. For us, he will be the deciding factor in the fight against the Netherbrain. In order to gain his resilience, I will consume his brain, so I can leave this place in full with you.”

“Get it over with, then.” Tsisk said. The Githyanki would have to find another

candidate to lead the cause.

The act of consuming a brain looked almost sensual. The Emperors tentacles slithered about the Githyankis head and shoulders in search of a good hold, cradling it in a soft embrace. Then, the embrace tightened, and a crunching sound heralded the demise of the Githyanki rebellions last hope.

When he had finished, the Emperor gathered them, donned a cloak to conceal his features and opened a new portal.

“This is as close as I can get us. The crown disturbs the flow of magic around it. The rest we will have to fight through.”

They had not moved far from the initial entry point to the canalisation, another part of the upper city. Chaos unfolded before them. Mindflayers had erupted from the tadpole-infected people and stalked the streets openly in search of brains to strengthen their weak, newly formed flesh. It was easy enough to kill them, since they did not recognize the tadpoled group as prey or threat until it was already too late.

Two successive explosions down from the harbour rattled the houses around them, causing window-panes to shatter and pieces of the facades to litter the streets. People ran in panic to seek shelter wherever they could, while the Steelwatchers stood immobile, uncaring spectators to panic and chaos and destruction.

And above everything, the brain hovered as a monolith in the sky, calling for its followers. Over the Wide, the enormous market place at the centre of the upper city, it was clearly visible, a massive, sun darkening cloud with tentacles, hailing the storm to come. While Tsisk watched on, two nautiloids arrived to stay at its side, while two others swooped down on the city to trade ready mindflayers and intellect devourers against fresh human material to bolster their numbers.

“Hey, you!” A captain of the Flaming Fists called out to them as his group marched by. “Are you adventurers? All capable fighters are to gather at the

Watch Citadel. Follow us and be sung as heroes afterwards, if you dare.” Alone, they would stand no chance against the madness, Tsisk concluded. A detour to join up with a group heading in the same general direction as they needed to go under the guise of fighting voluntarily for the city would greatly improve their chances. She motioned for them to lead the way and together they marched to the Citadel.

The Watch Citadel was an ants nest of Flaming Fists, armouring up, runners conveying messages back and forth between the troops scattered throughout the city and the commanders present and a number of groups come to defend it. Jaheira had arrived with Halbror and her battle-proven grey-skinned harpers brought over from the shadowlands, as well as fresh relief from the city itself, noticeable not only by their lively skin, but also their nervous looks and behaviour.

The leader of the Gur talked to the command of the Fists while her people waited outside the gates, some posted to watch, but most hidden away in alleys and hastily acquired houses, distant faces regarding their every move. In a corner, Isobel bestowed Selûnes blessing to all who came to ask for it while Aylin watched on with crossed arms, ignoring the Fists touching her half spread wings for good luck. She was the first to notice the group, promptly folding her wings and walking over to intercept and greet them.

“You have come. I had hoped we would see each other again. Have you found a way to deny your father and to kill the brain?”

“Both, and we bring the solution with us.” Tsisk said, nodding to the Emperor.

“The hooded stranger? Who is he?”

The Emperor lowered his cowl to the horror of all present. The yard of the citadel buzzed with hostile hisses and protests. So much so, his words got drowned in the noise.

“Silence!” Aylin thundered. And – looking at Tsisk – she calmly spoke the now clearly audible words: “You choose to go along paths I don’t understand. I want to hear why a mindflayer will save us.”

“He is the one to shield us from the Absolute. We already tried, but the brain can’t be brought to heel by a human, it defies our understanding. A mindflayer’s mind still has a chance.”

Aylin stared at the cobblestones between Tsisks feet, then abruptly raised her head and said:

“Good enough. There is not much hope left with the enemy in front of the gates and inside the city already. I will convince the current Marshall of your usefulness, as the old one has gone missing.”

Just as normalcy was about to be resumed, the stench of the hells hailed his coming. Fires sputtered orange embers and drew the looks of everyone around.

“Aaah, how sweet the taste of hope lost,  
to acquire it new comes at a steep cost.  
Our favourite treacherous dragonborn paid,  
so the fury of the hells comes to your aid.”

Raphael stood in the middle of the yard, donned up in his sunday’s best, as usual, making a show of his arrival, as usual. He nonchalantly sauntered over to Tsisk, but his voice betrayed his seething underneath.

“You tried to cheat me. Be not mistaken, that only means I need to wait a little while longer, nothing more. And because devils keep their end of a bargain, I brought your prize.” On a gesture of him, the Orthon from Shars gauntlet stepped out of a gate previously empty. “Now my part is done, and I will eagerly await your time to come.” He bowed as shallow as bows went, with his nose turned up high and lit up in a roar of orange flames warping his silhouette into the roiling smoke. And then he was gone

That was very good timing on his end, Tsisk had to admit. He had managed to

embarrass her in front of not only her friends, but also ruined every chance of anyone here looking at her favourably in the near or far future for dabbling with the powers of hell, all while giving her exactly what he had promised. She intended to be as equally helpful to him, but that was a problem she would delight in tackling later.

The united battalion set off to conquer their own city and pave the way to its heart for one of the despised mindflayers. From Black Dragon Gate, Goblins and their brethren poured in and bound a good portion of the force, including Isobel and Jaheira, while Tsisk and her troop pressed on, towards Heap gate, where the brain currently stood. They lost more people in a skirmish as they crossed the Wide and got diminished to a small squad as they passed the gate and got ambushed. The Orthon threw himself into the battle in wild rage and ripped his enemies apart as if they were made of paper, yet refused to do anything more than protect the four people he was supposed to keep alive. His refusal enraged the normal soldiers, who saw their own getting wounded or die before their eyes in droves. Shadowheart solved the conflict by recklessly joining every skirmish, so the demon had to intervene to keep her safe.

When they had crossed the Gate and had clear sight to the Absolute, holes got punched in the sky. Tsisk held her breath. Reinforcements to the brain now likely meant they would never reach it.

A collective sigh was breathed as red dragons with riders broke through and attacked the mindflayers. The first, who shot after the brain in a straight line, got plucked out of the air by its tentacles, nimbler and faster than those of the nautiloids. After a short struggle, it went limp and got dropped to tumble to the ground. The other dragons veered clear of the superior enemy and concentrated on the less defensive nautiloids instead.

“Just a little closer and I can begin.” The Emperor said.

The way to the brain was now downhill from the plateau of the upper city, which

accelerated their pace. As they came unto a crossing right beneath the brain, a red dragon burst from a side-street. It was the one the brain had dropped, his Gith rider lolling about bonelessly in the saddle, a group of goblins cheering it on. The brain must have tadpoled him, Tsisk thought. It would have eaten the little pests any other way.

“The dragon is mine.” Aylin said, and threw herself forward with a battlecry. The dragon answered her with a roar itself and used its fiery breath against the oncharging Aasimar. With one mighty beat of her wings, she took to the air to evade it and delivered a blow to the dragons back flying by. She wounded it, and got grazed by a flick of its tail in return, tumbling away with frantically beating wings. The dragon jumped after her and both flew off in a wild chase only one of them would survive. The goblins panicked once the dragon was gone, and met their fate in an attempt at escape.

All of the squad who had made it to this point, positioned themselves to defend the Emperor. He closed his eyes to concentrate and raised the three stones above his head. Tsisk could feel a stutter in the constant booming that rattled her thoughts as he did so. It also attracted the attention of the brain.

Soon, all enslaved creatures close by rushed to their position. Mindflayers, freshly morphed or old and powerful, intellect devourers, goblins, bugbears, an ogre, even, attacked them from all sides and prevented all further thoughts about anything other than survival. Tsisk lost her sense of time as she fought alongside Flaming Fists and Harpers, ever fewer of them, lost to the monsters pouring in, or their own despair when they slumped to the ground or fled for the illusion of safety in the houses around. Gale had run out of ingredients for his stronger spells and felt unable to concentrate since he had to exert himself in a particularly nasty fray against several of the older and more experienced mindflayers, who countered his magic by lashing out with psychic attacks to his mind. Halsin had started the fighting by supporting the foot soldiers with druidic spells, but had long since gone on to defend the few left as a bear and drag the wounded to



safety. Astarions presence could only be measured by the bodies amassing in the alleys around them, so Tsisk could only conclude his condition by how often enemies passed his guard, which was increasingly more, but not yet all of them.

As she slipped and staggered from exhaustion on the slick, wet cobblestones, Shadowhearts shield saved her head from the cudgel of a bugbear. They kept together from then on, the tired and slowed dragonborn and the cleric only able to bear her shield because it was tethered to her arm. Every blow against it made her cry out in pain, before she sluggishly speared the adversary responsible.

“Tsisk!” She could hear the Emperor demand. “I cornered it, but it has retreated where I can’t follow *and* keep it bound.”

She hesitated. She was needed here. Every goblin could be their last. A thought rose slowly through the thick fog of her sleep-deprived mind. It was difficult to get ahold of it, but eventually she remembered: every goblin was controlled – or commanded by someone who was controlled – by the brain.

She let Lathanders Blood slip out of her hand. It would not help her where she went and she could barely hold it anyway.

The air around the Emperor felt energetic like Mystras weave, but instead of warm and inviting, it was cool and sleek as silk, rather demanding her attention and every fibre of her being from the moment she entered its sphere of influence, entwining her with the presence therein.

*Triumph.* She stood before eternity. Endless worlds connected by one mind, one goal: to achieve the grand design, to unite everything as one. It was close to completion. *Satisfaction.* The first world was falling, and it would tear down the next and the next until they all fell to her. Not everything went according to plan. The mortals She had chosen as her emissaries were brought to her weakened, their potential wasted. They would have completed the sum. Now they hardly mattered in her calculation.

Tsisk rebelled against the Absolute invading her mind, taking it for itself. They mattered very much. The line between Tsisk and the brain blurred increasingly.

*Curiosity.* What good could they be She had not accounted for? What could the murder-mind see that She didn't? *Gratitude.* It had brought Her here, it had devised the plan, it just couldn't see how great it really would be. It should join the grand design to see it finished. It had use, still. It was worth keeping in the calculation when everyone else could be reduced from it.

And she understood. It had to be her. Someone so unstable as to not let the brain know where she would fall. A game of chance, played by the one the Lich represented. And their luck had brought her here. So close to a decision. The Absolutes thoughts almost drowned Tsisks own. She fought to stay afloat on a current carrying her to future schemes, to forget the here and now so she could build and plan the next world in her head.

*Anger.* It needed to let go. The expendable ones could be the murder-minds to rule, the same way She ruled the True Souls. Let them be reliable values instead of fleeting variables. They would do its every bidding, never doubt, never stray.

It was tempting. If left to themselves, they would leave her, scatter to follow their own goals. They could not, if she took the offer layed before her. Possibilities unfolded. Would she be intrusive like Bhaal, incite fear through cruelty like Cazador, groom them like DeVir, manipulate like Gortash or enforce her will like Ketheric? She weighed the futures against each other and liked none. She had seen how every one of them got turned against, and decided she would rather wander the

world alone than suffer any of their fates. Her mind snapped back, clung to now like trees in a gorge, doomed to fall from the moment they sprouted and still growing despite of it.

*Impatience.* It was time. The grand design needed to come to a conclusion. With or without the murder-minds cooperation.

Tsisk felt smothered. The brains attack was oppressingly peaceful, not unlike the moment before sleep, locked into her head, unable to move a single finger. Feverish warmth encompassed her in a possessive embrace to draw her deeper, to never wake up again.

She struggled to stay, fought for control, but nothing she did prevented her from sinking further into darkness, to become part of a new order under the Absolute, one of complete certainty.

In a last rearing against her fate, Tsisk sought to break out of the pattern it forced on her and found the thrum of her heart, a steady rhythm, calm, and slower with every beat. She urged it on to go faster and stronger, to race against her doom until she felt it pound in her chest and made her ears rush with hot blood; and a song answered the beat. It joined her to sing of change, unbridled energy in its purest form, pressed into a shell that could barely hold it, it had transitioned with her to this place.

With the indomitable vigour of newly forming life it erupted out of its confines and grew towards the light. The Absolute answered the spreading and branching intruder by exerting more control, while Tsisk felt it rush through her and simply nudged it towards weaknesses she perceived in the brains defense. Its attempts to regain control became more vicious and futile at the same time. It could not stop the explosive expansion, taking hold throughout the Karsite weave in which the Absolute hid. And with its concentration on her gone, Tsisk had time to perceive her surroundings unhindered for the first time. She found what connected the

Absolute to the outside world, made it able to act here and there at once, and needed to be severed.

This whole experience reminded her of her visit to the weave with Gale, an ethereal composition of sensation, the manifestation of thought. Which meant she could do everything. Everything she could think of. And so she sank her claws into it to rip it apart, frayed it to pieces in an instant of vicious violence.

The attention of the Absolute returned to her with full force. It grazed Tsisks consciousness and everything went black.

## 45. THE END

Darkness.

She could not move. Her whole body hurt if she so much as moved a finger. Her pain-induced wheeze caused a little commotion around her, which in turn inspired her to force her eyes open.

The weathered face of Halsin peered down on her and his voice boomed through her skull with the force of a thousand trumpets tooting simultaneously.

“Are you with us again?”

“Stop screaming.” Tsisk croaked. “Please.”

Her voice had the quality of rusty hinges, left to themselves in a damp room for decades and only now exercised again. He smiled at her and returned to quietly whittling away at a piece of wood. Nothing interesting captivated her mind and her eyes fell closed.

The scratching and scraping of metal on wood had ceased, replaced by eery silence. She could hear occasional rustling, but nothing else, just her own breathing. Tsisk became bored. She risked a new try.

“What happened?” Much better than her last one.

“You made me walk through a field of flowers as you dropped to the ground like the sack of blood you are.” Astarions voice quietly accused her. “I’m not sure what the new council of Baldurs Gate will do about the massive tree growing in the middle of the street, but they sure are happy you swatted that commandeering blob of greasy self-indulgence out of the sky.”

This time, her eyes obeyed more readily as she opened them. Astarion had replaced Halsin on the chair in their room of the Elfsong tavern. He had backed it to the wall next to the entrance so he could have an eye on her and an escape

route ready at all times.

“Where is it?”

“Dead. On the ground of the river, stinking up the witches cauldron that is the harbour.” The next part he wheezed more with laughter than he spoke. “Gale needed three days to retrieve the crown and one more to prestidigitate away the stench. In the meantime, no one wanted to talk to our odorous wizard. I wonder why, he has such a delightfully boring personality.”

Four days. She ought to get back up soon. Her enemies would not wait for her and she was sure she had many.

But first, she wanted to sleep.

The next time she woke up, her stomach twisted, hurt and roared angrily.

“I’m hungry.” She told the person napping on the chair.

Shadowheart opened her eyes. “Haven’t the others brought you something?” Tsisk shook her head and noticed with satisfaction that she could do so without inducing piercing headaches, if she did it calmly. The emptiness she could feel behind her temple was a relief. [And what did the tadpole take with it? A particular ability? Her sight? Something else?]

Shadowheart sighed.

“Typical. The boys are all worked up in a tizzy because you’re sleeping – justifiably so, might I add – and completely forget about the important things.”

She heaved herself out of the chair. “Wait a moment, I’ll get something.”

From the moment of Shadowheart’s return, Tsisk’s period of grace was over, it seemed. Gortash had managed to place an article about them in Baldur’s Mouth – the gazette he owned that was the main source of information in the city – before he died. He must have anticipated her betrayal or at least his death, and prepared it to be published. Now everyone knew about the white dragonborn Bhaalspawn and its band of dreadful mercenaries: the despicable amorous vampire spawn, the dark daughter of Shar, the vicious, uncontrollable bear-druid and the

irresponsible, power-hungry wizard. Everyone with enough influence to enforce a visit came to gawk at them like animals in the zoo, just with less banging at the bars and with the excuse of congratulating them for the salvation of the great city of Baldurs Gate.

Tsisk was tempted to scare them away like the pests they were. And yet, having saved the city was the only thing sparing her from an untimely demise by the gallows, as Jaheira told her on a short visit and so she just made plans for her departure, whenever someone new came to feel the tingle of harnessed fear, having seen a real Bhaalspawn and living to tell of it.

One last promise and several goodbyes remained before she could do so.

At dinner, while everyone was seated and they had a moment to themselves, she recounted her relationship with Gortash and what she had gathered about it. That she had been the one to plan it all, steal the crown with him, found an elderbrain and enslaved it. And, after all that, got ambushed by Orin to be used as a test-subject for a new generation of magically enhanced tadpoles. The very same ones then planted into their heads.

Stunned silence followed her account of events, as she had anticipated. It was difficult even for her to accept what she had done.

“You know what astonishes me the most?” Gale asked eventually. “That I would deem everyone else mad as a hatter or out to command my admiration of sorts for telling me that, and somehow I believe every word you say, as unbelievable as it is.”

“You should not talk about it outside of this circle.” Halsin warned her. “Most people do not know you and could end up believing you are still the same person who did all of this.”

She agreed with him on being discreet about it, but not about the rest.

“I’m not sure I changed that much.”

“Sometimes the tiniest thing can bring about more change than the biggest

effort. Like the reason you do something for.”

Shadowheart looked at her less favourable.

“You’ve done enough that I would tell everyone else: come to me whenever you need help. But I would prefer it if you never did. Trouble follows you and I don’t want it to find me when I start my new life with my parents. They have seen enough.”

Her eyes darted through the room, then came to rest on her bandaged hands.

“I can’t risk to loose them or there will be nothing to live for.”

Tsisk put her own hand lightly on Shadowhearts. The cleric didn’t pull hers away, even though it had to be jarring to suffer her touch on the curse-ridden hands. It eased Tsisks fear she would never be welcome and made the pain of having to say goodbye a little more bearable. She lifted her hand before Shadowheart could decide it was too much for her. At least there was a chance of seeing her again. In a few years, under new circumstances, maybe.

“I understand. Can you promise me someth- two things?”

“And what would that be?” Shadowheart was suspicious.

“Have a good life. I want you to be happy.” Tsisk put Lathanders Blood to the clerics belongings under the table. “And find a safe place for this. It was helpful, but it does not belong to me.”

Shadowheart let out a small breath of relief she never noticed herself.

“I think I can do that, yes.”

“So do you know already where you’re going? I think I saw enough raw magical potential and wit you could be a student in Waterdeep. Just a few years of studies and you would be a formidable wizard.”

“Have you reconciled with Mystra?”

“Frankly, it was all very much the last few days, and I was busy doing other stuff, helping with the rebuilding – you know, mage hands are really useful for certain tasks too dangerous for humans, and-”

“So, no.”



“I was coming around to it. There was just so much to do the last days.”

“We will go to the temple tomorrow, then. I need to get out of here.” Tsisk decreed, before she spoke to Halsin directly. “I also want to learn one other thing from you.”

The druid nodded to her and continued to whittle away at the small figure he held.

Tsisk felt awful. Which was precisely why she needed to get moving again. A fast recovery required exercise. Gale had to magically disguise himself and Tsisk on their way to the Stormshore tabernacle as a white dragonborn was too easily recognizable and he himself had gotten himself somewhat famous with the local fishermen in the aftermath of the brains demise for his unrelenting quest after a stinking chunk of metal and his willingness to help whomever had the guts to ask the smelly wizard with the questionable reputation. Ultimately, it was this fame which earned him the crown itself, as it was brought to him by a fisher on his third day of searching, he told Tsisk.

They had first taken a little detour down to the place they had fought the brain and although the plants had been trampled by spectators already, the tree continued to stand proud and tall. Tsisk had never seen one like it. Its bark was smooth and dark green with a silvery shimmering waxy coating, its fern-like leaves waved in the wind and were people had carved into it to immortalise prayers next to profanities, it bled red sap. Its positioning in the middle of the crossing reminded her of something.

“Where is the Emperor?”

“I don’t know. He helped us bring you into one of the houses to hide after the tree grew and the brain had fallen, and then disappeared. The Orthon stayed just a little longer. We didn’t even notice fully they were gone until a group of Fists came by. They had heard the screams of the wounded...” He trailed off, uncomfortably reminded of that day.

Tsisk nodded and chose a path not as fraught with bad memories from then on. The screams of the wounded and dying entrenched themselves deep into memories, she knew that all too well.

Throughout all of the city, but especially in the lower parts, houses had collapsed from the tremors the brains breaking free had caused and around the gates, fires had spread uncontrolled as the intruders set the houses ablaze. Restoration of the damages was already in progress, but it would take a while, still, until no one would notice the gaps in the streets any more.

Gale had brought the crown with him today and stood before Mystras altar, turning it in his hands. It was now considerably smaller, its form no longer mind-bending in itself, but a rather simple, twisting thing, akin to an interwoven vine sporting blunt thorns.

“To think this thing could turn me into a god, still...”

The thought of him becoming a god sickened Tsisk, but she remembered the last time she let her anger carry her away and simply asked, a little harsh, but a lot calmer than she felt:

“Why would you want that?”

“To feel this power, to be able to change the destiny of a whole world and countless worlds beyond. Who wouldn’t want that?”

Tsisk could feel the rise in magical energy, the gentle touch of weave Gale taught her to recognize. She held on to the wizards elbow to keep him from stepping into it.

“But you already have.”

He looked at her questioningly. “Please elaborate.”

The energy around them built up and discharged as dancing flickers of purpleish light, transforming the hall and its imposing features into a reflection of the weave.

“You helped kill a being so powerful, the gods feared it. You made saving not

just this world but countless others possible. You already are the greatest wizard I know.”

“You don’t know any other wizards besides me.”

“The ones I met weren’t worth getting to know any better than I did.”

This transmuted his frown into a smile, until the weaves touch tugged at him impatiently and exacerbated Gales nervousness tenfold. Tsisk leaned closer to him to quietly tell him something, knowing full well Mystra would be able to hear her right now, regardless of how soft she spoke. But even just the act had to spite her, and the thought it would brought Tsisk joy.

“For once, you hold all the power in your hands, and she wants what you have. Use this position for what its worth.”

He laughed softly, then raised the crown over his head.

“Mystra! I have brought the crown. Would you be so kind as to take it off my itching hands?”

He would have to work on his deliverance, but at least he had called Mystra to him instead of the other way around.

The lazily floating lights shuddered and burned brightly, settling as glittering dust on an invisible body until Mystras form was framed in their glow.

“And so you did what no one deemed possible. I must admit, I thought all chances at containing the Netherbrain gone, when you refused me last time. I underestimated you and your allies.” She held her hands open to receive the crown from him, but he made no move to put it there.

“You will take the netherese curse from me. I know I could do it myself if I held the power of the crown, and will accept no less.”

“Of course I will. You earned it.”

She said with a slightly sour expression on her face. Being the weaker party in this negotiation irked her. Gale opened his hands for her to take up the crown. Once she held it in her left hand, she layed her right on his jaw, cupping his face where the wisps of the curse had halted their quest to break free from their

vessel. The dark blemishes on his skin lightened to the pale purple of a nearly healed bruise under her touch. All the while, her face showed the universal expression seen after taking a particularly bitter medicine.

“It is done. You are healed.” Mystras glowing silhouette turned to Tsisk. “I see a bright future ahead of you. Or imminent pain. Your irreverence could bring you far or spell your end one day.”

Tsisk bowed to her.

“That would be an end worth pursuing over waiting for my fate to get to me instead.”

“A delightful notion, if I weren’t on the receiving end of it right now.” Her image faded from the temples interior to leave it as inoffensively grey and dull as they had found it. “I’m looking forward to seeing you again, Gale of Waterdeep.” Her voice drifted through the room – an echo, bouncing lost and lonely from wall to wall.

“Would you please do me the honour of calling me Gale Dekarios from now on?” He asked Tsisk.

“Sure, Gale.”

A loud purr reverberated through the hall. The source was difficult to make out, but eventually a winged cat revealed herself by the flick of her tail. She perched in a tympanum above the statues amidst the depictions of winged lions roaring at each other in an attempt to look half as formidable as her and glowered down on them with her glowing eyes.

“You were right, Mr. Dekarios. The first impression wasn’t quite accurate. You should invite her to have a tea with your dear mother and I some time in the future. I presage she will have some interesting tales to tell when she comes around to accept it.”

“Tara! How good to see you. Of course I’ll invite her, I already did.”

“Oh, splendid!”

“And I’ll visit you one day. But now I need to go some place else.”

Tsisk said her goodbyes to Gale and Tara and left the temple to find Halsin on the slopes of Dusthawk Hill, the mountain towering over the cities eastern districts.

He awaited her in a small copse, a little ways away from the next path and the people using it. From under the canopies of the outermost trees, he sat and watched the Chionthar winding its way to the sea of swords, milky and briny from the effluents of the brain rotting in the harbour-bay.

“It is good to know it will be forgotten by the river in just a few weeks. The Shadowlands will need much longer than that, even with the Oakfathers blessing and the help of Oliver and Thaniel.”

For a while she just stood there and watched the river with him, until he continued.

“But that is not why you’re here.”

“No.”

“Then what drove you to me today?”

“I want to learn how to take the form of an animal, like you.”

He let out an amused huff.

“First of all, you don’t take it, it takes you. Normally, I would invite you to the grove to work on it, as this can be a tricky and often faulty process at first, especially when the mindset requires more work.”

“I don’t have that time.”

Halsin sighed an exasperated sigh.

“I thought as much. Your very nature is restless and headstrong. You will follow its call and make your experiences along your way. Let’s just begin the lesson and see where we end up.”

He recommended her to first try the forms of more ferocious animals as they seemed him closer to her own predisposition and would thus ease the transition. He guided her how to invite the spirit of the animal of her choosing, how to

establish her likeness and what to expect if she succeeded. She then tried for the next hours to follow his instructions, only to fail at every turn. The rending spirit of the saurian raptors rejected her for her weakness, the flighted raptors refused to acknowledge her existence from their perch high above, the mink tested her agility by daring her to catch it and then proceeded to humiliate her by climbing all over and under her garments and getting away before she was able to grab as much as a hair of its tail.

It was already getting dark when she tried her luck with the spirit of the cat. The fact it did not outright flee or attack her raised her hopes. They circled each other, puffed up in every way they could and ready to pounce.

“Remember, being alike does not mean being alike as rivals and competitors.” Halsin commented from the edge of the copse. Following his words, she relaxed her posture and so did the spirit. A promising sign. She tried to think of something a cat would enjoy and let herself be drawn to a rustle in the bushes, silently prowling towards it, a skill honed by years of practice on her side. The rustling in the leaves became her whole world, and when she jumped on it, the cats spirit delighted in the expectation of playing with the small animal until death would leave it still and boring. Tsisk shied away from that image and a grey mouse fled the foliage unharmed.

“A clouded leopard. Not bad as a first try. Now you know how, every other form will follow the same principle. But the easiest form to obtain will always be the one closest to your inner self.”

He was right, she felt uncomfortable in this skin. The cats spirit wasn't too pleased with her reaction and bridled at her control. Moments later, Halsin stood beside her in the form of a lynx, with its stubby tail and tufted ears. Together, they took off to explore the mountainside, had a few scuffles along the way and only returned at first dawn, the cats' desire to game sated.

**More talks, Halsin will take a truckload of children to the grove to foster**

“So? With whom are you going? Will you go to the grove with the big sturdy bear of a man or lock yourself in a tower full of dusty books with our knowledgeable, but uptight wizard?” Astarion leaned in the door to their room when she returned to the Elfsong tavern.

“Neither.”

He looked a bit lost and baffled.

“But you talked an awful lot with Gale yesterday and I heard what you did with Halsin last night on - “

She closed the distance between him and her in two languid steps. Fear glimmered in his eyes. He had made a mistake. In an effort to impress, he had allowed himself to be backed by a room with no second exit.

“You followed me.” Tsisk stated flatly. She wanted him to stew a little in his realisation.

“Nooo, darling. I wanted to have a nice walk in the dark, since I can’t have them in broad daylight anymore and you just happened to make an awful lot of noise. Next time invite me, though. Halsins just the guy to share a good nights fun and I’m curious how much of a bear he really is.”

“I’ll invite you next time I want to hone my stalking skills, since you are such a practised target yourself.”

He looked around nervously and Tsisk decided he had been scared enough, to the point he probably would not try that again. He had also not backed away from her, which she approved of. It was the most sure-fire way to excite more predatory behaviour. She walked past him into the room and began packing her belongings.

“So this is what you want? What you *really* want?”

“I meant what I said after the ritual.”

“Oh. Good. People don’t just promise something and then...keep their words. This is all rather disconcerting.”

Tsisk stopped what she was doing.

“I would have never done that if you didn’t show me you were trustworthy first.”

His high-pitched laugh faded away uncomfortably in the small room.

“Me? Trustworthy? I seduced you, I manipulated you, so you would help me against Cazador, nothing more.”

“You must be the best liar on the Sword Coast, then.”

He was not entirely convinced, hesitant to make a decision. And wary of her. He could not be allowed to leave alone. She pulled her knife.

“Give it back to me if you trust me enough not to kill you or keep it and watch me leave at next dawn. I am not staying any longer in this city.”

“And you are sure Bhaal is gone from your head?”

“He is.”

A knot in her stomach untwisted, when he placed her knife back in her hands. It made for a very good day of sleep, the best she could remember.

Gur give 3 children to A and T: the Gur have voted to outcast everyone with spawn children. Yet all were claimed except these. They are Gandrels children (Chessa and X) and a boy. Since no one will care for them and you have proven to be an ok spawn, we give the responsibility over to you to raise them as your own.

A: What? Why did you outcast them?

Ulna: because it relieves them of the duties to the clan so they can concentrate on their children first. But these have lost their parents in the fight and have no one to take up the role. We understand you can teach them to control the hunger and you seem to be a capable rogue. Teach them to hunt monsters like Cazador and the heritage of their ancestors will live forth in them.

T: Both of those were my decisions, so they will be my responsibility from now on, thank you very much. Don't you think they would hate being with the reasons why they are this way?

Ulna: Do you think us monsters? They were the first to be asked. I and them have seen you



fight. You will make fine hunters of them.

A: You claim the children of strangers? Don't you think they would have found another idiot to care for them?

T: I don't trust any other idiot out there to do right by them and care for them as parents. Most don't even know what being a spawn means. And now you won't mention that topic ever again or I will take my part of the spawn-force and absconce to somewhere else where they'll be safe from your words.

A: rolls eyes and sags together: Fine! Take on more spawns you can't handle.

T: I'll have you to help me, haven't I?

A defeated: Only for questions. I know nothing about children.

T: So do I.

You're fucked.