

~ Toy Soldier Saga Book III ~

Sable's Privateers

Diane Morrison



A Novel in the
SPYGLASS
Fantasy Universe®

Sable's Privateers

A Spelljammer® Novel

Book Three of the [Toy Soldier Saga](#)

Diane Morrison



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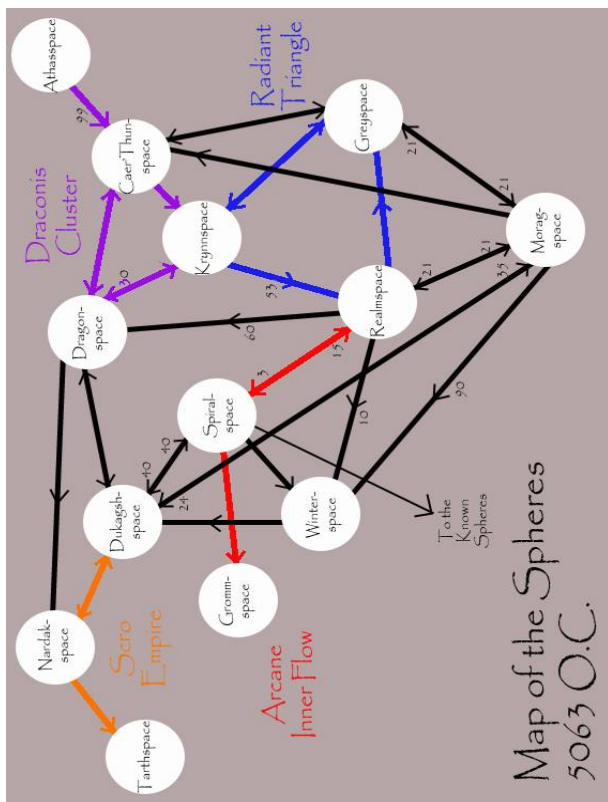


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A great war leaves a country with three armies: an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves.

German Proverb

War in the end is always about betrayal, betrayal of the young by the old, of soldiers by politicians, and of idealists by cynics.

Chris Hedges

I'm an outlaw, not a hero. I never intended to rescue you. We're our own dragons as well as heroes, and we have to rescue ourselves from ourselves.

Tom Robbins

Prologue

Y'Anid studied her husband with sad and wary eyes. "I'm sorry, Corin," she whispered. "I didn't know." She clutched her babies to her body fiercely, as though the sheer ardour of her defence would protect them.

Corin wasn't sure what he felt when he saw the two little girls his wife had delivered. Still streaked with the bloody viscera of birth, they were tiny and olive-skinned with honey-blond hair. Their ears were tall and pointed and graceful and their little hands, with their delicate orcish claws were like perfect miniatures. There was only one aspect that was awry; stunning lapis lazuli eyes, complete with distinctive elven pyrite sparkles. He was angry and he was sad. He was also aware of just how much he loved his wife, and that caused an unfathomable abiding pain that hurt him on a level so deep that he hardly knew what to say. Compounded with his sense of his blood brother's betrayal, he could hardly breathe.

He sucked at his tusks and scratched his black beard. What now? The tribes of the scro were scattered; their forces were fleeing across the far reaches of the Void as the Imperial Elven Navy hunted them like deer before wargs. He supposed that must have been Bolvi's wish. He could hardly believe it; Bolvi, his blood brother, his comrade at

arms, who had saved his life more times than he could count – an *elf*! He was sick with rage and shame. How much had he contributed to his own people’s demise by trusting Bolvi, by sharing the clan’s secrets?

He supposed there were probably signs that he should have seen. Bolvi’s refusal to take a wife. His reticence about his past. His strange unfamiliarity with many of the customs Corin took for granted. Corin had attributed his *na’kor*’s nuptial reluctance to love for a woman he could not have, and resolved to keep his secret. He’d written off the silence as wounds of the spirit, and Bolvi’s lack of social graces as a mercenary’s rough upbringing. And was Bolvi even his *name*? He supposed not. It didn’t sound *elvish*, did it?

Why lie with Y’Anid, then, before leaving? Y’Anid had confessed her dishonour as soon as Corin reunited with her in exile. “We both knew he was going off to die, Corin,” she’d told him – pain enough! They had wept together, Corin and Y’Anid, for this honourable scro they both loved, and Corin had forgiven his wife and his best friend their indiscretion. When they learned that Y’Anid was pregnant – news she had shared with quiet uncertainty – he was happy, and he resolved to raise the children of his *na’kor* as if they were his own. Custom demanded no less, and neither did his heart.

Now, this.

He turned on his heel and left the room, nearly running into Olaf, his eldest son. There was a crate in the lad's hands, and it bore the Bloodfist clan rune. Corin's anger evaporated upon meeting his son's eyes. Black-skinned like his mother Nakyra, but with Corin's own bright blue eyes; a feature he was never certain about on his own face, but one that seemed perfect on the young lad. And a strapping boy he was too! He was going to be a fine spacefarer and perhaps even a Warpriest. Certainly he had the brains for it.

"Durkarr," began Olaf respectfully, "this arrived for you, brought by this girl in a Goblin Blade." A small but sturdy female goblin stepped forward and curtsied gracefully. She looked vaguely familiar but Corin couldn't place her.

"Are you Lord Corin Bloodfist?" she asked him boldly. Her orange eyes were fierce and they met his without a trace of servility; unusual for her race.

An assassin? His heart began to trip-hammer in his chest. What was in that package that his beloved son was holding? "Who's asking?" he demanded warily. "Who are you?"

"Forgive me, my name is Ala," the goblin maid announced. "My father's name was Graak. I am loyal to the clan, but we've never met."

Relief flooded through Corin's body. "Yes, I am Lord Bloodfist," he acknowledged. "Welcome home, Ala; with Dukagsh occupied, this is our new estate." He indicated the package. "What have you brought us here?"

Ala smiled. "I was given this by a green-skinned scro with blond hair and blue eyes. He told me that I was to describe him to you in detail. He was about your height but slighter of build. He had a Bloodfist rune in his left tusk but not his right and a scar on his ear. It seemed to be a whip scar to me, my lord; I've seen them before among other goblins. He also wore a black pearl earring."

Corin reeled. That was Bolvi; there was simply no way it could be anyone else! But now the fear returned. "Okay, I recognize him by your description, Ala. What else did he tell you?"

"He told me to seek you out here on Tarth," she continued, "and that I should give this directly to you, if you were still alive. If not, I was to give it to your eldest son. Failing that, I was to find the clan lady Y'Anid."

"That's why I took it, father," Olaf explained. "She's describing Uncle Bolvi, right? That means he's alive, right?" He was excited and happy. Corin licked his lips. How could he tell his son the truth about the uncle he idolized? It would break his heart!

"He was when I left him, my lords," Ala confirmed.

“Give that to me, Olaf,” Corin growled, which wiped the joyful grin from the lad’s smiling face. He took the crate, which was surprisingly heavy, and headed into the study, still mostly unfurnished and likely to be for some time. “Don’t come in here!” he commanded, and he bolted the doors.

He hefted the crate onto his empty desk, marvelling that the diminutive goblin had managed to carry the thing. Did he even dare to look? Was his death lurking in this box, the final insult from his supposed blood brother?

But he knew he had to know. Maybe this box held the answers he so desperately sought. Maybe it contained the reason *why*.

He pried open the crate with his knife.

At first he couldn’t see what might be hiding in among the sawdust and plantain leaves. He dug through it until his hand found something solid, flat and cold. He worked his fingers around the item until he found its edges, and then he drew it carefully from the packing material.

It was a reliquary. A reliquary he knew very well. It was made of solid black marble, and it was adorned with lapis lazuli eyes limned with greenish faerie fire, though he had to pull away plantain leaves adhered to the marble with sap to reveal them.

When Corin had last seen this most sacred relic it was still in its place of honour in the black marble building that was Dukagsh's Tomb. He'd heard that the elves had destroyed it. He understood why; but it still wounded him deeply, as he was sure it had wounded all living scro; and that, of course, was the reason.

But if this reliquary had been saved . . . He unfastened the clasp that bolted the lid and released the ancient brass hinges. Inside were ashes and bones, just as he had hardly dared to hope, as well as a piece of folded-up parchment.

Gingerly Corin removed the paper and brushed off the grey ash. He realized that his fingers were trembling and he tried to make them stop. He unfolded the paper and there, familiar as the backs of his own hands, was Bolvi's handwriting, hastily scrawled and badly blotted:

Na'kor:

I will likely never see you again, so I sent you a present – and a charge. I just couldn't let the elves have it. Guard it well. And Olaf, if you're reading this instead of your father, know that I loved him, and Mother Y'Anid too. And I'm sorry.

Bolvi

“Durkarr?” Olaf inquired through the doors of the office.
“Father, what’s wrong?”

Corin snapped the reliquary shut. He unbolted the doors and looked into his son’s questioning eyes. “Come with me,” he commanded, and headed into his bedchamber. His wife was now nursing the girls, whispering reassuringly to them. She started and looked up at him – with fear, he was hurt and unhappy to note – and Olaf blinked in surprise at the sight of the blond babies. He met his father’s gaze with confusion.

“Olaf,” said Corin, “I would like you to meet your sisters. Well,” he amended, “Mom Y’Anid not actually being your mother, I guess they’re more properly your cousins.” He showed the note to his wife. She made a startled peep when she saw the handwriting. Then she burst into tears.

“What did he send you, Corin?” she asked in a voice so low he could barely hear it.

He smiled and he met her eyes and his son’s as well. “The bones of Dukagsh,” he announced. His grin widened. “Bolvi is a scro after all!”

Part One:

Between the Rock and a Hard Place

Chapter One

Spacefarers everywhere agreed: the Rock of Bral was a wretched den of vice, thievery and betrayal; the midden-pit of the Universe. But everyone came there eventually. That's what Shaundar Sunfall was relying on. Sooner or later, if his sister yet lived, she would come to this place.

He had been in port three months now, however, and he wasn't sure he could wait here much longer. The handful of coins he'd arrived with when he hit the shore had quickly dwindled away. Shaundar had no idea how expensive everything was here. The last time he had been on the Rock, he'd still been a member of the Imperial Elven Navy, and they'd seen to his needs at the base. Now that he was officially a deserter, to return to the Navy would be to court death – or worse. He shuddered at the memory, and his scarred back twinged painfully.

He was trying to find work along the dockyards. Tug-jammer, loader, supply clerk, common labourer; he'd tried it all to no avail. He'd even tried to get on at the Ironworks, no matter how horrible foundry work was to him. It seemed that nobody but elves wanted to hire elves in the aftermath of the War, and they wanted to know why he wasn't with the Navy. And what could he tell them? He made up a different excuse every time, but either he'd become a poor liar or they really didn't care

and just weren't interested in hiring elves at all. He couldn't blame them, really.

He supposed that it didn't help that he was drinking again. But otherwise, he didn't sleep. This was already his second boarding house. The first had dumped his belongings in the street, citing frequent screaming in the middle of the night as the reason for his eviction; and what could he say? When he did sleep, his dreams were terrible and yes, more often than not he shrieked himself awake. Better to drink himself into a stupor; at least he would get some rest, and he was a quieter tenant. But, he hadn't paid his rent yet this week and he knew eviction couldn't be far off. Since the meals were included with the rent, it had also been three days since he'd eaten. He was trying to avoid it, but he knew if he got no work today, he would have to steal his dinner.

Not that dinner was anything to write home about (*not that you have a home to write to*, came the thought unbidden from the sludge of his subconscious; he clamped the lid down on *that* part of his mind as quickly as he could). Greasy mutton, dried mushrooms, rotten potatoes and some tough, leathery substance that was likely horse-meat, lightly garnished with something that had probably been green once, usually stewed into an unidentifiable greyish slop. He supposed he could expect no better, in this place where gold was supreme, and Raven Talon had taught him never to turn down a meal. He was hungry enough now that grey slop would go over pretty well! He'd certainly eaten worse.

Shaundar slugged along past the cathouses and opium dens, the taverns and the gambling holes, his hand firmly on his purse and his gaze fierce and wary. He was big enough that most thieves and muggers thought twice about molesting him, and the visible scars and tattoos were a further deterrent. All to the good. A few of the whores blew kisses at him, but when they got a good look at his threadbare clothes and hungry eyes they pretended they were waving at someone else. He chuckled cynically. The Priestesses of Luthic would have taken his hand and drawn him into their sanctum. They would have covered him with kisses and caressed him with their healing hands. What interest could he possibly have in common whores by comparison?

With that thought, he immediately felt guilty. What right did he have to think of anyone as “common whores?” How were they so different from him? Actually, when you came right down to it, prostitution was certainly a much more honourable way to make a living than thievery; or soldiering, for that matter. He just didn’t have what they needed. He was lonely, that was all.

Realizing that thought stopped him in his tracks and doubled him over as though someone had stabbed him in the bowels. Yes, crushing, overwhelming, heartbreaking loneliness. His family, dead. His betrothed, dead. His adopted family and his lover forever separated from him by duty. His whole planet, everything he ever knew from his childhood, gone. Even the Navy that had given him purpose and a sense of

belonging, denied him now due to personal honour, corrupted into something unrecognizable and tyrannous. Had he spoken three words to anyone since his arrival on Bral, save “Are you looking for workers?” Had anyone said a word to him, save, “Three silver, please,” or “You there! Stop loitering!”?

What in the Demonweb was he even *doing* here? Why had he chosen to turn his ship from the welcoming, incinerating heat of Tarrak Gar and Gruumsh’s Eye? The vision of his sister was probably nothing more than desperate, mindless survival instinct, grasping and useless and empty of purpose or reason.

One of Bral’s enormous wharf rats strolled brazenly up to a barrel of waste behind a tavern and began to help itself to supper.

Shaundar considered it. Rats, yes. Very meaty.

He palmed his dagger, focused his gaze, made his hand stop shaking, and threw. His aim was true.

He collected his dagger and the dead rat from the barrel, and he realized that there was a half-eaten bread trencher filled with stew sitting on top of everything. And it was still steaming. He ate it without hesitation and the head of a slightly mushy cabbage beneath it as well. And then he felt better.

“Get out of here, you bum!” a surly voice snarled from the tavern door, as a scowling dwarf in an apron came to toss more garbage in the barrel. He threw it carelessly and Shaundar had to dodge to avoid being splattered with the bones of some sort of fowl and a half-finished salad.

“Sorry,” Shaundar grunted. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment. But he took his dead rat all the same. The fleas had already marched away from its corpse. He hoped that they’d found a new home in the dwarf’s beard.

Part of the problem was the barrios. Everyone kept to their own in the Low City of Bral. He could see that he’d wandered into the Dwarven District and the spacefaring dwarves didn’t seem to have much use for elves anyway. And the fact that he didn’t have a job was something that the hardworking people just didn’t understand; there was always work for dwarves with other dwarves, and what were you good for if you weren’t working? The halflings (Shaundar preferred the term *hin* which he’d learned from his Torilian ancestors, but no one in space seemed to use that much) rightly didn’t trust anyone who wasn’t a halfling. He’d tried his luck in Gifftown, figuring that there *had* to be some way to hook up with a mercenary company or something there, but he found that since he was an elf, no one took him seriously when he said he was a marine and they wouldn’t even let him prove himself. And he didn’t speak Norse or Shou.

He bought a bottle of rum for the evening and as a light drizzle started he returned to his room, tromping up the three flight walk-up in a narrow alley; only to find that the lock on his door had been changed.

“Ye can have yer stuff back when ye’ve paid the rent,” snarled the landlord behind him, a human male with a thick black beard, a beer belly, and no concept of what soap or water were for.

Shaundar considered it but anger simmered deep in his belly. “A full suit of armour is worth a lot more than five silver pieces,” he explained.

The landlord folded his thick arms. “Guess ye’ll come up with it pretty fast then,” he grinned. His teeth were like ship rails after a broadside.

Shaundar sighed. “Let me trade you this bottle and some labour in the kitchen or something instead,” he offered. “I peel potatoes pretty well; I’ve had lots of practice.”

The landlord’s grin widened. “Five silver or sleep in the rain without yer stuff,” he insisted.

Shaundar studied the lock. Yes, it was every bit as well made as the last one.

He aimed a well-placed kick at the mechanism with his heavy orcish war boot. It snapped easily and the door banged open.

“Ye can’t do that!” the landlord roared.

Shaundar heard an inhalation and a grunt. His brain instantly made the connection; he was about to be hit from behind with something heavy, probably in the head. His training took over. He managed to get his skull mostly out of the way as the sap fell. It skittered off of his occipital bone, rather than caving it in, and as he came down and rolled withershins it struck his left shoulder. Something cracked and it went completely numb and dead, along with his entire left arm. His vision doubled and blurred. *Shit*, Shaundar thought irritably as his right arm came up to return the strike. He saw the elbow heading for the landlord’s greasy throat, almost of its own accord, and when he realized at the last second that he was going to kill the man he diverted it and struck his jaw instead. The bone shattered and three of his teeth popped out of his mouth as his eyes rolled up to show their whites. He almost toppled from the landing, but Shaundar grabbed his shirt and eased him to the floor. He regretted it instantly; the pain shooting up his arm and neck was excruciating.

Shaundar glanced around the shoebox of a room. No, nothing appeared to be missing. His spiked, red Bloodfist armour was still hanging on its rack, properly oiled and polished. As the inevitable

headache started to set in he put it on. Between flashes of red and green accompanied by waves of pain and nausea, he gathered the last of his meagre possessions into his ragged haversack. By some miracle the rum bottle had survived being dropped and not rolled off the landing, so he gathered it up too. Briefly he considered leaving his tobacco in return for the back rent, but decided that trying to sap him with what he now could see was a bag of lead shot, spilled out next to the landlord's hairy fist, voided any right to payment. With his arm dangling uselessly Shaundar slung the bag over his right shoulder, hooked his helm onto his forearm by the strap, and staggered over the landlord's beer belly, down the stairs and into the street.

Between the pain and the double vision he could barely see where he was going, and as flashes of red passed over his sight he forgot for brief seconds what he was doing. *Must have been hit pretty hard*, he realized dimly in some dark recess of his aching mind. Waves of nausea rolled in with the red vision, accompanied by a strange sense of unreality. He remembered this sensation in a vague way from his training at Permafrost and again from his time in the Navy hospital. He was going to be sick and useless for a while, and it was going to get worse before it got better. Not to mention that the landlord was likely to be paying for protection and those "protectors" were likely to come looking for him. And his arm was completely out of commission. The sap must have broken his scapula or his collarbone. He needed to find somewhere to hole up.

Shaundar wandered into the narrow alleyways and people gave him a wide berth. Some of the whores even crossed the street to get away from him. So be it. He leaned against a wall at the corner of a tavern while a wave of illness washed through him, and continued when it passed. Mostly he fled on pure instinct, heading for the dark and the quiet and as far away from the boarding house as possible.

Somewhere nearer to the docks he found a dark alley behind a stone building that was boxed in by enormous wine barrels, forming a protective barrier on three sides. It was dry, didn't appear to be well-frequented and there was no sign of cardsharps or beggars. Perfect. He crawled in behind the barrels. He now felt as though he was trying to think through peas porridge, but he realized he had to do something about his arm. Glad that he had rum to ease the pain, he pulled the cork free with his teeth and slugged back about a third of the bottle. Then he dug the shabbiest of his three shirts out of his haversack (a process that took almost ten minutes with one hand and the throbbing, splitting headache) and tore it into strips to bind his arm up and against his body. This required more creativity than Shaundar presently possessed, really, but finally he settled on using his right hand to force the fingers of his left hand to hook over the top of his breastplate, then pressing the arm up with his knees while he used his teeth to tie the sling. When that was accomplished, he lay back against the soothing cold stone to ease the pounding in his head and the sickness in his belly for a few moments. When the nausea eased he tipped back a little more of his painkiller,

wishing fervently for *quesstiasa* or maybe even some blueglow moss liqueur, and he waited to see if he would survive the night.

“There’s a drunk in the alley again,” Sally informed the madam, a pretty little gnomish whore with fiery red hair.

Molly looked up from her pipe and her book and sighed. “Okay, I’ll take care of it,” she promised. “Can you back me up?”

“Sure,” the leggy brunette agreed, hefting the heavy wrought-iron candelabra they kept by the back door strictly for this purpose. “It’s raining; you might want your cloak.”

Molly rested her pipe on its gilded stand and stood up to shake out her skirt and pull up her red silk bustier. She couldn’t blame the drunks for wanting to sleep in the back alley – it was quiet, dark, well-sheltered and relatively clean – but it was bad for business. Often they muttered to themselves and they usually smelled terrible. If they looked like they weren’t too dangerous she sometimes brought them in for a bath, and if they weren’t crawling with lice she would sometimes rub their shoulders. It was amazing what simple touch could do to heal a wounded spirit. “What do you make of this one?” she asked her companion as she drew her fox-fur cloak over her shoulders.

“Dangerous,” Sally confessed. “Very dangerous. Half-orc, maybe. He’s wearing some spiked armour and he’s muttering and yelling in Orcish.”

Yelling; great. That usually meant violence. She pulled out her makeup compact and clutched her symbol of Sune in her hand as she intoned a prayer. A flash of energy formed around her in a bubble and disappeared, though the lingering magic tickled her nose and the little hairs on her neck and arms. She then spoke the same prayer again and touched Sally.

“Okay, let’s go,” Molly nodded, and they headed out the back door together.

It took a moment to adjust to the darkness, even for gnomish vision. Sure enough, Molly saw steel-toed orcish war boots and bits of spiked armour on the prone figure behind the barrels. An empty liquor bottle lay on the cobblestone and the aroma of rum and vomit permeated the air. Strangely, though, the scent of orcish musk was faint. The drunk was moaning incoherently; and the moans were suddenly interrupted by a roared diatribe in what sounded like the guttural orc tongue. Sally cast the gnome a knowing look.

Molly met her gaze and nodded, and as Sally readied her improvised club, Molly reached out and gently shook one of the boots.

“Hey there honey,” she said. He didn’t respond so she shook it harder. “Hey,” she repeated.

The drunk bolted upright and was on his feet so quickly that Sally, no stranger to trouble, let out a little squeak and nearly dropped the candelabra. His eyes were so wide and staring that Molly could see their whites. He dropped immediately into a fighting stance that put his bound-up arm out of the way. Molly was startled to realize that this was no half-orc; this was an elf!

The elven drunk in the orcish armour saw her face and something – was it recognition? – dawned in those frightened eyes. “Molly?” he mumbled. “It is Molly, right? Where’s Garan and Yathar?”

He knows me, she realized. Something about him was familiar, but she couldn’t place it. “What are you talking about, sailor?” she inquired in a deliberately calm tone. Sally lowered the candlestick ever so slightly.

He blinked, obviously deeply confused. One eye wasn’t focusing properly. *Oh Hells, he’s had a stroke or something*, Molly thought with alarm. She’d heard of such things happening when a man had too much drink, though she’d never heard of it happening to an elf. Still . . .

“Garan. Yathar,” he said again. “How about Tyeletae? She’s the little ruffian with the crutches and one leg.” He winced. “Guess that giff

hit me harder than I thought,” he admitted. His voice was tinged with some guttural accent that she couldn’t place. “Or was it the mind flayer?” He blinked in bewilderment again and shook his head, which was immediately followed by a cringe and an inarticulate whimper. “I need help,” he explained. “Thoughts aren’t . . . things aren’t . . .” His good hand went up to his head.

The connection struck her like a ballista bolt. “My gods, honey,” she whispered, “what’s happened to you?”

“So you *do* know him?” asked Sally with a quaver of uncertainty.

“So do you,” Molly pointed out. She put her hand on the orcish breastplate and the eye that was still properly focusing met hers. The other made a gallant effort, but to no avail. Yes, she remembered; it was those unusual eyes that had drawn her. They were periwinkle blue with platinum sparkles, not silver, gold nor copper like the other elves of Realmospace. “Come on in, sailor,” she invited. “Let me take care of you.”

They brought him into the temple and laid him down on some pillows, where they stripped him of his armour and then his shirt so that they could get a look at the injuries. His arm was purple from the shoulder to the bicep and his hand was swollen up like a giff’s. There was a silver ring with a simple runic design on the forefinger; Molly didn’t think they’d get it off without wire cutters, and she seriously considered

finding some because it was buried in the puffy flesh. Sally winced. “Good fight,” she remarked. “You think that’s broken?”

“Definitely fractured anyway,” Molly agreed. “Let’s hope it’s the shoulder and not the collarbone. I’m going to give him some laudanum.” She was a little afraid to do this; it could be dangerous, considering what he had already drunk, but she couldn’t see any other way to make the pain of her work tolerable. “Here honey,” she exhorted, “drink some of this.” She poured the laudanum into his mouth.

He made a face, and when she let him stop drinking it he swore in some language she couldn’t understand. Sally was right; it sounded goblinoid to her.

Eventually he eased into a stupor, and then she dared to manipulate the shoulder. It felt like the clavicle was still attached. “Must be the shoulder-bone,” she nodded.

“Good; the clavicle never heals right,” Sally observed. “Anything else?”

Molly ran her fingers through his golden hair, now partly sticky with vomit, and along his head and neck. Sure enough, there was a goose egg rising on the back of his skull. “Concussion, thank the Lady,” she sighed. “Not a stroke.” She examined his sensitive elfen ears, and while she sighed at the black pearl on his earring (which explained a lot) and

wondered where the whip scar had come from (which didn't,) nothing else seemed freshly damaged. It was amazing that he still had all his teeth, being a spacefarer. Something gold glinted in one of his canines though. Perhaps it had been damaged and repaired.

Sally dipped a cloth in a bowl of water and wiped away the vomit and the dirt from his upper torso. She recognized the uniquely elven celestial compass tattoo on the peaches-and-cream skin, but there were flak marks, a triangular indent in his ribcage, and a crescent-shaped scar in the center of his muscular chest, still new enough that it was an angry pink. Her eyes widened. "The Elven Navy kids!" she exclaimed. "The ones who got into that brawl with Lars the Dark! This was the handsome young mage, wasn't it?"

Molly nodded. "The one I singled out as most in need of a blow job."

Sally sighed as she began to go over his torso with exploratory fingers. "You think that earring explains where his friends are?" she inquired sadly.

Molly nodded. "His ship went down and he didn't. Probably."

Sally shook her head. "I hope that brave little gold elf girl didn't go down with it," she murmured wistfully. "Did you see her beat that giff with her crutch?"

They shared a laugh. “Right in the gonads,” Molly agreed.

Sally shook her head. “Wow, he has to have put on about eighty pounds. Filled out nicely for an elf. What happened, did he lose his wizard abilities or something?”

Molly shook her head, at a loss.

“Nothing here,” the woman reported as her hands finished their assessment. “Let’s get his trousers off.”

His legs seemed all right too; something they hadn’t been sure of by the way he had staggered into the temple. There was an old scar that looked like a bad break in his upper thigh, the type where the bones pierce the skin and leave rough muscle. Nothing wrong below the waist that she could see either, except some bedbug bites, easily enough taken care of with prayer.

“Okay, help me sit him up so that I can check his ribs and his spine,” Molly requested, and Sally helped pull him into a sitting position. Molly put her hand to her mouth and gasped in horror. “Oh my gods,” she whispered.

“What is it?” Sally demanded.

“Come see,” Molly urged behind her lacquered nails. Sally made sure that Molly had him propped up and then she came around to look.

Both of them stared in shock at the mess of scarring. Molly had seen whip scars before. Come to think of it, this elf showed some thin white ship discipline marks when she’d met him the first time. But now his body hadn’t been whipped, it had been *flayed*. Most of his back was marred with scar tissue that crawled in thick, raised angry red ridges that tangled and spread like tree roots. He was lucky he hadn’t died of the gangrene. She knew they likely still caused a lot of itching and pain.

Sally hitched in her breath. “Damn! This poor lad! Is there anything you can do for him?”

Molly shook her red curls around her like a mane. “No, they’re basically healed. It would take a regeneration prayer and I don’t dare risk it now.” She ran her fingertip lightly over one crawling mark that bisected a tattoo of a gammaroid, a giant turtle-like creature, with silver and golden auras that adorned his right shoulder. “Golden Shellback,” she breathed. “How about that?”

The brunette bit her lip. “He’s obviously been across the Flow to Hell and back.”

The gnome ran her fingers down his spine and along his ribs. The task was made considerably more difficult by the horrific scarring,

but she was able to determine that though some of the joints between his vertebrae were a little swollen (arthritis from old injuries, she wondered?) there were no broken bones.

“Okay, I think it’s safe to cast the healing,” she decided. “Can I get you to pour him a bath, lovey?”

Sally eased the spacer back down to rest his head on Molly’s lap. “Sure I can,” she agreed, standing up carefully in her sharp heeled boots. “We should get him some new clothes if we can too. I can get Anna to wash them, but they’re basically falling apart.”

“We’ll find him something in the meantime,” Molly promised. She ran her fingers gently over the side of his face. He moaned low in his throat and mumbled, “Narissa.” Molly remembered this was the name of the lovely flaxen-haired elf maid that was his betrothed, the one who’d ended the fight by threatening to blast the smugglers with a lightning bolt. How in love they’d been! Such a cute couple! But she couldn’t help but notice the golden heart charm resting at the hollow of his throat; a filigreed, dainty piece of jewellery much more suited to an elven lady than to this hardened spacefarer; and if she remembered correctly, the last time she’d seen it, his flaxen-haired elf maid had been wearing it.

“Gods watch over you and heal you,” Sally prayed as she invoked the power of her goddess.

“You’re in pretty rough shape, *teu’revanthas*,” Yathar told Shaundar in a worried voice.

Shaundar looked up at him from the bath that Molly, the pretty gnomish trollop, had poured him into. “Everything hurts,” he admitted.

“Molly will take care of you,” his blood brother assured him, his gold-speckled green eyes twinkling.

“Hang in there, mate,” said Garan bracingly, flashing his trademark grin. “It will get better.”

“Where is everyone?” demanded Shaundar, suddenly struck with a premonition of disaster. He bolted upright and Yathar and Garan disappeared.

For a moment there was a strange doubling of his vision. He wondered how it was that his shipmates had just suddenly vanished, along with the water in the tubs. Then he realized that he wasn’t where he’d thought he’d been; though it was similar, things were in slightly different places and the dimensions of the bathroom were different. He wondered what had happened to Garan and Yathar; and then he remembered. They were dead.

Everything that had happened came flooding back to him then at once and despair ground his heart into the ground like an orcish war boot. He put his face in his hands. *Oh teu'revanthas, how I miss you*, he mourned in his guilt and his grief. Tears came unbidden but he covered his face with a wet cloth and smothered them.

He snapped into focus when he heard footfalls approaching, and in that second he felt his mind list to port as he saw the very gnomish harlot he thought was bathing him not long before. He shook his head and blinked to banish the phantom as his shipmates' phantoms had been banished, and when he opened his eyes she was still there. She had some very fluffy and inviting towels loaded in her arms and she was studying him with deep green-black eyes full of concern. "How're you doing, sailor?" she asked him with genuine feeling. It had been so long since he had heard the sound of a voice that cared whether he lived or died that he had to swallow back tears again.

"Molly?" he whispered incredulously.

She placed the towels on one of the high-backed wooden chairs (a memory of Tyeletae seated on one of them with the stump of her leg dangling over the side, as Yathar tenderly helped her undress bobbed unbidden to the surface and his kicked it back below furiously) and came to wrap her tiny hand with its lacquered nails over his bicep, covering part of his Black Arrows tattoo. He flinched uncontrollably and

immediately regretted it. How long had it been since anyone had touched him with any gentleness? (Another memory was conjured from the subconscious depths of his mind, this one of jade-green orcish skin and intoxicating musk and jasmine, and he wrestled it immediately back into the dark as well.) He expected the pretty gnome to jerk back, but she didn't. Her rouged lips thinned and her eyes softened and she rubbed at the muscle instead; which he discovered was tense and sore only when some of that went away. "I'm pleased you remember me well enough to remember my name, honey," she simpered, "but I don't think I ever did learn yours." Her eyes encouraged him to fill in the blanks.

Upon closer study, he realized that Molly didn't look quite the way he remembered her. Those lovely emerald eyes were framed with tiny wrinkles that hadn't been there before; faint, but present. When those almost invisible lines crinkled in puzzlement he understood that he was being rude. He was alarmed when he found that he had to think about the answer. "Shaundar," he said at last. "My name is Shaundar Sunfall."

"Nice to re-meet you, Shaundar," she smiled.

"Where in the Hells am I, Molly?" he burst out in his confusion.

She blinked, and then she shook her head. "I'm sorry! I didn't even realize how disorienting this must be for you. You're in the Temple of Lady Firehair. On the Rock of Bral," she added when she saw he was

even more confused. “We moved here about three years ago because business on Dragon Rock sort of dried up.”

“How did I get here?” he demanded. He couldn’t remember anything past the point when he had kicked in the door of his room.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure, sweetie. Sally found you in the back alley. We thought you were a drunk,” she explained apologetically. “You had a demon of a bump on your head and your shoulder was broken.”

Ah, a concussion. That explained much. “Did you heal me?”

“Not me, dear,” Molly clarified, “Lady Firehair. But I asked her to.”

He smiled. Someone had cared enough to pray for him. That was a great feeling. “I’m in your debt,” he confessed.

She waved a hand impatiently. “Of course you aren’t.” They fell silent, unsure of what to say next. After a moment, Molly picked up a sponge and some black-dyed soap that smelled faintly of licorice. “Wash your back?” she offered.

He twitched. And let her see the scars? “No thank you,” he refused uncomfortably, trying to press his back into the porcelain.

Her eyes softened again. “Who do you think undressed you, spacer?” she asked directly. “I promise I’ll be gentle.”

Shaundar’s face flushed with embarrassment. But obediently he leaned forward so that she could wash his back.

Molly soaped up the sponge and ran it tenderly over the marks and in the spaces between. She really was very gentle. The pain was no sharper than pricking his finger with a needle.

“If you want to talk about it, I’m here to listen,” she offered in a quiet, soothing voice.

He closed his eyes. What was there to say?

“You don’t have to,” she added hastily. “Just telling you I’m willing.”

“That’s good to know,” he breathed. As an afterthought he added, “Thank you, Molly.” Still self-conscious, he swallowed sharply and confessed, “I have no money to pay you for this. I could probably . . .”

“We still operate mostly on donation,” she interrupted him, “but I wasn’t asking. Seems to me we owe you something more than a bath for that donation you gave us last time anyhow.”

Shaundar smiled. Yes, that was right. He'd had prize money burning a hole in his pocket and had given much of it to the Temple-Brothel; which was a damn sight better than what had happened to the rest of it – buying horses from the populace of Leira so that the Navy could repel the Scro Invasion there. “Thank you,” he said again. His voice broke. He cleared his throat.

His back washed, she filled a basin and rinsed him. Immediately the damaged nerves started itching with the change in temperature. He tried not to twitch. “Wash your hair?” Molly offered, and Shaundar, past protesting, leaned back his head and let her pour the water over him. As she scrubbed soap into his scalp – a joy that made him bite his lip to avoid moaning in delight – she met his gaze from above him and inquired, “You need a place to stay?”

He sighed. “I’ll manage.”

“Well,” she went on, “it’s no charity I’m offering you. We’re priestesses but we *are* in the Universe’s oldest profession. We could use some protection. I don’t know what they feed you boys in the Navy,” she ran her hand over his shoulder and arm, giving it an affectionate and appreciative squeeze, “but you look like an elf you might not want to mess with. And I guess they trained you to fight if someone was stupid enough to start something, didn’t they?”

Well, didn't that beat all? She was offering him a job! He smiled. "*Gul; av*, they did." When she fluttered her eyelashes at him his grin widened and he added, "It would be my honour to protect the ladies of the Temple, Molly."

"Glad to hear it," she beamed. Then she kissed him.

He kissed her back. She didn't protest. Quite to the contrary; she pressed her face to his and touched his lips with her tongue until they parted and their tongues danced a maypole dance together. They eventually drew apart, and Molly's smile was welcoming and her eyes were sparkling like a nebula. "Let me finish rinsing your hair, sailor," she murmured, "and then I'll give you a proper welcome."

For Molly's part, she marvelled afterwards that those calloused and scarred hands could be so gentle and diffident. For Shaundar's, he fell asleep immediately in the afterglow for fifteen hours without a single dream to trouble him.

Chapter Two

When Shaundar finally awoke, he found himself in a soft feather bed, nestled between linens of the finest weave and covered by a bedspread of down-stuffed silks. There were about a hundred silk pillows to be arranged in any way desired, and he saw with a smile that one of them showed a depression and some curly red hairs. His armour and helm had been arrayed on a stand and it was freshly cleaned and oiled. So were his twin short swords, properly mounted on a weapon rack, and so was his haversack, which was dangling, somewhat deflated, from an ornamented brass cloak hook near the elaborately carved purple heartwood door. His polished orcish war boots were resting on a bracket on the door's other side. A black marble bedside table patiently bore his tobacco box and his hard-won orcish bent tomato pipe on a filigreed stand. The purple heartwood chest of drawers contained his belt pouches and a whole lot of clothing that Shaundar knew he didn't own. Upon inspection, he found everything in the pouches undisturbed; from the concealed spell component pockets and his weathered folding spellbook, to his lieutenant's double-crescent and half-forgotten Moonflower pin, to his broken pocket-watch and his *toregkh*, to the handful of copper coins and poke of orcish chaw he couldn't remember putting in there.

The walls were adorned with a single painting of the Colour Spray Nebula. Shaundar had to admit that the artist had captured the likeness almost perfectly, and he wondered in a vague way what sort of alchemical compound he or she had used in the paints to depict its faint luminescence. He was glad there was no mirror. He had no interest in seeing his own reflection.

He threw the covers back and sat up, to find a pair of soft-soled slippers waiting for him almost precisely where his feet fell. To his surprise, they fit too. He reached for his pipe and opened the tobacco box, and he discovered that the thin dusting of cheap, dried-out grains at the bottom of it had been replaced with some fresh flake that smelled of brandy and molasses. His smile widened. It packed nicely and it tasted like ambrosia.

Opening the drawers again, he uncovered several pairs of trousers and shirts that varied from raw silk to simple sailcloth. Holding them up to his chest, he realized they would probably fit too. He shook his head, but not finding his own garb anywhere, he settled on the sailcloth and a simple pair of black-dyed canvas trousers.

Cleaner than he'd been in months, he ventured out into the hallway. He saw several purple heartwood doors framed by brass and filigree. Padding along in the slippers, he eventually found himself in a luxurious salon. Molly reclined in a comfortable chair too big and padded

for her diminutive frame, smoking a long wooden tobacco pipe and reading a book. Shaundar thought he recognized the beautiful middle-aged brunette woman primping before a dressing-table, but there were five other people in the room and he didn't know any of them. A far too handsome for his own good kender was rubbing the shoulders of a slender male drow who, Shaundar had to admit, would have been rather pretty if he were a girl. The drow was sprawled out on his belly on a silky white fur rug by the hearth, and the kender was perched on top of him. A buxom blond dwarf-maid with a corset and a finely-braided beard was busily writing in a journal, while a moon elven maid pleated her very long blue-black hair. The last of the people in the room was a curvy half-orc girl with wavy black hair and skin the colour of peridot, reclined on a daybed with her legs crossed at the ankles and her feet dangling over the edge of the arm. Shaundar hitched in his breath as an icy dagger twisted its way into his heart.

They looked up at the sound of his intake of breath and Molly smiled warmly. "Finally had enough sleep, honey?" she inquired with an arched eyebrow.

"For now, I think," he mumbled. "Thank you for the clothes. And the tobacco." He drew another puff on the horn pipe stem to cover his discomfort and his aching soul. "What do I owe you for all this?"

She put down the book and came over to stare up at him with the deep green pools of her eyes. “Nothing,” she clarified. “You live here now. We all share in the Temple’s wealth. I’d like you all to meet Shaundar,” she introduced him to the assembly. “You might remember Sally—” the brunette with a silver streak in her hair waved. Shaundar nodded at her with a smile. “This is Ravi,” the kender nodded, “Duruz,” the drow raised a half-hearted hand, “Bertha,” the dwarf waved from over her writing, “Tasha,” the half-orc maid smiled cautiously at him, “and Zavalya,” and the elf batted her eyelashes. “Wulfgar is the other Temple Guardian but he’s not here at the moment so you’ll meet him later.” She drew on her pipe and waited for him to say something.

“Nice to meet you all,” Shaundar greeted them. “Thanks for taking me on. What are my duties, by the way?”

Molly took his hand and guided him over to her overstuffed chair. “Essentially, you’re a bodyguard,” she explained as she pulled an ottoman in front of her chair and patted it to indicate that he should sit. He did. “You keep our clients and petitioners from getting violent or trying to take more than is offered.” She climbed into the puffy chair, seized a brush from the side table, and started running it through Shaundar’s golden hair. He leaned back and tried not to moan aloud. “When we open the salon, you patrol to make sure we’re okay, and you fling open doors and throw out whoever we’re with if you hear us yell for

you. Your pay is your room, clothing, food and tobacco, and a small stipend for personal expenses. Does that sound acceptable to you?”

“It sounds downright generous,” he admitted. “And you manage all this through donations?”

“And tips, honey,” Duruz explained; and they shared a laugh.

“When do I start?” he wanted to know. He was surprised at how eager he was to be working.

“Later this evening, after dinner,” Molly explained as she continued to brush his hair. He realized that he had no idea what time it was; or what day it was, for that matter.

Sally and Molly dressed him up in a mostly-ceremonial breastplate and bracers, all of which were tooled with the smiling face of Lady Firehair. He had the sense that Zavalyln and Duruz wanted to see the process but he didn’t think he could handle the look of disgust or pity that was likely to follow the sight of his scars so he went to his own room to change.

The sacred prostitutes received their clients in a festive atmosphere of live music (mostly played by Ravi and Zavalyln,) smoking hookahs, incense and perfume. Shaundar mostly lurked in a corner with his arms folded and looked thuggish. Wulfgar, he discovered, was a

Northman, and with his Viking's blond hair and blue eyes, Shaundar realized they complimented each other well as part of the scenery. He couldn't help but be a little amused. In general, the clientele was reverent and respectful, which pleased Shaundar greatly.

"Mostly we're ornamental," Wulfgar confided to him in a thick Northman's accent when they and Tasha were the only ones left in the salon.

"That's a good thing," Shaundar nodded. "I would hate to have to break someone's neck." He poured himself a cup of jasmine tea from the teapot steaming in the center of the room.

Wulfgar laughed; a strangely quiet chuckle for a hearty Norseman, but then Shaundar realized it was so he wouldn't disturb the clients. "Good, you mean it!" he observed. "So do I. Well met! Shaundar, wasn't it?" He slapped him on the shoulder.

"That's right," Shaundar nodded. "Good to meet you too, Wulfgar."

Molly studied Shaundar carefully over the first couple of weeks. He kept mostly to himself and socialized only when required to do so by practicality or necessity. He also made Tasha nervous. "He speaks with

an orcish accent,” she confided in them one evening in a whisper. “Why would an elf speak with an orcish accent?”

Sally and Molly both shook their heads, at a loss.

“I’ll tell you something else,” she mumbled quietly, glancing over her shoulder to make sure he wasn’t in the room, “that armour of his? That’s the armour of a scro commander.”

“How can you tell?” Sally wanted to know.

“It’s red, for one thing,” she explained. “Red is only worn by the noble families. It’s also got clan runes on the shoulders. I don’t know what all the clans are but I’ve seen that kind of thing before.”

Molly didn’t really know how to take this. “A war trophy, perhaps?” she suggested.

Light dawned in Tasha’s eyes and she nodded. “Yeah, that’s got to be it. I suppose that explains why he doesn’t like me.”

“He doesn’t like you?” Sally echoed, surprised.

She shrugged. “Every time he sees me, he winces. Didn’t you notice?”

Molly hadn't. "No," Sally agreed. So they watched him for the next day or two and sure enough, Tasha was correct. Molly was disheartened by this. It looked to her like guilt, and she wondered what sort of horrible war crime Shaundar Sunfall had committed upon scro and orcish maidens that made him bear that burden.

He also drank too much. Unless she curled up with him after the evening's activities (which she did, often,) he got into the rum as soon as the guests took their leave and didn't finish until he was staggering off to his room an hour or two later, leaving an empty bottle behind that, more often than not, he was cleaning up in the morning.

He flinched if you tapped him on the shoulder or grabbed him suddenly from behind, and if Wulfgar did it, his hand balled into a fist as he spun around with widened eyes. He never actually hit anyone, though it was obviously a conscious effort to make that fist relax.

Despite all of this, he was a gentle and caring lover. Surprisingly innocent, Molly was constantly showing him new things, and he was happy to learn them. Never once did he push for sex; actually, she had to come to him, and she had to practically hit him over the head with her bluntness before he would respond. Those strong arms held no threat when they were around her. They were the arms of a guardian and a defender. She supposed he could be racist against orcs – elves often were – but she had difficulty connecting the horrible things his reactions

and his demeanor suggested that he might have done to orcish women to the tender but calloused hands that held her in their protective grasp between the sheets.

Shaundar slept restlessly (and it was interesting enough that he slept, since he was an elf and Molly thought that elves used a meditative trance called “reverie,”) and his dreams were troubled. More than once Molly held him as he trembled and moaned, and once or twice he cried out. Usually it was the name of his betrothed, which confirmed her fate to Molly, and she grieved for him. He would also mutter to himself in what she knew had to be Orcish, and Molly wished fervently she understood it. “What does ‘Y’Anid’ mean?” she asked Tasha one day after a very bad night.

“‘Y’Anid?” she repeated curiously. “I think that’s a name.”

Yet another unsolved mystery.

She tried to get him to open up about his past a couple of times, but he was reticent, even when drunk. Molly was patient. She could only imagine the painful experiences that he must have suffered, and she couldn’t blame him for not wanting to discuss them. Even so, after a month or so she began to see signs of healing.

“Damn!” Duruz swore one evening. “Hastain is here!”

“Hastain?” Shaundar repeated. Duruz indicated a strawberry blond, willowy humanoid male in a cloak of peacock feathers, with an aura of shifting rainbow motes of light surrounding him. He wore a belt with a decorative lizard-like bangle that was bespeckled in lovely bright shades of blue and green. An entourage clustered at his heels, giggling at his every word. “Reigar?” Shaundar asked. “I’ve never seen one before.”

“A reigar *jerk*,” Sally clarified. “He has grabby hands.”

Shaundar’s eyes narrowed in a way that concerned Molly. “Not twice,” he promised.

Sally put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t get too physical. Aside from being a reigar, he’s a Bralian noble.”

Shaundar shook his head. “I don’t care if he’s the Queen of Evermeet. I won’t tolerate anyone’s disrespect towards you.”

Molly intercepted the reigar with an eye to preventing trouble. “Good evening, my lord,” she greeted him with a placating smile. “How may we serve you this evening?”

“I’m sure you know the answer to that, sweetheart,” the reigar lord smirked.

She sat down beside him and delicately crossed her legs. “Well, I’m sure we’re happy to help,” she offered, running her lacquered nails up and down his arm.

“You know you’re not my type, sugar,” he drawled. “You lack the requisite parts.”

“Neither of our boys wants to play with you, my lord,” she refused softly. “They say you’re too rough.”

His delicate face folded itself into a scowl of pique. “Well, that’s just too bad,” Hastain insisted. “I get what I want.”

Molly removed her hand pointedly. “Not here you don’t,” she frowned.

“Ooh, a *feisty* one!” trilled one of the gaggle of hangers-on, and they tittered.

“Darling, I get what I want everywhere I go,” the reigar rake persisted.

Duruz folded his arms. “I’ve still got a scar where you bit me last time. Not on your life.”

“Now listen here,” began Hastain, standing up; and Shaundar was in front of him. He’d taken maybe two strides through the room; Molly blinked and she’d almost missed it.

Here we go, she thought with an inward groan.

“These are *sacred* prostitutes,” Shaundar explained to the reigar male. They stood eye-to-eye. “If they say no, the answer is no.”

The reigar took a long look at Shaundar and then he smiled. Molly noticed him fingering the lizard-shaped bangle. She opened her mouth to warn Shaundar because she knew those things were more than decorations, but there was no need. Shaundar’s fingers twitched and he murmured something under his breath that she was reasonably certain was an incantation, and though for a moment the lizard seemed to shift and change, a flash of electric blue energy washed over it, fizzled, and died.

Everyone, Hastain and Molly included, stared at Shaundar in open-mouthed amazement. “You’re a *mage*?” he sputtered, aghast.

“Listen,” Shaundar offered calmly, “there’s no need to continue this unpleasantness. Why don’t you and your friends have a drink on the house, and the ladies can rub your shoulders and bathe you, and we all can leave here without anyone having to get hurt, what do you say?”

Hastain hesitated; but then his eyes washed over Shaundar in a way that she might have associated with lust, and he grinned; not possessively, but with joy and a touch of wonder glittering in his radiant eyes. She wasn't certain but she thought the aura that scintillated around him brightened. "My stars!" he exclaimed. "Where did you receive your training? Every muscle perfectly honed, like a predatory cat! And a wizard too! Evidently I do not give the elves enough credit. Are you in the Navy?"

"I was," Shaundar admitted, his eyes marking the reigar's every move.

He shook his head. "Amazing! What a fine instrument! Tell me, would you be interested in doing some mercenary work in the future?"

"I'm pretty comfortable here," the elven spacer replied, "but I suppose, depending on the mission." Molly had the sense that he didn't anticipate being offered any task that would warrant this.

Hastain laughed aloud and slapped him on that skull and crossed arrows tattoo. Molly was astounded because Shaundar didn't put his head through the china cabinet. "Excellent, excellent! We'll take that drink, Molly," Sally immediately ran to fetch some wine, "and my new friend here can demonstrate some of his training. You may need to move the table."

"Sure," Shaundar agreed. By the time Sally had returned with a tray of glasses and some of their finest elven wine, he was going through what looked to be some kind of ritualized shadow-boxing regimen. The reigar was grinning and marking every movement with gleaming eyes. Every move was lightning fast, and Molly couldn't help but realize how lethal every strike would be. They drank and watched Shaundar's routine while Duruz massaged Hastain's shoulders. When they had finished their glasses, Hastain put a sizeable donation into Molly's hands. "He's wasted on bodyguard duties," he proclaimed. "If he ever decides to take up something more worthy of his talents, tell him where to find me." And with that, he bowed to Shaundar with a flourish and the company took its leave.

Relieved that the situation had not degenerated into violence, Molly breathed, "Thanks! That was well-handled."

Shaundar shook his head. "Is it true that reigar dedicate themselves to a particular art?" he wanted to know.

"I think so," she agreed dubiously.

He sighed. "Warfare is his art, isn't it?"

Molly didn't know, but Ravi piped up, "I've heard that rumour."

Shaundar nodded grimly. He turned on his heel just as Tasha's hand fell on his wrist. Again Molly cringed, expecting him to do the same, or maybe lash out at the half-orc girl, but he cocked his head in her direction and met her gaze. "Thank you for defending Duruz," she whispered.

"My honour, *karra*," he replied with a hesitant smile, touching his fist to his forehead and ducking his head a little; and then he went about securing the doors and windows for the night.

Thoroughly disgusted by the reigar, Shaundar hit the bottle pretty hard that evening. Lost in his own dark and mournful thoughts, he looked up at one point, thinking a visit to the loo might be a good plan, and his blurred vision came to rest on Tasha, seated in a chair across from him. "How long have you been there, *karra*?" he asked quietly. He hadn't noticed her come in but he was pretty drunk, and he was beginning to get comfortable here.

"A few minutes," she said. "Would you answer me honestly if I asked you something?"

Shaundar contemplated his bottle. It was about two thirds of the way through. Damn. "I promise to answer honestly, *karra*," he swore, trying to focus on her eyes, "but I don't promise to answer."

“I suppose that’s fair.” She studied him carefully. “Why don’t you like me? Is it because I’m a half-orc?”

He laughed. Even to him it sounded strange; cynical, bitter, wounded, weird, but genuinely amused as well. “No, *karra*. I like you just fine. You’re a sweet girl. You just remind me of someone, that’s all.” He considered it, and added, “I’m sorry I gave you that impression.”

She smiled a cautious little smile at him. “I don’t suppose you’d tell me who it is that you remind me of, then?”

“Nope,” he refused outright, quaffing a good swallow.

“That’s too bad,” Tasha responded with regret. It wasn’t what Shaundar was expecting to hear – not that he knew what it was that he *had* been expecting – so it forced him to meet her eyes again. “We’re here to help when you’re ready, Shaundar.”

Agony tore at his soul and he drowned it with most of what was left in the bottle. He thought about the Temples of Luthic on Dukagsh and about Ynga. Dear gods, what was the Elven Navy doing to the Priestesses under the Occupation? He hoped they had managed to get off-world before the Fleet landed. “I wish that were possible,” he lamented.

Tasha got up and came over to lay a hand on his shoulder. "Of course it's possible; it's what we do." She started rubbing at his shoulders and neck. He was reminded of the Orcish Temples and he allowed her hands to do their healing work. "My gods, these are like iron," the half-orc maiden tisked. She ground her knuckles vigorously into the cables of his muscles and tension released with his tears. By the time Molly came to collect him, he was already half-asleep, and he allowed himself to be guided into his sanctuary, where Molly held him.

"He's doing better," Sally observed over coffee the next day.

"It's good to see," Molly replied. She had just left his bed, and he was sleeping peacefully. She had watched him for a few minutes, thinking to herself how amazingly handsome, how downright *beautiful* he was when pain didn't mar his features and she wondered if she might be falling in love with him.

"We should let the Elven Navy know he's here," the woman went on. "Maybe they've got someone who can do something for his back. And he's probably got a pension coming to him, which would give him some spending money." She didn't mention it, but Molly knew that Sally realized that he was spending his stipend on alcohol.

"Good idea," Molly agreed. She brightened. It would be nice if she could do something to help get him back on his feet! Even if he chose to just bank the pension money, there was an address they could send it to when he did decide it was needed. She sipped her coffee, and finding it too hot, poured cream into it until it was drinkable. Then she downed it. "Let's go right now," she urged, "before he wakes up."

The office of the Imperial Elven Navy was located in the Middle City. Molly tended not to go there much; only once a year, as a rule, to pay their taxes and renew their permits, since most of the administration buildings were in that section. There was a persistent rumour, according to Ravi, that the elves actually had a base located somewhere on the Rock, but she had no idea where. Still, she didn't doubt it; certainly there was a much greater concentration of Navy traffic than such a meagre office warranted. It was easily recognized by the green standard with its golden Elven Man-o-War flying above. Otherwise it was an average administration building, remarkable in its bland, commonplace appearance.

Two elves in silver and forest green uniforms nodded politely as they held the doors open for them. The elf behind the desk wore an efficient braid to match his impeccable silver and blue uniform. "Good afternoon," he greeted them. "How may we help you today?"

They glanced at each other and approached the very civilized desk with its lamp, inkwell and parchment, their heels clicking on the hardwood floor. “I’m not sure who we talk to,” Molly began hesitantly as she peered over the edge of the desk. “I want to leave a forwarding address for one of your sailors.”

“You’d talk to me,” the clerk assured her, taking a quill, clipping the nib, and dipping it in the inkwell. “What would our elf’s name be?”

“Shaundar Sunfall,” she relayed. The clerk scrawled that into a notebook.

“Do you know his rank?” he inquired.

Sally shook her head. Molly said, “He’s got a pin with two silver crescents, like yours.” She reached over and tapped the ornament at his collar.

The clerk smiled. “That will help; that means he’s a *Teu’Ruan*; a Lieutenant.” He scratched some Espruar into his record book. “Okay, let’s have that address.”

“Lady Firehair’s Temple-Brothel in the Low City,” Sally reported happily. He raised an eyebrow and met their eyes. Molly simpered, cocked her hip and blew him a kiss. The clerk chuckled. “Lucky elf! I think I’m jealous!” He wrote this down as well. “Okay, I’ll pass this on up

the chain. It will probably be at least a few weeks before you see any of his correspondence, and they might insist he come to the office here for his pay. No offense," he added with a tone of apology, "but I assume you are not his next-of-kin?"

"No," Molly admitted. Come to think of it, where were his next-of-kin? She doubted all of them had been on the doomed ship. "Will you inform his family of his whereabouts?"

"Of course we will," the clerk promised. He read over what he'd written. "I think that's all we need," he nodded. "What's your name, miss?"

"Molly," she told him.

"Okay Molly, thanks for coming by," he smiled at her, standing up and offering that strange elven heart-in-hand salute. Molly curtsied and she and Sally headed back to the Temple.

Shaundar was awake when they got back, sitting at the kitchen table. He was smoking that interesting pipe and drinking a coffee, to which he had added cinnamon and a dash of black pepper; a habit that Molly suspected he had developed long before his arrival on Bral. He rubbed at his eyes, which were always veiled with shadows. "Hello Lieutenant!" she greeted him in a bright and cheery tone. "How are you this morning?"

He snapped his gaze in her direction when she mentioned his rank. "You've never called me that before," he observed.

"We went down to the Elven Navy Office this morning and let them know you were here," she explained, taking a seat beside him. "So now I know what two silver crescents mean."

He blinked slowly. "You did what?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"We let the Navy know how to find you," Sally chimed in. "We thought you might have mail or something. Should we . . . shouldn't we have done that?"

All colour completely drained from Shaundar's face. He stood up from the table suddenly enough to bump and spill the coffee. He didn't notice. "I'm sorry, ladies, I should have told you not to do that, but I guess I was afraid you would turn me in." He tapped out his pipe with a military efficiency.

Molly was stricken. He was wanted by the Elven Navy? Maybe she should have guessed. Why else would he have been hiding in an alley, instead of making his way to their infirmary? She felt like a complete idiot. She wanted to ask what he had done, but she decided it didn't matter. "Shaundar, I am so sorry," she said. "I didn't know."

He cast her a strained smile that was tight at the corners. “Like I said, my fault. I should have told you.” He was shoving his pipe into a belt pouch and he made his way stiffly into his room, where he started strapping on that orcish armour.

“Let me help,” Sally offered, and she started tightening straps and fastening buckles. He again tried to smile and allowed her assistance.

“Do you have a place to go?” Molly asked him. She cast around herself for something to do, and then she remembered the drawers and she opened one and started taking out his clothing. She tried to grab his haversack down from the peg it was on but couldn’t reach, so she instead started buckling his chausses around his legs.

“I’ll find something,” he promised. He met her eyes and gave her a much more genuine smile, as he gently touched the side of her face. “Thank you, Molly. This little reprieve has helped me more than you could possibly know.”

“We’re not done yet,” Sally retorted. “We’ll find you another place; won’t we, Molly?”

The gnome was at a loss at first, but she knew there had to be something. A place where he could live, and work, and where the Elven Navy couldn’t get at him. “Of course we will,” she pledged, considering it; and as he shoved his belongings into his belt pouches and the haversack,

and strapped on those twin short swords, it came to her. “I know just the place! Come with me!” And she took his helm in her hands and led him out into the streets.

The Laughing Beholder was a local landmark. Not because it was big, or busy, or scummy, or especially ritzy, but because its proprietor was a genuine-article beholder. Shaundar had heard of Large Luigi – who hadn’t? – but he thought the creature a selkie-story. Not so; he (if *he* was the accurate term) floated serenely behind the finely-carved, rounded oak bar, using one of his eyestalks to direct a polishing rag around in circles. The other nine peered out in all directions, wriggling from the crown of his maroon ball of a body like Medusa’s tentacles, while the enormous, heavy-lidded green central eye that took up most of his “face” gazed straight ahead. Unusually for the beholders that Shaundar had seen, all of his eyes matched. He was humming a slightly off-key star shanty to himself in a gruff baritone. When he saw them his eyes brightened and his broad mouth opened into a grin that was somehow cheery despite the many dagger-sharp teeth that filled it. “Molly!” he exclaimed in a friendly way. Then he scowled, and that was truly fearsome on his alien face. “Okay girl, tell me about it,” he demanded, leaving the rag behind and gliding over the tables and chairs to the arched double doors with paned windows where they had come in.

“Hi Luigi; I need you to keep my friend out of the hands of the Elven Navy,” Molly explained, slapping Shaundar’s upper thigh lightly, “and he needs a job. I highly recommend him for bouncing work. Shaundar, this is Large Luigi.”

Lacking a hand to shake, Shaundar opted for an elven bow. “Well met, sir. You’re pretty famous in these parts.”

“That’s just because people aren’t used to seein’ beholders who aren’t tryin’ to kill ‘em,” he said dismissively. “Well met indeed, Shaundar! I could use a good bouncer. This place gets all types.” He looked him up and down. “But I guess you can handle it, eh?”

“Thus far,” Shaundar returned.

Luigi seemed to find this amusing because he let out a hearty chuckle. “I get the feelin’ that survivin’ is what you do best, boy,” he replied. He fixed Shaundar with a serious expression and pointed out, “You know the Elf Navy don’t have no authority here on the Rock, don’t you?”

Shaundar couldn’t help it; a cynical bark of a laugh escaped his belly. “The people with the weapons are the ones who have the authority here on the Rock, aren’t they?”

Luigi grinned. “You should have no trouble then, lad. At least not with me around. We’ll watch out for each other, we will. Stow your gear and I’ll show you what’s to be done.”

“Thanks Luigi,” Molly beamed.

Shaundar thought she looked genuinely relieved and that touched his heart. He knelt down so that they were about eye-to-eye and he kissed her. “Thank you, Molly,” he smiled.

“Come back when you can,” she whispered; then she patted his shoulder and skittered by him. “I better go. When they come looking for you, I’ll send them away. Thanks again, Luigi!” She blew them each a kiss and headed back out the door. Shaundar watched her go with an ache in his heart. *Should have known better than to get comfortable*, a voice at the back of his mind hissed. Shaundar sighed.

He turned back to Large Luigi, who was studying him with a focused gaze. With all of those eyes it was a little unnerving. “Do you really think that I can stay ahead of the Navy here, or were you just trying to reassure Molly?” he queried bluntly.

The beholder cleared whatever passed for his throat, indignant. “I don’t tell fibs, not even to spare another’s feelings. Though I don’t promise to tell all I know.” He started floating up a winding banister that

circled around to a second floor, and most of the eyes on his eyestalks whirled about to study Shaundar pointedly, as if to ask, *are you coming?*

Mollified, Shaundar shouldered his haversack and followed, his boots clomping up the solid oak steps. His hand traced the brass banister and he suddenly missed being on a ship's deck.

He was shown to a room at the top of the stairwell. "That's so's you can come runnin' if I need you and you're sleepin'," Luigi explained. He aimed an eyestalk at the door; the brass knob turned and it cracked open. Shaundar was pleased to note that the well-oiled hinges hardly squeaked when it swung wide. The beholder bobbed into the room, just squeezing through the doorway. A tindertwig struck itself against a desk and then lit a lamp.

The space was warm and inviting, though much more simple than his quarters in the Temple-Brothel. A simple chest, a brass coat rack, a small desk and a plain cot with a wool blanket and cotton sheets comprised the furniture, but an equally beautiful painting adorned the wall, illuminated by the lamp-light. The artist had immortalized sunrise around Selune, with her Tears trailing like spilled diamonds against the midnight of Wildspace.

"You like it?" the beholder asked him, rotating around to fix him with that mammoth central eye.

“Looks comfy,” he admitted. He indicated the painting. “That’s beautiful.”

Luigi chuffed and his grin devoured his face. “Really? That’s mine.”

Shaundar was aghast. “You painted that? Did you paint the Colour Spray Nebula for the Sune Temple?”

If it were possible for a beach ball to puff up, Luigi did so. Shaundar thought he tipped his body upwards just a little and his eyes certainly gleamed. “As a matter of fact, I did.”

The elven marine shook his head in admiration. “I’m humbled by your talent.”

The beholder tilted his body and his eyes slightly downward, and his eyestalks crumpled. It somehow managed to make him look embarrassed. “Well, thank you. Thanks a lot. It’s just a hobby.”

“I couldn’t help but wonder,” Shaundar added, “what did you use to capture the nebula’s glow?”

“Oh!” Luigi exclaimed, stretching out the eyestalks again. “You’ve seen gossamers, right?”

Shaundar nodded.

“Well, you can extract their blood,” he explained.

Shaundar smiled. He hadn’t thought of that one! “I’ll remember that,” he promised the beholder. “Thanks for the information.” He tossed his haversack haphazardly into the chest at the foot of the cot. *Probably no point in unpacking*, he mused sourly; and weariness washed over him in a wave.

The beholder fastened that intense gaze upon him again. “You don’t have to worry, lad. The Elf Navy knows better’n to mess with me. And they’ll learn not to be messin’ with you soon enough.”

“Why would you do this?” the elf demanded. “Why go out of your way and possibly risk your own safety for someone you don’t even know?”

“Because Molly asked me to,” he shot back, almost as though he was expecting the question. “And I really do need a good bouncer,” he added. “You can keep that armour on; you might need it.” He twisted about half of his eyestalks in the direction of the chest, and said, “If that’s all the stowin’ you’re doin’, come with me and I’ll walk you through your duties. We open in an hour.”

“Of course,” Shaundar agreed. The giant creature sailed back out the door. The elf closed it behind them.

Chapter Three

Desk duty suited Boatswain Thersylvanna about as well as a bonnet would suit a beholder, but he supposed there wasn't much else now that the War was over anyway; and since he was stumping around on crutches while he waited for his new leg to be finished, he could hardly be part of the Occupation Fleet. But no question, he was chomping at the bit, and every day served made him progressively more irate.

Sailors were coming in to Bral from all over the place, limping their way back from wherever they'd been sent or stranded when word reached them that the War had ended. Some of them staggered in without having heard the news at all. He supposed that it was only to be expected, the Navy being as big and as far-flung as it was, and he set about trying to see that mail reached its intended recipient, pay was issued, news brought, and healing requested. But it seemed to him that there was a cabal of his former skipper's cronies who were determined to stall and stymie that work as much as they possibly could. Take his leg, for instance. Six months since his return to the Rock, and they still couldn't tell him when he was slated for his appointment with the medical artificer. He knew it was because they didn't want to spend the money on a mere Warrant.

And to add insult to injury, the Watch Officers usually got the Warrant Officers to do their grunt work. So he wasn't in a screaming hurry to see that the paperwork that he shouldn't have been doing anyway reached the appropriate departments.

He was skimming haphazardly through the previous day's log book while entertaining himself with a detailed fantasy that involved drowning Admiral Durothil in a latrine (he was kicking and writhing so nicely that it brought a beatific smile to Thersylvanna's face) when a familiar name snapped him out of his pleasant daydream like a slap.

"Son of a spider-licking whore," he muttered under his breath. Yes, there it was; *Teu'Ruan* Shaundar Sunfall, staying at the Temple-Brothel of Lady Firehair in the Low City. Stamped and dated by that prick of a Lieutenant who was serving as the desk clerk because his last name was Leafbower; which meant there was no way to simply make this disappear.

Well, maybe he could delay it for a while. He filed the paperwork around Shaundar right away. Distressed Veterans and the Commissariat were the logical departments; possibly also Casualties, since he was reasonably certain that Shaundar was listed as MIA and they would expect him to check. That done, he figured it would be a very good time to get caught up on all that backlogged paperwork he had been putting off. He filed the requisition for new toilet seats for the

latrines at the Bral base, the overdue fitness reports, the quarterly inventories, and every single application for assistance from everyone that had ever known anyone who had been a member of the Navy. Then, since he had two days leave, he piled them on top of the report about Shaundar, and left the stack on his desk to moulder while he went out into a weekend of what he hoped would center on drinking and debauchery. His fantasy by the time he left had changed into one of sitting on Admiral Durothil's chest and shoving crumpled up reports into his broken gob one after the other until he choked and smothered on them. It made Thersylvanna smile a little.

He decided it would be a very good weekend to pay a visit to the Temple-Brothel. He hadn't been in a while, and he missed Zavalyn's company.

"It's Thersylvanna!" cried Zavalyn with delight. The elf maid kissed him soundly as he hobbled through the door on his crutches.

He was hardly chaste about his return kiss. "How're you doing, lovely one?" he grinned, and he came into the salon and flopped down in one of the overstuffed chairs, laying his crutches at his side. Zavalyn plunked herself into the burly green elf's lap and he shifted her over onto his good leg a bit by laying his hand on her backside. He didn't remove it either.

“I’ve missed you!” she assured him. “Where have you been hiding?”

“Buried under paperwork,” he sighed. “Which is one of the reasons I’m here. You know an elf named Shaundar?”

Molly’s lips thinned around her pipe. “He was staying here, but he’s gone now,” she said guardedly.

Thersylvanna rubbed at Zavalyn’s bottom absently. “Good, tell him to get as far away as he can,” he grumbled. “The Navy wants to hang him by his thumbs.”

“What did he do?” Sally burst out, leaning forward in her chair.

The Boatswain shook his head. “Blew down an Admiral who desperately deserved it. Messed up his face real bad. Best thing that ever happened to the scumbag too.” He chuckled to himself. “Rumour is that was the second time Sunfall’d knocked him down, but he was a civilian the first time.”

“Is that all?” the red-haired gnome inquired incredulously. By the way he’d faced down Hastain, Molly didn’t think Shaundar would spook so easily.

“Well,” the spacer confessed with reluctance, “they want him for desertion. And they say other things, but I’ll tell you true; I don’t believe it. I served aboard an Armada with him when he was just a young Midshipman. The lad took a flogging better than most men, and his big concern was whether or not his friend was all right. I tried to feed him coca leaf and he wouldn’t take it. Cowardice t’isn’t in the lad’s blood.” He scowled. “I think I’ve stalled them for a few days but that’s about all,” Thersylvanna explained. “He should get off the Rock if he can.”

“Thanks for the tip-off,” Molly smiled at the Boatswain. “I’ll pass the word along.”

He clucked and winked at her. “Good, don’t tell me if you do know where he is. Then I can claim to have no idea myself.”

“So,” Zavalyn began with a smile, brushing his coppery hair out of his eyes, “what’s the other reason you came to see us?”

“I think you can guess that one, lass!” he grinned, slapping her lightly on the bottom.

The Laughing Beholder was a hopping place. A few of the patrons cast Shaundar strange looks as he drew draught in his orchis armour, but not as many as he expected. Then again, next to a

bartending beholder, what *would* look strange? Watching Luigi direct tankards under taps with that levitating eye was more than enough entertainment for one evening. He was downright chatty too. Customer after customer greeted him like an old friend, and they came in every race known to space.

Shaundar quickly saw the clever design of the furniture. For instance, the barstools had a couple of rails mounted at strategic points along the stem. A gruff dwarf with a red beard streaked white and an ivory peg leg was able to stomp himself up on the stool by using one of rails as a step. He lit an oversized calabash pipe and the room was quickly filled with sour tobacco smoke like the stuff Shaundar was smoking before he came to the Temple-Brothel. At the other end of the bar, three *hin* bards accompanied their attractive and talented front girl with fiddle, mandolin and accordion. Shaundar dropped a few of his limited coins into their fiddle case. Two dracons stretched out on couches playing backgammon while a human free trader discussed business eye-to-eye with a tinker gnome in a high chair. A trio of robed mind flayers huddled in a corner couch, wriggling their tentacles in animated discussion; everyone else gave them a wide berth. The bar's other employee, a pretty blond human girl, asked them if they were done with their drinks and would they like another. One of them waved an empty glass with its strange three-fingered hand; the barmaid took it away with the others and returned a few moments later with something green and bubbling. A pair of decorated giff came in about halfway through the night; they took

over a table with big, sturdy oaken chairs and proceeded to sing three hours worth of off-key military chants, unfortunately drowning out the skilled halving bards, while they put away so many shots of rum that Shaundar figured they must have disposed of about a cask between them.

Before Shaundar knew it, Luigi was bellowing, “All right, that’s it folks! Last call!”

The illithids and the *hin* were gone by then, and the gnome and his human business partner had been replaced by a gaggle of well-dressed young ladies and a pack of young dandies kissing on their hands. The rakes were putting on a show and the ladies were falling for it, which irritated him. “We’ll each have one for the road,” the leader of the dandies demanded.

The barmaid brought them a pitcher and some glasses. As she leaned over the table to pour, one of the rakes goosed her – hard. She started and dropped the decanter, which shattered when it hit the hardwood floor.

“Hey!” roared Luigi. Shaundar marched over and grabbed the lad’s collar and hauled him to his feet. “The maid ain’t for sale!” the beholder growled.

"I think it's time you and your friends said good night," Shaundar explained matter-of-factly.

"We'll have our damn beers first!" another one of the piqued playboys insisted. The dragons downed their drinks and made for the door as the one in Shaundar's grasp narrowed his eyes and took a swing.

Shaundar grabbed the lad's fist, bent his arm up into a chicken wing and marched him to the door on his tiptoes. "Ow, ow!" he howled. "You're hurting my arm! You're breaking my *elbow*, let *go*!" Shaundar tossed him unceremoniously into the street.

"You'll pay for this!" the youth shrieked. "Do you know who my uncle is? I'll . . ." and that's when the doors swung closed, so Shaundar turned to his companions and said, "I suggest you pay your tabs and go home."

One of the young women pretended to swoon, but nobody paid any attention. "And your mate's too," Luigi insisted with a truly frightening glare at the gentlemen, which emanated from all eleven eyes. Some of them looked to Shaundar but he stood in the doorway and folded his arms. Without another word the boys began to produce coins from their purses. "Sorry for the trouble," a dark-haired one apologized as he skittered past Luigi.

"Sorry," added a blond lad to the barmaid. Shaundar stood aside so they could go. The girls followed after one of them hissed, "Knock it off, Charlotte!" and the fainting girl glanced around, blushed, and gathered her skirts around herself as she fled. Shaundar watched them leave and marvelled with a sigh that they were all probably around his equivalent age in human years.

"Nicely done," one of the giff said approvingly. He studied Shaundar through his monocle. "Military man, are you?" When Shaundar didn't answer he harrumphed and said to Luigi, "A fine establishment, sir, as we've come to expect. Have a good evening." They paid their bill and between the two of them managed to roll out the door.

The tavern was now empty except for Luigi, the barmaid, Shaundar and the dwarf with the peg leg. Shaundar was pleased to note that the dwarf was now on his feet. "Don't worry about it, Elsa," the barkeep soothed her when she came out of the back with a mop. "Shaundar and I can get it, right Shaundar?"

"Sure," he agreed, taking hold of the mop. They traded smiles.

"You go on home, hon," urged Luigi.

"Thanks Luigi," the woman beamed. "Thanks Shaundar. Nice to meet you." She gathered her cloak from behind the bar. "Good night!" she waved.

The beholder floated the sharp ceramic fragments into a trash barrel before he let Shaundar at it with the mop, which struck Shaundar as both practical and thoughtful. "Well, no point in you maybe cuttin' yourself when I gotta levitate stuff anyway," the aberration grumbled, bobbing back over behind the bar. "When you're done with that, mop the rest of the floor, then start wiping down the chairs and tables."

"Ain't seen you around here before, lad," the dwarf observed to Shaundar as he pushed his mop while Luigi polished the spigots. Since Luigi didn't seem inclined to throw their guest out, Shaundar swabbed the floor around him without comment.

"This is my first day," Shaundar told him.

"Well," the dwarf chuffed on his monstrosity of a pipe, "folks call me Cap'n Gyudd."

"How do you do, Captain?" Shaundar replied, clasping the hand extended to him. It was hard but the calluses were old and partially healed. He'd once been a starfarer, but now he did something else. Shaundar thought it best that he not offer his name; word was less likely to get back to the Navy that way.

"So I thought the last bar wench was Elsa," the Captain observed with a smirk.

"You still here for a reason, Cap'n, or are you just jaw-jackin'?" demanded Luigi of the dwarf.

"I want to know when that next cargo of IEN one-offs is due in," Cap'n Gyudd announced, leaning back a little on his heels.

"It'll cost you, Cap'n," the bartender warned as he directed the flying rag to dip in a wash basin and wring itself out.

So that confirmed the rumours; Large Luigi was an information broker. Shaundar's heart started to pound in his chest. If his sister was here on the Rock, Luigi would likely know; or know who would. On a side note Shaundar wondered why the Elven Navy was selling off their supplies, but he assumed it was natural that they would need to demilitarize after the War's ending. His heart ached as he thought of Dukagsh again and he forced the vision away.

The Captain folded his corded arms. "How much?"

Large Luigi allowed the washcloth to drop and studied the old salt with a whole lot of discerning green eyes. "I could sell that to the highest bidder. You want exclusive on that, it's gonna cost you."

Cap'n Gyudd cast him a pained expression. "After all we've been through together! Luigi, you wound me."

The beholder laughed aloud. “The only reason why I’ll even *think* about givin’ you exclusive on this is that we *have* been through a lot together. So cough up or walk.”

The Captain sighed and stroked his whitening beard. “All right, all right; fifty gold be the standard rate, ain’t it?”

“That’s right,” Luigi agreed amicably. He aimed that eyestalk (the first one on the right, Shaundar noted) at a wooden chest under the bar-shelf and opened it. Reluctantly the dwarven post-captain unfastened his purse and deposited a handful of gleaming coins. The coffer snapped shut and Luigi made it disappear back under the bar. “Pleasure doin’ business with you,” the beholder rumbled with a pleased smirk. “A merchant-trader from the Sindiath Line is due day after tomorrow at about six bells of the mornin’ watch.”

Cap’n Gyudd nodded. “Thanks Luigi, I owe you one. Guess I’d best be off then, let you close up.” He limped towards the exit. “Keep him out of trouble, will ye?” he asked Shaundar, and he headed into the night.

“Bolt those, will you?” the barkeeper requested of Shaundar, so he slid the bolt and locked it down. As the rag resumed its widdershins whirlygigs on the oaken surface of the bar, Shaundar put away the mop and started wiping down the chairs and tables as he had been directed. The silence was soothing after the evening’s chaos.

“You did good tonight, lad,” Luigi assured him. “Fine work! And I ain’t talkin’ about your deck-swabbin’ skills; though I see you’re right handy with that too.”

Shaundar nodded his thanks. He ought to be good at mopping; he’d certainly done enough of it aboard ship in his early days as a Midshipman. And he didn’t take much joy or pride in the evening’s earlier business; though he supposed he ought to be pleased that no one had been hurt. “Why do they call you ‘Luigi’?” he asked. “I’m sure no beholder ever had that for a name.”

The beholder came to drift casually along the front of the bar to tighten the spigots. It sounded like it actually took concentration to telekinetically force the taps to seal off because he was grunting with the effort between twists. “Because . . . it’s not that far . . . from the beginning of my name . . . really. Humanoids . . . have trouble . . . with the pronunciation. Ha! There! That’s got her, miserable bitch of a barrel . . . right then. My name is actually . . .” and he made a horrific noise that was somewhere between a snarl and a gargle, but damned if the beginning of it wasn’t something like, ‘Luueeejjjeerraaaggggh.’

Shaundar shook his head. “You’re right. There’s no way I could ever pronounce that right.”

Luigi rolled and shifted his eyes up and to the right while the stalks themselves folded in a little and his body bounced slightly. The

impression was that of a shrug, perhaps. "S'all right, I can't go home to them anyway. They don't get me. I've been through something that's changed all that I am, and my own people don't understand me no more." Shaundar's mouth twitched upwards. Were they kindred souls of a sort; he and this beholder? "I understand that completely," he admitted.

The barkeep fixed him with all of those eyes again and his expression was studied and concerned. "Thought you might," he said. He might have seen Shaundar's curiosity in his eyes, because he added, "The orc armour kind of gave that away."

That wasn't really what Shaundar was wondering about, however. Once again the question went to motivation. Why would a beholder choose to tend a bar and associate with a bunch of humanoids? And how did he get into selling secrets? Beholders in space would be a xenophobic, genocidal menace if they weren't so busy killing each other over minor physical differences in their own species; and grounding beholders most often lurked underground in solitary darkness like hunting spiders. As a rule, they weren't friendly creatures. "Must have been some experience," he observed.

A bottle uncorked and tipped itself onto a clean rag. The acrid tang of vinegar wafted through the air and the cloth started wiping down

the windows and mirrors. "I imagine you could say the same, eh?" was Luigi's reply.

Shaundar considered the long, convoluted journey that was his experience of the War. "I could, I suppose." They fell silent. The only sounds were low wooden clunks as the legs of the tables wiggled against the floor and the squeaking of the cloth on the glass.

"Now, just the sweeping," Luigi announced.

"I'll get that," Shaundar volunteered, exchanging his mop and pail for the broom and dustpan. The beholder barkeep levitated chairs one after the other and flipped them over to stack on the tables, while Shaundar swept.

"A good night's work," declared Luigi with satisfaction, and he lifted an overstuffed green velvet pillow from behind the bar and flopped it onto one of the stools. He sank into this with a sigh. "You want a drink?" He lifted a bottle of rum and two cups off the shelves and poured one for each of them. He didn't bother re-corking the bottle.

Shaundar perched on the stool next to Luigi's. "Thank you," he smiled in gratitude. They drank in silence for a few minutes. Neither one of them winced much at the strong spirits.

“So, what brings you to Bral?” the beholder asked him. “You don’t look like a local.”

Shaundar figured he would never have a better opening. “I heard a rumour that my sister might be around here,” he told him. That wasn’t exactly true; the person who had passed this on to Shaundar certainly could not be trusted. Quite frankly, Shaundar strongly suspected that his sister was dead with the rest of his homeworld. But he had to know for sure. “If you did know, or could find her,” Shaundar added slowly, tasting his caution, “what would something like that cost?”

“Thought you were flat busted,” Luigi commented, peering at him with three eyestalks and the corner of the big one.

Shaundar nodded. “I am. But then I’d know how many free days labour I’d owe you. Which I will serve before you tell me, of course.”

Luigi turned like a lazy Susan to look at him. “Are you an elf of honour, Shaundar?” he asked directly.

Shaundar shrugged. “Depends on who you ask, I guess.”

“I’m askin’ *you*,” the beholder pointed out.

Shaundar contemplated his answer. “I do my best,” he finally decided. “Sometimes I fall short of my own expectations, which I imagine is pretty normal. But I do try to be.”

The beholder nodded, if a creature that was entirely a head could be said to nod. “Okay, here’s the deal,” he said. “You work for me for a standard month, room and board only. Maybe I ask you to do a couple of extra things for me.”

“Like what?” Shaundar demanded warily. “I won’t do leg-breaking or anything like that.”

“Who says that’s what I want?” Luigi snapped back. “No, like maybe I need you to go defend the girls and boys at the Temple, or maybe I want you to stand watch while I talk to a client like the good Captain there.”

Shaundar unbristled. “All right, fair enough.” He was silent a moment and then added, “I’ve been offered some of those kinds of jobs before, and this *is* the Rock of Bral. You’re in the information business; it was important to be clear.”

“Guess that makes sense,” the barkeeper grumbled. “Do we have a deal?”

“Agreed,” Shaundar confirmed. They clinked their cups together and drank.

“Molly said your name was Sunfall, right?” the beholder inquired.

Shaundar nodded. “*Gul, av.*” He shook his head to clear it. “I mean, yes.”

“That name sounds familiar somehow,” Luigi observed. Shaundar’s heart started pounding again. It was familiar? “Not that I want to get your hopes up,” he put in quickly, but of course it was too late. “Let me look into it and I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thank you,” Shaundar smiled. A little of bit of raised hope was certainly better than none.

“Here, you finish that,” the beholder offered, leaving the bottle and his glass. “I get the feelin’ like you need it more’n I do. Try to get some sleep; tomorrow starts earlier’n you think!” He flew off of the pillow and tossed it back over the bar with his eye, wiped down his cup and flew it back to its proper place in the cupboards. “G’nite; sleep well!” And he bobbed up the stairs and through one of the doors, which swung closed behind him.

Shaundar considered what was left of the bottle. Two thirds. He figured it ought to be just enough.

He awoke with a start from a dream of Narissa to kisses and a small body snuggled up to his. Molly was lying on him. “Morning, sailor,” she purred.

His arm found the small of her back and started rubbing gently. “Morning, lovely one,” he smiled back. He was genuinely surprised to find her there. “I thought I might never see you again.”

Her smile faded. “Of course I wasn’t going to let that happen,” she said. “But I came to let you and Luigi know that you’re not without friends. An old shipmate of yours came by to warn us to get you off the Rock. He figured you had a few days though.”

Shaundar’s hand stopped moving. “An old shipmate? Did he say who he was?” He was excited. Someone he knew had made it? That was wonderful news!

She nodded. “He’s a regular of ours; Thersylvanna is his name. He’s a Bo’sun, I understand.” Shaundar continued to look mystified, so she added, “He said he tried to feed you coca leaves once.”

The kind-hearted, burly green elf Boatswain's Mate from the *Aerdrie's Pride*! Shaundar remembered him well. He'd been the one to deliver Shaundar's first flogging as a young Midshipman; twelve lashes for negligence causing the destruction of His Majesty's property and harm to a fellow officer. Thersylvanna tried to feed him the painkilling leaves before the court martial to spare him pain, but Shaundar, figuring in his immortal youth that he could handle it, refused. That refusal gained him respect with the enlisted that none of the other Midshipmen ever matched.

Shaundar eagerly anticipated looking him up and swapping drinks and stories, but his heart sank. No, he couldn't do that. He was wanted by the Military Police. For all he knew, Thersylvanna was assigned to the Military Police. Either way, if he saw Shaundar, he would have no choice but to turn him in. Not a position he wanted to put the compassionate green elf in. "It's good to know I still have a friend or two out there," he mumbled. "When you see him again, thank him for me." He didn't really know what to say. "I wish I had something to give to him. I haven't forgotten his compassion. Or his sense of honour. He taught me a lot about life." Only as he spoke these words did he realize the truth of them.

Molly ran her hand through his hair. "I'll tell him that. I think that would matter more to him than any gift."

“I should get up and clean up,” Shaundar sighed. His mouth tasted like fur and his head was pounding.

“Yes you should,” Molly agreed. “I’ll help.”

Shaundar intended to have a quick bath in the room at the end of the hall, which featured taps that poured running water (he guessed that particular gnomish invention must be catching on; a good idea in his opinion) but Molly had other plans, and he certainly had no objections. “Thank you for this,” he whispered as they held each other in the bath afterwards, the water lukewarm and getting colder. He wanted to ask her why she would come to him even now, and what it was she saw in him that made her lie with him; but he didn’t quite dare.

Molly helped him dress. “I guess you’d better get down there; Luigi will want to open soon.”

“Is it so late already?” Shaundar wondered. He was surprised; he rarely slept for more than four hours at a time.

Molly led him down the stairs and out the back to a kitchen building, where Luigi was directing pots and pans into appropriate spots on the counters. A fire was burning merrily in the stove and a great cauldron of pork stock was simmering away. It smelled delicious. “Mornin’!” he greeted Shaundar gruffly. “I need a prep cook; we’re

havin' soup tonight. I figure a Navy lad ought to be able to peel and chop potatoes . . .”

Shaundar grinned. “Sure thing.” He rolled up his sleeves and fetched a knife.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Molly said. “I have to get to work too.” She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down until he kissed her. “Stay out of trouble, sailor.”

Shaundar cut and chopped in silence for several minutes as Luigi gathered the ingredients; carrots, potatoes, dried peas and a little ham. “You sure you don’t want to get off the Rock?” the innkeeper asked, casting him a sideways glance with his central eye and three stalks again.

“Not until I know what happened to my sister,” Shaundar said simply. Vigorously he carved up the ham and added it to the chopped vegetables.

Luigi levitated the cutting board so it spilled everything into the cauldron. A wooden spoon began stirring, and then banged itself off at the edge of the pot. The doors on a small spice cupboard creaked open and spices flew out and sprinkled themselves into the soup; black pepper, dill and cayenne being the notable ones. Shaundar’s stomach growled in response to the piquant aroma.

“I’ll need you to move this to the hearth in the bar, if you don’t mind,” Luigi requested. Shaundar picked it up and hauled it into the tavern. The beholder followed along. “I remember where I’ve heard the name ‘Sunfall,’” he said. “There was an Admiral by that name. Did some important things in the First Unhuman War and commanded the Realmospace Fleet in the Battle of Yggdrasil’s Child. Vastly outnumbered but still managed to stop a big scro fleet to a man, though I understand the cost was a small elven world in the roots of the tree. You related at all?”

Shaundar staggered under the weight of his grief and almost dropped the pot. He focused on hanging the cauldron on the hook on the inside of the hearth to swallow back tears of rage and despair. It was a moment or two before he could speak, as visions of the barren fragments of stone that were all that was left of his homeworld assaulted his mind, punctuated by flashes of his father’s cold ivory hand sticking out of the wreckage of one wall of the *Aerdrie’s* bridge, forever reaching for his fallen moonblade. “He was my father,” he managed after a long, deep breath. His voice was almost steady.

“I’m sorry,” Luigi piped up quickly. “I guess I could have handled that better. I should have thought . . . you all right?”

“Sure,” said Shaundar dismissively, heaving a great sigh to shake it off. But once again his pulse was racing and sweat beaded his brow.

“Sorry.” He took hold of the spoon and stirred the soup with gusto. “I think the peas are dissolving already,” he pointed out in order to change the subject.

Luigi once again harrumphed in a way that Shaundar associated with throat-clearing. “Well, that’s good,” he rumbled. “Bar opens in about an hour, gotta have dinner on . . . speakin’ of which, help yourself whenever you’re ready, Shaundar. When you’re done there, get another cask of dwarven ale from the cellar –” he indicated with one of the eyestalks facing aft – “and a couple of bottles of elven wine. Your choice; I don’t really know nothin’ about elven wine; I just order what I’m asked to. But maybe I should ask an elf, eh?” He floated on over to the bar and he made himself busy organizing tankards and cups.

The last thing in the world Shaundar wanted was food, so he headed right for the cellar, which was accessed behind the staircase. He appreciated the beholder’s unsubtle attempt to give him a moment alone. But that raised the question; where did a beholder learn such things? He doubted they knew much about grief like that, being so violent and xenophobic . . . ah, but maybe people had the wrong idea about beholders. They certainly had the wrong idea about the scro; why not assign a lack of feeling to a creature that was utterly alien to them?

The elven wine came in three different varieties; a green elven summer wine, an Evereskan red, and a dry white that seemed to have

come from somewhere in Greyspace. Of the three, the summer wine was his personal favourite. He brought those up first. “I recommend this one,” he said to Luigi. “We used to drink it back home.” He coughed and cleared his throat. Then he went back down and hauled up the ale.

“Set it in the empty spot,” Luigi instructed him. In the meantime, the beholder had tossed some trash into the empty cask and he asked Shaundar to carry the full barrel that preceded it into the alley; which he did.

Shaundar saw the movement out of the corner of his eye at about the same time that the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He put the stack of waste barrels between him and the intruders. A small troupe of brightly-dressed street performers came into the alley; except that these so-called performers were armed with slings and belaying-pins. There were two humans, a mustachioed man and a hatchet-faced woman; a gnome with a respectably tall red hat, a scowling halfling, and a half-elven youth with a pencil-thin mustache. He resembled the human male somewhat.

“Good evening, Mr. Sunfall,” the man with the curly mustachios greeted him with a bow and a flourish. “The Juggler, on behalf of her friend young Mr. Kullek, sends her regards.” He grinned and they began to spread out, tapping their pins against their hands.

Kullek? Who in the Demonweb was Kullek? But the Juggler was a name he knew. She was one of the four legendary Underbarons of Bral; a leader of a criminal syndicate that often included swindlers and con men, according to rumour. He supposed that explained the performers' outfits. "Don't do this to yourselves," Shaundar sighed. He had no urge to fight anyone; he was weary of death and bloodshed. "If you're here for the little punk I threw out of the bar last night, he's not worth the effort."

The mustachioed man's grin widened. "The Juggler takes the needs of her clients very seriously." Shaundar saw with an inward wince that he had mistaken Shaundar's reluctance for fear. They started moving towards him.

"To the Hells with this," Shaundar said in disgust, waving a hand dismissively, and he turned to head out the other end of the alley.

"Please, one moment," another voice chimed in, this one slightly accented. Everyone was equally surprised to find the other way blocked by a pack of five Shou men with rolled-up shirt sleeves and tattoos completely coating the visible parts of their arms to the wrist. Three were apparently unarmed and two had twin weapons that looked like some kind of billy clubs with handles so that they could be clutched against the long bones of the forearms. One of the unarmed ones clasped his hands before him and made a perfunctory bow. "*Nai hao*,

konnichiwa, Mr. Sunfall. We represent Mr. Ozamata, who offers protection services for the inhabitants of the Low City. I understand you reneged on your agreement with your landlord?" He was crisp and polite.

Shaundar groaned. Mr. Ozamata was the head of the Shou Town criminal syndicate, the Yakuza. They were a dangerous bunch. The other guys probably just wanted to rough him up, but they might actually kill him.

"We were here first," snapped the hatchet-faced woman to the tattooed Shous.

The Yakuza man smiled a bit more. "I am sorry to disappoint the Juggler and to deprive you of your fee, but Mr. Ozamata has an image to uphold. It would reflect very poorly on his business if he were to fail to provide the services he is paid for." Now the two groups began to keep watch on each other as well as Shaundar.

Shaundar started scanning the terrain. The door, unfortunately, had closed behind him and any attempt to open the knob would take precious seconds he couldn't afford to waste. On the other hand, there was a cobweb sticking to the wall right next to him. "I really don't want to fight anyone today," he protested softly. "Just let me go back to work and leave it off. Trust me, that greaseball isn't worth it."

The Yakuza also began to fan out. "I am afraid that is not my concern, Mr. Sunfall."

Shaundar considered it. Well, his odds were probably much better with the Juggler's people. "That's too bad," he said with regret; and with that, he scraped the web off of the wall and charged through the Juggler gang, simultaneously knocking down the half-elf and throwing the web into their midst with an arcane word. It made an almost rubber-band like sound as it expanded. He didn't look back but he could tell that it had produced the desired effect, which was to expand until it filled the alley, and possibly entangle them all, by the string of cursing and shouting that trailed him.

He fled for the alley's end. "Get him!" roared the man with the mustache.

Not knowing how far they might be behind him, Shaundar ran for all he was worth, figuring that the market was probably a good place to lose them. To his stunned disbelief there was yet another pack of thugs blocking his path. A handful of half-orcs clustered around a small man with a strongbox; illegal moneychangers, plying their trade with a pair of illithid. They saw Shaundar coming at them and one of them shouted, "Hey you! Get away from here!"

"Clear the road!" Shaundar yelled; and when they didn't, he ran right through them as well. One of the half-orcs tried to grab his

breastplate. He slapped the hand aside, knife-handed the half-orc in the throat, and allowed his momentum to carry him on past the thug, bouncing him off of a wall.

“That guy’s trying to rob us!” the other thug cried; and soon they were giving chase as well.

He burst into the busy market square; chose to go left instead of right, and ran right into a half-ogre in a stevedore cap. Shaundar’s momentum and aim were perfect to knock him end over end. The stevedore landed on his face, busting off a tusk, and he lay still. “Sorry!” he called as he went by, glancing back over his shoulder. The moneychanger’s thugs were coming out of the alley, along with most of the Juggler gang, still draped in webbing. The Yakuza were right behind them.

“Hey!” bellowed one of his companions, who had to be the ugliest man Shaundar had ever seen. “That elf knocked down Willy! Let’s get him!”

“Are you kidding me?” Shaundar exclaimed. About a dozen big men in stevedore caps, all of whom might have had goblinoid blood of some kind, joined the chase.

Shaundar glanced around himself quickly. He saw a cooper’s wagon, scabbled up on it and kicked loose one of the barrels. It rolled

down and broke over the head of the stevedore in the lead. “For Sehanine’s sake!” the elven marine cried. “I don’t *want* to fight today, damn it!”

“Well, too bad, jack!” snapped the ugly stevedore. Shaundar followed the barrel with another one and it broke open too. “You shouldn’t have hit Willy! OW!” He started scrabbling up the back of the wagon to get at Shaundar.

“Hey, you gonna pay for those?” demanded the dwarven cooper in a cynical monotone.

Shaundar picked up one of the barrels and slammed it down over the stevedore’s head. The cap came askew and the metal banding pinned his arms firmly to his sides. Shaundar then kicked his feet out from under him and rolled him into the first two of his companions. All three fell down and the ones behind them tripped over them in a tangle of swearing and limbs.

Shaundar flung the contents of his money pouch at the cooper and leaped up onto a grocery cart. He started flinging apples at the congregation of thugs and bullies. “I just want to go back to work, you assholes!” he roared in disgust. He could see that though the Yakuza had followed the circus out of the alley, they were standing at its mouth, watching the scene unfold with incredulous faces.

“Get that son-of-a-bitch!” shrieked the hatchet-faced woman, clawing at the spider webs in her hair. She was so filled with rage that she didn’t notice that she was tearing hair out too.

“Kill him!” bawled the half-ogre, now back on his feet. He was heading in the wrong direction, however, and still blinded by the dirt in his eyes or the throb in his head, he swung a gigantic haymaker punch that took out one of the two illithid, who had followed the moneychangers out in their curiosity. The mind flayer did about three flips before coming to rest in a bone-picker’s dung pile. Its companion hit Willy with a mind blast; he spun around like a top and that haymaker became a windmill that clocked one of the half-orc thugs and sent him flying into a dovecote. Willy’s eyes rolled back up in his head and he hit the dirt again; while the dovecote broke open and what looked to be hundreds of brightly-coloured birds took to the air in a flock. The unfortunate half-orc staggered to his feet swearing a blue streak. He was now also minus a tusk and covered in bird droppings to boot.

The halfling and the gnome from the Juggler gang stopped and took aim with their slings. Shaundar reached for the first available shield-like item and found one of those flat metal Shou pans. He ducked his head behind it just in time for the first stone to bounce off of it with a metallic *krang!* The second one found his breastplate. The steel dented in but the leathery pads behind it prevented it from doing much more than that. He threw the thing like a chakram and the half-elf ducked just

in time. It stuck edge-first in a hay bale three stalls down, taking the half-elf's feathered cap with it.

The shopkeepers started coming out of their stores, wondering what was going on. An old Shou man, evidently the owner of the pan, began to yell incoherently and shake his fist. "Sorry," said Shaundar again, and with the half-elf on the warpath, he deliberately leaped into the air and came down on the other side of the grocery cart so that it all tipped over. Hundreds of apples rolled into the street. The half-elf did quite a comical little dance and scramble in an attempt to keep his footing, but he lost it and tumbled down. The nimble halfling couldn't stay on her feet but she rolled up out of it without much difficulty. The gnome ended up planted on his bottom, hard. He swore soundly enough to blister paint.

One of the Yakuza nodded with a solemnly impressed downturn of his mouth. Another one made a screw-loose gesture with his finger against his ear. They both laughed.

The moneychangers managed to dodge the apples, and so did the man and the woman from the Juggler gang, though the woman almost turned an ankle. Shaundar ran by a very fat, very angry looking fishwife who took a swing at him with a whole scavver. He rolled away from it as she bellowed, "Git away from my store!" She wound it back over her shoulder like a club and got the mustachioed man right in the

face. He went down in a crumpled heap. “Take that,” she smirked in satisfaction. The rest of the pursuit gave her a wide berth.

He ran by Cap’n Gyudd stumping out of his store front, marked by a brass spelljammer’s sextant and a celestial compass in its window. “What in the Abyss . . . ?” he began.

“Sorry, can’t talk now,” Shaundar called over his shoulder. The Captain looked the other way and he saw the pursuing parade. The woman from the Juggler gang managed to streak by him in a shrieking banshee storm, but he noticed the half-orc moneychanger thugs coming and stuck his ivory peg leg out just in time to trip one. “So sorry,” he said innocently, helping him to his feet.

Shaundar ducked into another alley and when the shrieking hellion of the Juggler gang came careening into the dark behind him, he seized her skinny arm and flipped her over into a dumpster. He then charged back out the way he’d come, grabbed Cap’n Gyudd’s street sign, and used it to swing up and kick two of the half-orcs in the torso and knock them over. He rolled up and out of it, and realizing he was about to catch up with the stevedores, one of whom was staggering under the weight of a very pissed off illithid’s mind blast, he ducked into the shop right next door to Cap’n Gyudd’s, which turned out to be “Auntie Stella’s Pet Emporium.”

“Can I . . .” the dwarven proprietress, whom Shaundar assumed was Auntie Stella, began, but he said, “Just browsing. Is there a back way out?”

“Why would you need . . .” she started again, and that’s when two of the stevedores burst in.

“There he is!” one of them exclaimed, pointing, and they both charged him.

Shaundar looked around again quickly and yanked open a cage full of tressym. The winged cats came flying out, and seeing the stevedores between them and the door, they went right for them in a yowling pride-flock. The look of horror on the faces of the stevedores was priceless; they ran right back out the way they’d come, directly into the rest of their fellows. The tressym followed them out the door, but all of them went for the mind flayer instead, which started shrieking in some weird inhuman burble and fled down the street.

“Guess they like squid,” observed Cap’n Gyudd, puffing at his pipe.

Auntie Stella started beating Shaundar with a broom. “Thief!” she cried. “Cat-napper! Get out! OUT!” Obediently Shaundar backed out the door, his hands raised in supplication, and he found himself pressed up against something solid. The shadow cast over him was not

promising. He looked around and found himself eye-to-eye with the leader of the stevedores.

“Can’t we talk about this?” he suggested.

The dockworker’s face twisted into a snarl and he brought a hand around to punch Shaundar in the head. Shaundar took hold of his fist, used it to overbalance him and whirled him around into his fellows. While they were sorting themselves out, he headed back up the street.

“I WILL RIP YOUR HEAD OFF AND SHIT DOWN YOUR NECK!” howled the axe-faced woman as she emerged from the dumpster in the alley. She was streaked with garbage and the aura of reek that emanated from her was blinding from a cable away.

No one afterwards could say for certain when the press gang got involved; but the first thing anyone remembered was when Cap’n Gyudd watched them slap a bag over the reeking woman’s head and drag her off to their ship. The Captain swore he could hear her muffled screaming over the din of everything else.

Molly opened the door of the Temple-Brothel and peered out just in time to see Shaundar jog past. “Shaundar, what . . .?”

“Sorry Molly, gotta run,” he said as he scurried by.

Molly saw the motley crew in pursuit of her lover, so she invoked the power of her goddess and yanked down the front of her bustier. “Hey boys, are you looking for me?” she simpered coquettishly. Two of the stevedores stopped dead in their tracks and five of the other thugs ran right into them. She packed her breasts back under cover and stepped back into the Temple alcove.

Suddenly the press gang was everywhere and billy clubs and belaying pins were flying. “It’s a riot!” somebody cried out.

“Someone call out the Royal Guard!” someone else screamed.

Shaundar found himself in front of the Yakuza again, so he took the opportunity to explain, “I would have paid my landlord if he hadn’t sapped me.” One of the stevedores tried to lock him in a choke hold from behind. Impatiently he ducked down and stepped backward with his hand wrapped around the dockworker’s arm. Then he grabbed a hold of his foe’s thigh and jerked his feet out from under him. The stevedore went over backwards. “Part of a contract for shelter involves some degree of personal safety. I consider that contract voided.”

“I cannot say that I do not see your point, Mr. Sunfall,” the tattooed Shou man replied with a nod, as Shaundar locked the arm of one of the moneychanger gang attempting to punch him in the side of the head and threw him ass-over-tea-kettle into the remains of the cooper’s

wagon, “but nevertheless, Mr. Ozamata has engaged our services and our agreement is separate from yours. I am sure you understand.”

The gnome and the halfling from the Juggler gang grabbed Shaundar by each arm. “Seriously?” he asked them both in exasperation, and he lifted his arms out beside him and pinwheeled around until he had momentum, at which point he flung both the diminutive rogues into the dung-pile that the bone-picker was just starting to get cleaned up. He let out a blowing irritated breath. In the meantime, the cursing in three languages was just getting started. “I do understand Mr. Ozamata’s position,” he assured them, slightly out of breath.

A bully from the press gang tried to smack Shaundar in the head with his club. Shaundar grabbed his hand, twisted his wrist until the sailor could make no noise but whimpering, and he dug his fingers into the pressure point near the base of the thumb until the bully let the pin go. Shaundar then smacked him in the bridge of the nose with the back of his fist. “At the same time, you need to know that Mr. Ozamata is acting on behalf of a dishonourable agent.” Another stevedore grabbed him on one side while the half-elf tried to slug him in the face on the other. Shaundar pulled the stevedore right into the path of the punch, which connected with the dockworker’s jaw, then tossed the unconscious form at the half-elf to knock him down. “This doesn’t help Mr. Ozamata’s reputation,” he concluded, panting. “Doesn’t his protection extend to me too? I’m an inhabitant of the Low City.”

Auntie Stella started beating him again with her broom. “Oh for the love of Luthic!” Shaundar cursed in Orcish. He yanked the broom out of her hands and she looked into his eyes, surprised. “They’re tressym!” he exclaimed in exquisite frustration. “They know you feed them! They’ll be back!” As a whole pack of the stevedores charged him, he clotheslined the first one with the broom who toppled right over top of it; grabbed it in his hands like a two-handed sword and slammed it right into the chin of the second and brought it down on the second’s back as he dropped for good measure. It broke; so he seized both pieces, smacked away a right jab from the third with the top part, then he jabbed the bristled bit directly into his eyes while thrusting the rounded top of the other piece into the man’s solar plexus. He slapped aside the already overextended punch offered by the fourth one with the bristled bit, and then, stepping into the strike, he hit him in the ribs while stomping on the back of his knee and calf. He went down too. “Gods-be-damned!” Shaundar roared. *“I don’t want to fight today!”*

The rest of the stevedores, the moneychangers, both small members of the Juggler gang and the bullies all looked around at each other, shrugged, and charged him at once.

“Run for your lives!” a piercing shriek rang out, as a handful of gnomes in handler’s garb scrambled past them. “The tressym have stampeded the giant space hamsters!”

Everything fell silent for just a split second; except, that was, for the ominous rumbling. “Oh, Hells,” groaned Shaundar. Everyone else scattered as seven hamsters the size of mammoths came looming into view, casting shadows of doom over the market square. The little bright plumaged birds, which were nibbling at the spilled apples, cried in alarm and took to flight as a flock.

“What in the name of the Great Eye is goin’ on out here?” a familiar beholder’s voice bellowed, as Large Luigi hove into view from behind the Yakuza in the alley. He took one look at the chaos, fixed on the charging hamsters, and aimed one of his eyestalks at them. “Easy there,” he said soothingly to the creatures, flying out over the Yakuza. When they reached him, they chittered and started rubbing themselves on him. “Yeah, yeah,” he said impatiently, wincing as three gigantic, adorably cute rodents pressed their faces on him, burying his eyestalks and most of his body in fur. A couple of them started nibbling at the spilled apples.

Shaundar stared in disbelief over the wreckage. Fruit, the remains of several barrels, feathers and bird poop littered the streets. The tressym had left off of the hamsters and were now chasing the bright feathered birds, zinging at random intervals through the air, the birds twittering out their indignation. Auntie Stella jogged after them, calling out, “Here kitty kitty!” She was intercepted by the fishwife, who showed her a destroyed scavver and demanded restitution. The bone-picker

shovelled up the pile of dung, swearing; and the two Juggler gang members and the illithid who had landed in it were helping him, still covered in the mess; Shaundar wondered how that had been arranged and decided he was better off not knowing. A rhythmic clanging and angry jabbering echoed through the air as the old Shou man beat the half-elven youth repeatedly over the head with his pan while he tried to crawl away. The moneychanger himself – the small man with the strongbox – cowered under the cooper’s wagon. Bodies of stevedores, moneychanger thugs, entertainers, and random bystanders lay in the streets; the press gangers gathered them all like harvest gleanings. One of them waved to Shaundar in a friendly manner. “Thanks for the help!” he said cheerfully.

“Mr. Sunfall,” said the Yakuza, gaining his attention. Shaundar immediately dropped into a fighting stance and waited to see if there were going to be five actual bodies to go with the unconscious press gang victims.

The five of them stepped back into what might, in the beginning, have suggested a fighting stance; but then in unison they laid their right hands in front of themselves, palm up, and turned the stance into a formal bow of a sort. “Mr. Sunfall, we will consult. You will see us again. Perhaps it will be on better terms next time. *Zai jian, sayonara.*” And as one, they stood up and disappeared into the shadows.

“Holy Hells in a haversack!” Cap’n Gyudd exclaimed, limping over. “You managed to get the Juggler *and* the Yakuza after you at the same time? That takes talent, lad!”

Luigi glanced over at him from beneath a piebald hamster’s chin and his eyes all narrowed. “You don’t do ‘low profile’ well, do you?”

“Not anymore, I guess,” Shaundar admitted. Perhaps it would have been best if he’d taken on another identity when he hit planet; he seemed to do all right when he wasn’t being himself. But how else would he find Selena? He watched the returning gnomes as they attempted to corral the hamsters, which were ignoring them entirely. One of them reached behind its ear to scratch and accidentally toppled one of its handlers over.

“What in the Great Mother’s Dominion happened, anyway?” the beholder wanted to know.

“I was trying to avoid a fight,” Shaundar explained.

Both Luigi and the Captain gaped at him incredulously. There was a long pause. “What would have happened if you’d *wanted* to fight?” Gyudd burst out.

Shaundar shrugged. “It would have been over more quickly.”

“The Watch is coming!” one of the press gangers bellowed, and the crowd scattered, except for the animal handlers, the angry fishwife who was now waving her fish and swearing so loudly you could hear it across the square, and the moneychanger, who seemed terrified to leave the safety of the wagon’s undercarriage. Shaundar saw the brigandine-armoured men and giff approaching with crossbows and boarding pikes, and he asked Luigi, “Do I still have a job?”

“Let’s get out of here,” he agreed, and they all tromped into the Laughing Beholder.

Chapter Four

Shaundar was frankly astounded that he had not been arrested by the Bralian Royal Guard. He could only imagine that somebody must have paid them off to ignore the whole situation, something he understood was customary. “Prolly took that strongbox the little guy under the wagon had,” was Luigi’s response when Shaundar asked him to speculate. He seemed to regard this as par for the course.

He couldn’t sleep that night; a crawling, burning pain and maddening itching in his scarred back kept him awake despite the rum, he assumed because he’d managed to awaken nerves that slept uneasily at best with all of his physical activity. Finally he gave up and padded down to the barroom, where he sat on a stool and drank beer and tried not to think about black tentacles feeding on his life force while he was whipped over and over until there was nothing left of his back but strips of muscle and skin.

“You’re up early,” Luigi observed when he came down the staircase, thankfully startling Shaundar from his doze. “You sleep at all?”

Shaundar shook his head.

“Molly told me you had some old injuries,” the beholder added as he started floating the chairs off of the tables and setting them up for the day. “They botherin’ you?”

What was Molly doing spreading that around? “Yes, sir, they are,” he bristled. “Not that I prefer to discuss it.” He got up and lent a hand to the task, despite the roaring pain it set off in those old wounds.

“Easy there, lad,” Luigi said, fixing him with about five eyes. “I wasn’t tryin’ to pry, I was just goin’ to give you the night off if you hurt too much to work, is all.”

Shaundar made his muscles unclench. “Thank you,” he said, “but I can handle it. I’ve worked through worse pain than this.” Another memory he would rather not have. Besides, what would he do with himself if he wasn’t working? It wasn’t like he dared wander the streets after yesterday. “I hope you won’t ask me to run errands for you, though,” he admitted. “I probably should stay out of sight for a while.”

Luigi followed him with those five eyes as he moved around, methodically replacing the chairs. “Seems sensible,” he concurred. He paused for a few moments before he asked, “I don’t suppose you’d confide in me what the Navy want you for, would you? And how you managed to piss off both the Yakuza and the Juggler?”

Shaundar sighed. “It’s a very long story. You’re probably better off not knowing much about it, sir.”

Luigi offered a hearty laugh that shook his whole body so that it bobbed up and down. The little lines between the leathery pads on his carapace flexed and heaved. “Don’t you ‘sir’ me!” he laughed. “I don’t got no rank nowhere; I’m just Luigi.”

“You’re just a common starhand; you work for a living?”
Shaundar quoted with a smile from every Boatswain he’d ever known.

Luigi grinned in that remarkably un-fierce way that exposed all those sharp pointed teeth. “That’s about right,” he agreed. Then he sobered. “Look, Shaundar, you seem a decent elf. I’m just tryin’ to be a friend, is all.”

Shaundar nodded and swallowed past the lump that congealed in his throat. “I’m not very good for my friends,” he said. “You’d be better off keeping your distance.”

Luigi opened his mouth to say something, but that’s when a small tap on the back door revealed Molly. “Good morning, handsome,” she greeted Shaundar cheerfully. “How’re you feeling after your adventure yesterday?”

“Stubborn elf prolly won’t tell you,” Luigi interjected, “but some of those injuries you mentioned are hurtin’ him something fierce today. I think some TLC is in order.”

She scowled in concern. “We’ll have to fix that. Come upstairs.” She took his hand and pulled. He initially resisted and Molly barely budged the muscles in his forearm, but then he allowed himself to be taken upstairs.

“Healin’ stuff is in the bathroom,” Luigi called after them.

She started running a bath immediately and demanded that he strip. From somewhere in the dark recesses of his brain he heard a poisoned echo; *Strip, and place your belongings in this pile*. He shuddered and his back twinged. But he did as he was told.

“You don’t like that,” Molly observed. “Something about the way I said that.” He didn’t answer, so she sighed – whether in exasperation or impatience, Shaundar couldn’t say – and pressed on with, “What hurts, honey?”

“It’s not bad,” he protested. “I’ve been through worse.”

She glared at him. Those emerald eyes could actually look pretty fierce when her ire was roused. “That’s not what I asked you, sailor. I asked you, what *hurts*?”

Shaundar considered it and barked laughter. “It’s probably a shorter list of what doesn’t hurt, to be honest,” he admitted. Head, neck, sternum, leg, knees, back, tailbone; yep, all were chiming in with enthusiasm. “My back is the worst,” he confessed. “Sometimes it has weird phantom pains. My *teu’revan*–” he stopped and choked off the rest of that thought. No, he was not ready for that yet. “I knew someone with a missing arm,” he continued in a wavering voice. “He used to complain about the phantom pains off and on. I didn’t have any concept. I wish I’d been more sympathetic.” He wished a lot of things about Yathar. His throat filled with grief, pain, rage and regret to the point that he gagged on it, and he could not speak any further.

“What about the girl with the crutches?” she asked. “Ty . . . Tyelatae, I think her name was?”

Tyelatae! Shaundar hadn’t thought of her in years. He wondered how she was doing. He imagined that if she had survived the War, she was probably at her family estate on Evermeet; a place he could never again go. “I don’t know,” he ruminated. “She . . . our ship went down on the mission that directly followed our first meeting, Molly. I don’t . . .” he fell silent.

Molly watched him for several moments, perhaps waiting for him to continue, but when he did not, she said, “I have some topical

arnica salve. That should help a little. I could put some chalk-ointment on it; that should reduce the itching. I have some opium.” She shrugged.

“No opium,” he refused. “Too tempting. And I don’t dare dull my senses so much.”

The gnome priestess nodded thoughtfully. She turned off the water at the level of a shallow puddle and went to work with the ointments, carefully rubbing them oh-so-gently between the crawling raised root-like marks and the ravines that divided them. Every touch was agony that sent rolling flames of pain through the synapses. He gritted his teeth and suffered through it.

“Done!” she said at last, and by that time the ointment had begun its work and the burning sensation was receding.

“Thank you,” he sighed in relief. “That is much better.”

She drew his head to her breasts and held his ear close to her heart so he could hear its tenacious little dance, more rapid in a gnome than an elf. She heaved a sigh, and so did he.

When they came downstairs, Shaundar once more clad in his armour, he turned to Luigi and he said, “I can tell you about the thugs, anyway. I skipped out on my rent when my landlord tried to bash my brains in. I guess that’s where the Yakuza come from. And I understand

the little puke I threw in the street the other night sent the Juggler after me.” He shrugged awkwardly. “The rest of them were just bad luck.”

Luigi narrowed all eleven eyes and shifted his body back and forth in a way that suggested a shaking head. “No, we can’t have that. I’ll have a word with the Juggler. She can’t be harassin’ my employees for doin’ their jobs.”

“That’s right,” agreed Molly emphatically, her hands on her hips.

“Well, let’s get this place opened up,” Luigi sighed.

The first customers of the night were the giff from the previous evening. “Ahoy there!” one of them hailed Shaundar, and indicated he should join them.

Shaundar came over to their table. “What can I do for you gentlemen this evening?” he asked in the friendly tone of a bartender.

They glanced at each other, and then the more decorated of the two – the one who had spoken to Shaundar the other night – coughed and said, “We heard about the events in the market square yesterday. We were wondering if you’ve considered mercenary work? We have a fine company with an excellent reputation . . .”

Shaundar burst out laughing. Their confused expressions amused him even more. “Forgive me,” he chortled. “I have to get back to work.” He started polishing tables.

The evening was relatively uneventful, mostly because people were pointing at him and whispering behind their hands. Shaundar despaired. If word had spread so far already, it was only a matter of time before the Navy showed up. Perhaps it was best to go to ground again and disappear into the slums and streets of Bral. He hardly noticed that Luigi was bobbing around among the clientele that night instead of staying behind the bar.

As Shaundar was tidying up after last call deciding whether to stay or not, Luigi approached him. He was smiling. “Shaundar!” he called out. “I think I have good news for you.”

Shaundar froze in place, his hands curled around the back of a chair he was about to lift. “What can you tell me, Luigi?” he asked.

“Is your sister’s name Selena?” the barkeep asked him.

Shaundar’s heart started trip-hammering in his chest and sweat beaded his brow. He felt heat and then cold in a rush. *Is, he said is, not was*, was the thought that came to him, and his brain seized on this and began repeating it in an almost irritating childlike singsong. “Yes,” he said in a low tone, not meeting any of Luigi’s many eyes, not daring to hope.

“I was talkin’ to the Dockmaster,” Luigi said slowly. “Ship musters have to be registered with the city if a ship uses Bral as their port-of-call. It was a long shot but I usually start there when I’m lookin’ for someone. And I did find a Sunfall registered with a ship’s crew. Would you recognize your sister’s signature if you saw it?”

Shaundar stood with his back rigid and his head lowered. “It’s been some time,” he said in a quiet voice, “but I might.”

Luigi shoved a log book along the surface of the table Shaundar was standing before with a telekinetic push. Shaundar forced himself to read the list of names, skimming down it by following each individual signature with his fingertip. He recognized his sister’s handwriting immediately. The muster said she was working as a spelljammer.

“How long ago was this?” he demanded in a whisper.

“Four months,” the beholder told him. “The ship’s name is the *Tempest*. She’s a Squidship free trader. And she was sighted out of Waterdeep less than a month ago.”

Shaundar made a kind of strangled bleat that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob. She was *alive*! She was still alive! Admiral Durothil hadn’t been lying to him after all. He could hardly believe it! He rubbed at his face with one hand. “Thank you, Luigi,” he choked out once he had collected himself.

Something large and warm brushed against him and he realized that it was Luigi bumping him. "Closest I get to a pat on the shoulder or a hug," the beholder said gruffly. "I'm happy for you, lad. Glad I could help."

Shaundar reached out and laid a hand on the beholder's side. His many eyes widened with surprise. "I wish there was something I could do for you in return," the elf said. "If there ever is, please let me know."

"I believe you," smiled Luigi. "But you give me too much credit. It's what I do for a livin' after all. And it wasn't really that hard, to be honest. I know the skipper. She's a tough cookie, that one, and she's been frequentin' this place since she was a girl on her father's ship. I remembered she was crewin' up when she was in port last and thought it was worth checkin'. You just got lucky. Sounds like that's a change of pace for you, eh? All you gotta do now is wait."

But with the Juggler and the Yakuza on his case, and the Navy sure to find him at any time, did he dare? Yet how would Selena find him otherwise? He sighed. "Things could get very interesting around here for a while, Luigi," he acknowledged with reluctance. "I seem to bring trouble in waves."

"Things are usually interesting around here!" Luigi laughed. "I can handle it, Shaundar, don't you worry!"

Shaundar supposed that a beholder did have better odds of surviving trouble than your average innocent bystander. “I hope you’re right,” he nodded. Because when you came right down to it, what other choice did he have? The possibility that his sister yet lived, when everyone else he knew and loved was dead or lost, was the only reason he still drew breath himself. He would face whatever he had to, fight whomever and whatever he must, just to see her face again one more time, and know that she, at least, was happy. Unconsciously he cracked his neck and his knuckles. He didn’t notice the change in his posture and expression; but Luigi did, and it pleased him to know that Shaundar Sunfall’s spirit was still alive, for all appearances to the contrary.

Lieutenant Ardeth Mistrivven was especially irritated. As the Officer of the Watch at the Rock of Bral base, processing its paperwork was his primary job. He thought he’d done well when he’d assigned that arrogant Boatswain to the task; he figured that even green elven monkeys could be trained to check the appropriate boxes and file, and since the elf obviously hated paperwork as much as he did, Mistrivven got exactly what he wanted out of it; an easy life that involved as little work as possible; that is, until the Navy finally came to its senses and started bringing its constituent worlds to heel under the Imperial Navy’s rule. But this week, the lowlife was for some reason especially diligent, and Mistrivven had to cancel his own weekend leave in order to catch up on a

blizzard of fitness reports, old damage reports from ships no longer commissioned, and assistance requests. If that wasn't bad enough, there was some kind of riot over the weekend in the Low City's market square. Some Navy personnel had been accused of looting, court martial level offenses that all required arrests and processing. Some other sailors had been reported missing, and the word was that a press gang had taken all victims of the riot in secret. The Navy did not tolerate unauthorized pressing of their personnel, especially into any other service, and that needed to be dealt with. On top of everything else, the Sindiath Line had apparently lost a shipment of rare Caer'Thunese budgerigars and they were pissed off about it. In a rage he tossed aside the casualty papers and distressed veterans reports, not feeling particularly like helping people, though he did take care of the most recent missing personnel reports before anything else, since the longer the Navy waited, the harder it would be to track down their people. So it was four days before he finally sat down with a cup of tea and the overdue casualty reports, and his eye fixed on a familiar name.

"Spawn of a spider!" he swore, managing to spill hot tea on his clean uniform pants; which made him swear again. Wasn't that just like Sunfall; contact with him was always bad luck, wasn't it? Mistrivven still hadn't forgiven the elf for driving him out of the Imperial Navy's Elite Flight Academy, commonly known as "Aces High," when they were youths. And he knew that the Admiral shared his low opinion. He was not surprised to learn that Sunfall had managed to run afoul of the

Mithril; that was really only a matter of time. He had to confess that he was a little shocked that Sunfall was wanted for treason and desertion, but he supposed the mixed blood had to lead to some kind of mental problems.

Mistrivven took the report and immediately went to the Admiral's office. He knocked softly and stood at parade rest to wait, knowing that his commanding officer appreciated the formality.

He was not certain why it was that Admiral Silmara, who had been dumped on the Realmspace Fleet along with this hunk of rock and trouble, was promoted over his commanding officer to the Vice Admiralty, but he thought it was a mistake. The lieutenant actually liked his commanding officer, though he was awfully hard to look at. Hard luck, that, and he supposed he could understand why the Admiral made the capture and imprisonment, or execution, of Shaundar Sunfall into a personal mission.

"Come in!" called the Admiral. Mistrivven opened the door and saluted as he waited to be acknowledged.

Rear Admiral Durothil was at his oaken desk with the green-and-gold standard of the Navy at its face, reading over reports of his own, but the lieutenant had no illusions that he was unaware of anything that was going on outside his door. A slender, athletic looking fire-haired sun elf with a golden crescent at his collar was leaning against one of the hard-

backed chairs in the room, contemplating a map as he rested one gloved hand lightly on his rapier. Between the two of them, they were a study in war deformities. How the burns that scarred the redhead's face in strange mask-like patterns of red ravines, and bubbled and roughened the flesh of his forehead, had spared the elf's hazel eyes the Lieutenant would never know and was afraid to ask, though he suspected acid as opposed to fire. And the Admiral, Mistrivven was sure, had been an object of worship with his unique amethyst-and-citrine eyes and softly gilded skin; except that the left side of his face was open in a rictus that exposed his teeth through the strings of remaining flesh that formed the cheek above his jawline.

"What is it, *Teu'Ruan*?" the Admiral demanded.

"You might want to see this, sir," Mistrivven replied, handing over the report.

The Admiral took it and skimmed through it with a bored expression on his mangled face; though when he reached the relevant information, he, too, swore vociferously. The red-haired Captain glanced up from the chart with a quizzical expression.

"He's here!" hissed the Admiral, unconsciously crushing the report in his hand.

"Sunfall?" the Captain asked him.

“Av, *quessir*,” confirmed the lieutenant.

“May I, sir?” asked the redhead, extending his hand towards the report. Admiral Durothil handed it to him. The Captain straightened it out and looked it over. “Where is this Temple-Brothel?” he inquired of Mistrivven. “Do you know?”

“I understand it’s near to Cap’n Guydd’s and the Laughing Beholder, *quessir*,” Mistrivven replied. “By the Low City market square.”

“Market square?” the Admiral echoed. “Did I not hear something about a riot there a few days ago?”

“Actually, that’s what I came to tell you, sir,” the Captain disclosed. “One of my crew told me that the disturbance seemed to be centered on an elf in orcish armour.” He handed the report back to Lord Durothil.

Everyone exchanged a glance.

“Shall I go and pick him up, Admiral?” the redhead with the acid burns enquired.

The Admiral sipped at his tea. Mistrivven thought that the workings of his teeth and tongue, visible through the open tears in his

face, were especially gruesome. “Take the Aelerothis with you, Captain Lotharvalis,” Admiral Durothil commanded.

“Av, *quessir*,” the Captain agreed, and he saluted and sauntered towards the door like a cat. Lotharvalis nodded to Mistrivven on the way out. “Good job, Lieutenant,” he said approvingly.

“Avavaen,” the Admiral agreed. “Excellent work! Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Though I do have to wonder why it took four days, according to the filing date.”

The Lieutenant’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not sure, sir. I’m looking into it.”

“See that you do,” the elven lord nodded. “Dismissed.”

Mistrivven saluted and took his leave. All the while he was visualizing the many different ways he was going to crucify Boatswain Thersylvanna.

The moneychanger wasn’t happy when Talek told him he needed to take a leave of absence, especially since his principle had been confiscated by the Royal Guard, but Talek didn’t care much. He knew his

duty, and it wasn't to some random, bigger-than-his-britches human moneychanger.

Talek had served his three years after his *Zabbak'Tarr* had made him a man, accepted by a mercenary band in service to the Bloodaxe clan even though his father was human. He'd fought in the War of Revenge; even survived the Battle of Bahgtru's Teeth. Because he was half-human, smuggling him out of Dukagshspace during the Occupation with a mostly-human mercenary ship was fairly easy. He'd made his way to Realmspace and connected with the contact he was directed to find in the roots of Chandros. From there he'd come to Bral, to serve as an informant for the Scro Empire. He was directed to observe, as much as possible, the activities of the elves and their Navy, and to keep his eye out for anything he thought noteworthy. He figured that an elf in scro commander's armour was something worth noting; and he figured that Marak Bloodaxe might be especially interested to learn that the armour the elf was wearing bore the insignia of their age-old rivals, the Bloodfists; and furthermore, that it fit him perfectly. Which meant either that it was enchanted so that it would resize – something that could only have come from a Warpriest's magic – or that it was made for him. Either one had some very interesting implications.

One thing he knew for sure; that distinctive armour had belonged to the Bloodfist's Clan Champion; which seemed to support the idea that it was a war trophy, since the Champion had vanished some

time during the Exodus. And that meant there would be a significant bounty worth collecting.

He bought passage aboard a Tradesman headed for the groundling city of Waterdeep on Toril. The trip was short; only a few hours from the current position of the Rock of Bral in Selune's Tears. From there he got a room at the docks while he waited for passage to Skullport, the fabled city of rogues beneath the famous Torilian metropolis. He shuddered as the ship he boarded was thrown at the illusionary shoals and flattened to slip through the narrow passage that guarded Skullport from the outside world; and the outside world from them.

Talek felt right at home in Skullport, a place that was very much like the Rock of Bral, in that the only real law was what you could enforce with your fist and everything was for sale. The only difference, in his opinion, was Skullport's open slave market. Bral was a little more discreet about it. He got a room and sent word to his contact at the Black Tankard. Then he bought himself strong ale and some company for the night.

When he awoke, his company was gone and his contact was crouched over him on a chair in his room at the Crowing Cockatrice.

“Gods, don’t do that!” Talek protested, sitting up suddenly in his hammock, which he always pitched to avoid the bedbugs in the straw pallet.

The small, black-skinned scro dressed in Orcish clothing to blend in better chuckled. “You drink too much, Talek. It’s going to kill you someday.” He handed the half-orc a tankard. “Hair of the dog?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” the half-orc grinned agreeably and swallowed it back.

“What happened to your tusk, little brother?” the lithe scro rogue inquired as he studied the break. He drank coffee instead of booze.

Talek chuckled. “That’s what I’m here to tell you about! An elf wearing noble Bloodfist armour started a riot on the Rock two days ago,” Talek informed his half-brother.

This seemed to pique his elder brother’s interest. “Really?”

Talek smiled. Evidently this was useful. “I’ll tell you something else, too,” he went on. “This elf could fight like nothing I’ve ever seen, Torgol. He was the last man standing. Helluva show, actually. Wish I hadn’t been caught in the crossfire; and by the way, do you know

someone who could gild this up and fix it?” He rubbed at the gum below the aching, broken tooth impatiently.

“*Gul*, of course I do,” the small scro nodded. “Talek, this might be really valuable information. There’s some speculation that the elf who killed Narok Bloodaxe might also have taken out Champion Bolvi Bloodfist.”

“That could have been his armour,” Talek confirmed, “but then you gotta wonder; if he’s going to wear a war trophy, why not wear Narok’s armour? More prestigious.”

Torgol pondered the question. “A good point. The obvious answer is that Narok’s breastplate had a hole in the middle of it; but if the elf were inclined to take a war trophy, why would he have done that and left it behind? We know he had plenty of time.” They fell silent and ruminated on this.

The scro clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Well, let’s let them figure it out, huh? You got the information; I’ll bring it back to Chandros and get word back to Command. It could be some time before you hear back from me.” He fell silent and added almost as an afterthought, “Since you obviously have the time and the money, did you buy me company for the day?”

“No, big brother,” grinned Talek Blackblade, “but I know where to find some.” He got up and started to get dressed.

The small scro smiled. “Sounds great! Lead on,” he said encouragingly.

Molly was just getting ready to open for the evening when she heard a tap on the Temple door.

“We’re closed!” Duruz called through the door. “Come back in an hour!”

“I beg your pardon,” said a melodic elvish voice in reply, “but I am not here in regards to patronizing your establishment. May I speak with you a moment? I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Can it wait until we’ve opened?” asked Ravi plaintively through the bolted doors.

“Of course it can,” the voice replied, “but I was trying to respect the privacy and comfort of your clientele.”

Molly exchanged a glance with Duruz and Ravi. Then she looked to Wulfgar and nodded. Wulfgar unbolted the door.

A gold elf with a horribly burnt face stepped into the salon. He wore a rapier with all the comfort of a born duelist, and he was clad in the silver and blue uniform of an Elven Navy Captain. Accompanying him were a dainty elf maid with black hair and the brightest green eyes Molly could recall seeing on an elf in a silver spelljammer's flight suit, and two elves, obviously brother and sister, in the sparkling silver and red uniform of elven Marines that made other races call them "toy soldiers." They were gold elves as well, with an unusual combination of blue hair and golden eyes. The male was packing an elven long sword, and the female had a bow and quiver. "May I come in?" the elf with the burnt face inquired.

Wulfgar spread his arm wide. For a moment Molly was sympathetic; obviously this was another war vet like Shaundar. She sauntered over to meet him. "How are you tonight, honey?" she asked sweetly.

He smiled; but Molly didn't like that smile. She viewed herself as a pretty good judge of character; there were maggots crawling beneath those eyes. "Good evening, miss . . . ?" he left the last as an open question.

"I'm Molly," she replied cautiously. "What can I do for you, Captain . . . ?"

“Lotharvalis,” he supplied. “Andar Lotharvalis.” He took her hand and brushed the knuckles with his lips.

“How do you do,” she returned in a neutral tone.

He straightened. “Well, I suppose it’s my own fault for saying that I was uninterested in the Temple’s services, but I think I was hoping for a warmer reception. I’ll cut right to the chase then, shall I? We’re looking for a missing Marine. I understand that he is staying here?”

“I assume you must mean Shaundar; Lieutenant Sunfall?” Molly asked carefully. “I’m sorry; he *was* staying here, but he heard I left a forwarding address at the Navy office and he left rather suddenly. Are you a friend?”

The rough terrain of the elf’s forehead folded with some difficulty into a scowl. “We’ve met,” he said. “Madam; Molly, if I may. Do you know where he is?”

“Not at the moment, sugar,” answered Molly quite truthfully. She had *suspicions* of course . . .

Lotharvalis folded his face into that arrogant piqued look that Molly often associated with elven officers who were also nobles. “Molly, you should understand the great danger you may be in. I am certain that Lieutenant Sunfall can be quite charming, but he is a dangerous criminal.

He has a history of drunkenness and violent outbursts. He's wanted for a variety of charges, including treason, insubordination, striking a superior officer, attempted murder and desertion, to name but a few."

Sally raised an eyebrow. "Wow, that's quite the shopping list, Captain!"

Molly wasn't sure what to think. The drunkenness she'd seen, and violent outbursts certainly didn't seem to be out of character; it felt to her that Shaundar was carrying around a lot of barely-repressed rage. Insubordination and striking a superior officer she could definitely see. Desertion she sincerely doubted; courage was not something that Shaundar Sunfall lacked. But treason? Well, he was speaking Elvish with an Orcish accent. And he *did* talk in his sleep about an Orcish lover. She was sorry to admit that it was certainly plausible.

"Well, in that case I hope you find him," Ravi piped up. He sounded sincere.

The Captain glanced around to all of their faces; then he nodded. "Well, if you do see him, don't approach him. He's extremely dangerous. Send for us right away." He seemed genuinely concerned.

"Thank you, Captain," Duruz said. "We'll be careful."

“Good evening to you all,” he said politely, giving them a formal elven bow; and he took his leave. Molly waved goodbye but she shut and bolted the door after him.

“She’s lying,” the Captain observed to his First Mate.

The green-eyed elf maid shrugged. “Of course she is. His scent is all over her.”

“Well,” the Captain smirked, “that means she’ll go to him sooner or later, won’t she? Shalari, keep an eye on her for a few days.”

“As you wish,” said the handsome lad of the brother and sister pair. He invoked his powers of invisibility and silently scaled the roof of the Temple alcove.

Darmynes, the sun elf who owned the Gilded Leaf tavern, strategically located in an ash tree on the edge of Bral’s landmark Elven Forest, would have been appalled to learn that his back room, kept for “exclusive” clientele such as Admirals and distinguished Captains in the IEN, concealed an opening to Bral’s labyrinthine Underdark caverns, but he was far too thoroughly charmed to notice. To be fair, he would not have tried very hard to pursue the accusation with or without the magic that afflicted him, because those distinguished clients were very good to

him. Take Captain Lotharvalis, for instance. Hard luck, those burns, but he didn't seem bitter and he always tipped well, and he never seemed to lack for female company either. Darmynes approved of how he never seemed to let his unfortunate injury deter him.

"How are things today, Captain?" the bartender greeted him warmly. "Your usual for you?"

"Thank you," Lotharvalis smiled back as his lovely green-eyed companion gave him a wink and a lascivious smile. "And we don't want to be disturbed after that until we come out," she added.

"Of course, *Ary'Ruan*," said Darmynes in the automatic monotone suited to his programming, and as they settled into the private booth he brought them each a tall glass of Alasian nectar, acquired at no small expense, and left them to nurse it as he closed the doors. The Captain locked them.

He spoke the command word, "*Obsul!*" and purple mist formed pooled in the wall and expanded into a doorway which led into darkness. A faint murmur of voices could be heard through the gate. The two companions stepped into the dark and allowed the wall to close behind them.

Lotharvalis gave his eyes a moment to shift into the infrared and ultraviolet spectrums as he had become accustomed to doing, and

observed the scene around him. The drow guards posted at the cavern exit nodded to him with the ease of familiarity. Neither one of them spoke. The last time they had questioned his right to be here, he'd cut out one's tongue. Now one of them had no choice but to keep silent, and the other knew better than to speak until spoken to. In the distance, metallic screams, sobbing protests, and the crack of a whip or two rang off the walls of the labyrinthine caverns until they were indistinguishable from one another.

"Where's Vorn?" he demanded of the guard who was still capable of conversation.

"He's in the Temple, my lord," he responded immediately and with all due reverence.

Lotharvalis strode from the room as the guards scrambled to get their crossed halberds out of his path. The green-eyed maiden followed him.

"This scenery more to your liking, Fern?" the Captain teased his cohort affectionately.

"Yes," she agreed happily. "Underground beneath the woods! All it needs is a bit more water and I'll be perfectly content."

Lotharvalis chuckled as he made his way through the narrowly carved hallway. He passed by a dark elf dragging a half-starved human woman by a chain on a metal collar. She stumbled along listlessly until she saw him. “An Elven Navy captain!” she exclaimed. “Please, sir, get me out of here!”

Lotharvalis glanced at the drow. “Bound for the meat market?”

“She is,” the drow agreed mildly.

“Carry on then,” he urged, and the drow dragged her away to the portal room as she screamed, “Sir! Captain! You can’t! *Pleeeeeeassse . . .*,” while yanking at her chain and scrabbling at the floor with her bare feet. Fern’s face remained carefully neutral, but Lotharvalis could see her back teeth working and the tension in her jaw.

He made his way to the black marble steps and pushed gently past the thick black velvet and silk curtains that shielded the sanctum from the outside world. Within there was a stark and beautiful darkness. Two assistants in black masks that were revealed only by their outlines against the pitch of their ebon skin stood as solemn as a cenotaph beneath a nebulous cloud of nothingness. At a nod from the Captain, the dark nebula dissipated to reveal a lithe and handsome drow levitating upside down and naked with a blindfold covering his eyes. The sanctum also contained a deep pool of warm, inky water, a suspension device that

resembled a cocoon, a cross streaked with blood, and a black marble altar carved with rivulets and pools.

“Is it important?” sighed the suspended drow. “I do so hate being disturbed at meditation.”

“Of course it is, Ascended Darkness,” Lotharvalis said respectfully to the priest. “You know I would not bother you otherwise.”

The drow removed his blindfold with a disappointed sigh. He did not descend. “Will it take long, my friend?”

The Captain chuckled. “No, don’t bother coming down here, Vorn. I thought you should be aware; Sunfall is here on the Rock of Bral.”

“Is he now,” the drow mused. “So, where then?”

“We’re tracking him,” Lotharvalis assured him. “We should have him before too long.”

Vorn nodded thoughtfully, his white hair swinging back and forth as it dangled freely in the air. “All right, I’ll pass word to Belryn. When I’m done my meditations.” He smiled. “You should join me, Andar. It does the spirit good to contemplate the depths of the infinite.”

The Captain smiled. “If I weren’t so busy, I would,” he confessed.

The drow shrugged. “*Asanque*. Good to see both of you then. Fern, you are as lovely as ever.” He drew the blindfold back over his eyes and the dark nebula oozed back out of his body like an ink cloud and drew itself over and around him.

Lotharvalis headed back the way he had come with Fern in tow, listening to the pleasant, if mostly distant screams, in the caverns behind him.

When Molly didn’t show up, Shaundar was concerned. He was a little distracted at his work all evening. “Who’s in the business of doing errands?” he asked Luigi as he looked around the busy bar. “I want someone to go have a look in on Molly. I could trade some tobacco or some new clothing.”

“Your clothin’ isn’t going to fit anyone who isn’t a warrior, really,” Luigi told him. “I’ll handle it. I’m worried about Molly too.” A few minutes later Shaundar saw him speaking quietly to the bard of the evening, a non-descript human lad with a mandolin in late adolescence. He disappeared not too long after that. Shaundar was kept busy keeping peace between an entire herd of dracons who took over the corner with the couches, and the mind flayers from a few nights back who resented having their corner stolen.

Closer to the end of the night the bard returned and spoke to Luigi. The beholder came over right after they spoke. “It’s all right,” he told Shaundar right off. “The Navy came by the Temple lookin’ for you. Molly didn’t feel it was wise to run right over and tell you, just in case they were still lingerin’ around.”

Shaundar found that this information brought a lot more relief than tension, even knowing that the Navy was actively on his trail now. “The game’s afoot, Luigi,” he said with a hard diamond glint in his eye. “Do you want me to be here when the trouble comes?”

“Where else would you go?” Luigi asked him.

“Is that your concern?” Shaundar retorted.

“That depends,” the beholder ruminated. “What do they want you for, and are you guilty?”

Shaundar sighed and it took him a long time to answer. “I’m guilty of some of the lesser things they want me for, and I probably should stand for court martial – yes. But they also want me for desertion and for treason. I obeyed my orders, I defended my people, and I revealed nothing.” *To anyone*, he couldn’t help but add silently. “But they’ve already convicted me I think, so I’m fleeing for my life. I would let them have it,” he added wearily, “but for my little sister, and for the memory of my father. And that’s the truth, as far as I can tell you without

really becoming a traitor.” He met Luigi’s many insightful eyes. “So do I stay or do I leave?”

Luigi seemed to consider it. “You stay,” he said. “And maybe I can help.”

It took Captain Lotharvalis three days to confirm that Sunfall was staying and working at the Laughing Beholder. He finally succeeded at this by persuading Fern to chat up some people on the street, and they were happy enough to tell the tale of Large Luigi’s new bouncer. It irked the Captain that they refused to speak to him about it; both because it was a reminder of the reduction in status his injury had assigned him, and because it indicated how little respect the Navy was granted these days.

He knew better than to simply descend upon the tavern, however. He'd underestimated Sunfall once before at great personal cost. And with tensions what they were between the Bralian government and the IEN now that the War was over, they needed to keep as low a profile as possible. Any attempt to capture Sunfall now that he was sure to know that they were coming was likely to result in a body count. They needed a better plan.

So he wondered; why was the ex-marine here on the Rock of Bral? Lotharvalis knew it couldn't be accidental. Sunfall was far too clever to walk right into the lion's den without a damn good reason.

But much to the Captain's chagrin, Sunfall never seemed to leave the bar. He directed Malari to follow him if he did, but she waited fruitlessly. He eventually concluded that Large Luigi must be running for the elven marine.

That created another problem. Luigi was no one to be trifled with. Everyone on Bral made use of his talents sooner or later; and while that meant that nobody trusted him entirely, nobody was willing to move against him either. If the beholder was willing to do errands for Sunfall, what else was he willing to put into play on his behalf? No, they would have to find different leverage. He waited for an opportunity to present itself; and that very night, it did. The little gnomish whore went to pay the marine a visit.

The evening following her visit from the Navy, Molly was there to kiss Shaundar awake. "Are you okay?" she burred. "I was so worried!"

“You were worried?” he demanded. He kissed her back and held her tightly in his arms very briefly. “I’m glad you’re all right, Molly. Quite relieved, actually. Can I ask you to help me get my armour on?”

She looked at him quizzically but as he sat up and placed her feet on the floor, she nodded. “Expecting trouble?” she queried softly.

“It was only a matter of time,” he acknowledged, stepping into his orcish war boots and then throwing on his shirt. “But if they were at the Temple yesterday, they will have followed you here today.” The marine slid into his breastplate and epaulets with the ease of long habit. He found that he was calm and ready. Perhaps having something concrete to focus on had steadied his jangling nerves. He remembered that his father had once warned him that nothing was worse in wartime than the waiting.

Molly fastened the straps and fetched his chausses, which she buckled on as he sat on the cot adjusting his left bracer. He bracketed the right onto his lap and started to fuss with the buckles there, but Molly reached up and did it for him. He even put on the helm, but he did without the spiked gauntlets; too easy to hurt someone if he actually had to act as a bouncer.

He almost expected the Navy to be waiting for him when he arrived downstairs; but they were not.

Luigi bobbed his body in that weird nod-like gesture. “No sign of them yet,” he observed.

Shaundar went about putting down the chairs for the night. The bar opened and filled with such a crowd of patrons that Shaundar started scanning all of them with his assassin’s training to gauge whether or not someone might have a hidden knife, a vial of poison, palmed spell components, and so forth. But there wasn’t a pointed ear among them.

When a dwarf swore and leaped across the table at a human drinking buddy, Shaundar immediately waded into the fray expecting a secret lethal attack at any moment. Not taking any chances, he picked up each of the brawlers one or two at a time and tossed them unceremoniously into the street. The bar emptied quickly after that, but there was still no sign of the Imperial Elven Navy.

“Well, might as well close up for the night,” Luigi remarked sourly as he glared at the wreckage of a chair and several spilled drinks and shards of ceramic.

“I should have been back a long time ago,” Molly said with a sigh. “I’m glad there was no trouble.” She reached for her cloak at the pegs near the door.

Suddenly Shaundar was hit with a premonition and ice flooded his veins. Ah, yes; that was why they hadn't attacked him yet. "Let me walk you home," the marine offered.

Luigi met his gaze. "Ah," he grunted. "Good idea." As Molly's eyes widened, he added, "Elsa and I have this in hand, Shaundar. Stay out as long as you need."

Shaundar held out the cloak for Molly and she put it on, biting her lip. They exchanged a look. They stepped out into the streets together, Shaundar holding Molly close to his body and keeping his eyes and all of his senses tingling and alert.

He could smell trouble out there. *Someone* was watching; he knew it by the hairs on his neck and by the crawling feeling in his belly. He led Molly through the best-lit, busiest parts of the market square and the surrounding streets, trying to keep things relatively low-key. He was not successful; the Shou man whose pan he had liberated in the chaos of the market square shook his fist at him again while spouting off a diatribe that could only have been a string of cursing.

They made it to the Temple-Brothel without incident, but Shaundar knew it wasn't going to last. "Thanks for a great evening," he said with an out-of-character lusty smile, hoping that Molly would see what he was trying to do. "That was a lot of fun." He handed her Yathar's silver ring, the one he'd worn on his left hand since its recovery,

and kissed her knuckles. Molly seemed mystified for a split second, but then light dawned in her eyes and she palmed the ring. “Any time, sailor,” she promised with a cock of her hip and a wink. She laid a hand on his groin and gave it a gentle (and distracting) squeeze. Then she blew him a kiss and went inside.

Shaundar forced himself to walk, not run, back to the Laughing Beholder, humming a star shanty under his breath. He also made himself smile in that contented *I’ve-just-been-laid* kind of way. But once he was safely back inside the tavern, he bolted the door and met Elsa and Luigi’s quizzical glances with, “I assume you’ve got a back way out of this place?”

“Cellar,” the beholder admitted. “Behind that extra table. It leads into the sewer. Eventually it makes its way to the docks. You’ll want to get out where you smell the perfume.”

“Thanks!” he called over his shoulder as he vaulted over the bar and scurried down into the cellar. Lifting aside the heavy oak table that was propped up on its side, he found an open passage that led to a large sewer grate. Not seeing any other way to deal with it in the time allotted he wrenched it whole out of the tunnel. It tore free with a very loud metallic rip that instantly conjured memories of shot tearing through scro Mantis ships. He left it behind him and charged down the passageway, not concerned with being discrete since he was underground.

The scent of oils and incense managed to pierce the mouldy funk of the sewer, so he knew to stop. This time he was much more cautious about removing the grate above his head. Not seeing a way to open it from the bottom, he muttered an incantation and the screws on the other side wound themselves free one at a time, then lay down next to the drain. When he slipped it free and hopped out, he found himself back in the Temple bathing room.

He crept slowly towards the salon, rolling his feet toes first to muffle the sound of his footfalls and regulating his breathing. Voices, and various noises of coitus from the pleasure-suites, made their way around the corners to his ears: "I'm sorry, Madam Molly, but I really must insist that you come with us."

A shard of ice and fear thrust itself into his heart. He knew that voice. Shaundar palmed his dagger so the center of the blade was pinched between his thumb and first two fingers. He was entirely unconscious of it, but his lips curled into a snarl as he bared the teeth of his bottom jaw.

"Andar . . ." began an unfamiliar feminine voice with melodic elven timbre in a tone of warning.

Shaundar peered around the corner to see a face he'd hoped never to look upon again looming over Molly with his hand reaching towards her shoulder. There were three more elves in various uniforms

of the Navy whom Shaundar didn't recognize clustering around the other three sacred whores in the room.

The Captain's hand bounced off of the invisible force field around Molly's body with a buzzing noise that sounded distinctly unpleasant. "I'm not going anywhere with you, sugar," she refused. "This is the Rock of Bral; the IEN has no authority here."

The elf folded his brow in a scowl and opened his mouth to say something, his hand at his rapier hilt, but that's when the bronze door of the Temple cracked to admit the scents and noises of the city streets, along with five tattooed Shou men whom Shaundar recognized immediately. "Hmm," tisked the leader as his unarmed companion closed it behind him. "This situation would greatly displease Mr. Ozamata. It is bad for business. You should not be here." He folded his arms and observed the elves patiently, his black eyes glittering and impassive.

Shaundar ducked behind the wall again so as to not be noticed. His appearance at this point could do nothing but complicate things further. His snarl relaxed into a smile. The Yakuza were on top of the situation.

The Captain licked his lips. "Surely Mr. Ozamata does not wish to interfere with internal Navy affairs."

“Naturally,” returned the Yakuza lieutenant, “but it would reflect poorly on the Elven Navy if they were to harass or molest the citizens of the Low City, who are under his protection. I am sure you understand.”

One of the doors in the hallway where Shaundar was lurking popped open and a giggling Zavalyn came out, leading an intoxicated human male by one hand. “Shaundar, what . . . ?” she began before Shaundar’s finger-to-lips sign registered and she bit her tongue. He took no chances on the patron; he slapped a hand over his mouth and pressed him into the wall. The patron struggled, looking frightened. After a few moments Zavalyn’s gestures managed to calm him down. When she was certain she had shushed him Shaundar let him go, and Zavalyn led him quietly out the back way.

In the meantime the salon had fallen silent; whether because they were listening to determine the nature of the strange noises that this exchange made, or they were locked in the stand-off, Shaundar could not say. But at last the Captain acquiesced. “I see your point,” he said dryly. “Please extend our apologies to Mr. Ozamata for disturbing him.”

“I am sure he understands,” the Yakuza lieutenant replied, “but I will convey your message. Good evening to you.” The door squeaked open again and sharp military boots tromped out. Shaundar breathed a sigh of relief.

“*Konnichiwa* once again, Mr. Sunfall,” the Yakuza leader greeted him. “May we speak with you a moment?”

Shaundar came around the corner of the door frame, sheathing his dagger. “*Konnichiwa*,” he acknowledged the Shou men with respect.

The lieutenant extended that bow once more with the hand palm up and forward. Shaundar offered an elven bow in return. “My apologies, Mr. Sunfall,” he said with the most exquisite formality as Molly, Zavalyn, Sally, Duruz and Tasha looked on; “but Mr. Ozamata feels that your presence is bad for his business. He would appreciate it if you would conclude your affairs on the Rock of Bral and extradite yourself within two weeks. Mr. Ozamata extends his apologies for the unfortunate necessity.”

Shaundar’s belly plummeted into his feet. What if Selena didn’t return in that time? And yet, he could comprehend and appreciate the dilemma. “I understand,” he sighed. He knew he shouldn’t even stay that long. Perhaps he could ask Luigi to pass his location on to Selena when and if she at last arrived. His shoulders slumped.

“I am pleased we could come to an understanding,” the Yakuza lieutenant apologized again. “*Zai jian, sayonara.*” They faded into the night.

Chapter Five

“Wake up,” Talek’s elder brother demanded, shaking him vigorously.

Because this was entirely out of character, Talek came back to full consciousness immediately. He rubbed irritably at his stubbled face. “What is it, Torgol?” he wanted to know.

Torgol’s expression was serious and determined. “Vacation’s over,” he told the half-orc thug. “Come on, get dressed.”

Talek sat up and put on his pants. “What’s the matter?” he asked. It was a terrible shame that Torgol was back already. It had only been about a week, but then again, Chandros was nearly at perigee to Toril – just a three day trip, give or take a few hours – and who in the Hells would want to stay on Chandros any longer than he had to?

The scro rogue started packing up his brother’s things. “Orders direct from Command. Capture the elf alive and bring him in for interrogation. *Yesterday.*”

Talek’s eyes widened. “You think he really is the one who killed the Overlord?” Adrenaline began to race through his body. A chance to

restore the Bloodaxe clan honor! It was too good to be true. He started to dress with more enthusiasm.

Their Wasp ship, the *Venomsting*, was waiting in the Skullport harbour. Their full crew was aboard and at stations. They took off right away.

“Just to make sure I didn’t give the wrong information to Command,” the scro double-checked with his brother, “you *did* say someone called that elf ‘Mr. Sunfall,’ didn’t you?”

“I think it was the Yakuza,” he confirmed as the Warpriest bellowed that he was setting course for the Rock of Bral.

The scro rogue nodded slowly. “The blade that killed Narok? Apparently it’s something called a ‘moonblade.’ There’s only a handful of them, and each one was constructed for a particular elven noble family. That’s how they knew it was an elf that killed him for sure.” He met Talek’s eyes. “Guess which family that moonblade belongs to?”

Talek’s eyes widened. “I see,” he ruminated.

Making sure they were still clearly dressed as common orcs they ported in at Bral without incident. Talek resented having to play stupid to be convincing for the Dockmaster but he did it anyway. He wasn’t sure why the rest of the Universe seemed to think that orcs were retarded as a

species; in his opinion, they weren't more or less in the brains department than anyone else.

"Don't start any trouble," the Dockmaster, a surly dwarf, growled at them as they paid their docking fees and air taxes and signed their declarations.

The two brothers left a fifty percent stand-to and headed into the Low City. "Where's he staying?" the scro wanted to know.

"Tasha at the Temple-Brothel knows," the half-orc informed him. "That's how I was tipped off to him in the first place. She was asking me about his armour."

The scro rogue slung an arm around his brother's back. "Well, that works out! Guess you should pay her another conjugal visit, eh?"

"Come with me," the half-orc urged. "She really is a lot of fun. And when was the last time you had the war taken out of you?"

The scro shrugged. "A very good point. All right, lead on, little brother."

The elf and the drow shared a bottle of *morimatra* in Vorn's personal study. Lotharvalis decanted the fine drow wine and studied the greenish liquid in the candlelight. Vorn also pondered the wine through watering eyes. Still, considering the brightness of the candles, he was making real progress in his quest to desensitize his innate drow photosensitivity. "Interesting that the Yakuza have gone so far out of their way," Vorn observed, deep in contemplation. "I imagine that complicates matters for you."

"It does," the Captain admitted. "It makes it impossible to take the lieutenant into Navy custody discreetly." He sighed in exasperation. "I don't suppose we could just kill him?"

Vorn shook his head absently. "If Durothil steps out of line we need something to keep him in check. Something that can't be traced to us. Sunfall is far too useful in this capacity – personal vendettas aside." His eyes shifted from the wine to Lotharvalis. "Perhaps you can use something else as leverage to bring him into Navy custody. What about this sister that he's looking for?"

Lotharvalis shook his head. "No, I understand that was a fairy tale we told to Sunfall to make him dance for us. Nedethil and all of its populace were destroyed. He's on a fool's errand." He sniffed at the

morimatra to sample its nose. Then he sipped the greenish liquid and shifted it around in his mouth. “Not bad,” he appraised the drink after a moment to ponder.

The drow shrugged. “How about faking it? Drop hints that his sister is around. Set a trap.” He arched an eyebrow over his eye glittering with dark amusement and took another sip of his wine.

The Captain contemplated this. “Worth a try I suppose,” he decided. “He might just want to believe it badly enough that his belief will override his senses.”

“What will the Navy do with him when they catch him?” the dark elf wanted to know.

“Well,” Lotharvalis began after another drink, “Durothil wants him dead. If they convict him of desertion he’ll get his wish. What does Belryn think?” Knowing that would determine his next course of action within a clear range of options.

Vorn shrugged again. “Belryn wants to know what Sunfall knows, and whom he’s told that to. And he also hopes to use him to take out Durothil when he becomes inconvenient. A staged prison break could work well.” He smiled. “That’s the problem with letting your personal vendettas overcome your good sense, Andar. Wherever Sunfall’s execution is to occur, I am certain Durothil will be there to gloat. And

that will put our dear Admiral right in the toy soldier's path. We can eliminate two problems at the same time."

"I hate waiting," sighed Lotharvalis in disgust.

"I sympathize," the drow priest agreed. "And I sympathize with your rage in having to delay your vengeance." He clasped the Captain's shoulder. "I promise you, we shall only keep him alive until our plans come to fruition. Then I'll help you capture him myself, and you can use him for entertainment as long as you like."

"I appreciate that, my friend," Lotharvalis smiled, mollified. "May the Masked Lord guide us to success!" They raised their glasses in a mutual toast.

Tasha was happy to see Talek; he was always such a good client, and he tipped very well for a hired thug. She waved cheerfully as he entered into the salon. She didn't recognize the orc who accompanied him, but she thought there was a resemblance. "Greetings, warrior," she beamed at him.

"Ah, Tasha," he rumbled delightedly, picking her up in his massive arms and giving her a kiss. "I'd like you to meet my brother, Torgol."

Torgol touched his right fist to his brow and lowered his head in respect. Tasha grinned. It was nice to see that not everyone had forgotten how to properly address a priestess of Luthic.

“Well met, Torgol,” she welcomed him. “Your brother is one of my favourite clients.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” the smaller orc nodded in return.

“So whaddya figure?” Talek inquired. “You think you got time for both of us this evening?”

Tasha smiled. She enjoyed doing the holy work of a Temple priestess, healing in a way that truly touched the heart and soul through touching the body. “Let me take the war out of you,” she offered formally, and she took them each by the hand. Molly smiled at her as they left the salon.

The two orcish men followed her quietly into one of the pleasure-suites. This one had a large bed arrayed with silk pillows, reed lamps and a downy mattress. Tasha had never been to Dukagsh, but she understood that the style was not dissimilar and the Temple had gone to great effort to acquire appropriate bedding, rugs and artwork. The glass panelled bay windows even opened up to a small traditional garden in the Temple courtyard, and a wicker loveseat faced outward so that

clients and clergy could, if so inclined, take in the evening view. Talek's brother closed the door softly behind them.

Tasha guided Talek back on the soft feather bed and started rubbing his shoulders and kissing his neck gently between the massage. "I know Talek pretty well," she explained to Torgol, "but we've never met. Where are you from?"

"Dukagsh, originally," he replied directly, sitting down beside them on the bed. "But of course, nobody's from Dukagsh anymore. Not really, anyway." He turned her face towards him and started kissing her. She smiled and kissed back, never once taking her hands from Talek's shoulders.

"Ah, lovely one," sighed the smaller scro after a few minutes, "I would love to continue this pleasant evening with you. But we actually didn't come here to have the war taken out of us – at least, not directly."

"Oh?" Tasha began. "Then what can I do for you lads?"

Torgol backed off and met her eyes. "Recently there was a disturbance in the market square concerning an elf in orcish armour. We understand he was staying here. We want to know where he is."

The half-orc maiden caught her breath. They were after Shaundar? Why? She bit her lip and hesitated. “Why do you want to know?” she asked cautiously.

Now Talek twisted about to look at her and Torgol narrowed his eyes. “Why does it matter?” he asked. “He’s an elf; we’re orcs. Why would you care?”

Something in her guts flipped over. She recognized trouble when she saw it. She started muttering a prayer to Luthic under her breath, asking for Her protection.

Torgol’s face contorted into a snarl and he slapped her hard, disrupting her invocation. “Why would you fear us?” he demanded. “You’re not defending the *elf*, are you?”

“He’s been kind to us,” Tasha argued. “If you’re going to hurt him, I want to know why.”

Torgol’s eyes widened and his pupils dilated in fury. “Dukagsh preserve me,” he hissed. “Are you a *faerie*-licker?”

The priestess saw the look in his eyes and cold fear raced through her bloodstream. “No,” she protested, trying to scramble backwards on the bed. She ran into Talek and that stopped her. “No, he’s just nice, I haven’t touched him.”

“I don’t believe you,” the scro announced, looming over her in obvious threat. “Why else would you protect him?” He didn’t wait for her answer. Instead he grabbed her by the hair and started hauling her to her feet. She shrieked.

“Oh Tasha, a *spirra*-lover,” Talek sighed, shaking his head. “Damn, that’s too bad. I liked you a lot, girl.”

Wulfgar slammed in the door, belaying pin in his hand. “What in the Nine Hells is . . .” he began, but Talek got the drop on him. He slapped aside the pin and drilled him with a haymaker in the solar plexus. Wulfgar went down and Torgol let go of Tasha’s hair to help his brother pommel the Temple Guardian into unconsciousness.

Tasha was not about to let this go unchallenged. She cried out an entreaty to Luthic and raked her lacquered claws along the sides of Torgol’s face from behind him. Black light oozed from her hands and seeped into the deep gashes that opened up in the scro’s cheekbones. He howled in agony and backhanded Tasha in the face. Her delicate tusk and something else in her jaw cracked, and she fell on her tailbone hard enough to leave a nasty bruise.

“You *gurt-fucking bitch!*” roared the scro rogue in utter fury. He started raining blows down on her as she shuffled away from him on her hands and feet. She was screaming.

Talek hauled her to her feet. “Let’s take her to the ship and ask her what she knows,” he advised his brother.

“Good idea,” agreed the scro, and he tossed her through the bay windows. Tasha yelped and brought her hands up to cover her face as she went through the glass. It shattered and sprayed glass everywhere, lacerating her hands and wrists and belly and thighs. She crumpled in a heap on the ground in the garden and the two Bloodaxe males followed her.

Molly came charging through the doorway with Sally on her heels, naked as the day she was born. Taking in the scene, she stopped in her tracks and began to invoke the power of Sune. Hearing this, Talek spun around, grabbed the wicker loveseat and hurled it at the two women. Sally tried to slap it aside but was only partially successful, and it knocked them both down and disrupted Molly’s prayer. It only took them a few moments to disentangle themselves from the furniture and from Wulfgar, lying unconscious on the floor, but by that point the orcish men had escaped into the night, taking the weeping half-orc priestess with them.

“Damn them!” Molly cursed, her little hands balled into fists.

“See to Wulfgar!” Sally told her friend, heading back out the way they had come.

“Where are you going?” Molly asked as she knelt at Wulfgar’s side to check the extent of his injuries.

She spat over her shoulder, “I’m getting Shaundar!” as she ran into the hallway and out of the Temple.

For a change it was a relatively quiet evening at the Laughing Beholder. Three dwarves and two humans were the bar’s only inhabitants, and they were more interested in eating than drinking. Yet Shaundar was oddly edgy. He admitted that it could simply be that half of the two week deadline given to him by the Yakuza had already expired, and there was still no sign of Selena. He figured he would go to Waterdeep next, or perhaps even Skullport, and leave word about where he could be reached. Since Waterdeep demanded that visiting spelljammers only approach from the sea and that they keep their jamming arcanology hidden, he was trying to decide whether putting up with the lowlife inhabitants of Skullport was worth the trade-off. Still, it probably wouldn’t be too much of a problem; after all, a Squidship was a water-lander.

He was changing over one of the draught barrels on tap when Sally burst through the front doors. Shaundar looked up and noticed that she had a scrape on the side of her face and a blackening eye. He set the cask down with a sinking feeling in his bowels.

“Shaundar!” she cried, gaining the attention of everyone in the bar as she pushed through the chairs to his side. “Shaundar, a couple of orcs have taken Tasha!”

“Go!” Luigi told him.

Shaundar set his mouth in a thin line and took the stairs two and three at a time. He grabbed his weapons from his room and jumped back down off the balcony. “How long ago?” he asked as he followed Sally into the street.

“Just now,” she panted, running ahead until he fell in step with her. A few of the merchants in the square who remembered the riot saw them coming and got right out of the way.

“Do you know who they are?” he asked Sally as he burst through the doors of the Temple.

Sally called back, “I’m not sure!” She ran through the salon and the companionway into the pleasure-suite, Shaundar right on her heels.

Molly had Wulfgar sitting on the bed by this time holding his head. She looked up at Shaundar and bit her bottom lip. He took in the broken wicker seat, the smashed glass, and Wulfgar and the priestess’ injuries and his eyes narrowed. “What are they after?” he mused.

“I heard them call her a ‘gurt-fucking bitch,’” Molly told him.

“What’s a gurt?” Sally wanted to know.

All of the colour drained out of Shaundar’s face, though he was unaware of it. All he knew was that his blood was being replaced with ice water and adrenaline began to surge through his body. “It’s a racial slur for an elf,” he explained. His voice sounded strange and hollow, even to himself. “They’re after *me*.” If they thought that Tasha was his lover . . . he had to find her, and quickly.

Shaundar’s gaze fixed on the blood in the glass, and then on a bit of brown hair on the floor. He picked it up in his fingers. How very like Y’Anid’s hair it was, really. “Are they orcs, or are they scro?” he asked in a quiet voice that chilled Molly’s blood.

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

He stepped over the broken glass and surveyed the ground near the destroyed window. The garden had soft and pliable earth, which worked in his favour. He peered over each inch, looking for depressions that might indicate prints. And about three strides from the window he found what he was seeking. Solid rubber treads; two sets, designed for traction. Heavy on the toe, indicative of the steel tip. “They’re scro,” announced Shaundar. He lifted his boot to show them. “Regulation war boots,” he explained.

“Talek is a half-orc,” Molly informed him. “He’s a regular client. He came tonight with someone he introduced as his brother. A full-blooded orc named Torgol.”

“Must be rogues,” Wulfgar said in a thick and muzzy tone. “Got the jump on me.” Shaundar figured by the odd way he spoke that he likely had lost several teeth and was nursing a concussion. Shaundar spent a moment to strap on his swords properly and then he leaped outside over the glass and scanned the ground again.

Fortunately the scro war boots were easy to follow; the ground was soft and they had taken no precautions against it. The scuff-marks from what he assumed were Tasha’s heels being dragged along made him considerably less phlegmatic, especially when they stopped looking like short streaks and more like long trenches. She was bleeding heavily; which made him furious, but also worked in his favour, since the trail was easy to follow. Tasha’s two attackers avoided populated areas, likely so they wouldn’t attract too much attention; but that meant that their dirty boot-prints and the splotches of blood he was tracking were still present on the cobblestone of the alleys, not mashed and smeared hopelessly into the street by the heavy traffic. Occasionally they crossed over streets and Shaundar had to find the lane on the other side that they had passed into. Within a few minutes he guessed that they were heading for the docks rather than into the city. Proceeding on that assumption he picked up the pace.

Dribbles of blood continued to wind towards the docks, with their extended wooden platforms and mooring posts that stuck out into the edge of the Rock of Bral's gravity plane. From this vantage point you really could see that it was actually a rock; the docks were built out and against solid and attractive grey stone with a slight pink overtone.

He scanned the mooring bays, seeking anything that implied scro; Manti, Scorpions, Ogre Mammoths, anything of the like. Then he considered it and realized that of course he wouldn't find any of these things. With the Imperial Navy base here, they would be keeping an eye out for scro ships, and whether the Navy had any authority on the Rock or not, they certainly wouldn't let an obvious scro ship reach port. So he jogged along, seeking fresh blood drops on wooden planks.

He finally found droplets – slightly tacky and drying now, which was worrisome – at Docking Bay 38, a platform for small ships capable of landfall. Moored up there was a Wasp ship; an unusual choice for scro, since it was an odd-sized 18 ton sloop that was typically used by lizardmen as a merchant vessel, but he supposed that was the reason for the choice. The Wasp had a dockwatch posted; one standing on the Battle Deck overlooking the fo'c'sle, and another on the fo'c'sle itself near the gangway. They were scro, not orcs, just as Shaundar suspected. They were bigger, less savage-looking, and stood fully upright as opposed to slightly hunched like common orcs. He pressed his body against a stack of loading crates so they wouldn't see him with his orcish armour. There

was no way to approach the ship directly without being noticed. Not without magical help, anyway.

Shaundar scraped the bottom of his spell component pouch for the last of his gum Arabic; then he plucked out an eyelash and mashed it into the sticky resin. Though he had learned how to call upon the arcane powers without needing to speak, he whispered the words of power in Draconic anyway, and vanished from sight. He realized that he also had a bit of cowpie in there, taken from the droppings of an ox in the market square. Well, the crew of a Wasp was typically eighteen souls; he might need the boost. He called upon the power of the animal by making the rune of strength over the dung, which disintegrated. Vigour flooded into his blood and body.

He crept along the dock on the balls and sides of his feet until he had come around the port side of the Wasp and scaled the middle leg. At the joint where it bent under the ship, he leaped up to grab the mooring line and clambered up the underside of it until he could lift himself onto the Battle Deck, which would have been the thorax if the ship had actually been the insect it resembled. From there Shaundar moved quietly along the edge of the railing and around the heavy ballista turret until he reached the scro on the upper deck. His opponent was completely oblivious right up until Shaundar locked him in a sleeper hold from behind and pulled him down below the line of vision on the railing. After the requisite two minutes, the body went completely limp.

With his invisibility spell now defunct, Shaundar peered down to see the other watchman pacing irritably near the gangway on the fo’c’sle, which would have been the Wasp’s head. Judging the distance to be not far, he heaved the unconscious body over the side and into the guard, hoping the collision would wind him. The guard let out a sharp bleat, but that was all. As he tried to get his bearings and get to his feet, Shaundar vaulted over the railing and ran across the fo’c’sle’s deck. The scro did manage to get up, but the elf was on him by that time and a solid blow with the hilt of his short sword to the temple put him out quite nicely.

The marine stepped softly up to the double doors that separated the fo’c’sle from the main deck. Sheathing his sword to free both hands, he cracked it open and stepped in; then he drew it shut behind him right away, pulling it outward with his other hand so it didn’t creak or click. The sound of raucous male laughter and a weeping woman rolled out of a room with an open passageway on the portside. Strangely, the companionway was deserted.

Shaundar came to the door and he heard a sharp sound like a slap, followed by a female shrieking sob, and then something that caused his belly and bowels to twist themselves into knots and fill his throat with bile; rhythmic grunting.

He came through the passage into the galley. A cluster of scro gathered around the edges of the galley on benches, drinking and cheering as though they were watching a sporting event. All of the tables except one were drawn up by their ropes into the ceiling. Tasha was pinned across the table at her shoulders by one scro, while another with his pants around his ankles forced her legs open with his big greyish hands while he thrust roughly into her. In the meantime a third scro – a small black-skinned, roguish looking type – was standing fastening his trousers. “That’ll teach you, *gurt-fucking slut*,” he smirked. “That’s what a real man feels like, right Talek?” The one who was raping her chuckled between his panting in response. Then the black-skinned scro glanced at the audience to ask, “Who’s next?” And Shaundar clearly saw his face. He recognized Torgol Bloodaxe.

Shaundar would not remember what happened next except in the deepest recesses of his nightmares. But Tasha would never forget. Her mind noted every detail and movement clearly, as though time had slowed down. All Shaundar could recall is that his body and brain filled with rage until his vision went red and then white, building up a terrible pressure that set the veins at his temples to throbbing. His mind slipped sideways at that moment. It was just a little bit like a house of cards being blown over in a wind. One moment it was standing, a clearly-defined structure, beautiful and orderly; the next it was toppling to the side and sliding into an abyss of obscurity. He curled his bottom lip back

and thrust out his jaw in a challenging snarl. “How DARE you!” he roared out in Orcish.

In one fluid movement Shaundar seized Torgol by the tusk and ripped it free of his face. Blood and bone fragments burst into the air. In Shaundar’s grip the tooth became a dagger, which he thrust directly into the raping half-orc’s jugular. Torgol howled and clutched the remains of his jaw while blood poured free of Talek’s neck like beer from a spigot. The half-orc staggered backwards and fell with an expression of utter surprise on his face. As the scro holding Tasha down spun his head around to see what was going on, Shaundar released the tusk and brought his hand back around in a claw. To her astonishment, he clutched the scro’s trachea and yanked it free from his throat, along with skin and tendon. Tasha later thought this was perhaps the luckiest one; he didn’t even have a chance to scream. He died drowning in his own blood.

Shaundar drew his swords as the stunned audience stared in absolute shock at this murderous elf suddenly in their midst. Tasha would have nightmares for the rest of her life about his eyes. They were so intense they were almost glowing blue, but they were glassy and cold; and the platinum flecks in them were like pinpoints of starlight in an uncaring universe. His lower jaw remained extended and he was panting. “How dare you violate a consecrated priestess!” he growled in Orcish that

was perfect and entirely without accent. “Yurtrus will have your souls in Hell!”

He exploded into motion. He spun around and the blade in his right hand whirled about to cleave through Torgol’s wrist, severing his hand, still pressed to what was left of his jaw, to carry right through his throat. Arterial spray followed the path of the blade and Torgol fell to his knees and face, gurgling.

Continuing the spin, Shaundar’s left blade came around to block against another scro off to the side of the room, who was pulling a dagger. Then Shaundar’s eyes fixed on an enormous silver-headed rune-axe that was prominently displayed on the far wall facing the galley door. Recognition – or something like – dawned in them and he bared his teeth in a sinister grin.

The scro got his dagger free and rushed Shaundar with a snarl of fury. Shaundar’s eyes snapped in that direction and almost as though the gesture was mechanical he slapped the dagger aside with his left sword, exposing the scro warrior’s torso; but then instead of going for a direct stab to the chest, Shaundar twisted the edge of his right blade up and ran it along the inside of the scro’s weapon arm, slicing him open as though filleting a fish. Muscle and tendon pulled free with a gruesome wet tearing sound. The scream the scro made curdled the blood, but it didn’t last long. Shaundar pulled the blade up around the warrior’s bicep and

then across his carotid artery. His foe fell, burbling bubbles of his own arterial blood, and almost as though he had lost all interest in the rest of the scene Shaundar stalked across the room towards that axe.

As the rest of the crew began to scramble to their feet, some shouting out orders, others only concerned about getting their weapons free, Shaundar let his bloody swords fall to the floor with a crash and stepped up on the bench that most of them were sitting on to seize the iron-banded axe-haft. Yanking it free of its hooks in the wall with his right hand closer to its head and his left lower on the haft, Shaundar leaped from the bench and spun in a crescent to bury the heavy blade in the solar plexus of the scro on his far left, nearly cutting him in half. Ripping it free, he stepped back a little and brought it down to split the skull of the scro on the far right of the bench. Grey matter splattered the nearby wall. The reek permeated the air which was already full of the iron scent of blood.

Shaundar tugged at the axe but it was embedded, so when the first warrior along the wall, already naked and ready to join the fun, thrust at him with his dagger, Shaundar uttered an animalistic snarl, slapped aside the blade with his left hand, and then he snatched the scro's exposed equipment with his right. Tasha wasn't sure whether one or both testicles came free, but the scream that came from the newly-gelded warrior vibrated her eardrums.

The berserk elf tossed the bloody contents of his fist aside like offal, then pushed right into his victim to grapple his wrist. Already about a foot shorter than the naked scro, Shaundar dropped into a low, wide-legged stance and making his arm into a lever, pulled the scro around and used him as a weapon to pitch into the line of warriors from the bench, knocking the middle group down in a tangle of limbs just as they were starting to organize.

That gave Shaundar just enough time to yank the axe free, scattering slimy neural tissue that looked to Tasha's eyes like tiny slugs, and he brought it around in an upward swing that sliced off the next warrior's face, exposing skull, tendon and muscle. The marine chopped back down with a grunt and drove the head into another scro's hip. His joint folded in on itself, his pelvis shattered and his leg was almost completely amputated. He fell right into the path of three scro who were just untangling themselves from the chaos of the thrown body.

Shaundar pulled the axe back towards himself in a movement well-practiced by hauling on bowlines, and then he thrust the head of the weapon into the face of his closest attacker. The metal bashed the scro in the jaw, disintegrating his tusks, most of his teeth and his jawbone. The deadly elf then twisted the blade down again in an overhead chop into another scro's shoulder joint, severing his right arm almost completely. His shrieks joined the cacophony.

The elven marine stepped back, presumably to put some distance between himself and the attacking throng, and spun the colossal axe in a full circle, which almost sliced into the scro in the far corner near the door, who had armed himself with twin daggers while Shaundar was busy and was almost at Shaundar's back. In the meantime, the only one who was left in the center of the opposite wall was now on his feet and raising a boarding axe he had acquired from somewhere.

Tasha saw Shaundar's face briefly, streaked with blood and gore while his eyes blazed like supernova stars. When the momentum carried the blade around, it completely decapitated a scro who was trying to climb over his fallen comrades with a wet scraping sound; then it carved through the Adam's apple of the fighter next to him almost accidentally. The head rolled free and came to rest against the twin dagger-wielder's war boots. Tasha had never seen so much blood in her life, spraying into the air like a fountain. It rained from the ceiling in a spreading circle and the floor was slick with it. A couple of the remaining attackers skated in it.

Perhaps for that reason, Shaundar planted his feet firmly and chopped the axe into yet another warrior's clavicle as though felling a tree. It held fast and black ichor startled dripping from the scro's mouth. Again he shoved the dying scro into the group of attackers assaulting him and spun around while he scooped one of his swords up off of the blood-drenched floor. He almost dropped it because it was so slippery and wet,

but he managed to get a firm grip as he waded in to deal with the warrior from the door that was armed with the twin daggers.

The warrior kicked aside the head of his comrade in disgust. “You want it? Come get it, asshole,” the scro urged, baring his tusks.

It was only when Shaundar returned the gesture that Tasha realized that *he was trying to bare tusks as well*. Contemptuously he slapped the warrior’s left arm aside, stepping to his outside, and slashed the back of his knee; which buckled as tendons twanged free. The blade continued up to slice open the triceps, and Shaundar helped him along in his portside collapse to fall at the feet of the scro with the boarding axe, halting him in mid-charge. Seeing the axe-wielder’s intent, Shaundar growled low in his throat and rushed him. He thrust that sword directly between the charging scro’s tusks. Their opposed momentum smashed the blade through the scro’s teeth and back through his pallet and into the brain pan.

There were only two left, who had finally sorted themselves out from the pile of bodies and moaning wounded close to the far wall. Shaundar pulled his sword free of the scro’s mouth and looked at them for a long moment. Then he cast the sword to the floor, curling his lip in disdain, and stalked towards them, every step an executioner’s tread. The one on the left lunged at him. Shaundar drove his left hand in a knife blade down on the inside of the fighter’s elbow and flexed his bicep,

pinning the arm against Shaundar's breastplate and pulling him off-balance and into a position where his body was between Shaundar and the other warrior. The dagger clattered to the ground, jarred loose by the blow.

In the meantime, Shaundar's right hand thrust upwards, breaking the scro's nose, and then he drove his fingers into the orc's eyes. One of the eyeballs was pushed aside and the other popped like a balloon. He wailed in a pitch Tasha didn't know an orcish male could reach. Shaundar seized his face like a bowling ball and spun him around to smash the blinded scro's occipital bone into the cranium of his onrushing clansman, slamming them both into the wood beneath the axe hooks. The second scro didn't make a sound, but his eyes rolled up into his head to show their whites and he started slithering down the wall.

With no more effort than it would take to turn a spigot Shaundar grasped the one in his hand by the occipital ridge and twisted. His neck broke with a crunch. He left the body to fall, straddled the one who was slipping and struck him twice in the center of the torso. Something cracked, and as the last scro finished the slide, black blood oozed from between his lips. The back of his skull bounced off of the bench and he lay still.

Shaundar pivoted around in a combat stance as his terrible staring eyes searched and hunted; but nothing met his challenge save the

moans and rattles of the dying. Tasha would never forget the sight of him, those predatory eyes the only features visible in the blood that coated him from head to boots, dripping from his hands, his body, even his hair. Amid the bodies and the blood at his feet Tasha focused on the enormous axe handle, Torgol's severed hand, and the decapitated head with its horrible staring white eyes. She trembled and for just a moment she wondered if she was going to join her attackers in death.

Fixating on the wooden handle, Shaundar growled again. He seized it and wrenched the axe free of a dead scro's torso and scapula. "Bloodaxe," he sputtered, once again in Orcish, and it had the gravity of a curse. "You are not worthy of your tusks. And you have . . . no . . . honour!" And with that, he threw it on the deck near the galley table and made three paces to the other side of the room; where he snatched up the boarding axe and brought it down directly on the pivot point of the haft three or four times, snarling and carving up the deck. When the head of the boarding axe broke off and went spinning underneath the galley table, Shaundar tossed aside the broken handle; then he grabbed the great axe from the floor, dropped to one knee, and slammed the haft down on his own cuisse at the weakened spot. It split at last. The great silver axe head flipped once and skittered into a pile of the dead, and Shaundar threw the remaining piece hard enough to bounce off of the far wall. He let out a purely orcish roar of rage and triumph, and then his head fell forward and for a few moments he wept.

When Shaundar looked up, he finally seemed to notice Tasha, and those terrible eyes, now rimmed with tears, softened. He stood up, went to her and though she studied him with uncertainty and fear, he simply took her skirt and smoothed it down to cover her vulva and her thighs, leaving bloody fingerprints at its hem. Then he turned from her and cast about to find his swords. One was lying where it had fallen before he went for the last two survivors; the other he eventually extricated from beneath the pile of bodies under the display hooks. When he found it, he thrust it into some of the casualties a few times, perhaps realizing that they weren't going to die without extra help. He found the discarded clothing of the naked scro on the bench near the far wall and used it to clean the gore-streaked weapons thoroughly before replacing them in their scabbards at his hips.

That accomplished, he came to her, lifted her gently into his arms, and walked out of the galley through the double doors. Tasha was startled when he stopped suddenly about halfway across the deck of the fo'c'sle. Then he stomped down hard not once, but twice, with his orcish war boots. As he turned to descend the gangway, Tasha saw two bodies lying on the deck. The one that she could see clearly stared sightlessly into the stars, his throat crushed.

Tasha could never say afterwards why nobody stopped them as Shaundar trekked through the open streets of Bral with her in his arms. She could not imagine why nobody noticed the bloody footprints he left

or the strange war-paint he wore. But he made it all the way back to the Temple-Brothel without anyone even batting an eye. The other sacred whores fell upon her with embraces and tears when he brought her into the salon. “Are you all right?” Molly cried, throwing her arms around Tasha. “Thank the Lady; we were so scared! Are you hurt?” They took her and checked her over for injuries.

“Double-check my infertility enchantment, would you?” Tasha asked Molly softly.

Molly met her gaze and her dark emerald eyes filled with tears. “Oh honey,” she whispered. Immediately she clasped her symbol of Lady Firehair and made the spoken entreaty as she held Tasha around the waist. She followed it by a healing invocation and a prayer to remove all illness – just in case. Her hands glowed with gentle golden light and Tasha sighed and wept.

It was several minutes before anyone remembered Shaundar. Molly turned to him with full intention of throwing her arms around him and thanking him for saving Tasha with sobbing gratitude. But Shaundar was still standing there as though he was some sort of weird gargoyle; glassy-eyed and expressionless, like a construct. Blood had begun to pool around his boots on the floor and Molly thought, however briefly, *Damn, that rug is ruined.*

“Shaundar?” she murmured. “Shaundar, are you okay?”

He said something in Orcish in reply; and the response chilled her to the core. It was utterly devoid of emotion. Tasha looked up from her weeping to meet the gaze of her saviour, and there was nothing in there. Nothing at all.

Molly put her hand to her mouth, totally at a loss. “Oh Shaundar,” she murmured.

But Tasha knew what to do. She got up and went to him, then took his hand. Shaundar’s thousand yard stare flickered and focused in on her face.

Yes, maybe he looked like an elf. But Tasha was a priestess of Luthic. She knew a scro soldier when she saw one. “Come, warrior,” she said in Orcish with all the gentleness and compassion she could muster, laying a red-clawed hand on the side of his cheek. “Let me take the war out of you.”

Shaundar declined his head and touched his fist to his brow in the ritual gesture of acknowledgement to a consecrated priestess. “*Gul, karra*,” he replied obediently. And with that, something within him broke, and he doubled over and began to sob helplessly.

For Shaundar, that time of his life would forever be fuzzy and indistinct, like a distant nightmare. His thoughts were disordered and seemingly disconnected. He remembered being bathed by Molly and Tasha, watching the blood turn the water in the tub red not once, not twice, but thrice. He remembered making slow and gentle love to Tasha as both of them wept together, and their tears oozed out like infection from a wound. He remembered they held his naked, scarred body between them both as he lay shivering on Molly's oversized feather bed, dozing fitfully and then blinking awake as flashes of what he'd done came back to him. Tasha spoke to him gently in Orcish, whispering the litany of a Luthic Priestess. Sometimes he thought he was back on Dukagsh. Sometimes he forgot how much time had passed and he asked about Yathar again.

With soothing entreaties and powerful prayers they pieced his shattered mind back together. But Shaundar didn't trust the foundation. He was horrified by the savagery he had displayed, and he was horrified by his lack of control. It made him sick in his belly and his heart, but he knew no one could do something quite like that and be sane.

Then there were other questions. When he was well enough to ask Tasha why she was speaking to him in Orcish, and eventually got the story out of her, that opened up a whole new witch's cauldron full of trouble and poison. Had his years on Dukagsh, acting as Clan Champion Bolvi Bloodfist, changed him so much? Sometimes – often – Bolvi

seemed more real to him than Shaundar did. Was he now more orc than elf? Why else was he wearing the scro armour of his *Zabbak'Tarr* everywhere he went, even though he was trying to keep a low profile and it couldn't help but attract attention? It was a singularly stupid move, really, and it was something Shaundar should have known better than to do. Was he hoping, somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind, that the Bloodfist clan would make the connection and come speak to him – either to forgive his trespasses or to end his miserable life with honour?

There was only one thing left to connect him to his elven life, and that was his sister Selena. Was he hoping to find her because he wanted to protect her; because he needed something to hang onto to maintain a grip on his sanity, however tenuous; or because he simply had nowhere else to go?

One thing was clear; Shaundar's enemies would continue to hunt him no matter where he went, and they would stop at nothing to bring him harm. Anyone close to him was a potential target; anyone he cared about was a lever and a weapon.

Dodging the Navy was one matter. But dodging the scro was another. It was now clear that the scro at least knew enough about who he was to be a threat to the people around him; and the worst part was, that had come completely out of nowhere. There was nothing he could do about Selena; she would always be his sister. But he could no longer

afford the luxury of friends. As it was, he could hardly look Tasha in the eye without crippling guilt. What if they came back? What if the Navy did?

So it was that after only three days of healing at the Temple, first downing a quarter of a bottle of rum to give him courage, Shaundar donned his cleaned and polished armour and headed into the salon. He looked around at all of the Temple's clergy and anguish clawed at his heart. He knew he might have been truly happy here, if things were different.

"Where are you going?" Molly demanded when she saw him. All of the sacred whores looked up. Sally pressed her lips together. Tasha's eyes widened as realization dawned in them. Wulfgar just sighed.

"I'm leaving," he said. "I want to thank you – all of you – for everything you've done." His voice cracked a little as he said the last and his eyes found Molly's. "I don't want you to see me again. Ever." The last hurt more than he had imagined.

Molly put down her long pipe and stood up. "But why?" she asked.

"I think you know why," he replied in a thin voice, feeling the weight of his fear and confusion. "I'm dangerous. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want others to hurt you."

Now Tasha was also standing up and they and Sally came over to him. “We don’t care about that,” Molly proclaimed.

“That’s right,” agreed Sally, laying a hand on his arm.

“But I do,” Shaundar insisted. He backed away from them. “I could never live with myself if something like that happened to any of you again.” He touched the side of Tasha’s face and she looked away. “And I don’t trust myself either.” That was terrible to admit, but it was true, and it was real. “If someone comes around here looking for me, I want you to send them to Luigi’s right away,” he commanded. “Before I leave the Rock, and after. Do not hesitate and do not ask why. Give them no excuses to hurt you.”

“Okay,” Molly acquiesced. “Okay, I’ll do that. But please don’t leave.” Her eyes were brimming with imploring tears as she grabbed his calloused hands in her dainty little fists.

“Please don’t make this harder than it already is,” he whispered, staring at his feet.

Silence fell. Into that silence, like a stone cast into a pool, Tasha spoke. “We respect your decision, warrior,” she assented. “I am sorry to see you go. But if you must, will you go with Luthic’s blessing?”

“I would be grateful and honoured, *karra*,” he accepted with a formal salute. His eyes found Molly’s. “May I have Lady Firehair’s blessing as well?”

“Oh sailor,” Molly breathed, “it seems to me the gods owe you a few blessings. Come to me.”

He knelt at her feet, and one by one each of the holy whores came to Shaundar and bestowed the benediction of their gods and goddesses upon him. Then he stood and embraced each of them, though he kissed both Tasha and Molly. “Goodbye,” he said. His voice was thick with regret.

Without another word, he spun on his heels and walked out. Molly tried not to cry, but she was not successful.

Part Two:

Privateer

Chapter Six

Shaundar returned to the Laughing Beholder to get his things about twenty minutes before they opened. Luigi cast the gaze of his central eye and about five others up in Shaundar's direction. "Glad to see you're up and about!" he cheered gruffly. "Ready to get back to work?"

He still had a *job*? Shaundar was more than a little taken aback. "I think the time is long past for me to be out of your face, Luigi," he answered. "I'm sorry I have yet to fulfill my contract. When I can, I will return and I'll pay you the rest of your fee in equivalent wage." He started tromping up the stairs.

The beholder flew beside him as Shaundar made his way up the winding stairwell. "I already accepted a reduced rate, you know," Luigi pointed out, "and s'all right, but you still got three and a half days left. I'd like you to stay."

Shaundar stopped and turned to look at him too. "I can't thank you enough for everything you've done," he told the beholder, "but I'm far more cost than benefit to you. I won't forget it." He continued up the stairs.

“Tell you what,” Luigi negotiated, “stay for tonight. Finish the shift. One day won’t make too much difference. And by the way, where’re you going so I can pass the word?”

Shaundar sighed. “I’m afraid to tell you,” he confessed.

“How else is your sister going to find you?” Luigi argued reasonably.

The elf cast him a tight-lipped smile. “That’s the dilemma,” he admitted. Well, did he go to Waterdeep or Skullport? “Probably Waterdeep,” he decided. He was less likely to run into scro there than in Skullport, and the Navy had to keep their presence really, really quiet.

“Have you considered going to Selune?” Luigi suggested out of the Void.

“Selune?” he echoed, cocking his head. He hadn’t been to Selune since the famous battle there . . . oh, years ago now. He, Yathar and Sylria had stood fast together against a formidable foe. That was where he’d met Dorin Bloodfist for the first time. That was where he’d last seen his father before Raven Talon; the last time he and his father had really talked. His throat congealed with grief.

“Sure,” the beholder insisted, apparently oblivious to his pain. “Hardly the typical place to go to ground, I figure. Who would think to look for you there?”

Who indeed? That was a valid point. But Shaundar couldn’t bear to face the memories lingering in its soil. Besides, “I don’t think I can afford to, Luigi. It’s a tourist trap, isn’t it? I don’t have any money, and I was there long enough to know they probably won’t hire outsiders and it would be a terrible place to beg.” Not to mention, everyone there was strangely paranoid. What if there was something in the water? He couldn’t afford any more threats to his sanity, could he? “I’ll think about it,” he promised. “And you’re right, one day won’t matter that much. I’ll do this last shift. I owe you that at least. But the sooner I leave, the better off you are.”

“Guess I can’t fault your logic, lad,” the beholder acquiesced. “But I wish it weren’t so.” Shaundar headed back down the stairs and grabbed a mop.

When the bar opened, a crew of roughened sailors rolled in. In the lead strode a busty brunette human woman in the universally recognized uniform of a free trader; canvas chemise, bandolier and hips strapped with wheellock pistols and twin scimitars, a sash and a belt looped with pouches and dagger, rough silk pantaloons, thick high leather boots, and hair twisted back into a braid. “Luigi!” she cried, her face

flushed with good cheer, bright blue eyes twinkling. “Drinks for my whole crew!” She was followed by a tall, solemn-faced wiry elf with intense green eyes and his black hair wrestled into a top-knot like some of the armoured warriors of Shou Town, and a foppishly-dressed gnomish swashbuckler with unusually fine bones and extremely long, almost elvish ears. Said crew cheered loudly as they poured in. They filled the tavern to its full capacity.

“Sable!” Luigi returned; and Shaundar snapped his head around to look. “Good to see you, lass! How’s business?”

“Booming like cannons,” she grinned wryly, plunking herself down at the bar. “Pour me a rum and bring the bottle; we’ve plunder burning holes in our pockets.”

“Don’t be sayin’ that too loud on the streets of Bral,” he advised with good humour as he floated over one of the larger rum bottles and a cup.

In the meantime, Shaundar was pushing his way through the crowd. It was quite a motley crew; humans, dwarves, half-elves, a lizardwoman and, of all things in the world, a creature that had to be either a gith or a githyanki; gods knew which. But there was only one face he wanted to see. As the golden-eyed gaze of a very attractive elf maid with silver hair and an unusual silvery sheen to her skin followed

him, Shaundar hunted through the raucous spacefarers. And then he saw her.

He almost couldn't believe it; he just stood there for a moment, staring, hoping that she wouldn't vanish into mist. She had lost all the baby fat and had grown into quite an elegant and beautiful maiden who looked so much like their mother that it hurt. But she carried herself in an entirely different way; blue-black hair tossed carelessly over one shoulder, silver-sparkled blue eyes shining, one jaunty boot resting on the table as she chatted with a very large black-haired elf or half-elf dressed all in black in the finely-tailored garb of a gentleman duelist. She was armed with twin daggers and her belt was adorned with many pouches, suggesting that she had buckled down to her magical studies after all. As Shaundar approached, the duelist took note and his eyes narrowed. He shifted position just slightly so that he had better access to the delicate, finely worked mithril long sword on his hip. It was a gesture that reminded Shaundar painfully of Yathar. Perhaps he was a bladesinger; he had the look. Shaundar cleared his throat. "Selena?" he murmured.

Selena looked away from the duelist and met his gaze with a puzzled expression. Did he really look so different? He supposed he did. He opened his mouth to explain himself, but then her eyes widened and recognition sparked in them. "Shaundar?" she exclaimed in disbelief. "Shaundar?"

He smiled faintly. “Hi, *Ruasali*,” he breathed. It was her childhood nickname; only her family knew it.

Selena squealed with delight and threw herself into his arms. “Oh thank Corellon, I’m so happy to see you, they told us you were *dead!*”

Shaundar picked her up and swung her around, just like their father might have done when she was a little girl. And the gaze of the bladesinger softened. He gave Shaundar one of those little nods of respect that warriors give to one another. “Well met, Shaundar,” he said in greeting. “I’m Valrik. I’m your brother-in-law.” He offered a formal elven bow.

Another elven male, who looked exactly like the duelist except that his hair was standing up in a crazy unkempt mop and he was clad in a forest green doublet and unmatched red and green boots, made his way over. “This is Shaundar?” he asked. “Neat! I’m your other brother-in-law, Kaimen.” He was also armed with a traditional long sword, one that might have been the mate of his brother’s.

The duelist Valrik cracked a smile. “As you can tell, we have heard a great deal about you. May we come together in love and light.”

Elven twins, no less? Well, that was rare. Shaundar could barely remember the proper words, but after dredging the depths of his

memory, he returned politely, “May there always be harmony among the People.” To him it sounded alien and awkward, but he laughed anyway.

Captain Sable was in a mood to celebrate. There wasn’t much left of the *Tempest*, it was true, and she’d had to tow its wreckage to the Rock; but the Hammership they’d taken as a prize, the *Maelstrom*, was a solid man-o-war well worth the trade. There was only one problem; she had only forty-five souls to crew her, and at full crew to handle all the weapons, she needed sixty. Bral was a good place to hire crew if you needed seasoned starhands; but it was damn expensive. There would be a bout of hiring now, and it would likely be at least a week in port, unless by some miracle they actually found a seasoned spelljammer in the next day or two. Still, it couldn’t hurt to check on her holdings and to touch base with some old friends, like Cap’n Gyudd and Large Luigi.

“Mr. Haziz, you have the deck and the conn,” Sable commanded. She sniffed the air. The faint odour of rot was emanating from somewhere.

“Aye lass, I have the deck and the conn,” her uncle recited; a big, burly man with a thick black beard and the same blue eyes that ran in her family. He turned around and in true boatswain’s style roared, “All right, lads! Let’s unload this wreck and prepare our new ship.”

“Thanks, Uncle,” she smiled. “Come on lads, let’s go see what Luigi is up to!” As they headed out, she noticed that there was a whole flock of stargulls circling around a Wasp ship on the landing platforms. It was roped off and the Bralian guard was crawling all over it like an infestation. Two priests of Ptah carried out a body stitched up in canvas. She wondered offhandedly what was going on, but decided it was best if she keep her nose out of it.

Her First Mate fell in step with her. Yubina was considerably less sanguine. “When do you want to start crewing up?” he asked her, his arms folded across his chest.

“We can have a look at the guildhouse when we pass by,” she consented. “But I figured I’d talk to Luigi and see if he has anyone to recommend. I thought we could probably set to hire from the Laughing Beholder.”

“Seems sensible,” the elf agreed.

“I could really use some shore leave,” Quicksilver smiled at them both as she fell in step, her golden eyes glittering. She had abandoned her practical sailor’s garb for something diaphanous that revealed more than it concealed. How she had done this so quickly, Sable would never know.

“You said it,” agreed Khris as he zipped up beside them, adjusting his fine clothing and enormous feathered foppish hat. His head was about level with Quicksilver’s bust. “Drinking and carousing; sounds like fun! I’ve been meaning to visit the Temple of Sune for some time. Who’s with me?”

“Me!” crowed Astor, his black Mulhorandi eyes alight. “Right after I wet my whistle at the tavern!”

Sable smiled. She figured that what Astor was going to do after he wet his whistle was inspect the inside of his eyelids. She loved the man, but he never seemed to know when enough was enough when it came to drink.

“I’ll join you, Khris,” said Tala’Kryn, striding up to the group in her high boots with their perilous heels, her bosom bouncing in her undersized bodice.

They headed into the Laughing Beholder and Sable greeted Luigi and took her usual spot at the bar. She lit up a cigarillo and started to relax. Taking a quick survey of the room, she saw her crew settling in to having a good time in earnest.

“New bouncer?” Yubina inquired of the beholder as he waited patiently for his sake to heat. He pointed and Sable followed the line of his finger. At first she thought she was looking at a half-orc, based on the

armour; or perhaps one of those troublesome scro types. But then she realized that this was the biggest elf she'd ever seen. He had to be six feet tall and maybe a hundred eighty pounds. His arms were thicker around than hers, and by a fair margin; and she'd been hauling bowlines and hawsers since she was a child.

"Aye," Luigi agreed, "but prolly not no more. His name is Shaundar Sunfall; I understand he's related to one of yours. Selena Sunfall's brother."

They watched him make his way over to Valrik, Kaimen, and Selena; then Selena jumped up and threw her arms around him.

"Half-elf?" theorized Yubina, evidently just as amazed by his size as she was.

"I don't think so," Sable mused. "Look at his ears." They were tall, extending perhaps four or five inches from his head. Half-blooded elves tended to have tiny points at their ear-tips.

Selena guided her brother into the couch she had been sitting in. Valrik and Kaimen sat around beside them. Yubina smiled a little and shook his head. Sable realized what it was that her best friend saw right enough. He was even bigger than the twins, whom up to this point held the record for giants among elves. They started chatting amongst themselves.

“Come sit down!” Selena urged Shaundar with a delighted grin, taking his hand and guiding him to the couches.

“Okay,” acquiesced Shaundar, sitting beside her, “but I have to keep an eye open. I work here,” he explained.

“Sounds like a good job,” Valrik remarked as he also came to sit on the opposite couch. “Large Luigi has an excellent reputation.”

Kaimen vaulted over the sofa and flopped himself down on the other side of Selena. She kissed him. “So where have you been all this time?” he inquired bluntly. “Selena says she hasn’t seen you for years.”

How was he supposed to answer that? As far as he knew, his mission to infiltrate the scro was still classified. He opened his mouth to make some excuse, and then he noticed a laughing, scrubby-looking human in a Mulhorandi pectoral slap Elsa on the rear end.

“Excuse me,” he scowled, anger filling his throat with bile, and he stood up.

Sable turned back to the bar. “I need new crew, Luigi,” she announced. “I figured I’d set up here tomorrow and leave word at the docks that I’m hiring. Is that all right with you?”

“Sure,” Luigi assented. “You can have the corner table. But since I know I’m goin’ to hafta pick your drunks up off the floor in the mornin’, they can help me clean the place while you’re doing that.”

“Seems reasonable,” the captain agreed, taking a long draw off of her cigarillo. Luigi floated over the ceramic flask of now-heated sake and three *ochoko*. The golden liquid poured into the small round cups and then Yubina took the *tokkuri* and poured a drink one-handed for Luigi, who bobbed to nod his thanks. “*Kanpai!*” Yubina cheered, and the others echoed the sentiment as they clinked their cups together, making sure the rim of Sable’s cup was a little higher than the others. When they raised them to drink, both Yubina and Luigi turned slightly away from Sable.

Then Yubina’s eyes narrowed and he got to his feet. In three strides he was across the room. Sable followed with her gaze and saw that Selena’s brother was heading for Astor with a murderous look on his face. The blond elf yanked the chair out from underneath Astor and raised it above his head. Then Yubina interposed himself between them. Luigi cleared his throat nervously in a way that Sable did not like.

“What are you doing?” her First Mate demanded.

The big elf tilted his head down to meet Yubina's gaze with a glassy stare. "Bouncing," he said dryly. Sable was not used to seeing her tall elfen Matey in this unusual position. He had to look up to Selena's brother, who probably had twenty or thirty pounds on him. With that orcish armour, the blond elf positively dwarfed him.

Astor swore and looked up to see what was going on. He jerked backwards suddenly when he saw the lifted chair, and slammed back into the table, knocking over his tankard and spilling the pitcher he was sharing with Khris and One-Eye. The Mulhorand put up his hands. "Sorry!" he apologized immediately. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it!"

Luigi's barmaid turned to the big elf and said placatingly, "It's okay, Shaundar. He didn't goose me or anything. He just patted my bum."

The elfen bouncer slowly lowered the chair. "She's not for sale," he spat through gritted teeth, never once taking his eyes from Yubina's. Sable could see that the elf's hands were curled into fists around the back of the chair and his eyes were full of fury.

"He'll keep that in mind," Sable piped up, now that the bar had fallen silent to witness this exchange. "Won't you, Astor?"

“Aye, Cap’n,” the Mulhorand agreed readily. “Sorry,” he said again to the bouncer. “Sorry,” he repeated to the barmaid.

Yubina and Selena’s brother continued to eye each other for a long, tense moment. “See that he does,” the blond elf growled at last, and he turned away and went to set back down with his sister. She was studying him with questioning eyes.

Behind her, Luigi let out a sigh. It sounded to Sable like a sigh of relief.

Yubina came back over to the bar, his green eyes so dark that the golden flecks in them stood out like starry points of light. “What kind of madmen are you hiring, Luigi?” he wanted to know, taking another sip of his sake.

“Cut him a break,” the barkeep growled. “He’s just back from the War.”

“Navy elf?” Sable inquired in a sour tone. She didn’t have much use for the Imperious Elven Navy, and she had good reason. The captain drank a little sake to wash the bitter taste from her mouth.

“Ex-Navy,” the beholder clarified. “Definitely no longer on speaking terms.” This actually spoke in his favour, in Sable’s opinion.

“I don’t care,” Sable’s Matey spat. “There’s no reason to react like that to a sailor touching a bar wench’s bottom. Not that I approve of that,” he clarified, “and Astor is absolutely inappropriate and should know better, but your bouncer was going to kill or maim him. I could see it in his eyes.”

Sable cast a glance back over at the big elf. The barmaid had given him a flask and he was tossing it back with gusto. Khris came to join them, a glass of fine wine in his delicate hand. “Nothing actually happened,” he pointed out reasonably.

Yubina shrugged and continued to sip at his sake.

“What was that all about?” Selena demanded of Shaundar as he came back to join her and the twins. He was still shaking a little.

He didn’t answer her right away. “Elsa, can I have a flask?” Shaundar asked, thinking perhaps a drink would calm him down to a more reasonable level. It was more than a bit frightening how quickly his response had soared straight up to violent fury. Maybe it was best that he no longer serve as a bouncer. That kind of violence wasn’t going to help anything.

Elsa brought him a bottle of rum without a word and he nodded his thanks before taking a good hearty swig. Selena's eyes filled with sadness and disapproval as he did so, probably remembering how he and Yathar were drinking when they came back from Raven Talon. Shaundar saw that look and his cheeks burned.

"You were about to tell us where you've been all this time," Valrik reminded him patiently; probably to change the subject.

Shaundar shrugged. "I'm not sure what I'm allowed to tell you," he divulged. "I was on a secret mission for Lionheart Command. Part of the conditions was to feign our deaths so that there would be no repercussions on our families." Saying it was reassuring. Yes, ultimately that was the real goal, wasn't it?

"We?" Selena echoed, pouncing on that statement like a tressym on a ball of yarn. "Who's 'we'? Yathar too?"

"Yes," he admitted with some reluctance. A vision of Yathar's orcish form came to him like a bad apparition.

The elf maid seized his hand with hopeful eyes. "So Yathar, is he ...?"

"He's dead," Shaundar snapped to cut off the question he couldn't bear to hear. He knocked the flask back and drank heartily.

Her eyes darkened with disappointment and remorse. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

What a complete asshole he was! “Of course you didn’t know,” Shaundar reassured her, patting her hand and then holding it to his arm, reluctant to let it go. “It’s a reasonable assumption; I’m still here, so . . .” He tried not to think about Yathar lying on the hardwood floor of the Bloodfist estate, pierced through the heart by Shaundar’s own dagger, deathly pale and his lifeblood dripping from the corner of his mouth. Shaundar’s gorge rose. He swallowed more of the sugary spirit to keep from vomiting. Sweat beaded on his brow.

But there were things that Selena needed to know. “Did you hear about Nedethil?” Shaundar blurted out past the lump in his throat. Now he was sweating in earnest. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

She put her face in her hands and started to cry.

Shaundar winced. Well, he guessed that made him the avatar of assholes. Immediately he put his arm around her, and the twins each grabbed one of her hands. “I’m sorry,” she gulped, trying to regain calm. “I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t be sorry,” Shaundar soothed, rubbing her upper arm as he drew her to his chest. “I don’t want to talk about it either. I just felt . . .”

“You felt she needed to know,” Valrik nodded. “And of course she did.” He looked down at the table. “I cannot begin to express to you our sorrow for your loss, Shaundar. But perhaps Kaimen and I can understand a little.” He met Shaundar’s gaze, his eyes awash with compassion and sorrow and simmering anger. “We’re from Veladin. On Caer’Thun. It was destroyed by a tyrannical empire called the Tiranen.”

“That’s right,” Kaimen agreed. He was pulling out something that appeared to be knitting or darning.

Shaundar sucked at his teeth and nodded his head. A few of his friends from Aces High had been from Caer’Thun. He knew something about this; a human tyranny that had devastated in twenty years about ten thousand years of elven culture and history. “I guess probably you do then,” he muttered. He thought of the lovely green of his homeworld; ancient trees, some large enough to build cities in; roses and jasmine and faintly-luminescent starglow flowers, which he had never seen again on any other world; the chittering and songs of the birds and the shrieking of monkeys; the regal academy, which he’d hated so much as a student; the sparkling harbour, where spelljamming ships forever landed and took off again, reflecting the stars and the other worlds in Garden’s roots and the

spectacular aurora of the Colour Spray Nebula; the roof of their family tree manor, where he held Narissa in his arms the night before he went off to war; the roof of Narissa's family manor, where he proposed to her; and the great willow overhanging the creek where they used to play as children. Something cracked in his soul and a sob exploded from his chest. He lowered his head and wept for several long minutes.

When he looked up again, Valrik offered him a handkerchief without a word. "I'm sorry," he said, mopping his face. Kaimen was wiping the tears from Selena's eyes with an expression of tenderness that won Shaundar's instant approval. He hadn't really looked closely at Kaimen yet, but now that he was, he noticed a pendant in the form of an asymmetrical golden eight-pointed star lying against his green doublet. A priest of Erevan Ilesere, god of luck and trickery. Well, Shaundar supposed that explained how it was that Selena had managed not to be on Nedethil when it was destroyed. Granted, they were known for occasionally taking a joke too far. But with a priest of the Trickster and a bladesinger on her side, Shaundar supposed she was in reasonably good hands. "I'm sorry, Selena," he sighed. "I guess you probably don't think much of what's left of your big brother, hey?" Yep, what a wreck he was. So much for protecting his little sister. He knocked back a good pull of the rum. He was starting to get drunk now; that was probably a good thing.

“Are you kidding?” Selena sniffled. “My gods, I’m just so glad you’re *alive!*” She started crying again.

“I’m glad you’re alive too,” Shaundar murmured. He touched the side of her face and she tried to cast him a brave smile. It was unconvincing. So was the one he returned. “You have no idea how much.” He still had no idea what to say to her, any more than he had when he fled home after the horror of Raven Talon in the first place. But being in her presence, painful as it was, gave him hope. “Tell me about what I’ve missed in your life,” he pleaded. That would give him something to focus on that was happy for a change. “Did you finish school? It looks like you took up some magical studies.” He indicated her spell component pouches and smiled.

Selena laughed a little. “Yeah, but not at school. I hated school. I got Narissa to teach me.”

A bitter lump of guilt and sorrow settled into his throat at the mention of Narissa’s name. Unconsciously he gripped the goldheart charm around his throat and began to rub it with his thumb. “Well, I’m sure you’re quite an accomplished mage then,” he nodded with a tight smile. “She was always so far . . .” The words choked in his tonsils and refused to push past them. He coughed back a sob and chased it off with more liquor.

“I left home not long after you did,” Selena pushed on, meeting his eyes. “I was pretty angry at Dad about how he handled it when you came home.” She looked away and once again Shaundar was overcome with remorse. Selena was their daddy’s little girl. If Shaundar had managed to drive a wedge between them, then that would certainly be consistent with his pattern of destroying everything he touched.

“I got work as a short-run jammer,” she continued. “And then I signed aboard Captain Sable’s ship out of Waterdeep. I’ve been with them a couple of years now. That’s how I met Valrik and Kaimen. They’re kind of a package deal.” She smiled at both of them, the gaze of a girl who was truly in love.

Ah, okay. They were *both* her husbands. Well, Selena never did anything the usual way, did she? Such arrangements were uncommon among moon elves and virtually unheard of among sun elves, but they weren’t entirely unknown. Shaundar was both ecstatically happy for her, and bitterly jealous. “We were actually just married last week. Captain Sable married us.”

“I’m really happy for you,” Shaundar said sincerely. “Congratulations to all three of you.”

“Thanks!” Kaimen responded blithely. Shaundar could now see that he was actually knitting a sock. If he didn’t know better, he would swear that the needles were magical wands. They were tipped with

sparkling crystals and inscribed with Draconic runes that Shaundar couldn't see clearly enough to identify.

Selena looked at her boots. "Were you at the final battle?" she asked him.

He gritted his teeth and fought the wave of memory that assaulted him; their homeworld in pieces, stripped of all life, the wreckage of the Realmspace fleet scattered around it. "Yes," he sighed.

"Do you . . ." She swallowed. "Do you know if Daddy is . . ."

Shaundar winced and shut his eyes. It didn't help. The clear image of the shattered wreck of the *Aerdrie's Pride* overwhelmed him, with their father's hand sticking out from under a pile of flinders, his moonblade fallen beside him. "Av, he's dead," Shaundar confirmed in a strangled tone.

Her face fell. "I just hoped; you know, seeing you . . ."

"It's all right," he said again. But of course it wasn't.

He forced himself to look up and smile. "I don't suppose you've heard rumours about anyone else making it out, have you?" he asked hopefully. Across at the bar, a very attractive black-haired human woman in a skimpy bodice winked at him.

She shrugged. "I hear Admiral Durothil made it."

Piss on it. Shaundar tipped the bottle back to drown the rage that filled his blood.

"I know," agreed Selena when she saw his infuriated expression. "Of all the people to make it . . ." She heaved a sigh. "Give me some of that, would you?" she demanded, reaching for Shaundar's flask. Shaundar handed it over and she quaffed a good swallow.

"Way to go, Selena!" Kaimen cheered.

She gasped when she pulled it away. "Wow!" she exclaimed.

"Guess I should've warned you it's pretty strong stuff," Shaundar observed as he took the bottle and knocked it back. "Shall I get another?"

"Sure," Valrik inserted. "We'll drink with you; won't we, Kaimen?"

"Sure, of course we will," the twin chimed in. He was scratching his crotch with one of the "knitting needles," though he stopped and put on an exaggerated guilty expression when he was seen.

Shaundar gave Valrik a strained smile. “Thank you. It will be an honour to drink with you, brother.” He waved Elsa down for another bottle.

A rich mezzosoprano started to sing a song that Shaundar hadn’t heard for many years. He turned to seek the voice’s owner and found the attractive human woman with the too-tight bodice and the high-heeled boots. Her long black hair cascaded down the line of her bust and her pouty red lips formed the Espruar almost without an accent:

Tel’Quessir malawain, khaor enial ua’aestar

Sehan eshaal mhaor koeh, teushtasa ent mestar

Enna ia, u’sofema, quess’revar ausa alu

Ent lor tel’tasa’tree, quessir hinue lor’alu:

“The elven exile, banished from home and family, wandered through dark lands, weeping and alone,” Shaundar whispered in synchronization. “One day, in thoughts of mourning, he rested at the waterside, and to the fugitive current, he said . . .”

With that, the silver-skinned elf maid sat beside her on a bar stool and began to interweave a trilling soprano descant:

“Nehel wylint’or’ath tel’quiet, avae’mhaoraar nes gisir

"Shan, hinual revanthas, siilen le sol nehel'feer

"If you see my realm, that unhappy place that keeps my heart," Shaundar continued in a murmur, "go tell my friends that I remember them." Kaimen looked over, knitting forgotten, and added a surprisingly rich tenor to the tapestry, which Valrik instantly took up as well:

"O adoe suor ath encik, nehel n'tel'orar

"Le nielen wylinta nehel, tarkhal mhaernthoraar!

"O days blessed with charm," he muttered, "you have decayed and disappeared." Selena's lovely soprano keened a rich harmony, "I will never see you again, lost homeland!" No longer able to resist, he added his space-roughened tenor to the last verse, his eyes leaking:

"Shunti le Ghaatil'ren, or'ath tel'quiet'itae!

"Le pellinta nae'nehel ausa darn'ihel'evaelae!

"Nehel wylint'or'ath tel'quiet, avae'mhaoraar nes gisir

"Shan, hinual revanthas, siilen le sol nehel'feer."

"When I pass West, my beloved realm, I will look to you with a gaze sad and passionate. If you see my realm, that unhappy place that keeps my heart, go tell my friends that I remember them." The whole

tavern fell silent, and Shaundar and Selena were by no means alone in their tears.

Much of the night blurred into obscurity after that. He remembered singing sad ballads and star shanties in his space-hoarsened voice with Selena's lovely soprano soaring high above, almost redeeming his musical butchery. They wept together about Yathar, Garan, Narissa and Laeroth; and above all their parents. Shaundar cried long and hard then. A full-grown elf, and damn it all, he still wanted his mother.

Sometime late, Valrik carried Selena off to bed, with Kaimen in tow. He stayed up and continued drinking, overwhelmed by memory and grief.

Shaundar came to in the taproom, his aching head wedged in a dark corner and his neck awry. Dragging himself to an upright position, he was pleased to note that the vomit was on the floor and not his face. He wiped his mouth, which tasted something like fermented rat droppings and had the consistency of bat fur, and worked at making himself mobile. Bruises ached and complained. Well, that was what happened when you passed out in your armour; it wasn't like he hadn't done it before.

He staggered out of the tavern and dunked his head in the scuttlebutt outside; a time-honoured remedy. Suitably revived, at least for the moment, he cracked in his neck and cupped his hands together to

drink. When he was somewhat rehydrated and his gullet stopped threatening rebellion Shaundar headed back inside.

The barroom floor was in total disarray. Chairs were tumbled about haphazardly and the floor was slippery with beer and rum. The Mulhorand was wrapped around the legs of a chair, snuggled up like a lover, and snoring loudly. The ship's captain was shaking him vigorously. "Get up, Astor!" she demanded. "You'll have the devil to pay for the rest of your life if you don't move your ass!"

At that threat, the sailor came to with a snort and a start. "Don't say that, Cap'n," he moaned. "I can't get the tar outta my hair as it is."

"Then haul your ass," she commanded mercilessly, handing him a mop.

He groaned; but he took the mop. Then he winced and threw his arm up over his eyes. "Somebody put out the sun," he pleaded as Captain Sable abandoned him to his fate.

"I wish," Shaundar lamented with him.

The Mulhorand – Astor, she'd said his name was – clambered to his feet with difficulty. Shaundar gave him a hand. "Thanks," he growled. "Listen – I'm real sorry 'bout last night."

“So am I,” Shaundar apologized.

“I’m Astor,” he introduced himself, extending his hand.

Right; this was a human form of introduction. Shaundar grasped the extended palm and Astor gave his hand a firm shake. He bore the calluses of a warrior and a sailor. “Shaundar Sunfall,” he replied; and it came more easily this time than it had the last.

“You gotta be the biggest elf I’ve ever seen, anyone ever tell you that?” the Mulhorand mused. “Whadda they feed you on your planet?” Then he smacked his lips and extended his furry tongue in an expression of disgust. “My mouth tastes like two frogs fucked in it,” he announced. “You know where I can get some water?”

“Scuttlebutt’s outside,” Shaundar responded sympathetically, jerking his thumb towards the door. Astor nodded and headed in that direction.

In the meantime, the Captain had a carafe of coffee clutched in her fist and she was setting up at the corner table with that glowering Matey of hers. Shaundar curled his lip in mutual contempt. He had not joined in on “The Elven Exile.” Too proud, Shaundar guessed. Why did it seem like most of the gold elves he knew were so full of their own self-importance? To the Nine Hells with them, anyway. He made his way behind the bar where Luigi had a pot of coffee brewing, and he poured

himself one and dashed it with a little cinnamon and black pepper. Almost like *graf*; it really just needed the cardamom and it would probably be a reasonable facsimile. “Good morning,” he nodded to them both.

“Morning,” the Captain nodded back politely. The Matey just glared over his folded arms. Shaundar had not properly considered the way he was dressed last night, but today it struck him as singularly interesting. He was bare-chested save for a small silk vest, and he wore those wide-bottomed trousers he associated with some of the Shou swordsmen who wore similar top knots. The insides of his forearms were beautifully tattooed with an Oriental dragon on the right and a black panther on the left. Shaundar knew that there was a monk’s order with a temple in Shou Town who were tattooed with a different sort of dragon and a tiger, and he wondered if the Matey was an expatriate of a similar order.

The Captain opened up what looked to be a log book and rolled some forms out of a chart case. Shaundar recognized them; they were ship’s articles. Shaundar had signed similar documents in both Espruar and Orcish each time he’d joined a ship’s crew. She also set out ink, blotter, sand, sealant and quills.

“Astor, wake up Valrik or Selena, would you?” she asked the scruffy man when he came back into the barroom, hair dripping.

“Aye, Cap’n,” he grunted, and started tromping up the staircase. He still had the mop clutched in a death grip.

“I’ll do it,” Shaundar volunteered. “Do you know what room they’re in?”

“Luigi said he put them up in your room, since you weren’t using it,” Captain Sable told him with a wry smile. “Thank you, I appreciate that. That means Astor can get to work on the swabbing.” She cast him a grin of sinister mockery.

“Aye, Cap’n,” grumbled the sailor, and he turned back down the stairs again. His steps were the tread of a press-ganged kobold marching to battle.

Not sure if he had done the Mulhorand any favours, Shaundar headed up to his room and knocked at the door.

“Come in,” a voice that Shaundar recognized as Valrik’s called.

The trio were already dressed, although Shaundar was dubious about Kaimen’s choice of attire. His doublet was fastened around his lower half like a kilt and his trousers were dangling from his head.

“Good morning,” the elven marine greeted them, and his heart was lifted by the smile and the brightened eyes that Selena cast his way.

“Your Captain would like to see either you,” he nodded to his sister, “or Valrik.”

They looked at each other, shrugged, and engaged in a quick round of rock-paper-scissors. Valrik’s scissors lost to Selena’s rock. He nodded. “Excuse me,” he said politely to Shaundar, and he made his way down the stairs.

Selena met his gaze and bit down on whatever was about to come out of her mouth. He imagined it was probably a disparaging remark about his appearance. Shaundar couldn’t blame her; he was reasonably certain that he looked as awful as he felt. To avoid responding he began to gather up his meagre possessions.

“Packing up?” inquired Kaimen directly. He was standing on one foot, for no reason that Shaundar could discern.

“Last night was my last here,” Shaundar explained.

“Are you going back to the Navy?” queried Selena as she started brushing out her hair.

“No,” Shaundar said. He looked down and sucked at tusks that weren’t there. It was odd. He hadn’t allowed himself to consider anything past finding his sister. Now that he was here, he found telling Selena the truth of the situation was far more difficult than he could have

anticipated. “I’m absent without leave,” he explained at last. “I can’t go back to the Navy.”

Selena tried to meet his gaze, and when he resisted, she came over and took his hand. “The Captain’s looking for crew,” she informed him helpfully. “We’re expanding to a Hammership. I could recommend you.”

He met her eyes then. “I would appreciate that,” he smiled.

“Come on,” she urged, and she led him down the stairs.

Valrik had a stack of papers in his hand and he was pinning one to the door of the inn. It was a poster that stated they were hiring crew for “the *Maelstrom*.” “I’ll be back,” he promised Selena as he headed out.

Selena marched Shaundar up to the table where Sable and her Matey sat. The Captain glanced up from her paperwork. “What can I do for you, Selena?” she asked brusquely.

“Captain,” she began, “I’d like you to meet my big brother Shaundar. He’s looking for work.”

Sable studied him intently. Her eyes were as intense as that of her Matey’s, now that they were turned on him fully. He watched her

mind make a few calculations and then those eyes clouded. Shaundar recognized the look well from his childhood. She had decided against him. And how could he blame her? He must look like death warmed over. His eyes were likely red-rimmed and he probably still reeked of stale booze. And of course the scro armour hardly improved matters. Certainly that First Mate had that sun elven sniffle of disapproval in his expression.

But she gave away nothing in her tone as she extended her hand towards him. “How do you do, Mr. Sunfall?” she said in greeting. Shaundar shook the hand offered. “Please have a seat.” She indicated the chair in front of her across the table. It scraped across the floor as Shaundar pulled it out and sat. It was strange how right away he felt like he was back at the academy and about to be called to task by the Headmistress. He cleared his throat uneasily.

“How many years of spacefaring experience do you have?” Captain Sable began.

He pondered it. “About sixty?” he guessed. Well, he was forty the year his father had first taken him aboard his Armada class dreadnaught. That meant that this year was his official coming-of-age. His mouth wrenched itself into an odd smile.

The brunette ship captain raised an eyebrow. “Well, I guess you *are* an elf,” she allowed. “All right, what sort of vessels are you familiar with?”

Shaundar ruminated on that. “Let’s see . . .” he mused. “I suppose I’d be rated Master Starhand on Elven Armadas, Elven Men-o-War, Dragonflies, Hammerships, and Scro Manti. I’m an Able Starhand on Scorpions, Ogre Mammoths, Squidships, Dragonships and Mosquitoes, and I guess I’ve got a passing familiarity with Nautiloids and Tradesmen too.”

Kaimen chuckled. Shaundar wasn’t even aware he had joined them downstairs until he heard that laugh. The Captain blinked twice and the Matey narrowed his eyes. “That’s quite a resume, spacer,” Sable acknowledged.

Shaundar shrugged.

“All right, what position are you applying for?” she asked as she sipped at her black coffee.

“Spelljammer, *etriel*,” he replied.

The Captain coughed and nearly drowned on her coffee. “*You’re a spelljammer?*” exclaimed Astor from where he was pushing a mop across the room. Shaundar glanced at him and his expression was

incredulous. So were those of the Captain and the Matey. He blushed. Why was that hard to believe?

“My brother was the top graduate of his class at Aces High,” Selena announced with great pride. Her eyes were fierce like a hawk’s. “He still holds most of the current records for performance and speed.”

Pleased by the praise, but seeing that they were unconvinced, Shaundar folded his hands in his lap to keep from fidgeting. “I’m also trained as a general spacefarer, artillerist, navigator, and marine, *etriel*; and I have Imperial Navy officer’s training,” he apprised her. He realized that if he didn’t think fast, his sister was going to leave the Rock without him, and he might never see her again. “I’m qualified on ballistae, catapults, jettisons, bombards and cannons. I have extensive strategy and tactics training suited to all levels of spelljamming combat, fleet and personal, be it magical, melee or hand-to-hand. Please, Captain Sable,” he pleaded softly. “I really need the job.”

She fell into a pensive silence. But the Matey demanded, “How much do you drink, Mr. Sunfall?” with penetrating eyes.

“I’m sure no more than he does, *quessir*,” he snapped back, indicating Astor with his thumb. He realized with a start that he had gathered a crowd. Most of those colourful figures from last night had assembled while he was distracted.

“That’s hardly a point to recommend you,” Sable smirked; but he could tell that she was amused and he allowed himself to hope. “Well,” she decided, “I do need a new jammer in a bad way, and your sister is our Ship’s Mage. We make a point of treating our crew like a family; so their family is always welcome. Congratulations, Mr. Sunfall.” She extended her hand and he took it. “You’ve got the job.”

“Thank you, Captain!” Shaundar breathed. He wanted to wipe the sweat from his brow or perhaps collapse into a puddle, he was so relieved.

“This is my First Mate, Omaka Yubina,” the Captain introduced the annoying top-knotted sun elf.

Looking as though he were about to stick his hand in fish guts, Yubina bowed slightly and then offered his hand as well. Shaundar took it. Perhaps they both grasped a little more tightly than they needed to. “Welcome aboard,” the gold elf said, his eyes defying the cordial words.

“Thank you, sir,” Shaundar replied through tight lips.

The githyanki (or gith, or whatever he was) ambled over, one amber eye glowering from his cadaverous face. The other was marred by a sword slash divided by a patch. Like most other sailors, gold hoops glittered from his almost orclike lupine ears. He slid the ship’s articles over to Shaundar with a clawed finger. “I’m One-Eye,” he announced.

“I’m the Quartermaster. Have a look and sign yer soul away if the terms seem acceptable.”

Shaundar read the paper. His Common was a little rusty so it took him a few minutes, but he puzzled it out. He almost burst out laughing as he realized that they were a pirate vessel. Was this what he had come to? He remembered when most of the risk to his father’s person was chasing pirates in Garden’s roots.

Most of the articles were concerned with the divvying of shares; one for each crew member, two for warrants, three for officers, five for the Matey and ten for the Captain; a downright reasonable division, based on what Shaundar had overheard among the mercenaries and free traders he’d had occasion to meet. And this was after a fifty percent division to the ship herself right off the top, before shares were considered. Warrant was from port to port with option to renew automatic for all signed crew. Then he found the clause that made him cough in astonishment. Spelljammers were automatically considered to be officers, and they not only received an appropriate share, but a standard private spelljammer’s wage; which, he was astounded to learn, was one’s tactical rating in hex-lengths per minute, times 50 standard gold pieces per month!

He shook his head. Even considering that the Navy took care of all one’s personal needs, it seemed like a lot of money by comparison.

He took the quill in his hand and stopped. With a sinking feeling he realized that he had an obligation to inform them of the risks that came with taking him on. "You should know, Captain," he mouthed around the words like a hot potato, "the Navy is hunting me. I'm absent without leave. I've been accused of desertion." He fixed her eyes with his own. "But I'm not a deserter, *etriel*."

Again to his surprise, Sable smiled. "The Navy isn't very fond of me either, Mr. Sunfall. As a matter of fact, I seem to be collecting elven expatriates. I don't think it will be a problem."

He grinned back, and they shared a friendly chuckle. Making a silent apology to the spirit of his dead father for becoming a pirate, Shaundar scrawled his signature on the appropriate line. "Thank you," he said again. "I won't let you down." He offered a Navy salute.

"We salute like this," One-Eye informed him; and he crooked his arm at the elbow to touch his knuckle to his brow, where his hat would be if he weren't wearing a bandana instead. "And we say *aye* instead of *av*."

"Aye, Quartermaster," Shaundar responded with a nod. "I'll try to remember."

"Well, settle your business," Sable commanded. "We sail as soon as we're crewed up."

“Aye aye, Cap’n,” he acknowledged, imitating the salute. “I don’t have much left to do save bathe, I think. Where should I stow my gear?” The sooner he was aboard ship, the less likely he was to get into any further trouble.

“I’ll show ‘im,” One-Eye offered, standing up. “Come with me; I’ll take you to the jammers’ quarters.” Obediently he fell in step with the githyanki.

Just outside the door, Yubina grabbed him by the epaulet. Shaundar’s hand curled into a fist before he could stop it. He forced himself to relax.

Yubina didn’t miss his twitch and he glowered. “If I ever catch you drinking on duty, Mr. Sunfall, I will personally jettison you into the Void,” he snapped. “Do I make myself clear?”

Shaundar reminded his taut muscles and the furious blood surging through his veins that this was not the Scro Empire, and issues like this were not resolved by ploughing the culprit under dirt like an angry ox. “*Cryshal, quessir*,” he snapped. What in the Abyss did this guy take him for?

After a moment, the Matey released his shoulder. His eyes were softer somehow. Shaundar didn’t wait to find out why. “May I be dismissed, *sir*?” he requested, barely restraining his fury.

“Dismissed,” Yubina agreed. Shaundar snapped him a sharp salute and followed One-Eye to the ship. *Welcome back to the rest of the Universe*, he thought bitterly.

They passed by the Temple-Brothel and Shaundar ached for Tasha and for Molly.

Seething, Admiral Durothil studied the report delivered onto his desk yet again. He could hardly believe it. Lieutenant Mistrivven waited for him to digest the information.

“So let me get this straight,” the Admiral growled, his exposed teeth visibly grinding. “A Wasp ship, entirely crewed with scro, landed unhindered and unchallenged right here on the Rock. And then, unhindered and unchallenged, someone came aboard that ship and slaughtered each and every one of them to a man. And *still* no one noticed, until the gulls began to circle and the ship began to smell.”

“As far as I can tell, that’s exactly right, sir,” the Lieutenant confirmed.

Lord Durothil closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples. “This is very disturbing, *Teu’Ruan*. Thank you for bringing it to our attention right

away.” The Admiral put his chin in his hand, which almost covered the unsettling facial deformity.

“Does that mean I am dismissed, *quessir*?” the lieutenant inquired.

Durothil waved a hand dismissively. Not offended, especially considering the circumstances, Mistrivven saluted and quietly let himself out.

The Admiral swore and slapped his porcelain ashtray off of his desk. It flew across the room and shattered, scattering ashes everywhere.

Lotharvalis pressed his lips together. “Do you think it was him?”

Durothil sighed. “If it wasn’t, we have an even worse problem. Who else might have done it? And how in the Nine Hells did a *whole ship* of bloody scro get to Bral *without us noticing*?”

The Captain shrugged. “Bad news either way,” he admitted. “Either Sunfall has relented on his temporary pacifism, or there’s a rival scro faction loose on the Rock.” Neither one boded well.

The Admiral met his eyes. “Now the Bralian Guard is all over it,” he complained. “Like we needed them sticking their noses in.”

“Is there anything that links it to Sunfall?” the Captain asked in an effort to help.

“Not according to the report,” Lord Durothil frowned. “As a matter of fact, according to this, every possible valuable on the sloop was completely stripped. All they found were bloody corpses and a broken axe handle. Even most of the brass fittings were gone.”

That was indeed unfortunate. It meant that somebody else had seen the mess. “I think we need a more practical way to neutralize Sunfall, sir,” Lotharvalis suggested.

Durothil arched a brow over an amethyst-and-citrine eye. “You have an idea as to how?” he queried.

“Certainly, sir,” smiled the Captain, sliding into the chair across the desk and leaning back with his hands folded behind his head. Actually, the idea had come from Vorn, and it was really quite clever, in Lotharvalis’ opinion. “It’s simple, really. Claim that he’s crazy.”

The Admiral leaned back in his chair and regarded the Captain with incredulity. “It might work,” he cogitated after a moment. “He’s certainly attracting enough attention with that bizarre persistence in wearing the scro armour.”

“And he’s displayed all sorts of odd and unstable behaviours,” Lotharvalis added. “I’ve had some . . . associates watching him for a while.” Andar started ticking off the symptoms on his fingers. “He’s jumpy and paranoid, like anyone just back from a heavy war zone. He’s drinking way too much. He isn’t sleeping for more than a couple of hours a night unless he’s dead drunk. He reacts with entirely inappropriate levels of emotion to present situations, often violently, and sometimes there’s no visible connection to the behaviour whatsoever. He speaks with a Scro accent and wears that armour everywhere. And then there’s the Wasp ship.” He smiled in a predatory grin. “I think we should accidentally on purpose drop hints to the Bralian Guard that we believe that Sunfall might be responsible for that. Make it *look* like we were trying to keep it a secret because of the potential embarrassment to the Navy, but let it slip out anyway.” Easy enough to do; he would leave that in Vorn’s capable hands. “Then we can even actually use the Navy’s machinery to bring him in, although we haven’t technically convicted him of desertion or treason yet.”

“Oh?” inquired Durothil intently.

“Sure,” the Captain went on, his smile broadening. “We want to help our poor lost toy soldier. No one wants to hurt him, but he needs help, for his own protection as well as that of the general public.” He put on an expression of intense concern and sympathy to back up the point.

Durothil chuckled at his performance. “Not bad, not bad,” he admitted. “But what’s the catalyst? How do we explain how he cracked?”

“I should think that more than enough stimuli have been provided,” the Captain argued, leaning forward. “His homeworld – and I’m sorry, of course your homeworld too, sir – was destroyed.” Durothil’s eyes clouded but Lotharvalis went on, not wanting to allow him to dwell on this. “We know he was at the final battle. We know he had a head injury; who’s to say how well he recovered?” Lord Durothil twisted his hand in a half-circle; *go on*. “Better yet, as far as we know, he was the sole survivor of that scro prison camp – what did they call it? Raven Talon, on Spiral?”

“Except for Lieutenants Sylria and Yathar,” the Admiral clarified. For a second his expression contorted and strained. Lotharvalis allowed him the moment, knowing that *Teu’Ruan* Yathar was the lord’s son, though the two had disowned each other by mutual consent many years ago. “But they are both missing in action, presumed dead,” he muttered at last. Those exposed teeth were still grinding and a little tic started at the corner of the Admiral’s eye.

“Just so,” the Captain nodded; then he grinned, having waited to theatrically reveal the punch line so it would have maximum impact. “So then we claim that we believe it was an indoctrination facility.” At the

Admiral's puzzled expression, he pressed on: "Sunfall was part of an orcish program to charm and brainwash potential agents. He thinks he's an orc." His eyes sparkled wickedly. "Maybe he was even responsible for the destruction of Nedethil. And now he can't handle it, and his mind has broken." He leaned back in the chair again, well-pleased with his cleverness, since that last tack had been his addition to Vorn's idea to portray Lieutenant Sunfall as a lunatic.

The Admiral bent his head thoughtfully. "It could work," he reflected. "It could work very well." He beamed a sinister death's head grin back at the Captain. "Poetic, really," he mused.

"Then," the Captain went on, "when the military police pick him up, we rush the trial – during which I have no doubt that the Tribunal would see it our way," *and if they don't*, he thought to himself, *magic could always bend the odds in our favour*, "and with that resolved, we put him safely in a little room somewhere so that he can live out the rest of his days, comfortably neutralized." *Until we need him to end your life, sir*, he added silently. It was a work of art, really. Vorn was a veritable genius. He loved the twisty and convoluted way that the drow mind worked. It had a certain symmetrical perfection as many sticky strands came together, just like a spiderweb. Funny, that.

Admiral Durothil laughed out loud. The Captain considered how fortunate it was that he was able to see and appreciate some of, but not

the entire picture. "I love it, Captain!" he chortled with great glee. "Let's make it happen! What do you need from me?"

"I need you to draw up a couple of documents, sir," the savvy Captain smiled.

